
THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY

INTRODUCTION

On the fifth anniversary of the publication of the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Vita Consecrata” in 2001, the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life published an Instruction “Starting Afresh from Christ”, the fruit of the Plenary Assembly’s reflection. In a general way we may say that it does not qualify as a doctrinal document, but its reflection appeals to us to remember that it is the Holy Spirit that is at work in the world of humans and calls the consecrated to a continuous and decided conversion.

The reflections deal in detail with a theological point, since, from Vita Consecrata the evangelical counsels: poverty, chastity and obedience are means that nowadays configure a profound identity of religious life. Consecration, as a life choice, and a way of celebrating and living the faith; communion, as a way of living charity in community; and mission, as service of self-giving to others from the community and the Church, with the example of their Founders and the responsibility of maintaining their spirituality and charism, in the midst of the new challenges and trials of today’s world. In our specific case, to live the charism of hospitality from the familiarity of consecrated brothers.

SYNTHESIS

The synthesis focuses on nos 11 – 19 that reflect on the theme of the second part of the Instruction: “the courage to face trials and challenges”.

The different realities and situations that affect persons and therefore societies and the world, also affect institutions, becoming difficulties of greater or lesser importance. In this way, if vocations are lacking, the Church, as faithful community and institution, is also affected in its commitment to carry on proclaiming the Gospel, and in the serious commitment of being consecrated to the service of mankind and his problems. That is why the Instruction invites us to look at consecrated life with new eyes, rediscovering its quality and new meaning, in the real-life situations of men and women who have chosen a vocation, as an ever-new gift of service from religious life, and their consecration to live the fraternity of a communion in mission with the Church in community, and the responsibility of keeping alive the charism and spirituality of the Founders, whom they have decided to follow, as a life model, witness of faith and spirit of service.

In a way, today, human difficulties have led to a crisis in the faithful’s identity, a religious crisis, a crisis of faith, a spiritual crisis. When confronted with modern secularism, it means that the choice of a consecrated life is no longer an attractive one. The same thing happens in vocations already consecrated, doubts are created, and institutes abandoned, casting aside this model of fraternal life. The ageing and death of many members belonging to religious institutes produce the same effect. All of this leads to a significant drop in the membership. Faced with this situation, a vocations’ ministry adapted to the new challenges and

prospects of life, able to accept and take on these trials and be a new time of grace in the world, is more necessary and crucial than ever. Likewise, the accelerated involvement of lay people nowadays can become a threat to religious communities, as their members become convinced that times have changed and, that being the case, lay people should also shoulder responsibilities for certain requirements proper to and determined by, each community. It should be stated clearly that it is not a question of rejecting the important responsibility of lay people in preserving the charisms and spiritualities that the Founders have passed down as a response, always creative and up to date, to the world, but rather that they should always be accompanied, guided and formed by those who have truly and in a radical way committed themselves to living a consecrated life. In this way, the consecrated religious who live the evangelical counsels, can form their co-workers, as is usual, to work together with them as true witnesses of service to others, and guardians of the marvellous gift of life and human dignity, where today there exists the culture of death, rejection and exclusion. They can be the light in the midst of difficulties and invite them to take on the problems and the new challenges of today's world with them, so that together in the middle of it all they can seek holiness.

Consequently, when we, both consecrated as well as co-workers, do not work in a united way to keep alive what is proper to each religious community, then the personal feelings of the individual prevail, and that too is an attack on fraternal life.

Vocations' promotion has to be service to the world, to societies and to the Church, whose primary responsibility it would be to encourage the gift of vocation, through witness and prayer, of those who hesitate to make the choice for a consecrated life. It should not be only the one responsible for vocations, but every consecrated person who keeps his vocation alive and bears witness to it before others. They should all also be responsible for the new candidates in formation, who being vocationally anxious, knock on the doors of religious communities, ready to fall in love with the possible option for consecrated life. Where, if not amongst the consecrated, those who keep up the witness, charism and spirituality of the Founders, will new members see, know and love their call as a gift from God all the more? "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few". Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9, 37 – 38; Lk 10,2)

The "Come and see" (Jn1, 39) spoken by Jesus to the apostles John and Andrew should be turned into the path to follow, it is the maxim we must repeat in order to carry God's call to new members of religious communities; "come" to my place, discover your gifts and charisms and take part in the communion offered you to live service to others, with our charism, in our case Hospitality, and, "see" that if you leave everything behind for it, your recompense will be for ever. "That is why we need welcoming communities, capable of sharing their ideal life with youth, allowing themselves to be challenged by their demands for authenticity, ready to walk by their side."

