
CONSECRATED LIFE – SIGN OF COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The Magisterium of the Church, through doctrinal documents that guide, illuminate, compare and promote certain realities throughout history, has attached importance and value to the theme of consecrated life, as a way of life for people, which fulfils and demands a mission within the Church itself, focused on the transmission of the Gospel based on experience of fraternal life and the radical following of Christ.

Within the doctrine we find the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, published in 1996, by St John Paul II. It summarizes the reflections and requirements of the Synod of Bishops and Major Superiors of religious communities. The document is a timely reflection on the call that God has sent, sends and will continue to send to men and women to involve themselves in the extension of the Kingdom of Heaven. It covers a great deal of ground, and invites people to contemplate the option for consecrated life. It emphasises the importance of consecrated life for the Church today, its mission as a place where the communion between the One and Triune God is made visible, its role as being bound but at the same time binding to God's Holy Church. Finally it describes what the formation process ought to be, beginning with the motivation for new vocations from the standpoint of vocations' promotion and ministry. It is a document well worth reading therefore, which will undoubtedly invite those who feel a vocation of service to opt for consecrated life, and, in the same way, revive the feelings in those who have already opted for consecrated life, like us, who, from our consecrated life, have been invited and called to live the following of Christ from the spirituality and charism of hospitality of St John of God.

SYNTHESIS

The exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of St John Paul II, following the introduction where the great value of consecrated life for the Church, in its various expressions, is highlighted, places it in the experience of the disciples on Mt Tabor, where, in the episode of the Transfiguration of the Lord, the communion of the Most Holy Trinity is expressed. It is this communion that the Church asks consecrated life to bear witness to in the world as unequivocal expression of the experience of the Kingdom of God in the midst of humanity. It centres all of consecrated life on the person of Jesus, who, as his legacy, left us his humanity in the humanity of every human being who suffers and is at our side, and who permits us to configure ourselves with the Master day by day.

For those of us who have already made this choice, the message is clear. That is why, when we embrace consecrated life, the experience and living of the evangelical counsels, we commit ourselves to being the Trinitarian expression wherein the Father makes one family of all and the incarnated Son reunites the

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redeemed and gives them an example of life, and the Holy Spirit is the principle of unity throughout the Church, thus giving rise to fraternal and spiritual families.

Most certainly the drop in vocations in today's society has been a major challenge for consecrated life, in that its mission is only possible thanks to the fidelity of those consecrated to it. The future of consecrated life depends on the generous response of men and women to the Lord's call. That is why institutes and communities of religious life must continue to work at making this lifestyle and life choice attractive, so that those who receive the call will feel interested in giving a generous response to the Lord. They need to concentrate on making visible the experience of brotherhood that shows that Jesus is at the centre of the community, and united to the Church. Never forget that Jesus' invitation. "Come and see" will always be valid and allows us to show the beauty of following the Lord Jesus, just like the Founders of the religious institutes of brothers.

The document concludes recalling the importance of religious life for today's society, as a place where the grace of God abounds, as a response to the questioning of an utilitarian world that measures us according to the immediate usefulness of our actions, and feels that a lifestyle like the consecrated life is useless, and that giving one's life up to the service of others, in the wake of the Lord, is meaningless. It also reminds us that in heeding and responding to the Lord's call, we are being called to love him with a faithful and undivided heart.

Finally, it invokes the protection of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, so that, through her intercession those of us who have been called may attain fidelity to our consecration, following and witnessing to the Lord Jesus with a transfigured existence, that will allow us to live our consecration joyfully at the side of our brother religious and walk together towards our celestial land.

TEXT

POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION VITA CONSECRATA OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS AND CLERGY RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND CONGREGATIONS SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE SECULAR INSTITUTES AND ALL THE FAITHFUL ON THE CONSECRATED LIFE AND ITS MISSION IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD

III. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Difficulties and future prospects

63. The changes taking place in society and the decrease in the number of vocations are weighing heavily on the consecrated life in some regions of the world. The apostolic works of many Institutes and their very

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presence in certain local Churches are endangered. As has already occurred at other times in history, there are Institutes which even run the risk of disappearing altogether. The universal Church is profoundly grateful for the great contribution which these Institutes have made to building her up through their witness and service. The trials of the present do not take away from their merits and the positive results of their efforts.

