

*IDENTITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF
CONSECRATED APOSTOLIC LIFE*

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PREFACE

Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV

Original in Spanish

Theological Seminar 2011 Chronicles of the Event

The Theological Seminar which was held in Rome on February 7 – 12, 2011, was conceived as a continuation of the Congress of 2004 “Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity”, which was attended by more than 800 religious and has had strong repercussions in the succeeding years.

This Seminar was born out of the desire to give new impetus to the theology of consecrated apostolic life and to take stock of its identity in this changing times which we live, with its challenges and opportunities and therefore, it had as theme “Identity and Significance of Consecrated Apostolic Life”.

For this Seminar, twenty General Superiors from the two Unions (UISG and USG) and thirty theologians (15 women and 15 men) have been invited to reflect on what is emerging in this our time and what God is telling us through it. During the convocation, much attention was given to gender equality, diversity of cultures and congregations. Similarly, invitation was extended to some Directors of magazines on Religious Life from the different continents.

The participants knew clearly that it was not just a workshop. The Conferences, translated and sent beforehand were subject of serious reading and reflection by all, to eventually give more time for discussion, in-depth dialogue and careful discernment during the Seminar itself. The Speakers presented their talks with great vivacity while the attention of all focused on what is new or that which needed a redefinition. The reflections of the participants were accompanied by the work of some “listeners” who took charge of putting them together and presenting them to the Assembly. To maintain this atmosphere of discernment, the days included several moments of contemplation and liturgical prayer celebrated in different languages.

Towards a renewed reflection

After the presentation of this “theological workshop” on our identity, the question remains on the results. We want to know what has been achieved or what magic formula can give us back our much desired prophecy without making us lose the mystical dimension. It is no wonder therefore that this question came up during the Seminar. It may be well for us to remember that the goal was not to come up with a good document, but rather to provoke a renewed theological reflection on the apostolic religious life in the future.

The first task therefore falls on all the participants, each in his/her own context – be it in governance or in academic theology or in written communication - each one can spread the essentials of the content, sharing ones experiences given the opportunity to contribute to the theological reflection in this field.

The two Unions (UISG and USG) who organized the Seminar feel doubly committed to share this information to all its members in various ways:

- * The web page of USG-UISG (www.vidimusdominum.org) has made available to the Religious of the world all the Conferences of the Seminar translated in four languages.
- * The USG has chosen the theme of the Theological Seminar as theme in the forthcoming annual meeting to be held next May and to which all General Superiors in Rome are invited to participate.
- * The UISG, in addition to publishing the more significant Conferences in the next two issues of its Bulletin, will take on anew this subject at the Council of Delegates to be held in November 2011 in Aparecida, Brazil.

The Theological Seminar is indeed, a meeting with a limited number of participants – for methodology reasons – but open to all religious men and women all over the world. We shall appreciate its results may be only with the passing of time.

Unity and diversity

At this point, as a participant in this Seminar and as an introduction to this issue of the Bulletin I would like to share my personal reflection: what I have experienced in those days of harmonious living together which was both intercongregational and intercultural (28 nationalities).

What I saw can be summarized in two words: unity and diversity.

In this rapidly changing times amidst cultural diversity and the many challenges we face, a non-negotiable element of our identity has emerged: the call to follow Jesus, the Son, with His own life style, lived in community and at

the service of the Kingdom. This element has come up many times as the meaning of our life and the radical foundation of our hope.

All this has been reinterpreted from the concept of being sent by Jesus to a secularized world, impoverished, violent and multicultural, with which the religious apostolic life must maintain a permanent dialogue. Hence, our life must be expressed in a diversity of forms and languages so that it may be significant.

In the name of a false fidelity, certain obsolete ways of being cannot be maintained (as the classic example of domination-submission) if we want to be an understandable sign and if we want to present ourselves as alternative of a life that brings to fullness.

This does not mean to refuse or throw away what was valuable and that which formed us. It is to re-imagine the religious apostolic life today and build bridges within the Church of the People of God, a Church of communion with a spirit of reconciliation as a journey towards restoring harmony in every person, in every community and among all peoples.

If we live deeply rooted in the heart of the Mystery that gives us meaning and carry on a loving relationship with the world of today, our life will be mystical-prophetic. The significance does not lie in numbers - given that God works best in weakness – but in so far as Jesus continues to be present in our world today.

THE CONSECRATED PERSON OF APOSTOLIC LIFE: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Fr. Paolo Martinelli, OFMCap

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Original in Italian

1. The consecrated person and apostolic existence

Apostolic life” is quite a demanding expression from the point of view of the person. In fact, originally the expression had the cast of a decisive biblical term: *apostle, envoy, one sent*. Apostolic life, from a theological view point, is the life of the envoy, the one sent. This term has some decisive anthropological implications that are connected with the heart of Christian revelation. Theologically the term “apostello” takes on a connection of meanings with other key words of the biblical message: *being called, elected, chosen and even more originally “predestined.”* That is already true in the Old Testament in relation to God’s call. Think about Abraham (Gen 12) and consequently the “elected” people, or a key figure such as Moses with a very precise mission to carry out. This character emerges even more in the prophetic vocation, though in all its diversity. The prophet is *elected* by God, the formation of his body in his mother’s womb is put in relation to his task (cf. Jer. 1:4-5), as carrier of God’s Word which marks him in his flesh. That figure is carried out in the New Testament: Jesus Christ appears first of all as *the one sent by the Father*.¹ He is, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, *ho Apostolos* (Heb 3:1) in the absolute sense of the word, so that all other vocations and missions are located as a constellation around the person of Christ. It is sufficient here to remember St. Paul: Eph 1:4-5; Rom. 8:29-30.

Now apostolic life, like all Christian life, has had to and continues to come to terms with the process of modernity and post-modernity, characterized in a different way from both *secularization* and a *return to the sacred*, which are not lacking in ambiguity. In our time, is it still possible to speak about apostolic life in its biblical, Christological and ecclesial meaning? Is it possible to conceive of being “sent” by Christ through the Church in the power of the Spirit through belonging to a concrete institute of consecrated life, thus as a realization of a plan gifted by the Spirit? In fact, one of the fundamental traces of modernity is the autonomy of the subject and the affirmation of the human person as freedom and self-determination. It has been noted that especially in the great vocational crisis in the west, the same notion of vocation and mission, and their character by necessity, contrast with the modern concept of freedom elaborated since the 1600s.² Clearly the truthful character of Christian faith itself, of which the consecrated person is made apostle, is involved in such a vision. It is reasonable to give life not in order to announce a theory or some generic values but to announce Christ as truth of God and of the human person. This fact is confronted with the postmodern tendency to relativize every truthful statement and introduce a subjective view of the sacred. Today can there still be apostles of a man who said, “*I am the way, the truth and the life?*” (Jn 14:6)

One of the recurring reductions seems to me identifiable in the temptation to emancipate the term “apostolicity” from its Christological meaning, making it plausible to the paradigms of contemporary thought, for example, re-reading it in the light of an ethical commitment and dedication for a determined moral value which the autonomous conscience (Kant) could recognize as positive, as for example a philanthropic sensitivity, human development, solidarity, etc. Obviously these words are quite important, but, in my opinion, on their own they are not sufficient for basing a total and irreversible life choice. In a volunteer work each person chooses his or her own area and as such it is justly revocable. Taking on an apostolic life, requires not belonging to oneself anymore. (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9) Apostolic life entails the idea of a positive call by God, which as such grasps the totality of the person in an irreversible way. I believe that the personality of a religious man or woman in apostolic life can be developed and deepened to the degree to which it arrives at an essentially positive perception of his/her being sent.

In this sense we must ask: *what is the relationship between the self and the apostolic task?* To take on being sent is always also an acceptance of the challenge of a specific task. I must accept having a certain “part” to carry out. No one can ultimately decide his or her own mission; it can be

recognized, accepted and creatively corresponded to. No one can send him/herself. All this can certainly be lived with faith and thus be discovered that this “particular” becomes the point where my life participates in a limitless mission; nevertheless, it can have a certain frustrating or alienating character. *Only when the “role,” the task is discovered as personal mission, then can it truly be embraced with complete freedom, with full desire.*

No one has experienced this being wanted, being sent by the Father like Jesus. *For Jesus, having awareness of himself means being aware of being sent, that is, of being aware of the Father.* What truly grounds his life is his awareness of the Father, of being from the Father, being sent by Him. When Jesus says, “I am the way the truth and the life,” (Jn 14:5) it is the same one who says, “I do nothing myself.” For Jesus, doing the will of the Father is something that *gives being*, it is the end of every heteronomy, of every alienation. In the Gospel there is a phrase of Jesus that expresses this very well, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.” (Jn 4:34). Normally when you do the will of another you alienate yourself because you must take on the role someone else gives you. But instead, when Jesus is talking about the will of the Father as his food, it is as if he were saying: the more I do the Father’s will the more I am myself, the more I do, I realize myself, the more my human stature is profiled within history according to the plan of the Father himself. Jesus knows who he is. He is the One who has received his eternal definition from God: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.” (Mk. 9:7) Jesus knows he is the Son and he knows what his task is. It is the *mission* that the Father gives him to do, through which the divine plan for the world is accomplished. Then *his person and his mission simply coincide*. Every event, every encounter in the life of Jesus is experienced in the light of this relationship with the Father: the person he encounters, the sinner, the sick person, the event, even rejection. All this is looked at in the perspective of the Father. Therefore, the relationship with the Father is not something outside of reality, but it is the light with which to read each event. The relationship Jesus has with the Father is the light that allows him to grasp the mission he has to do in each provocation of the reality. Jesus lives all this in the form of entrusting himself. Thus Jesus shows us the perfectly successful person; (GS 22) the person who does his/her mission is the person whose freedom is perfectly accomplished, because it is a freedom entrusted to the mystery of the Father.

In this perspective it seems to me that in order to avoid the risk of reducing the apostolic vocation to a helpful volunteer program, it is necessary *that the person of consecrated life deeply experience a filial anthropology*, (cf. VC 18.65-69), where discovering oneself and one’s own true face is

accepting the mission that comes from the Father through the “human mediation” of his will. (cf. *Faciem Tuam*, 9-11) In this sense to discover God’s will through one’s own history, to obey the mission discovered through the charism of one’s institute, means discovering oneself, in the very being son and daughter of the Father in Christ: *living the apostolic nature of our life fully personalizes us and allows us to concretely take on the charges, not in an alienating or frustrating way, but in a responsible and creative way, by bringing all of ourselves, all of our faculties into play in being for the reign of heaven.*

2. The consecrated person in apostolic life between action and contemplation

Many consequences come from this which can go to build up significant polarizations. Living the apostolic nature of one’s mission for the consecrated certainly means a way of understanding the operative and the contemplative dimensions one has of one’s existence, between remaining with the mystery of God and letting oneself be sent into the various circumstance of apostolic activity. I believe that our time marked among other things by a hyperactivism, which at times also characterizes apostolic life, needs to re-think its balance. *On the one hand*, one can be overwhelmed by apostolic activity, losing the rhythm of spiritual life, even ending up with a functional perception of one’s action, determined by a logic of “results” and of “outcome” which puts one’s personal integrity at risk. In general this temptation, also for psychological reasons which we do not want to mention here, tend to be self-sustaining to form a true spiral that seems incapable of being stopped. Such an anomaly generates an inability to find “rest in God” and tends to build up parallel forms of compensatory existence of the apostolic labors. *On the other hand* we find instead the attempt to put one’s life together by trying to defend personal space for regeneration and the spiritual life. Nevertheless, that model at times risks taking on a dualistic character that does not allow true growth of the person. To give an example, you can think of the model of “recharging batteries,” where the person throws him/herself into action to then step back to “recharge” during free time, awaiting the next apostolic activity. I believe that the discovery of life as apostolic mission needs to teach us a deeper spiritual balance and a deeper unity of life, both in contemplation and in action. In fact, the idea that mission consumes or “runs down” the person already indicates a defect in understanding the relationship between mission and the person. In reality, the carrying out of one’s action should be the place where day after day an ever deeper relationship is introduced with the mystery of Christ in his filial

relationship with the Father. In this sense, if it is true that also in the life of Jesus and in the life of the apostles we find the inevitable space set aside for prayer, contemplation, rest and apostolic action, nevertheless the same concept of mission can interiorly unite all of the life of the consecrated person. In fact, mission itself, before having an active character, has a receptive aspect. Wearing oneself out in action shows how the same action can be understood in a personalized or self-referring sense. In that way even the execution of apostolic activity becomes a place of renewed encounter with the Lord who calls us to serve him in the circumstances of daily life. In that sense in a healthy balance between reception and execution of the mission, the person should acquire a more intense depth of spiritual life right in the experiencing of the apostolic nature of the form of life: the receptive and active poles of mission will attract each other and contribute to the personal growth of the subject.