"Consecrated life does not seek praise and human regard. It is rewarded by the joy of continuing to work actively at the service of the Kingdom of Heaven, to be the seed of life that grows in secret, without expecting any recompense other than that which the Father will give at the end (cf. Mt 6, 6). It finds its identity in the Lord's call, in following Him, in unconditional love and service, all of which can fill a life to the brim and give it fullness and meaning." The changes underway directly demand that each Institute of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life give a strong evangelical sense to their presence in the world, the Church and to their service to humanity.

**STARTING AFRESH FROM CHRIST:
A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO CONSECRATED LIFE
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM
PartTwo
COURAGE TO FACE TRIALS
AND CHALLENGES**

Rediscovering the Meaning and Quality of Consecrated Life

12. The difficulties which consecrated persons face today take on many faces, especially if we take into account the different cultural contexts in which they live.

The decrease in members in many Institutes and their ageing, evident in some parts of the world give rise to the question of whether consecrated life is still a visible witness, capable of attracting young people. If, as is affirmed in some places, the third millennium will be the time of promotion of the laity, of associations, and of ecclesial movements, we can rightfully ask: what place will be reserved for the traditional forms of consecrated life? Consecrated life, John Paul II reminds us, still has a history to be written together with all the faithful.⁴²

We cannot however ignore that, at times, consecrated life has not seemed to have been held in its proper consideration. There have even been times when there was a lack of confidence in it. Given the ongoing religious crisis which heavily confronts parts of our society, consecrated persons, particularly today, are obliged to look for new forms of presence and to raise not a few questions regarding the meaning of their identity and future.

In addition to the life giving thrust, capable of witness and self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom, consecrated life also experiences the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle class values and of a consumer mentality. The complex management of works, while required by new social demands and norms of the State, together with the temptations presented by efficiency and activism, run the risk of obscuring Gospel originality and of weakening spiritual motivations. The prevalence of personal projects over community endeavours can deeply corrode the communion of brotherly and sisterly love.

These are real problems which should not be taken lightly. Consecrated persons are not alone in living the tension between secularism and an authentic life of faith, between the fragility of humanity itself and the power of grace; this is the experience of all members of the Church.

13. The difficulties and the questioning which religious life is experiencing today can give rise to a new *kairos*, a time of grace. In these challenges lies hidden an authentic call of the Holy Spirit to rediscover the wealth and potentialities of this form of life.

Having to live in a society where a culture of death often reigns can become a challenge to be stronger witnesses, bearers and servants of life.

The evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, lived by Christ in the fullness of his human nature as the Son of God and embraced for the love of God, appear as a way for the full realization of persons opposed to dehumanization. They are a powerful antidote to the pollution of spirit, life and culture; they proclaim the liberty of the children of God and the joy of living according to the evangelical beatitudes.

The impression which some have of a decline of appreciation of consecrated life in some sectors of the Church can be seen as an invitation to a liberating purification. Consecrated life does not seek praise and human appreciation, it is repaid by the joy of continuing to work untiringly for the kingdom of God, to be a seed of life which grows in secret, without expecting any reward other than that which the Lord will give in the end (cf. Mt 6:6). It finds its identity in the call of the Lord, in following him, in unconditional love and service, which are capable of filling a life to the brim and giving it fulness of meaning.

If in some places consecrated persons become little flocks because of a decrease in numbers, this can be seen as a providential sign which invites them to recover their very essential tasks of being leaven, sign and prophecy. The greater the mass of dough to be raised, the greater the quality evangelical leaven called for, and the more exquisite the witness of life and charismatic service of consecrated persons.

The growing awareness of the universality of the call to holiness on the part of all Christians,⁴³ far from making the belonging to a state of life particularly adapted to the realization of evangelical perfection superfluous can become an added motive for joy for consecrated persons. They are now closer to the other members of the People of God with whom they share a common path in the following of Christ, in a more authentic communion, in mutual respect, without being superior or inferior. At the same time this awareness challenges them to understand the sign value of consecrated life in relation to the holiness of all the members of the Church.

If in fact it is true that all Christians are called “to the holiness and perfection of their particular state”⁴⁴ consecrated persons, thanks to a “new and special consecration”⁴⁵ have as their mission that of making Christ's way of life shine through the witness of the evangelical counsels, thereby supporting the faithfulness of the whole body of Christ. This is not a difficulty, it is rather a challenge to originality and to the specific contribution of the charisms of consecrated life, which are at the same time charisms of shared spirituality and of mission which fosters the holiness of the Church.

Clearly these challenges can constitute a powerful call to deepen the living of consecrated life itself whose witness is needed today more than ever. It is fitting to remember the ability of holy foundresses and founders to respond to the challenges and difficulties of their times with a genuine charismatic creativity.