For other Institutes, there is the problem of reassessing their apostolate. This task, which is difficult and often painful, requires study and discernment in the light of certain criteria. For example, it is necessary to safeguard the significance of an Institute's own charism, to foster community life, to be attentive to the needs of both the universal and particular Church, to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to the new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, even if necessarily on a small scale, and above all in the most abandoned areas. The various difficulties stemming from the decline in personnel and apostolates must in no way lead to a loss of confidence in the evangelical vitality of the consecrated life, which will always be present and active in the Church. While individual Institutes have no claim to permanence, the consecrated life itself will continue to sustain among the faithful the response of love towards God and neighbour. Thus it is necessary to distinguish the historical destiny of a specific Institute or form of consecrated life from the ecclesial mission of the consecrated life as such. The former is affected by changing circumstances; the latter is destined to endure. This is true of both the contemplative and apostolic forms of consecrated life. On the whole, under the ever creative guidance of the Spirit, the consecrated life is destined to remain a shining witness to the inseparable unity of love of God and love of neighbour. It appears as the living memory of the fruitfulness of God's love. New situations of difficulty are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those who know that what is required of each individual is not success, but commitment to faithfulness. What must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission. Rather, by persevering faithfully in the consecrated life, consecrated persons confess with great effectiveness before the world their unwavering trust in the Lord of history, in whose hands are the history and destiny of individuals, institutions and peoples, and therefore also the realization in time of his gifts. Sad situations of crisis invite consecrated persons courageously to proclaim their faith in Christ's Death and Resurrection, that they may become a visible sign of the passage from death to life.

Fresh efforts in the promotion of vocations

64. The mission of the consecrated life, as well as the vitality of Institutes, undoubtedly depend on the faithful commitment with which consecrated persons respond to their vocation. But they have a future to the extent that still other men and women generously welcome the Lord's call. The problem of vocations is a real challenge which directly concerns the various Institutes but also involves the whole Church. Great spiritual and material energies are being expended in the sphere of vocational promotion, but the results do not always match expectations and efforts. Thus, while vocations to the consecrated life are flourishing in the young Churches and in those which suffered persecution at the hands of totalitarian regimes, they are lacking in countries traditionally rich in vocations, including vocations for the missions.

This difficult situation puts consecrated persons to the test. Sometimes they ask themselves: Have we perhaps lost the capacity to attract new vocations? They must have confidence in the Lord Jesus, who continues to call men and women to follow him. They must entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit, who inspires and bestows the charisms of the consecrated life. Therefore, while we rejoice in the action of the Spirit, who rejuvenates the Bride of Christ by enabling the consecrated life to flourish in many nations, we must also pray unceasingly to the Lord of the harvest, that he will send workers to his Church in order to