3. Apostolic life between individuality and belonging³

In the same perspective we can indicate a final polarization that can theologially characterize the consecrated person in apostolic life. I am referring to the individual and community character of one's action. Certainly here, as in the other elements, the charism of belonging furnishes sensitivity and important references for fruitfully living this polarity. Here we will limit ourselves to recall the essential. There can be charisms that emphasize more the community aspect of apostolic life and others less so. In any case in times like ours, it is necessary that apostolic life give witness to the ability of living that polarity in a fruitful way. We must not deny that our time knows individualism, both in the carrying out of our public apostolic function and in our personal and private life. Examples are not lacking of apostolic life where only individuality is at the center, where sharing of one's responsibility with other brothers or sisters is achieved only with a certain amount of difficulty. Similarly, the personal life of contemplation or resting at times can take on an almost private character, that one avoids community relationships in the Institute. Here as well, it seems to me that a filial anthropology of apostolic mission might help find an inner balance. In fact, if it is true that mission is really unique for each person, as the life of each person is unique, it is also true that this mission is possible in as much as we are within the body of Christ, of the ecclesial communion and in a network of relationships of belonging that is charismatically defined. In this sense the problem lies not so much in the division of responsibilities of apostolic works but fundamentally in an adequate formation for consecrated life that knows how to find belonging as the place of the person called to

communion with God and with others. In this way apostolic action will be carried out in a more personal or more communitarian form, according to the circumstances or the charismatic emphasis, but in any case it will show that we are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters in Christ and that, therefore, through apostolic activity we want to increase communion and human relations in which *we are truly ourselves because we learn to live for the other*.

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- ¹ Cf. ad. esempio Gv 5,36-38; 6,38-40; 7,16-18; 8,26. Cf. qualche immagine sinottica: Mt 10,40; Lc 9,48; Mc 9,36; Lc 10,16.
 - ² Cf. M. HÖFFNER, *Berufung im Spannungsfeld von Freiheit und Notwendigkeit*, Echter, Freiburg 2008.
 - ³ Cf. in particolare il documento *La vita fraterna in comunità*

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS IN APOSTOLIC CONSECRATED LIFE

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Original in French

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hat is the specific contribution of the “evangelical counsels” to consecrated apostolic life?

Reflecting on this question requires that we first of all clarify the place of the three vows in a theology of the religious life, and then situate them in relation to the apostolic character of all religious life, so that we can finally outline how we can understand the apostolic dimension that is proper to them.

1. The three vows: their place in a theological understanding of religious life

It remains fairly common, following Thomas Aquinas 1, to define religious life by the three classic vows of poverty, chastity, obedience. However we come up against several major difficulties.

We know now that this triad did not exist at the beginning of religious life; it appeared when the latter was long-established, and already diverse ².

This triad does not appear as such in every religious profession. Thus it cannot define religious life.

Furthermore, such a definition rests on a distinction which is itself problematic, between “counsels” and “precepts”. This distinction, which is not a Biblical one, has led to a differentiation between a “common way” and a “way of perfection”, thus creating “classes of baptized people”, in a kind of two-speed Christianity; as if receiving the Gospel did not require the same radicalism, according to states of life...Religious life then appears as a “plus” in relation to baptism ².

Every Christian is called to the perfection of charity ³, to place Christ at the centre of his or her existence, saying “You alone are the Lord”. And in an ecclesiology of communion, no vocation has meaning in isolation. The baptized who have a vocation to marriage make the radical choice of Christ in receiving their partner, and then their children, if they are granted them; the “You alone” that they say to Christ cannot be effective without a “you alone” addressed to their partner. As for those who are called to the religious life, they make a radical choice of Christ without partner or children; they say “You alone” to Christ without another “you alone” and thus they enter into a way of life as brothers and sisters. The origins of religious life in monasticism remind us in fact that the choice of celibacy is a choice to unify one’s life around God, in order thus to love very broadly. The choice of celibacy and the two dimensions of a life unified by a concern for God and by a love for humanity which is not marriage, but brotherly and sisterly, are the marks of religious life.

This is the fundamental “proposition” (*propositum*) of religious life ⁴, against the background of which the three classic vows must be understood and situated. If this triad has become explicit and is maintained, it is because of its anthropological strength: it is able to show how the whole being in its basic dynamisms is the place of incarnation of the offering to God alone, without any other “you alone”, that religious life ⁵.

2. The Vows and the Apostolic Nature of Religious Life

Thus placed in their context, the three vows are neither the origin nor the heart of the apostolic dimension of the religious life. Its reason for existing and the rootedness of mission in religious life are found in this “You alone”, with all that it implies.

In fact this “You alone” without any other “you alone” is, for religious, the place where they open themselves to the love of God and their response to this love, within the movement of God towards humanity. In Christianity,

in virtue of the unity between the two commandments, there is no genuine openness to the love of God which is not openness to loving the other. In the image of Christ, whose gift without reservation to the Father is gift for the life of humanity, to genuinely welcome the love of God is to allow oneself to be turned towards one's brothers and sisters; when there is no human "you alone", this movement received from the love of God for humanity goes, in principle, to all, to infinity.

In the image of Christ, whose identity as beloved Son is also at the same time that of the One sent by the Father, it is the relationship with God which sends every Christian into the world: receiving with the Son and in the Spirit the movement of love of the Father, we are sent. There lies the link between contemplation and mission: the former is not separate from apostolic life, whether preceding it or following it. Religious life lives that sending in its own way: differently from ministry, religious life, even the most apostolic, does not consist first of all in a mission to be carried out. Apostolic work is the work of God in the religious; the apostolic instrument of the religious is his or her person worked on by God, and a religious who can no longer do anything is no less apostolic. ⁶

It is here that the three vows come in. They are certainly not the only elements of religious life that give it its apostolic dimension ⁷ which, incidentally, does not say all that is to be said about the vows. These do not have primarily an apostolic aim, but they cannot fail to have apostolic consequences.

In fact, the vows, bearing on the real life of our flesh – its basic appetites of freedom, of possessions, of love – offer the whole of our flesh to Christ, sent into this world to become flesh. Each one speaks in its own way of a birth from above: placing oneself under obedience in order to receive one's freedom from God alone, finding fulfilment in celibate chastity, receiving in poverty all goods as coming from God and belonging in principle to all. This does not come from the movement of people left to themselves. Only a birth in God, a birth of God in us can be the origin of this.

The three vows thus show powerfully the eschatological dimension proper to religious life.⁸ It differs from marriage, which, through children, opens up the present to an earthly future; chastity in celibacy anticipates and proclaims a world made not by generation but by universal communion, the very same that is promised in the afterlife, when "God will be all in all". Obedience and poverty for the Kingdom are the renunciation of ensuring an earthly future by works or possessions. The sacrament of marriage sets the seal of eternity on earthly realities and makes them the way of common and

mutual holiness for the two partners; Christian partners are thus called, based on the flesh, to turn towards the beyond. Religious life, for its part, has the vocation of proclaiming the promise and the anticipated presence of the beyond: turned towards the beyond, marked by the overabundance of God which relativizes everything that happens, religious life cannot turn away from here below where it is sent by the Spirit. Religious life is thus invited to live in the flesh what does not come from the flesh – that could be a definition of the vows – and sent into the world by a Word which comes from elsewhere – that could be a definition of mission.⁹ It is in that perspective that the apostolic dimension of the three classical vows can be envisaged.

3. The apostolic dimension of the vows

Discussion of the vows has for a long time been ascetic, presenting them as a “holocaust”, a way of personal sanctification and a means of struggling against obstacles to the perfection of charity¹⁰, and/or juridical, where the vows are understood as law and obligation¹¹. More recently the approach has been strongly anthropological. The tendency today is to be more attentive to contexts, with the “challenges” they present, and the discussion becomes “militant”, even “counter-cultural”, emphasizing an understanding of religious life in terms of prophecy¹²: the vows “proclaim and denounce”, they represent an alternative way of life. None of these dimensions can be omitted but there is always the risk of dissociating them, of making one dominant or passing one or the other over in silence, and thus losing the coherence of the religious life. If the ascetic approach tends to overlook the Thomist horizon of charity, today the perspective commitment can have more difficulty in truly integrating the gift of God and the personal dimension of conversion. Placing the vows more modestly in the context of the theology of religious life allows us to take the different dimensions into account and not to focus on them in terms of the apostolate. Their place, secondary and relative, allows for a variety of interpretations according to the spiritual experience of writers and depending on the context. For the subject which concerns us, beyond and underlying these interpretations, four points are to be emphasized, which seem to be necessarily present in any interpretation of the vows.

Firstly, the vows, as offering to God, link inextricably personal conversion and mission.¹³ If they incarnate in the whole of our being the “You alone” that we say to God, they help us to receive fully the love of God that opens up in the service of our brothers and sisters. Just as there is no gap between contemplation and action, there is none between conversion and mission.

Furthermore, the three vows work in us on capacities and difficulties in relationships. In obedience, we are before the figure of the other as older or as “parent”¹⁴; with chastity, it is the other as peer, face to face, in a relationship of partnership, that we meet; as for poverty, it presents the other as a “neighbour”, with whom to share, the other who is nothing to me except by the grace and the desire of God. What relationship does not derive from one or other of these models? The vows thus enable us to allow the love of God to reveal itself and to convert all the relationships which we live. They send us to live all relationships – and does mission exist otherwise than in relationships?- on the basis of the “You alone” which is ours.

The vows also commit us to a certain way of looking at people – at each person, the other and myself. Poverty involves looking at people as they are, without possessing any relationship – people “naked”, as they come from the hands of God and as they will return to God on the last day. Chastity in celibacy makes us consider the other simply for God or for themselves, or for another, and not in a spontaneous movement of turning back towards ourselves. Obedience places us in a position of dialogue and reveals to us human beings as beings who speak, that is to say capable of speaking and listening. Thus the three vows should lead us to be sensitive to the situations in which humanity, desired by God, is despised, and should bring us close to those of our brothers and sisters who live in these situations; they also commit us to recognize the radical beauty of humanity and to give thanks for all that respects and values it.

Finally, the three classical vows show the eschatological dimension of our vocation. They imprint in our flesh the beyond which calls to us. They can be understood in a dynamic of waiting, like the opening, at the heart of time, of a window looking towards that which will not change. This ceaselessly questions our thirst for making sure of what is at our disposal, within our reach, of our work, and of providing for our future ourselves, and they keep alive in us the desire for a world where all bread, including the bread of affection, will be shared with all. They mark every commitment with this dimension, drawing us away from what, in our way of looking at the world, and even with the best apostolic intentions or justifications, can always remain “worldly”. Through this space, they can point out the place of God in the heart of the world.