Vocation Animation

16. One of the first fruits of a path of ongoing formation is the daily ability to live one's vocation as a gift which is always new and to be accepted with a grateful heart: a gift which calls for an ever more responsible attitude, to be witnessed to with an ongoing conviction and attractiveness so that others might feel called to God either in this particular vocation or through other paths. The consecrated person is, by nature, also a vocation animator: one who is called cannot not become a caller. There is, therefore, a natural link between ongoing formation and vocation animation.

Service to vocations is one of the most demanding challenges which consecrated life must face today. On the one hand, the globalization of culture and the complexity of social relations make radical and lifelong

choices difficult; on the other hand, the world is living through a growing experience of moral and material sufferings which undermine the very dignity of the human being and is silently calling for persons who will powerfully announce a message of peace and hope, persons who will bring the salvation of Christ. We are reminded of the words of Jesus: "The harvest is great but the labourers are few. Pray the master of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" (Lk10:2; Mt 9:37-38).

The first task of any vocational pastoral program is always prayer. Especially in those places where few are choosing to enter into consecrated life, a renewed faith in God who can raise Children of Abraham even from stone (cf. Mt 3:9) and make sterile wombs fruitful if called upon in faith, is urgently needed. All the faithful, and especially youth, should be involved in this manifestation of faith in God who alone can call and send workers. The entire local Church—bishops, priests, laity, consecrated persons—is called to assume responsibility for vocations to this particular consecration.

The master plan of vocational promotion to consecrated life is that which the Lord himself began when he said to the apostles John and Andrew, "Come and see" (Jn 1:39). This encounter accompanied by the sharing of life requires that consecrated persons deeply live their consecration in order to become a visible sign of the joy which God gives to those who listen to his call. For this reason, there is a need for communities which are welcoming and able to share the ideal of their life with young people, allowing themselves to be challenged by the demands of authenticity, and willing to accept them.

The local Church is the privileged place for this vocational announcement. Here all the ministries and charisms express their complementarity.⁵² Together they realize communion in the one Spirit of Christ in the many ways that it is manifested. The active presence of consecrated persons will help Christian communities to become laboratories of faith,⁵³ places of research, of reflection and of meeting, of communion and apostolic service, in which all feel part of the building up of the Kingdom of God. In this way the characteristic climate of the church as God's family, an environment which facilitates mutual knowledge, sharing and the contagion of those very values which are at the origin of the choice to give one's whole life to the cause of the Kingdom, is created.

17. Care for vocations is a crucial task for the future of consecrated life. The decrease in vocations particularly in the Western world and their growth in Asia and Africa are drawing a new geography of the presence of consecrated life in the Church and new cultural balances in the lives of Institutes. This state of life which, through the profession of the evangelical counsels gives a constant visibility to the characteristic features of Jesus in the midst of the world,⁵⁴ is today undergoing a particular period of rethinking and of research with new methods in new cultures. This is certainly a promising beginning for the development of unexplored expressions of its multiple charismatic forms.

The transformations which are taking place directly involve each Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, calling them to give strong Gospel-based meaning to their presence in the Church and their service to humanity. Vocational ministry requires the development of new and deeper means of encounter; of offering a living witness of the characteristics of the following of Christ and of holiness, of presenting ways which strongly and clearly announce the freedom which springs from a life of poverty whose only treasure is the kingdom of God, the depths of love of a chaste existence which seeks only one heart, that of Christ, and the strength for sanctification and renewal contained in an obedient life whose only goal is to carry out the will of God for the salvation of the world.

Today vocation promotion is not something which can be delegated in an exclusive way to some specialists dedicated to the task, nor can it be separated from a true, specific youth ministry which first and foremost communicates Christ's love for youth. Every community and all the members of the Institute are called to

take on the tasks of contact with youth, of an evangelical teaching of the following of Christ and of handing on the charism. Young people are searching for others who are able to propose styles of authentic evangelical life and ways of arriving at the great spiritual values of human and Christian life. Consecrated persons must rediscover the teaching art of bringing to the surface and freeing the deep questions which are too often kept hidden in one's heart. This is especially true when dealing with young people. As they accompany others on the path of vocational discernment, consecrated persons will be forced to share the source of their identity. Communicating one's own life experience always entails remembering and revisiting that light which guided the person to his or her own particular vocational choice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. How can we be sure in this day and age that it is the Holy Spirit that calls us to discover our true vocation for consecrated life, and thence face the trials and new challenges of today's world?**
- 2. Bearing in mind the Charism of the Hospitaller Order, how may we be true witnesses of God's love and the service of St John of God so that others may become enamoured and choose consecrated life?**
- 3. What can we do to make vocations' promotion in the Hospitaller Order the responsibility of all the brothers, and ensure it is at the service of vocations, through witness and prayer?**