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meet the needs of the new evangelization (cf. Mt 9:37-38). Besides promoting prayer for vocations, it is essential to act, by means of explicit presentation and appropriate catechesis, with a view to encouraging in those called to the consecrated life that free, willing and generous response which carries into effect the grace of vocation. The invitation of Jesus, "Come and see" (Jn 1:39), is the golden rule of pastoral work for promoting vocations, even today. Following the example of founders and foundresses, this work aims at presenting the attraction of the person of the Lord Jesus and the beauty of the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel. A primary responsibility of all consecrated men and women is therefore to propose with courage, by word and example, the ideal of the following of Christ, and then to support the response to the Spirit's action in the heart of those who are called. After the enthusiasm of the first meeting with Christ, there comes the constant struggle of everyday life, a struggle which turns a vocation into a tale of friendship with the Lord. In view of this, the pastoral work of promoting vocations should make use of suitable help, such as spiritual direction, in order to nourish that personal response of love of the Lord which is the necessary condition for becoming disciples and apostles of his Kingdom. Moreover, if the flourishing of vocations evident in some parts of the world justifies optimism and hope, the lack of them in other areas must not lead either to discouragement or to the temptation to practise lax and unwise recruitment. The task of promoting vocations should increasingly express a joint commitment of the whole Church. It calls for the active collaboration of pastors, religious, families and teachers, as required in something which forms an integral part of the overall pastoral plan of every particular Church. In every Diocese there should be this common endeavour, which coordinates and promotes the efforts of everyone, not jeopardizing, but rather supporting, the vocational activity of each Institute. The effective cooperation of the whole People of God, with the support of Providence, cannot but give rise to an abundance of divine gifts. Christian solidarity should abound in meeting the needs of vocational formation in countries which are economically poorer. The recruitment of vocations in these countries should be carried out by the various Institutes in full accord with the Churches of the region, and on the basis of an active and long-term involvement in their pastoral life. The most authentic way to support the Spirit's action is for Institutes to invest their best resources generously in vocational work, especially by their serious involvement in working with youth.

Commitment to initial formation

65. The Synod Assembly paid special attention to the formation of those who wish to consecrate themselves to the Lord, and recognized its decisive importance. The primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission. To say "yes" to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation is the inescapable duty of all who have been called. One's whole life must be open to the action of the Holy Spirit, travelling the road of formation with generosity, and accepting in faith the means of grace offered by the Lord and the Church. Formation should therefore have a profound effect on individuals, so that their every attitude and action, at important moments as well as in the ordinary events of life, will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God. Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving, this must also be the principal objective of formation. Formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father. If this is the purpose of the consecrated life, the manner of preparing for it should include and express the character of wholeness. Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions. Precisely because it aims at the transformation of the whole person, it is clear that the commitment to formation never ends. Indeed, at every stage of life, consecrated persons must be offered opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission of their Institute. For formation to be complete, it must include every aspect of Christian life. It must therefore

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provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects. Sufficient time should be reserved for initial formation, understood as a process of development which passes through every stage of personal maturity — from the psychological and spiritual to the theological and pastoral. In the case of those studying for the priesthood, this initial formation coincides with and fits well into a specific course of studies, as part of a broader formation programme.

The work of those responsible for formation

66. God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the educator par excellence of those who consecrate themselves to him. But in this work he makes use of human instruments, placing more mature brothers and sisters at the side of those whom he calls. Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey. Sensitive to the action of grace, they will also be able to point out those obstacles which are less obvious. But above all they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman, until they are genuinely free. The chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.

Because sensitive tasks are involved, the training of suitable directors of formation, who will fulfil their task in a spirit of communion with the whole Church, is very important. It will be helpful to establish appropriate structures for the training of those responsible for formation, preferably in places where they can be in contact with the culture in which their pastoral service will later be carried out. In the work of formation, the more solidly established Institutes should help those of more recent foundation by contributing some of their best members.

Formation in community and for the apostolate

67. Since formation must also have a communal dimension, the community is the chief place of formation in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Initiation into the hardships and joys of community life takes place in the community itself. Through the fraternal life each one learns to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with their differences and limitations. Each one learns to share the gifts received for the building up of all, because "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). At the same time, from the moment of initial formation, community life must disclose the essential missionary dimension of consecration. Thus, during the period of initial formation, Institutes of Consecrated Life do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative.

On the one hand, it is important for consecrated persons gradually to develop a critical judgement, based on the Gospel, regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work. On the other hand, they must be trained in the difficult art of interior harmony, of the interaction between love of God and love of one's brothers and sisters; they must likewise learn that prayer is the soul of the apostolate, but also that the apostolate animates and inspires prayer.

The need for a complete and updated "ratio"

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68. A definite period of formation extending up to final profession is recommended both for women's Institutes, and for men's Institutes as regards Religious Brothers. Essentially, this is also true for cloistered communities, which ought to set up suitable programmes, aimed at imparting a genuine preparation for the contemplative life and its particular mission in the Church.