Love comes down from above¹⁵– the three vows only have meaning if they allow us constantly to¹⁶readjust our life by welcoming this love which sends us. They remind us that we cannot escape our diaconal function¹⁷ but that our mission cannot be reduced to this: it is to be understood and received not from the world and its cries, but from the One who sends us

with the Son and the Spirit. “Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned – if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever”¹⁸

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- 1 “The three vows of religion form the essential of all religious life” according to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 11a11ae, art.1, dif.2
 - 2 Cf. J.M.R.TILLARD: “The classical triad seems only to appear, and that tentatively, in the middle of the 12th century. (...) The formula seems to find its definitive authority in 1405 under Innocent VII. It then spread rapidly, but without being seen as essential in all formulae of profession. The Benedictine tradition remained attached to the triad: stability – *conversio morum* – obedience. The Dominican tradition continued to retain only a profession of obedience. The Eastern Orthodox do not have it at all.” (*Devant Dieu et pour le monde*) [*Before God and for the World*], Paris, Cerf, 1977, p. 121
 - 3 The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* tries to avoid this failing by speaking of a “special” “particular” “specific” call, but it does not fully succeed; some expressions show the “plus”, the superiority, the “objective excellence of the consecrated life”. (No.18)
 - 4 This is very clear in Thomas Aquinas: “Of itself and in essence, the perfection of the Christian life consists in charity, principally in the love of God, then and secondarily in the love of the neighbour, loves to which the principal precepts of the Divine law refer. Now it is necessary to note carefully that the love of God and of neighbour do not fall under the precept following only a limited measure, the surplus being simply a counsel. (...) ‘Charity is the very end of the precept’, as St Paul says. Now when it is a question of an end, there can be no measure to be observed. (...) Perfection consists essentially in the precepts”. *Summa Theologica* 11a11ae, Q. 184, art.3, conclusion.)
 - 5 Cf the important light shed by Philippe LECRIVAIN on the initial and fundamental *propositum* of religious life, which is translated by the “vow of profession”: “to vow oneself to the Lord” does not mean “make one’s vows”. These are two different registers: one expresses the deep resolution of the person, and the other the organisation of decisions rooted in this resolution and trying to express it”. (*Une manière de vivre, les religieux aujourd’hui* Brussels, Lessius, 209, p. 42)
 - 6 Enzo BIANCHI summarizes it thus: « The Gospel demands are many and cannot be reduced to three; however these three virtues (chastity, poverty and obedience) by their anthropological character, can summarize and synthesize them. The social sciences also arrive at this triad, when they indicate the three *libidines* which constitute human nature in its depth: the *libido amandi*, the *libido possidendi* and the *libido dominandi*. We develop our personality, we mature, we humanize ourselves in relation to these three points, but we can also become idolatrous, contradicting the true and living God, and bringing back a death-dealing logic into human relationships. The great spiritual tradition has thus gradually indicated chastity, poverty and obedience as the fruits of a struggle against idolatry, the fruits of a spiritual struggle, the distinctive signs of the following of the Lord; they must show it in their flesh, by their life, through their action and being: they must show that they are following the Lord, daily and concretely, both in community

- and individually.” (Si tu savais le don de Dieu [If you knew the gift of God] French transl., Brussels, Lessius, 2001, p. 74
- 7 Cf. *Vita Consecrata* N° 25: “The first missionary duty of consecrated persons concerns themselves, and they fulfil it by opening their heart to the action of the Spirit of Christ”.
 - 8 The handing over of oneself to God, the commitment for ever by a word and fraternal life have in fact powerful apostolic consequences.
 - 9 Theological reflection on religious life is rediscovering at the present time an eschatological orientation, which is fortunate and fruitful.
 - 10 One of the impassés of the theology of St Thomas AQUINAS on this question comes precisely from a difficulty in thinking of religious life in relation to the world. If “religious engage themselves by vow to abstain from secular things, which it would be lawful for them to use, in order to attend to God more freely” (*Summa Theologica 11a11ae, Q. 184, art.5, concl.*), it becomes very difficult to think of their relationship to the world.
 - 11 It is the case with Thomas Aquinas, for whom “the religious state can be understood in a threefold aspect: 1° as an exercise by which one tends to the perfection of charity; 2° as a way of life suitable for freeing the human heart from exterior concerns; [...] 3° as a holocaust by which one offers oneself completely to God, one’s person and one’s goods³ (*Summa Theologica, 11a11ae, Q. 186, art.7, concl.*)
 - 12 Already present in Thomas AQUINAS, this dimension is developed by SUAREZ and very widely thereafter. Simon-Pierre ROLD tries to rectify this deviation in his last book *Au risque de Jésus Christ, une relecture des vœux, Fr. Tr., Brussels, Lessius, 2007*
 - 13 Cf. for example Jacques HAERS, *Vivre les vœux aux frontières, Brussels, Lessius, 2006, Simon-Pierre ARNOLD, op.cit. ou Jean-Claude Lavigne, Pourquoi’il aient la vie en abondance, La vie religieuse, Paris, Cerf, 2010*
 - 14 One of the merits of Simon-Pierre ARNOLD’s last book is that he reminds us: “Our first mission is our vocation to evangelical conversion. Our own human healing, whose workshop is the religious community and the Christian community of the people of God thus becomes the privileged sign of redeemed humanity, which we proclaim by our work” op.cit., p.90
 - 15 To be convinced of this, it is necessary only to look at how the living of this vow brings parental relationships into play!
 - 16 CF. Ignatius of LOYOLA *Spiritual Exercises, N° 184, 237 and 338.*
 - 17 According to Enzo BIANCHI’s classification of the different forms of religious life: the monastic life” seeks to follow the Lord according to the Gospel, and that is all”, “the apostolic life in the full sense” which is consecrated to evangelisation and preaching, the “diaconal life” which seeks to respond to a need emerging in history and in society” (*op.cit., p.68-71*)
 - 18 1 Cor. 13:3

*OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR
APOSTOLIC CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE
THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN
ASIA: SOME REFLECTIONS*

Sr. Mary Sujita Kallapurakkathu, SND

Born in Kerala, India, Sister Mary Sujita joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame as a missionary in Bihar, North India. After completing her early formation in religious life in North India, Sr. Sujita did her University studies in Bombay earning a Master's Degree in Social Work and Diploma in Mass Media Communications.

In October, 1998, Sister Mary Sujita was elected as the ninth Superior General of the Sisters of Notre Dame. In 2004 she was re-elected and she has just completed her mandate.

Original in English

The Asian continent is home to 60% of the world's population and to 85% of the world's non-Christian religions. Asia is the birthing continent of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and many other faith traditions that have spread to the whole world. These religions have molded the soul and psyche and cultures of Asian people. There is no ONE Asian reality or culture against which we can reflect on religious life in Asia. Nevertheless, beneath Asia's rich diversity there are some commonalities. For example, a sense of the sacred is fundamental to all Asian cultures. Asians, in general, have been sensitive to the mystery of life and find meaning in an enduring spiritual quest for the divine. The basic values of religion and religious practices, marriage and family, harmony and non-violence are still present in most Asian hearts. It is important to note that although the Church hardly makes up 2.7% of the entire Asian population, like the gospel "leaven and light" she contributes immensely to the development of this continent and to the universal Church and beyond. The Church in Asia radiates hope!

As the topic we are dealing with is very large, let me focus on a few points that are very significant for consecrated life in Asia at this time. Globalization has ushered in a gradual and steady socio-cultural, economic

and cyber-age transformation of Asia that will have lasting impact on the future of Asia. Although a good number of Asians enjoy some of the positive impact of globalization, today we experience that our traditional Asian values are being replaced by the globalized post-modern culture of materialism, consumerism, individualism and secularism. Asia has her own small percentage of rich and middle class and, above all, the multitudes that live in immense poverty and destitution. The main casualties of globalization, in addition to our Mother Earth, are those who are most vulnerable and defenseless – the poor and the marginalized and in particular, women, children, and the elderly.

Asia offers to the world a deeper understanding of mysticism based on her centuries of spiritual pursuit and her accumulated spiritual heritage. She is familiar with a life of passionate search for God and prophetic renunciation. The greatest challenge and opportunity before us as Asian religious is to be mystics who are impelled by a passion for Christ and his mission of compassion. If we are serious about being a transforming presence in Asia, then we must embrace a lifestyle that witnesses to our people, regardless of their cultural and faith traditions, the age-old Asian values of true holiness, contemplation, renunciation and asceticism, detachment and simplicity. Our discipleship enables us to own these values and to enrich them with the transforming power of the Good News of Jesus and to live his prophetic mission amidst the Asian complexities and the growing persecution in some parts of Asia. Even in these difficult times, our message for Asia will be accepted when our Asian brothers and sisters see in us the marks of God-realized persons, compassionately involved with those most in need. Our growing emphasis on professionalism and success in ministries in our competitive society runs the risk of replacing this inner spiritual flame and radical living of the Gospel with a more comfortable and secure life that takes the prophetic and the mystic out of the seeker's heart!

Religious in Asia are very much appreciated and known for their commitment and their most efficiently managed institutions of education, health care, pastoral and social services. Asia still needs these essential services. However, often we religious are not perceived and experienced as God-realized men and women and spiritual guides in keeping with the Asian tradition of holy persons. Our professionalism, our comfortable and secure middle class lifestyle can leave our people untouched by our life as they do not always see in us credible witnesses of Jesus and his radical commitment to the Reign of God. WITNESSING is key to our being religious in Asia today. If we truly are passionately in love with Jesus, if we have seen him, heard him and touched him in our personal lives, we

cannot but make him known by our lives, by our harmonious and compassionate presence and action. We, as consecrated persons in Asia, must ask ourselves why we are not having the impact we could have on the Asian people who do recognize and value holiness, renunciation and detachment, contemplation and silence, simplicity and love for Mother Earth, the lifestyle of men and women who have embraced the life of Sanyasa. Witness becomes powerful when we open ourselves to a radical conversion to live the evangelical counsels with visibility and credibility among a people who understand the meaning of a thirst for God, a life that dares to renounce and risk all in search of the divine, in the service of those most in need.

Dialogue is a key issue in Asia. The Asian Bishops have addressed the urgency of entering into a triple dialogue with Asia: dialogue with the poor, with the religions and with the cultures. They pointed out that integral liberation, interreligious dialogue and inculturation are priority concerns of the Church and religious life in Asia. This is an area of tremendous prophetic opportunities for consecrated persons in Asia provided they have the necessary formation and competence. An increasing number of congregations are making serious efforts to reconnect with the world of poverty, with the poor and marginalized persons, and struggle with them for dignity and justice. During my many years of living and ministering with the poor and destitute people of Bihar, India, I have had many life-transforming experiences. During the first year of my life with the poor, a very poor, illiterate old woman in the village made me reflect deeply on my readiness to enter into a life of this *triple dialogue*! She had accepted me as her dear daughter. I used to see this poor old woman doing her “puja” worship very early every morning by pouring some of her very meager supply of oil and milk on a stone that she kept in the worship corner of her mud hut. I was young and inexperienced about her religious practices. After our relationship became stronger, one day I decided to call her attention to the fact that her God was not in the stone that she worshipped but rather in her heart. Of course, I sounded so theologically correct! She just smiled and continued with her “puja” and prayer. The following Sunday a priest came for Mass for the few Catholics from that village. We were all huddled together in a little mud hut for the Mass and my old Hindu friend came and sat next to me with deep reverence all through the Mass. As I closed my eyes in prayer after Communion, she nudged me several times and whispered in my ear: “Daughter, the other day you told me that my God is not in the stone that I worship. But now it seems your God is in the Bread that you ate just now!” Her remark cut through my soul and something changed deep within me. To be women and men of true dialogue is one of the greatest challenges of consecrated

life in Asia. How prepared are the Asian religious for an ongoing, open dialogue based on profound respect for individuals, communities and their religious traditions?

According to FABC: “In Asia, millions of people still suffer from massive poverty. The victims of deprivation, dispossession, humiliation, exclusion and oppression who struggle for dignity, freedom and solidarity and a life worthy of their humanity, are privileged resources for theology. The *anawim* are the medium *par excellence* for a God-encounter.” (FABC Papers No.96) Any reflection on the identity and significance of apostolic consecrated life today in Asia must be done in the above context. Evangelization is most effective in its mutuality! To evangelize in Asia is a matter of deep spirituality and witness of life and not just the preaching or teaching of doctrines and Church laws. Gandhi is reported to have said to a group of Christian missionaries: “You talk too much. Look at the rose. It too has a gospel to spread. It does it silently, but effectively, and people come to it with joy. Imitate the rose.” A presence that is holy and authentic is the key. We are encouraged by the many Asian religious who do *imitate the rose* and make a huge difference in our society and in the Church in spite of many challenges!

Most religious congregations, especially those which are international in their origin, will have to make a conscious effort to free themselves from their perceived identity as “foreigners” with foreign financial resources and higher and better lifestyle, as professionals who run big institutions and are a “special” class in themselves! I wonder if instead of being a transforming presence in Asia, some of us are losing our mystical and prophetic “sting” by becoming increasingly co-opted by a consumerist culture, reinforcing a secular and comfortable lifestyle! At times our religious membership can make us feel entitled to a more comfortable and secure life because we convince ourselves that *we have left all things to follow Jesus and He has promised us a special hundredfold return!* Being religious in Asia can be seen as a way of upward socio-economic mobility. The way we live our vows, especially the vow of poverty, does not make sense to average Asians who must fight poverty all through their lives. We need to create a new identity and lifestyle that give more credibility to our being Asian disciples of Jesus who are consecrated to be an incarnational and prophetic presence for mission especially among those on the margins of our society where life is threatened and insecure. I hope that theologians, especially Asian theologians, will continue to work towards rewriting Asia’s traditionally Western-based understanding and theology of religious life and allow it to spring up from the Asian soil, from our Asian experience of Jesus and his

Good News lived and shared among our people. How can consecrated life find renewed relevance and vibrancy in responding to the agonies of the Asian soul in our present globalized, post-modern, socio-cultural cyber-age context? Our response cannot be different from that of Jesus!

Amidst all the challenges, we also witness many signs of hope and vibrancy in the Asian Church especially in her many vocations to religious life. Among the religious there is a growing openness to mission *ad gentes* and a willingness to move into new and frontier missions where the presence and service of religious are needed. There is also a rising awareness of and action for justice, peace and integrity of creation, direct involvement with and for those who are poor and marginalized especially women in their struggles for dignity and justice. There are efforts to nurture better integration and harmony among all people. Small as we are, our presence and ministries as committed women and men religious do make a difference in Asia. Today Asian religious have many opportunities to reach out to the West in their missionary efforts for new evangelization. The Asian way of doing mission, being missionary, will be different. We can only go as women and men who carry the wealth of our deep faith in Jesus and our commitment to his mission, but without power or money. To accept this reality is very liberating!

In keeping with the Asian tradition, to be a disciple, the religious must go through a rigorous period of formation, silently being at the feet of Jesus, her Guru, learning to be the compassion of God that transforms our wounded world. Both initial and on-going formation must prepare the religious to live the radicality of the evangelical counsels. The future of religious life in Asia depends on who we choose to BE, where and among whom we choose to live and what we choose to do. In the Asian context, religion and religious life will always have a deep social implication as religion is not just a private affair. In this sense, religious life in Asia may not lose its visibility and identity. Consecrated life needs to be recognized and valued more within the Church, not only for the wonderful work done by religious, but for their greatly needed charismatic and prophetic presence. An increasing number of women religious in Asia risk frontier ministries empowering the poor, especially women, while they themselves are far from being accepted as equal partners in the mission of the Church. We need to challenge ourselves for the “more” that our discipleship demands of us in Asia. In the context of our Asian realities, what new understanding of consecrated life, of the evangelical counsels can theology offer to the Asian religious? Will the accumulated spiritual wealth, wisdom, lived experience and hope of the Asian people give birth to a new way of being

religious in Asia and a new way of theologizing that will enrich and challenge the universal Church to a closer following of Jesus?

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN AFRICA

Msgr. Faustin Ambassa, CICM

Msgr. Faustin Ambassa, Bishop of Batouri in Cameroon, was born in 1964. As a member of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he worked as a missionary in Senegal and as formator in his Institute in Cameroon before becoming Provincial Superior and President of the Conference of Major superiors of Africa and Madagascar (COMSAM) until his episcopal ordination in January 2010. He is author of important books on Consecrated life in Africa.

Original in French

Introduction

We are proposing within the framework of this brief presentation to approach some aspects of the socio-religious situation of Africa in terms of challenges. Four points or aspects are of interest. We will point out the opportunities and the challenges proper to consecrated life in relation to each of the aspects. Each time we will conclude by suggesting some areas of research for an African theology of consecrated life.

1. Globalization and Marginalization of Africa

Today's world, as we know, is marked by globalization. In relation to this phenomenon, which has been becoming slowly but surely more and more obvious and extensive in the last decades, we want to underline the ambiguous situation of the African continent. On the one hand African societies are merged together in one great village, of which they are no more than some cells. One can, for example, cite the ultra-fast penetration of the new means of communication (cell phones and the internet). One can also point out the effect of fashion and the seduction of all that is presented in the great television channels which blanket the continent. On the other side, however, one notes that Africa, for the most part, is outside of the great global circuits. It is easily left by the wayside. This marginalization is evidenced in several respects.¹ Africa realizes that it is no heavyweight in

the global Exchequer. It is inseparably connected to a mega-organism of which it is only an appendage. A negligible link in the chain, it sees itself as a zone easily avoided in the global web. Nevertheless, in certain areas it feels it brings much to this world and one could rely on it if it can be helped to move out of its marginal position. It is in this perspective that I understand, for example, the demands which arise in favor of a permanent place for Africa on the UN Security Council.

For the African members of international institutes of consecrated life, globalization catches up certain aspects of their lives. Belonging to an international religious institute contains an opening to the world. One goes out of one's own culture and immediate milieu to welcome people and values which were heretofore far away. Life in such an institute implies an insertion in a communications network with units spread throughout the whole world. *"The religious institutes very much look like global networks with antennae of limited power, which are obliged to refer to a much larger structure. Assuredly for the ordinary African Christian the man of God, who is the religious, sometimes appears as a man of the world, a man who communes with the entire universe."*²

Young men and women, who commit themselves in an international religious institute, find themselves then in a network which is much larger than the micro-structure immediately visible in the region where they were born. Different factors are at play in what appears today as a growing presence of African men and women in international religious institutes. It is not only a question of numbers. The African men and women begin to play a rather important role within their institutes. Even if this movement is still small and halting, it is worth underlining. Consequently there is a question posed to consecrated life in Africa concerning preparation for leadership. Theologians of consecrated life will have to propose a model of leadership appropriate to consecrated life in Africa. We know the role of a leader within a group. The exercise of this task will have to rely on reflection and research which will help us to distance ourselves from some models that traditional societies or modern societies offer. It is also necessary to bring out clearly the specific aspects of religious leadership in relation to the ministry of government connected to the sacrament of orders.³

2. Religious Demography

The Western World and more particularly Europe, where religious life developed into its present forms, is marked today by secularization, relativism, and in some cases, an aversion to Christianity. In this Europe which considers itself post-Christian, consecrated life in particular is experiencing a decline.

Young vocations become rare, and membership declines perceptibly. Many infrastructures formerly established for various services today are being transformed or sold. Hope for a revival gives way to a harsh realism which turns into a search for strategies for facing the death foreseen.

The African religious can make the complaint that these strategies begin with a partial reading of the present situation and go on to a hasty generalization of the data. If, effectively, consecrated life is experiencing a decline in the West, it is not the case in the majority of particular churches in Africa. The legitimate concerns vis-à-vis its decline in the West ought not to hinder rejoicing in its development in the African milieu or in other places in the world.

In Africa, as everywhere else, consecrated life is essentially received as a “*gift both precious and necessary*,”⁴ from God for his Church. The present situation puts the non-Western World face to face with its responsibilities regarding the future of consecrated life. This precious gift from God appears today as an essentially fragile possession.⁵ In my opinion this fragility ought to be taken into account by theologians of consecrated life when there is the question, on the one hand, of preparing the milieu to better receive this “*form of life*”⁶ in the Church and, on the other hand, to have it bring its fruits to the universal Church. The research on inculturation of consecrated life in Africa ought not to shut itself up in some Afro-centric navel gazing. It ought, above all, to be concerned for the richness that an authentic African consecrated life could bring to the Universal Church.

3. Reconciliation

Africa as a whole seems to be experiencing a certain lull in relation to the strong tensions which marked the continent during the last two decades. Even if the peace and security of the populations are still threatened in certain places, a real evolution towards peace is perceptible. With war at an end – or almost - it is now necessary to take up the path towards reconciliation. The second Synod on Africa came at a good time to remind Christians to be artisans of peace and reconciliation. In this immense challenge, where the Church needs to collaborate with other structures, the role of consecrated persons is not negligible. The Synod presents the mission of consecrated life in this area in terms of its witness.⁷ It is certainly useful to act in the direction of facilitation and mediation in view of reconciling the parties in conflict. But one hears of consecrated persons who begin by witnessing, through their very lives, to reconciliation. The Synod thus returns to an essential dimension of our vocation: communion and fraternity. In fact fraternal life in community is not an element foreign to consecrated life:

“The fraternal life plays a fundamental role in the spiritual journey of consecrated persons, both for their constant renewal and for the full accomplishment of their mission in the world” (VC, 45). The sight of a process of pacification around a problem without true reconciliation cries out to us. The reflection on consecrated life in Africa needs to avoid superficiality in taking up the theme of fraternity. It needs to take into account the sad experience of communities which have not been able to resist the test of ethnic and cultural differences. The discussion on universal “brotherhood” and interculturality should result in a conversion regarding differences, beginning with the closest. For these are the ones, the nearby differences, which can end up annoying me because they are always in front of me. It is in fact easier to love a brother or sister who is far away than one with whom one lives. For the first it is enough to have good feelings and pleasant words. For the second, on the contrary, it is necessary to have a continual acceptance and regular reconciliation.

4. Migration

The displacement of individuals and groups constitutes one of the important characteristics of our world. In Africa the patterns of migration, which one observes, have different origins. One can cite among others the cultural habits of certain peoples who are essentially nomads and find it difficult to stay put in one place.⁸ During the last two decades many populations have moved in order to flee war or to seek water and more favorable weather or climatic conditions. The current situation in the last few years has seen numerous young Africans leaving the continent looking for a better life in the West. Some of them, alas, meet death along the way.⁹

Consecrated life, faced by the movements of peoples on the African continent, is called to develop a form of evangelical presence specific for the displaced groups. A new apostolic field opens up in this way. Above all, it is necessary to be concerned about the welcome and human and religious accompaniment of displaced persons. But it is necessary, as well, to ask about accompaniment for those who are leaving. In a word, pastoral ministry to migrants, whatever their motivation, is a field in which apostolic consecrated life can be involved in Africa today.