The Synod Fathers earnestly asked all Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to draw up as soon as possible a ratio institutionis, that is, a formation programme inspired by their particular charism, presenting clearly and in all its stages the course to be followed in order to assimilate fully the spirituality of the respective Institute. The ratio responds to a pressing need today. On the one hand, it shows how to pass on the Institute's spirit so that it will be lived in its integrity by future generations, in different cultures and geographical regions; on the other hand, it explains to consecrated persons how to live that spirit in the different stages of life on the way to full maturity of faith in Christ. While it is true that the renewal of the consecrated life depends primarily on formation, it is equally certain that this training is, in turn, linked to the ability to establish a method characterized by spiritual and pedagogical wisdom, which will gradually lead those wishing to consecrate themselves to put on the mind of Christ the Lord. Formation is a dynamic process by means of which individuals are converted to the Word of God in the depths of their being and, at the same time, learn how to discover the signs of God in earthly realities. At a time when religious values are increasingly being ignored by society, this plan of formation is doubly important: as a result of it, consecrated persons will not only continue to "see" God with the eyes of faith in a world which ignores his presence, but will also be effective in making his presence in some way "perceptible" through the witness of their charism.

Continuing formation

69. Continuing formation, whether in Institutes of apostolic or contemplative life, is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration. As mentioned above, the formation process is not limited to the initial phase. Due to human limitations, the consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the "new creature" who, in every circumstance of life, reflects the very mind of Christ. Initial formation, then, should be closely connected with continuing formation, thereby creating a readiness on everyone's part to let themselves be formed every day of their lives. Consequently, it will be very important for every Institute to provide, as part of its ratio institutionis, a precise and systematic description of its plan of continuing formation. The chief purpose of this plan is to provide all consecrated persons with a programme which encompasses their whole life. None are exempt from the obligation to grow humanly and as Religious; by the same token, no one can be over-confident and live in self-sufficient isolation. At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity.

In a constant search for faithfulness

70. There is a youthfulness of spirit which lasts through time; it arises from the fact that at every stage of life a person seeks and finds a new task to fulfil, a particular way of being, of serving and of loving. In the consecrated life the first years of full involvement in the apostolate are a critical stage, marked by the passage from a supervised life to a situation of full responsibility for one's work. It is important that young consecrated persons be supported and accompanied by a brother or sister who helps them to live to the full the freshness of their love and enthusiasm for Christ. The next stage can present the risk of routine, and the subsequent temptation to give in to disappointment because of meagre results. Middle-aged consecrated persons must therefore be helped, in the light of the Gospel and the charism of their Institute, to renew their original decision, and not confuse the completeness of their dedication with the degree of