The migratory movements that one sees and their management call the theology of consecrated life in Africa to ask itself about mission. Mission is an essential dimension of consecrated life. In a certain measure, this mission implies some geographical displacements which enter into the large panorama of the migration of persons. Theological reflection ought to put in sufficient relief the missionary dimension of consecrated life. In the context of Africa

it ought to ask about the pertinence and the requirements of the mission *ad gentes*.

Conclusion

Consecrated life, as a vital form, is sensitive to its milieu of expression. The challenges observed in African societies are so many calls addressed to consecrated persons as they reflect on their identity and their mission. The actions which follow on this will better show their witness and will contribute to the strong development of institutes. On the other hand the growth which one recognizes in consecrated life in Africa ought not to be a cause for forgetting the slowing down under other skies. The theologians of consecrated life – who do not necessarily need to be religious men or women – will need to situate its mission within the horizon of the global mission of the universal Church. The true challenge, for the future, will be to persevere in witnessing in the midst of teams, which, at least in their ability to be representative, will be severely limited.

¹ One can cite some examples of this marginalization. The currencies of African countries are in general difficult to exchange with the great global currencies. The large airlines have only a few flights to the continent. For some others there is no scheduled stop. Telephone rates between Africa and the rest of the world are the most expensive in the world

² F. Ambassa, *Le Diamant et la porcelaine, Valeur et fragilité de la vie consacrée en Afrique*, Centro Theophile Verbist Mexico, 2005, p. 80-81.

³ We speak of this in F. Ambassa, *Chemins de joie. Foi chrétienne et vie religieuse consacrée en Afrique*, Centro Theophile Verbist, Mexico, 2007, p 77-93.

⁴ *Vita consecrata*, no. 3.

⁵ We speak of this fragility in F. Ambassa, *Le Diamant et la porcelaine*, p. 38-48.

⁶ Canon 573, 81.

⁷ Cf. Proposition no. 42 of the 2nd Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops: "The Church expects much from the witness of religious communities, characterized by racial, regional, and ethnic diversity. By their life in common

they proclaim that God makes no distinction between persons and that we are all his children, members of the same family living in harmony, diversity and peace (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_elenco-prop-finali_en.html), consulted 19 September 2010). Cf. also F. Ambassa, "La vie religieuse consacrée et la témoignage de la justice, de la réconciliation et de la Paix en Afrique," in J. Ndi-Okalla (ed.), *Le deuxième synode africain face aux défis socio-économiques et éthiques du continent*, Karthala, Paris, 2009, p. 155-170.

⁸ The Mboros of Cameroun and the Tuaregs in certain West African countries are examples of this.

⁹ Cf. Proposition no. 28 of the 2nd Synod on Africa ([HYPERLINK "http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_elenco-prop-finali_en.html"](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_elenco-prop-finali_en.html) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_elenco-prop-finali_en.html, consulted 19 September 2010).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE NEW EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS APOSTOLIC LIFE

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Original in Portuguese

Introduction

The overwhelming phenomenon of new experiences in consecrated apostolic life awakened a great interest not only in the traditional religious life and the Church¹, but also among researchers². These experiences have become object of study, research and interdisciplinary analysis to examine the existing continuity and the discontinuity in relation to the actual culture, to catholicism and, in particular to consecrated apostolic life.

The actual overview of the new experiences of consecrated religious life presents itself as varied, complex and polyhedral making it almost impossible to have a detailed analysis of the universe of its multiple expressions, structures and projects.

To be faithful to the objective proposed to me for this reflection, I would like to give a glance at the reality of the new experiences of consecrated apostolic life and capture that newness which the Spirit who “blows where he wishes” (Jn 3, 8) is revealing to us in this difficult and unequalled crossroad in these new times we are living, in the history of humanity and as religious Institution of the millenium.

To bet on the newness that is coming out and to allow oneself to be guided by the Spirit, takes courage and audacity to accept the uncertainties and the complexities of a reality which is in continuous transformation, acknowledging that we don't have the last word, but that we are only one among the many

voices and presences. It is overcoming the world logic in order to open ourselves to the logic of the Reign of God, of the small grain of wheat thrown into the earth and dies to give much fruit. (cf. Jn 12, 24), of inclusive dialogue, of the harmony that exists in opposites and of communion.

Above all, let us ask ourselves: What do we mean when we say *new experiences of consecrated apostolic life*?

I. Types of new experiences

The post-Synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* offers us some indications to establish a type of new experience of consecrated life situating it in a historical continuity.

The Spirit, who in different times has raised many forms of consecrated life, never ceases to assist the Church, either nourishing in the Institutes already existing the commitment for a renewal in fidelity to the original charism, or distributing new charisms to men and women of our time that they may give life to Institutes which are respondents to the challenges of today. Signs of this divine intervention are the so called New Foundations with characteristics which are original compared to the traditional ones. (n. 62).

Taking as a basis this article from *Vita Consecrata* we can establish a form of *new experiences* in two main categories:

- *the renewal efforts in fidelity to the original charism*: these are experiences that are shown in the untiring research and the awareness of the need for renewal and actualization of consecrated apostolic life, in faithful creativity to the original charism of ones Institute and in an innovative response to the provocation of the Spirit;
- *the new foundations*: new and singular experiences of consecrated life born in this last decades which present original characteristics compared to the traditional models of consecrated apostolic life.

We ask ourselves: *is it possible to come up with a profile of these new foundations of consecrated apostolic life*?

II. Profile of the new foundations of consecrated apostolic life

The new foundations of contemporary consecrated apostolic life are referred to with the expression *new communities*³. They differ from “*new movements*” even if in religious documents and pastoral organizations of the Church, in general, they are placed in the same category⁴. Here, we do not deal only with transitory missionary projects carried on by religious Institutions which, without doubt, are always very important and useful.

The expression *new communities* was officially used for the first time in the apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*.⁵ This document makes reference to the new forms of consecrated life raised by the Spirit, as distinct from the traditional religious life with its original characteristics. It is important to keep in mind the profile of these *new communities* described in the document itself.

The originality of the new communities often consists in the fact that it deals with groups composed of men and women, from clergy and lay, from married people and celibates, follows a particular style of life, sometimes inspired by one or another traditional form or adapted to meet the exigencies of the society of today. Even their commitment to evangelical life is expressed in a different way, while it manifests, as in a general orientation, an intense aspiration to community life, to poverty and to prayer. Clergy and lay participate in the government, according to their competence, and the apostolic vision opens up to the framework of new evangelization. (n. 62).

Actually, the expression *new communities* embraces a plurality of religious groups within the Catholic Church, which came to life in these last decades. We are dealing with catholic associations which gather together men and women, spouses and celibates, youth and families, around one charism expressed in definite forms of devotional and sacramental religious experiences in a project of evangelization. Historically, many of these are a branch of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement which in the course of some decades consolidated itself as a spiritual movement centered on the gifts of the Spirit and on the experience of charisms. Other forms have a different matrix.

These communities live, actually, a flourishing moment, with young members and numerous vocations⁶, as contrary to religious life that follows the ancient parameters of the Church which, in general, live in a situation of perplexity, ill feeling and a strong identity crisis. One feels strongly influenced by the transformations which happen in the society, one suffers the ageing of members and a significant lack of vocations which seem to threaten the future.

In Brazil, estimates put at about 500 the new catholic communities. It is said that Brazil is at the top when we speak of new catholic communities, followed by Columbia and Mexico.

Their proposal of community life and of belonging contemplates two different ways of insertion:

- *community of life*: gathers persons who feel called to a total and radical self donation. They live under the same roof, renounce to possession of goods, live in common life and service, in a total consecration to God and neighbour.
- *covenanted community*: gathers persons who participate in the same style

of life and accept the spiritual proposal of the community, but does not share the communitarian experience of living under the same roof. In addition, they are less available to geographic transfers which a new community may ask, for example, in the foundation of new groups in a determined region.

As regards the profile of members: the members of leadership, generally, belong to the middle class and are freelance professionals, while others belong to the popular class.

These *new communities* do not present themselves as in a monolithic block, but are extremely heterogeneous, demonstrating a great variety of expressions and meanings: there are those which give importance to emotions, those which puts together devotions, emotions, moral rigidity and care for the sick. In this ocean of diversity, an analysis will prove complicated.

Considering this diversified profile of the new communities, we ask ourselves: *What are the factors that hinder a reflection on the new communities?*

III. The complexity of analysis

To start with, it is important to keep in mind some factors that may hinder an analysis which is deeper, more profound, wider and more complete.

- *Theological character of the new experiences*: the *new foundations* are places of God's manifestations, expressions of the dynamic presence of the Spirit who acts in history and, in His freedom and goodness, raises up new forms of evangelical life. They are a gift of the Holy Trinity in the Church and society⁷, called to contemplate and to reveal to the world the mystery of Christ and of His Church. As such, they cannot be an object of analysis based exclusively on parameters of human logic.
- *Variety and differences of charisms, forms and expressions*: this extraordinary diversity extends itself from expressions of strong radicalism especially in living poverty⁸, to the strong manifestations of a pre-conciliar identity accompanied by exterior signs⁹. To this vast range, the experiences realized in the traditional Congregations are added. They seek to restart their charism of foundation.
- *Quantity of new experiences*: the number of *new experiences* which actually exist is a phenomenon that is unequalled in the history of religious life. This fecundity, on the one hand, testifies to the efficacious presence of the Spirit in His Church; on the other hand, it requires a greater effort not to run the risk of generalization.
- *Youth reality*: let us define these experiences with the adjective "new". If we consider this adjective from a chronological criterion, this would mean

that these realities did not have sufficient time to consolidate themselves. This factor has to be kept in mind in our analysis.

We are, therefore, aware of offering a limited theological reflection and we do not expect to exhaust the topic, but we simply desire to contribute to a fruitful and enriching dialogue.

Meanwhile, let us ask ourselves: *what aspects are important for this analysis?*

IV. Significant aspects

For an adequate theological understanding of the *new experiences*, it is important to keep in mind three fundamental aspects: *the perennial newness of the Spirit, the pluralistic scenario, the paradigm of complexity.*

- *The perennial newness of the Spirit:* the dawning of *new experiences* and of *new communities* of life in itself is not a new phenomenon. History shows that religious life is born as an alternative to a convenient life and a bourgeois Christianity. It comes, therefore, as a critical conscience of the same Church. In the course of the centuries, the Spirit raised and continues to raise in the Church different forms of consecrated life which are expressions of the only commandment of love, given by Jesus in His indivisible bond between love of God and love of others¹⁰. This love is concretised in giving ones life to continue the missionary project of Jesus.

The Orders and Congregations to which we belong were born, almost always, along the margins of Institutions. Guided by the charism of the Founder/Foundress, they went through the initial, innovating enthusiasm, assuming socially relevant roles of the moment, to accommodation and institutionalisation. Each one of these, in its own way has been a bearer of a seed of renewal and of prophecy in the Church and in society. In this sense, we may, therefore, speak of the perennial newness of the Spirit in His Church, in the course of history.

As a consequence, in this case, the adjective “*new*” does not refer so much to the fact itself of the appearance of new experiences, but rather the quantity, the forms, the diverse expressions and the visibility which this phenomenon assumes in our globalized society characterized by the culture of communication.

- *The pluralistic scenario:* our present reality, characterized by pluralism, presents itself as a suitable ground for the development of new religious experiences.

Plurality appears as a sort of a new paradigm which re-organizes the

entire scenario, arouses a new vision of life and of the world, compelling us to review our way of being and acting.

Contrary to what might appear on first sight, plurality is not an obstacle to overcome, but a fertile ground where the newness of the Spirit may spring forth with greater vigour. The secret lies in the dialogue with what is different, in the sharing of gifts and in the plurality of knowledge, in valuing the multiple expressions of life and ways of acting.

Learning to live together in a pluralistic society where we find ourselves, is a challenge for the Church, for Christianity itself, for consecrated life. Pluralism presents complex and, at times, undesirable aspects, but it also represents an important provocation for the re-organization of our communitarian life which must be considered in the analysis of the new experiences of consecrated religious life.

- *The paradigm of complexity*: “Everything is interconnected, intertwined, and there is an interdependence between phenomena and crises”, Edgar Morin, French sociologist affirmed.

Considering the characteristics of profound and substantial changes in the course of the world society, the approach to new experiences of religious apostolic life cannot be done in an isolated way, but from the paradigm of complexity. It means to perceive that “everything is interconnected, intertwined and that there is an interdependence between the phenomena and crises”.

Numerous and different phenomena are occurring. Society is in crisis, the Church is in crisis. Consecrated apostolic life is in crisis. Our problems and challenges, our insecurities and uncertainties, our utopia and our achievements cannot be conceived apart from one another.

Keeping these aspects in mind, we can ask ourselves: from the theological point of view and a comparison with the parameters of traditional consecrated apostolic life: *what is the newness of the new experiences of consecrated apostolic life?*

VI. Significant elements of new experiences of consecrated apostolic life

A theological look at the universe of these new experiences, in their plurality and complexity, brings us to perceive some significant elements which, though presenting different nuances according to the charism of each community, are more or less common in all of them. These significant elements refer, in particular, to the new foundations.

1. A strong spiritual experience: as opposed to secularism

One of the characteristic traits of *new experiences* of consecrated apostolic life is, without doubt, an intense spiritual life as opposed to secularism.¹¹ The spiritual experience, fruit of openness to the Spirit who renders us sensitive to the cry of the needy, is that which impels and moves us and at the same time, sustains us in difficulties.

In the *new experiences of renewal*, the spiritual experience is lived in the light of the charism proper to each Congregation or Institute. In the *new foundations*, in many cases, this spiritual experience has a charismatic matrix which emphasizes the personal relationship with God, the gift of tongues, the care for one's interior liberation, the personal transformation through individual and communitarian prayer and sacramental life, putting in the first place the daily participation in the Eucharist and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. They proclaim the centrality of the Word of God, characterized, sometimes, by a hermeneutical reading of fundamentalistic tendency.¹²

The image of Mary, receives a particular attention and is venerated with some different names; Medjugorje, Lourdes, Fatima, 'Scioglitrice dei Nodi', to name some. This devotion is expressed, in a particular way, in the daily recitation of the Rosary, in the morning and evening prayers and in the different ejaculatory prayers repeated throughout the day.

This intense spiritual life nourishes and sustains itself on a morality which is more or less rigid, particularly that which concerns sexuality. .

This spirituality, united to the charism of each community, confers upon its members a strong sense of identity and belonging. In many cases, this identity is rendered strongly visible through the use of common symbols, the Cross, an image of Jesus Christ, dress codes and logo of the community, with some medieval reminiscence.¹³

In general, it is possible to recognize the sympathizers or the members of these communities with the use of the cross or crucifix which are symbols of their incorporation in the community. They also produce a great quantity of *souvenirs*, whose sale guarantees their sustenance.

This experience of spirituality, which reflects, in some way the characteristic return to the sacred of post modernity, reveals a strong recall for consecrated apostolic life in the sense of reviewing the primacy of God in the life of its members and to translate the experience of God in an understandable witnessing to the society of today.

2. A new way of living religious consecration

As a consequence of the commitment to one's group, religious consecration

constitutes the essence of the person's incorporation in the community and creates a strong bond of belonging. Within the community, the members are acknowledged and feel part of the group. This, in turn, takes him/her out of anonymity, situating and putting him/her in the Church and in the society.

In the course of its history, consecrated life has always been known for its consecration to God which is expressed in the living of the evangelical counsels. However, in the *new communities* of life and of covenant, something new and extraordinary happens, because here, we do not deal with religious who profess the vows, but of lay people, sometimes whole families, who take on the commitment to live *obedience* in a world that exalts freedom, to live *poverty* in a society which is deeply consumeristic, and live *chastity* in a time that preaches eroticism and individualism.

Being groups that propose to live together, in the same physical space, sharing domestic work, economic responsibilities, the spirituality and missionary project, these do not differ so much from the traditional Congregations. The "*newness*" lie in the fact of being lay people who propose to live the ideals of chastity, obedience and poverty in a mixed community of spouses and celibates, of men and women, young and adults. In this sense, they represent a new way of being consecrated, a *newness* in the radical living of the Gospel.

The Community "Canzone Nuova", for example, one of the communities of great expansion, offers several forms of religious commitment: to men and women available to embrace a celibate life, for married people and those called to priesthood.

This diversity of religious commitment seems to be one of the reasons for the growth of *new communities* which is concretized in the openness to incorporate new followers, offering different options of consecration to those who choose to be identified with their mission.

Religious consecration, in general, is preceded by an intense period of formation with stages similar to those of the traditional religious life, especially the novitiate. The formation of future consecrated persons constitutes a great challenge to the new communities. How does one form mature persons, capable of assuming, for the rest of their life, the evangelical commitments without discouragements when faced with personal and communitarian crises, before the tribulations and the temptations of life?

The integral and permanent formation of the members is also a major preoccupation and challenge that accompany the traditional, consecrated religious life

In the security of the structures of apostolic works, in comfort and individualism, many religious seem to lose their sense of consecration to God.

The *new communities* are a reminder to a deep examen of conscience in relation to the living of religious consecration.

3. *Evangelical austerity and radicality*

Constant research on austerity and radicality of life is a characteristic typical of the *new experiences* of consecrated apostolic life. The expressions of this austerity and radicality assume several forms: the way of dressing, the space for fraternal living together and in particular, the way of living the religious vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

Austerity and radicality of life express themselves in terms of courageous detachment from one's well-being which the post modern society offers and mark a break away from the guardians of consumerism and individualism. As a consequence, they are seen as prophetic signs.

These attitudes of evangelical austerity and radicality challenge the consecrated apostolic life which, many times, gives in to the flattery of this globalized and secularized society and deviates from evangelical radicalism that is at the root of its founding charism.

4. *State of the spirit of foundation and the centrality of the figure of the Founder/Foundress*

Religious vocation is not the result of a simple human decision, but is the response to the call of God through Christ and in the power of His Spirit. God enters the life of the person and provokes a rapture, a radical change. The response to this invitation implies leaving everything behind to undertake a journey. The secret of the vitality of a community is in its capacity to preserve the "*vocational spirit*" which opposes the temptation to individualism, mediocrity, accommodation. This is living in a "*state of foundation*".

In the *new communities*, this *state of foundation* is nourished by the centrality of the figure of the Founder (Foundress), considered as charismatic and prophetic leader. His/her presence – in many cases, they are still alive – arouses veneration, love, dedication and discipleship; awakens individual strength and self realization.

The vitality of the new communities also depends on the presence of the leader among his/her followers. According to Max Weber, the centripetal force which this person exercises is undeniable. It is like a *prophetic mystagogue* who guides the knowledge of the ineffable mystery of God, like an *ethical-religious prophet* who becomes an instrument of God and an *exemplary prophet* who indicates the journey with his/her own life. Between the leader and his/her community, there circulates a fruitful lymph woven with reciprocal love, thanks to which, the prophecy impregnates behaviour and pushes towards

a total donation of one's life for the mission.

Probably, this is one of the reasons for which the new communities attract the young desirous to follow charismatic teachers and prophets, in heroic times.

At the opposite extreme, we find centennial and distant Religious Congregations and Orders which, from the enthusiasm of the first moments, had to recourse to the memory of the foundational phase. On the one hand, they enjoy the security of the structures and tradition: on the other hand, they carry the burden of lack of agility and shortage of novelty.

This element of presence and of relationship with the figure of the Founder (Foundress) calls our attention to the role of leadership in the consecrated apostolic life and on the necessity of reclaiming its evangelical dimension at the service of others and the way to exercise this function.

5. New ecclesial awareness, characterized by laicism and Catholicism

This aspect refers, in particular to the *new foundations*, born out of lay protagonism in the Church, aroused by Vatican II. The Founders (Foundresses) are, generally, lay people and their members try to live the universal vocation to holiness as Vatican II reminds us in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: "All the faithful, of every state and condition are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity".¹⁴

These communities express the charismatic dimension of the Church and an ecclesiology of communion in which men and women, priests and lay come together and participate of the same charism and mission, fulfilling their baptismal reality: Everyone, though in different ways, are *priests, prophets and kings* Everyone tries to live this ecclesiology in simple and essential structures, without any preoccupation for the exterior elements of houses, sustenance and works.

This new ecclesial awareness is accompanied by a strong sense of Catholicism which is expressed in the submission to and communion with the Church Magisterium, and in particular, in the filial love for the Holy Father and the Bishops.

Their proposals do not present structural transformations but rather an innovation in the sense that they are a novelty in the structure of consecrated life in the Church which is characterized by division within the consecrated life.

In this sense, the *new experiences* represent a challenge for the consecrated apostolic life to rethink the ecclesial dimension of one's charism and awareness of the sense of ecclesial belonging of its members.

6. Institutional flexibility and agility

Free from the complexity of the great centennial Congregations, the *new communities* expand rapidly, at times to found new groups and realize projects, at other times, to incorporate new members. They do not live the tension between charism and one's Institute of the great Religious Orders and Congregations.

In this sense, the traditional consecrated life is put into discussion with an invitation to review the structures which, with the passing of time, becomes heavy and outdated. This necessity is perceived and expressed in the actual preoccupation of consecrated apostolic life which we conveniently refer to as "re-organization".

7. A strong communitarian sense with the primacy of communion over doing

The *new communities* understand themselves as places of fraternal communion. Fraternal life offers consistent help to its members in great tribulations or in times of crisis, to which all of us are subject, and becomes a home ground of support.

They grow because the new members feel protagonists of the new community, without discrimination of sex, race or social condition. They create bond of friendship, of family and of reciprocal support. Each member of the community is a brother/sister who suffers and who commits himself/herself. These communities want to be authentic icons of the Church which was born in the Cenacle and from there, spread throughout the world.

The credibility of evangelization is demonstrated in the way fraternity is lived. There is nothing that can justify a fraternity which is mediocre, uncommitted and superficial. The community will prosper, realizing the Reign of God in the world, when its members will really be one body, when they will learn to celebrate the life of each other.

This strong communitarian sense puts into discussion the consecrated apostolic life and invites it to a profound review of the way to think and live the communitarian dimension according to the charism of the Congregation.

8. Missionary fervour and the use of media as privileged means of evangelization

The members of the *new communities* gather together around a common mission project which opens a wide horizon of participation according to the possibilities and gifts of each one.

Many new communities understand the use of media as a privileged

channel of evangelization, others are concerned about the suffering and pain of persons, promoting a liturgical and sacramental life centered on care and liberation. Still others are preoccupied about the presence of evil in the daily life of persons and from this, propose concrete actions of liberation.

However, the preferential use of mass media as channels of evangelization often becomes source of a certain ambiguity. The media culture carries with it also some counter values. As a consequence, it requires a critical spirit and a discerning wisdom.

Conclusion: an urgent task

We are living in a time of “epochal change” and therefore, of profound transformation not only in the socio-economic and political fields but also in the cultural and religious context, which may imply some unpredictable consequences. There are new scenarios and, in them, new emergent subjects which require from the religious apostolic life a deeper listening to God, discernment, audacious mysticism-prophecy, relational capacity.