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good results. This will enable them to give a fresh impulse and new motivations to their decision. This is the time to search for what is essential. The stage of maturity, while it brings personal growth, can also bring the danger of a certain individualism, accompanied either by a fear of not being in line with the times, or by forms of inflexibility, self-centredness or diminished enthusiasm. At this point continuing formation is aimed at helping not only to bring back a higher level of spiritual and apostolic life, but also at discovering the special characteristics of this stage of life. For at this time, after refining certain features of the personality, the gift of self is made to God more genuinely and with greater generosity; it extends to others with greater serenity and wisdom, as well as with greater simplicity and richness of grace. This is the gift and experience of spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. Advanced age poses new problems, which can be prepared for by a discerning programme of spiritual support. The gradual withdrawal from activity, sometimes caused by sickness or forced immobility, can be a very formative experience. Often a time of suffering, advanced age nonetheless offers to elderly consecrated persons the chance to be transformed by the Paschal experience, by being configured to the Crucified Christ who fulfils the Father's will in all things and abandons himself into the Father's hands, even to the surrendering of his spirit to him. This configuration represents a new way of living one's consecration, which is not tied to effectiveness in carrying out administrative responsibilities or apostolic work. When the moment finally comes for uniting oneself to the supreme hour of the Lord's Passion, the consecrated person knows that the Father is now bringing to completion the mysterious process of formation which began many years before. Death will then be awaited and prepared for as the supreme act of love and self-offering. It should be added that, independently of the different stages of life, any period can present critical situations due to external factors — such as a change of place or assignment, difficulties in work or lack of success in the apostolate, misunderstandings and feelings of alienation — or resulting from more directly personal factors such as physical or mental illness, spiritual aridity, deaths, difficulties in interpersonal relations, strong temptations, crises of faith or identity, or feelings of uselessness. When fidelity becomes more difficult, the individual must be offered the support of greater trust and deeper love, at both the personal and community levels. At such times, the sensitive closeness of the Superior is most essential. Great comfort can also come from the valuable help of a brother or sister, whose concerned and caring presence can lead to a rediscovery of the meaning of the covenant which God originally established, and which he has no intention of breaking. The person undergoing such a trial will then accept purification and hardship as essential to the following of Christ Crucified. The trial itself will appear as a providential means of being formed by the Father's hands, and as a struggle which is not only psychological, carried out by the "I" in relation to itself and its weaknesses, but also religious, touched each day by the presence of God and the power of the Cross!

Dimensions of continuing formation

71. If the subject of formation is the individual at every stage of life, the object of formation is the whole person, called to seek and love God "with all one's heart, and with all one's soul, and with all one's might" (cf. Dt 6:5), and one's neighbour as oneself (cf. Lev 19:18; Mt 22:37-39). Love of God and of the brethren is a powerful force which can ceaselessly inspire the process of growth and fidelity. Life in the Spirit is clearly of primary importance. Living in the Spirit, consecrated persons discover their own identity and find profound peace; they grow more attentive to the daily challenges of the word of God, and they allow themselves to be guided by the original inspiration of their Institute. Under the action of the Spirit, they resolutely keep times for prayer, silence and solitude, and they never cease to ask the Almighty for the gift of wisdom in the struggles of everyday life (cf. Wis 9:10).

The human and fraternal dimensions of the consecrated life call for self-knowledge and the awareness of personal limitations, so as to offer its members the inspiration and support needed on the path towards

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perfect freedom. In presentday circumstances, special importance must be given to the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their own community, their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth, and a correspondence between their actions and their words. The apostolic dimension opens the hearts and minds of consecrated persons and prepares them for constant effort in the apostolate, as the sign that it is the love of Christ which urges them on (cf. 2 Cor 5:14). In practice, this will involve updating the methods and objectives of apostolic works in fidelity to the spirit and aims of the founder or foundress and to subsequently emerging traditions, with continuous attention to changing historical and cultural conditions, at the general and local levels where the apostolate is carried out. The cultural and professional dimensions, based upon a solid theological training which provides the means for wise discernment, involve continual updating and special interest in the different areas to which each charism is directed. Consecrated persons must therefore keep themselves as intellectually open and adaptable as possible, so that the apostolate will be envisaged and carried out according to the needs of their own time, making use of the means provided by cultural progress. Finally, all these elements are united in the dimension of the charism proper to each Institute, as it were in a synthesis which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects, not only apostolic but also ascetical and mystical. This means that each member should study diligently the spirit, history and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs, in order to advance the personal and communal assimilation of its charism.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The apostolic exhortation is based on the experience of the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mt Tabor, episode that made manifest the communion of the Most Holy Trinity, where the experience of community gathered around the Lord was born. We must therefore ask ourselves today:

- 1. Every time a young man feels that he has been called by God and comes to our community, does he encounter in our fraternal and community life the brotherhood and unity manifested by the Most Holy Trinity in the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus on Mt Tabor?**
- 2. Whenever a young man with a vocation comes into contact with one of the members of our community does he feel the joy within us that the call of the Lord brought to our lives: "Come and see"?, as an example of response to the invitation that God continues to make to the youth of today**