To follow Jesus implies two dimensions: *reproduce* the fundamental structures of the life of Jesus: Incarnation, Mission, the Cross and Resurrection, and at the same time, *actualise* it, inspired and animated by the Spirit of Jesus and the Father, according to the exigencies of the context in which one lives. The following of Christ must be constantly thought of and reconstructed in the light of the Spirit who guides the whole of history.

These two important dimensions of the following of Christ may be expressed in these two terms: *recall and walk on*.

- *Recall* the manifestations of God in Jesus. This memory continues and leads us to another reality which cannot be forgotten: the relation of Jesus with the Father, the project of the Reign of God, the life of Jesus and His relationship with the poor.
- *Walk on*: the God of Jesus is a God who walks on, Christian faith in this God is walking humbly with Him in history, practicing justice and loving with tenderness (Micah 6,8).

This is the moment to ask ourselves: What is happening to religious life? Are we, perhaps, incapable of understanding the social changes which are always rapid and profound? What can we learn from these *new experiences of consecrated apostolic life* to reinvigorate our religious life?

It is important to keep in mind that, in these *new experiences*, there co-exist some elements from pre-modern, modern and post modern times which require serious discernment and a deep analysis. The question becomes more urgent: *how does one live consecrated apostolic life in a context which is*

multiform, pluralistic and in continuous change?

Beyond looking at new experiences and learning from them, an enormous task awaits us and this cannot be realized in an isolated way, but in collaboration, uniting all efforts. It is urgent to *rethink*:

- *The human being and relationships of fraternity and of power*: in this time of transition it is necessary to find a new anthropology, contextualized in the wide horizon of post modernity which brings us to a discovery of new relationships of fraternity and of power.
- *God and our relationship with Him*: how to understand God in the new context in which we live and starting from a new anthropology, review our relationship with Him.
- *Religious consecrated apostolic life, its role in the Church and in society*: in this pluralistic context where we live, in what way can we present religious apostolic life in the society in such a way that it becomes more meaningful?
- *Ecclesiology*: actual transformations indicate the necessity of thinking over again about our way of being Church in the media culture which is pluralistic.
- *The theology not only of consecrated life but also of our way of understanding and speaking to God*: it is important that our way of communicating to God is understandable to our interlocutors and that consecrated apostolic life becomes meaningful and have a strong identity

The task is enormous and only religious men and women deeply rooted in the Triune God, open to the action of the Spirit, aware of one's vocation, humanly balanced, professionally prepared, sensitive to the cry of the poor and capable of giving one's life until martyrdom, can collaborate so that consecrated apostolic life may live in a new springtime.

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- ¹ Il CELAM ha realizzato un "Laboratorio sulle nuove forme di vita consacrata in AL e nei Caraibi", in Assunção, Paraguay, dal 27 aprile al 1 maggio 2009; La Commissione Episcopale Pastorale della Dottrina della Fede della Conferenza dei Vescovi del Brasile (CNBB) ha pubblicato un sussidio *Igreja particular, movimentos eclesiais e novas comunidades*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2005.
- ² Vedere, come esempio, l'opera: CARRANZA, Brenda, MARIZ, Cecília, CAMURÇA, Marcelo (org), *Novas Comunidades católicas*. Em busca do espaço pós-moderno, São Paulo, Idéias & Letras, 2009, che mette insieme una serie di studi realizzati da diversi ricercatori.
- ³ "The new communities do not appear as such in the new Code of Canon Law, even if their rights and duties find in them their foundation" (cf. Conferenza nazionale dei Vescovi del Brasile, *Igreja particular, movimentos eclesiais e novas comunidades*, p. 21).
- ⁴ The so called "new movements" are, in general, international associations came to life generally in Europe before Vatican II. They gather lay catholics who aim at strengthening affective and effective bonds with the Church hierarchy, demonstrating unconditional fidelity. They attract practicing catholics. They nourish the utopis of a new Christianity desired by many sectors in the Church.. Cf. CARRANZA, Brenda, MARIZ, Cecília Loreto. Novas comunidades católicas: por que crescem? In: CARRANZA, Brenda, MARIZ, Cecília, CAMURÇA, Marcelo (org), *Novas Comunidades católicas*. Em busca do espaço pós-moderno, São Paulo, Idéias & Letras, 2009.
- ⁵ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale *Vita consecrata*, n. 62.
- ⁶ "Canção Nova", with its office in Cachoeira Paulista, Stato di São Paulo, Brasil, is one of the new communities growing strongly. Actually, the annual increase in number has a median of about one hundred new members..
- ⁷ Elias Dimas dos Santos, fondatore della Comunità, ha pubblicato uno studio intitolato: *Novas Comunidades: dom da Trindade*, São Paulo, Loyola, 2003.
- ⁸ La Toca de Assis is an example of this radicalism...
- ⁹ The "Araldi del Vangelo" constitutes, among others, an example of preoccupation for an identity linked to exterior medieval signs. .
- ¹⁰ *Vita Consecrata*, n. 5.
- ¹¹ FABRI, Márcio dos Anjos. *Convergência* n. julho/agosto 2010.
- ¹² The Belgian priest Caetano Minetti de Tillesse, founder of the Community New Jerusalem , suggests to his followers, men and women, spouses and celibates, to be a "biblical generation", a people that reads and knows the Bible." .
- ¹³ As example, we may quote: Toca de Assis, with simple features, brown habit and slippers on foot, the Orders of the Templars with showy habits and white tunic, the "Araldi del Vangelo", with boots and banners with the Papal coat of arms
- ¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40.

*FOUNDATION OF BLESSED EGIDIO OF
ASSISI
EUROPEAN MISSIONARY FRATERNITY IN
PALESTRINA (RM)*

Fr. Giacomo Bini, OFM

Fr. Giacomo Bini entered the Franciscan Order in 1956 and had his priestly consecration in 1964. From 1969 he has been given several assignments: Liturgy teacher in the Regional Seminary of Fano, Novice Master, “definitore” and Provincial Vicar of the Marche province, guardian and parish priest in Urbino. In 1982 he participated in Project Africa. He was in charge of the youth in formation in Rwanda and Tanzania and later was assigned Minister Provincial. In 1997 he was called to take on the responsibility as Minister General of the Order until 2003.

Original in Italian

Introduction

I want to say right away that I will be talking about a “new form within an Institute of apostolic consecrated life.” The European Missionary Fraternity residing in Palestrina, of which I will speak later, began four years ago and is juridically located within a Foundation begun a year ago in union with another Fraternity located in Istanbul and committed to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. The foundation is an incipient, separate Entity, and directly dependent upon the General Minister. It has the ability to welcome new vocations and new monks coming from other Entities. Under this aspect, it is a question of a new experience which goes back to the origins of the Order. It is an inter-provincial, international Entity, above the territorial level; it directly serves the Order and the men and women of our time.

European Missionary Fraternity

This Fraternity is the result of and the putting into concrete form of an idea coming from a Seminar wanted by the General Curia in 2006, on “New Forms of Evangelization in Europe.” In the Seminar, concentration was put on Europe as a continent that is in greater need of new forms of evangelization.

In addition, various Fraternities had been begun in different European countries, looking for deeper and more meaningful dialogue with men and women of our cultures. During this meeting we asked ourselves why we didn't begin a new international missionary Fraternity directly dependent on the General Minister. It could be a prophetic sign of communion, that would be freer in movement and less structured. It would have the purpose of searching for new forms of presence and dialogue with populations of our continent.

With the encouragement of the General Curia, six Friars Minor from various Provinces and nations came together to draw up a life plan and begin this journey in a traditional convent offered by the Roman Province, in Palestrina (Rm). There were no other pretenses other than to try to live the Rule and the General Constitutions in fraternity as a form of evangelization. The sense of direction was that of a simple Franciscan life that was more transparent than efficient, more meaningful for men and women of today.

A contemplative Fraternity in mission

In our Plenary Council of the Order (PCO) of 2001, the Order of Friars Minor defined itself as, "contemplative Fraternity in mission." In going back to this formulation, the desire was to emphasize fraternal life, both internal and external, based upon the Gospel. In our life plan we wanted to point out this value and thus commit ourselves to share, to dialogue and to collaborate in all areas of life, by praying together, working together, catechizing together, going on missions together, evaluating together.... In other words, we were committed to go from common living to communion of life according to the Gospel as missionary witnessing. It was a communion of life with simple, understandable structures accessible to everyone. The starting point became acceptance of each monk with his gifts, qualities, possibilities, and as a surprise from God.... The building of fraternity, of an open, welcoming and missionary fraternity is an indispensable and fundamental priority. This priority given to people rather than to structures, to living together rather than to efficiency, needs to be constantly reconciled with the demands of the fraternal journey and spiritual aspirations of our world, as a thirst for spirituality and the crisis in relationships. All this is rooted in a well-cared for life of personal and community prayer, with frequent spiritual chapters, weekly "lectio divina" both among ourselves and with the people.

A free and freeing Fraternity

It is a matter of a free Fraternity since it aims to be dispossessed of every possession while being evangelically possessed by the Spirit. It is a question of a clearly theocentric and therefore free Fraternity! It is not linked to the

“always done” that way, because the Spirit is creative and always expects new responses; nor to a burdensome structure that can become the sole reason for life; nor to a specific land, because it is felt more linked to the human person than to a limited land. It is a Free Fraternity, where the structures are at the service of the values and progressively become signs of life, transparency more than efficiency, and above all are meaningful for our world. The diversity of place of origin, formation, age, and spiritual journey of the monks who make up the group are reconciled and appreciated elements that announce to everyone who visits us that there is no need to fear what is “different,” but should become a source of richness, life and grace. It is a free Fraternity because a simple lifestyle is set, a lifestyle that becomes more and more essential, stripped of the superfluous and filled with great trust in Providence who will not allow anything to be lacking. It is not a greatly ascetic, radical or highly mystical Fraternity. But it is an “ordinary” Fraternity, which, in order to defend its freedom and strengthen its times of fraternal relationships, felt the need to be disciplined in the use of means of communications, gave up television, car, and hired service workers in order to live their vocation without too many “distractions”, to live from the work of their own hands and from Providence.

And when a Fraternity is serenely free, because it is rooted in the trust of God and others, it becomes freeing and peace-making also to those who are near. It easily frees all the abilities and gifts of each monk and each person to put them at the service of the others. All this fosters a family atmosphere of collaboration rather than competition, opposition or jealousy.

Fraternity in mission

We are aware that fraternal and contemplative life is not enough; an evangelical life is not enough; an evangelizing life is needed. The Lord calls people for a mission, to be sent. Religious life must become a constant exodus. Missionary life is to be understood as a spirituality of encounter more than of expectation.

In our life plan, evangelization is open to any kind of encounter, provided that it be done in fraternity and minority, always pointing out the gifts of each person. Even though we are small, during these four years we have tried to carry out forms of evangelization in Italy and other nations of Europe, such as Spain, France, Poland and Lithuania. It is a matter of simply-given, diversified missions, given without charge, and done in collaboration with small groups of religious men and women and laity. These same laity, for whom the missions were given, have become enthusiastic collaborators in itinerant missions of going two by two, without money and asking for food

and hospitality, as required by the Gospel; or going to the homeless on the streets or approaching the Gypsy population, which has been more and more isolated and despised; or missions through art by giving courses on iconography.... Some missions were organized by us, while others are the fruit of collaboration and sharing with other Provinces or Institutes. We have continued the evangelizing missions as a ministry of presence, listening, encounter and announcing, depending upon the situation.

We are also living the missionary dimension through manual labor in the house and for others, unpretentiously and without pay, but only as an exchange of services.

We are expressing other forms of evangelization in the local Church according to the charisms of the monks that make up the fraternity, in various ministerial services, without any distinction between priest monks or lay brothers. The dialogue with the bishop has been very good and the requests have been so many that we cannot satisfy them all. It is important that after every mission or absence from the house there is the felt need to return to the fraternity to rest, renew oneself spiritually, and talk about and evaluate what has happened together and before the Lord.

Fraternity of hospitality

In these few years of experience we have welcomed many people: religious men and women of various Institutes; laity (especially the youth) who desire to have a religious experience with us that can last from a week to a year; temporarily and solemnly professed members of various groups of Franciscans... We have always freely hosted a few people at the same time in order to better live these encounters in a familial and interpersonal style. All the guests faithfully follow our rhythm of life: prayer and work, silence and dialogue and sharing, missions and daily managing of life. We are offering more the Fraternity, rather than a house. Laity and religious undergoing a difficult time have also been welcomed for a time of reflection, prayer, and accompaniment toward inner peace. Everything becomes mission!

Conclusion

Where is the newness of this experience? Perhaps there is none, at least regarding the contents. We are trying to live the Gospel, the Rule and the General Constitutions with simplicity. Or perhaps *the newness* lies right in the considering it possible today to live certain fundamental demands of religious life about which so much has been said in the last 50 years, yet so little put into practice! The dichotomy between words and life has become so

habitual that it no longer surprises anyone. In fact, we usually try to justify and excuse it.

The “new” today can be verified in simply taking on again of the initial evangelical insight of the charism, believing in truth, trying to live it passionately in our daily lives as individuals and as Fraternity.

Another “newness” in this experience, which can become a “small Copernican revolution,” could be the attempt we are making of putting the individual person, the individual monk in the first place of our attention and not the structures, whether these be pastoral, survival or anything else. But with this as well, we are in harmony with what is said in our documents: “The base structure of the Order is the individual monk moved by the Spirit. (PCO 2) It is in starting from this perspective that the personal-spiritual, relational, environmental and institutional structures are adapted and changed, and not vice versa.

The central position of the fraternal-theocentric relationship. “We are convinced that this Spirit who is the link of perfection and the source of the evangelical plan, urges the monks to become “brother-in-relationship,” a person capable of putting their vocation on the line with others, even in situations of tension.” (PCO 2) By overcoming every temptation of self-promoting autonomy, self-sufficiency and isolation, fraternal relationships, which become prophetic word in our world, are asking to be put again in the central place of our spirituality in order to become a sign of our identity and evangelical transparency. Thus, another “revolution”, another newness in tune with the fundamental requirements of religious life!

A final element of “newness” in the history of the Order, could end up being this beginning of the Blessed Egidio Foundation. In the agility of its structure and in its composition of people from different Provinces and cultures, it could open new paths that are no longer conditioned by provincialisms or paralyzing structures concerned more about preservation than about conversion, about survival more than about the evangelical life. Here as well, priority is given to people and the needs of today’s men and women and not to territorial, institutional and structural bonds that are too limiting.

How has this experienced been accepted within the Order? Some Provincials are a little concerned because they think we will “rob” them of their vocations and their monks... With others there is good collaboration.

This experience is only a journey that is open *today* and that we entrust to the Spirit.

EXPERIENCES OF NEW FORMS OF APOSTOLIC CONSECRATED LIFE

Sr. Suzanne Phillips FMM

Sr. Suzanne Phillips had a great love of St. Francis as a child, and entered the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in 1977. From 1984 to 1987, she was a social worker with refugees in Australia.

In 1987, Sr. Sue was missioned to Meknes, Morocco, where she was involved with school administration. She also served as a local coordinator and was a member of the FMM province.

Sr. Sue was missioned back to Australia in 1995, and became involved in parish work and social work. She opened a House of Welcome for Refugees in Sydney. In 2008 she was named Superior General.

Original in English

Introduction

I was amused to realize that I was one of three Franciscans asked to speak on new forms of Apostolic Consecrated Life. The Franciscan Life which is defined as an Evangelical Life (the previous speaker Sr. Ilia Delio OSF is an expert on this subject) is not currently recognized by the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Canons 674 and 675 describe only two modes of Consecrated Life as exhaustive of the religious state, namely Contemplative and Apostolic. The 'newness' could be that one day Evangelical Life may be recognized by the Church in its Law, but more so, that the unique gift of S. Francis of Assisi, in his call 'to be brother' as his primary response to the Gospel, be recognized as an important insight not only for Consecrated Life, but also to the Christian understanding of God, the human journey and the reality of the cosmos.

Thus said, I will now concentrate on my response to the subject on the experiences of Apostolic Consecrated Life in the context of what is commonly referred to by Europeans as a 'new world' that of Australia¹. The Australian Church has not seen the 'new' forms or movements, as referred to by S. Vera, as in the contexts of Latin America and parts of Europe. However

I do believe there is a ‘newness’ of the forms of expression in already existing Institutes of Consecrated Life. This I propose has come about as a result of being faithful to an ‘organic’ process of discernment rather than as a planned evolution². For the purposes of this paper I will limit my contribution to that of the congregations of women religious and my own experiential knowledge.

Context

After Vatican II the religious women of Australia, within a social context that held no strong historical or religious traditions, had the freedom and the ability to respond to the call for renewal, not only in educating their members and in researching their founding charisms, but also in divesting themselves of either the ownership, or the administrative responsibility of many of the major educational, social and health institutions in their care. This meant a plethora of small communities located closer to the people, with simpler life and dress-styles, and the sisters continuing their contribution to institutions or taking on more pastoral and social welfare roles in an increasingly multi-cultural country, with a growing attention to the needs of the poor and the marginalized in both Church and society, and for some local congregations this also meant mission ‘ad-extra’.

This movement, within the context of social reality of a relatively young and modern country, geographically and psychologically distant from Rome, together with the emerging contribution of psychology, group dynamics and individual spiritual direction, called into question many of the aspects of traditional consecrated life especially with regard to leadership and community.

Leadership

More than twenty years ago the concept of ‘maximum feasible participation’ in the discernment for major decision making in the congregation, gave rise to regional and provincial assemblies, replacing some of the more hierarchical and exclusive delegation structures of government. Thus followed a slower and yet more inclusive manner as the congregation sought to face the real issues of difference in the life of the group and hopefully move towards consensus. This manner of proceeding was supported by a more feminine understanding of the importance of relationships and was also very critical of the patriarchal models that had influenced the Church and the lives of religious women.

As a consequence certain characteristics of a ‘new’ model of leadership

emerged: placing the leader alongside rather than above the members of their communities; viewing leadership as service and not status and privilege; power as a social process calling forth collaboration so to release the power in the group; facilitating groups to find their own answer; promoting the diversity of gifts among the members and striving for unity. This change was symbolized in congregational change in terminology from the traditional 'Provincial and Council' to that of 'Congregational Leader and Leadership Team'.

Community living

This 'new' model of leadership and its role also had its effect on the life of the small communities, 'shared leadership' became an option for those groups who so desired it, where each member had clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the fostering of life in community. Thus with the now strong emphasis on collaborative sisterly relationships in daily living as a focus, there developed the desire for individual commitment to 'life-giving' communities, calling for personal maturity and responsibility. When such communities provided to be 'life-draining rather than life-giving', due to the complex needs of some of the individuals who could manage in large groups but not small ones, then the move came to allow individuals to live alone, but still connected to a reference community. This was possible in a society where a significant number of women and men, unmarried or divorced, chose to live alone.

This phenomenon then gave rise to the question of what is community, does it mean all living under the one roof? This was a different question from living alone because of apostolic reasons. Referring to community as a network of relationships showed the attempt to be inclusive to this 'new' reality. In our present day, the terminology has evolved to congregations speaking of 'Living Cells', 'Clusters', 'Circles of Communion' etc. that are either geographically configured or self-selecting of the group / members. The largest, local Australian congregation of nearly 800 members, using the terminology of 'Living Cells' were last year unable to gain approval by the CICLSAL for the changes to their Constitutions with regard to their chapter on Community, but it has since been approved, after an acknowledgement by CICLSAL that local community does not necessarily mean that they all live under the one roof! In their configuration each 'Living Cell' has a named leader who is voted in by the members. As much authority as possible, is given to that 'Living Cell' at their level.

This is also the situation with International congregations, which even though they may have less autonomy with regard to configurations of

structures, still find themselves with similar situations and with a large number³ of aged sisters unable to take up the traditional roles of community leadership. Hence several small groups of sisters may have a 'geographic' or 'area' non-resident leader. In the larger communities of aged sisters, there may be a named 'superior/animator' but in name only, as the traditional role of the superior is taken by a lay person employed as 'health coordinator'. This role in some congregations with many aged sisters is also taken by lay people at the regional and national levels of the congregation.

Prayer life

With many of the external structures that once sustained and nourished traditional religious life now gone, with the lack of availability of the Sacraments in many places, together with the strong call to be the 'leaven in the dough' in the midst of realities that tear at the human heart, incarnating the Gospel message calls for 'personal internal structures' based on interior freedom and deep presence to the flow of life in the Indwelling Spirit... To live the 'presence' of Jesus, as everywhere we cross boundaries of race, culture and religion in our daily activity among a broken and beautiful world. Meditation, contemplation and creative integration of life's realities become the ground for 'new' forms of prayer to sustain and support an incarnational, holistic spirituality. Recitation of the Divine Office as proposed by the Church for many groups becomes too many words with violent images of God and exclusive language. Silence and interiority take on greater importance for reflection and integration of the lived realities of the day based on sharing of the Word with attention to feminine images of God and inclusive language.

Sharing the charism

As religious women devoted their efforts and energies to further their ministries to the marginalized of society in the areas of justice and peace, as well as attend to the quality of their lives and membership, there emerged the call from the lay people now administering the former religious educational and health institutions. The desire of School Principals and their staff, the Boards of Directors of their health and social institutions to know more about the founding charism, the convictions at the heart of the congregation's spirituality, the story of the foundress/founder, sometimes after decades of virtually no contact with congregation. Many religious saw this movement of the Spirit as a call for the charism to be lived and expressed in previously unknown ways, a form of 'new life' for this gift of God to the Church, especially in the face of diminishing numbers and a serious lack of vocations

to its traditional form of expression. This desire of lay people to discover the treasure we have kept hidden for so long, has led teacher groups, management boards to undertake pilgrimages to Europe and other lands to follow the footsteps of the one whose life gave the charism to the world. The effects of which touch the lives and relationships of many families for the coming of the Kingdom, in ways impossible for a limited group of religious women.

Conclusion

We so often hear, the world is in crisis, the Church is in crisis, religious life is in crisis, but as believers in an Incarnational God we know that the Holy Spirit is not in crisis! The Spirit weaves Her way forward and lights our darkness with rays of light and hope. As we search in that darkness to find our path as consecrated religious may we have the courage to let go of our comfort zones, open ourselves to risk and daring, with creative fidelity to the Church and trust the words of the Lord ringing in our ears and hearts: Behold, I make all things new!

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- ¹ The Aust. Bureau of Statistics 2001: Population: Relig Affiliation states: 27% Catholics, 21% Anglican, 26% Other, 26% No religion.
 - ² This 'renewal' movement was headed by the major local and diocesan congregations, but influenced many others.
 - ³ Religious Congregations in Australia, 2009 Survey: 120 women's religious congregations (of which 11 are Contemplative Monasteries). Of the 5,797 Religious Women, 61% are 70 years of age and over, in comparison with only 6.3% under 50 years of age.