

The vision of Vatican II for the renewal of the life and mission of the Church: Renewal of Religious Life

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY POPES AND REFORM OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

The twentieth century popes were very concerned about reform of religious institutes or communities. At first these reforms focused on issues of authority. The reforms of Popes Leo XIII and St. Pius X placed religious congregations under the local authority of diocesan bishops, while all religious, including those in orders, were under the jurisdiction of the Vatican's Congregation of Religious established in 1908. Pope Pius XII imposed several important reforms. In 1947, he granted members of secular institutes—who live out in the world, not forming their own communities, wear no habits, and take no solemn vows—official recognition as “consecrated persons.” Although this recognition was new, secular institutes had existed for more than a century, in order to evade secularist laws forbidding religious orders. Even earlier, there had long been devout laypeople (e.g., in 16th cent. Spain), who adopted the rule of religious life in their own homes, sometimes even wearing a habit. Still, many complained that this new status eroded the distinction between religious and secular life.

In 1950, Pope Pius' constitution *Sponsa Christi* established a distinction between major and minor papal enclosure of orders of nuns. The Pope also encouraged womens' orders to form federations for mutual assistance. The reforms proposed by Pope Pius in *Sponsa Christi* and in the instructions of the Congregation for Religious [AAS 43 (1951), 37-44; AAS 48 (1956), 512-526] were actually quite restrained, and preserved a strong rule of cloister as well as an emphasis on the contemplative life. In speeches, the Pope urged expanded training and education for the nuns to perform their works of the apostolate with high proficiency. Differing to every norm coming from the Holy See, various reformers in the 1950s and 60s made recommendations for nuns to stop wearing habits or to live in the world. All that is necessary for radical reform has been almost prepared before the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

POPE JOHN XXIII

The Prayer of Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Vatican II was, "O Holy Spirit, Come down upon thy Church and renew it with a new Pentecostal experience." We are aware of the very many efforts the Church has made to make the spirit of renewal and unity a lived reality in the Church. Vatican Council II brought in a fresh air of renewal at all levels. Providentially it called for a renewal in religious life too.

This article looks at Renewal of Religious Life from an experiential and interdisciplinary perspective.

A Special invitation to women religious

In his letter to Women Religious, Pope John XXIII wrote how they ought to prepare themselves by reconsidering with renewed fervor the

commitments of their vocations in order to offer prompt and generous response to the decisions of the council.

“The preparation for the council demands that souls consecrated to the Lord according to the forms approved by the canonical legislation should reconsider with renewed fervor the commitments of their vocations. Thus in its time, the response to the decisions of the council, having been prepared through a more intense personal sanctification, will be prompt and generous. In order that the life of the consecrated to God corresponds always more perfectly to the desires of the Divine Heart, it is necessary that it should in reality be (1) a life of prayer, (2) a life of example and (3) a life of apostolate”¹

John XXIII exhorted religious women to honour poverty, radiate chastity and sweeten obedience and to make religious life a life of prayer, of example and of apostolate. Vatican Council II truly challenged the religious for a genuine renewal and offered guidelines to make it happen.

The Call of Vatican II for Renewal

On 28 October 1965 the Second Vatican Council published the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life². The doctrinal basis of it is found in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, especially chapter VI on “Religious”. The Decree’s aim was to renew Religious life, to attain that “*perfect love*” of which *Lumen Gentium* speaks (n. 42). Starting from and continuously referring to what is said in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, it also succeeds in clarifying some of the Constitution’s content and becomes an important way to integrate it. A great wealth of theological elements too is present in the Decree.

Over the years, the conciliar documents have not lost their timeliness; indeed, their teachings have proved very relevant to the new situation of the

Church and the current globalized society.³ Today, it is up to us to rediscover this relevance and significance in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*.

A contemporary theology of the consecrated life

The Second Vatican Council was also, undoubtedly, a historical turning point in theological reflection on the consecrated life. No Ecumenical Council had ever spoken at such length and with such depth on this important charism in the Church. Indeed, Vatican II was the first Council to have spoken in an eminently doctrinal perspective, outlining the identity of the consecrated life with reference to its place within the mystery of the Church as the People of God. Thus, it was the conciliar reflections in this area that gave rise to the rich contribution that led to the birth of the contemporary theology of the consecrated life. A close look at the Decree will reveal how the ecclesial spirit stands out in it and dominates the entire Decree. The good of the Church is the *raison d'être* of the Document and the supreme rule for the consecrated life (cf. n. 1). It then becomes clear throughout the text that this insertion in the Church is intrinsic to the consecrated life for the purpose of removing tendencies or views within the Institutes that are excessively individualistic.

Religious in the footsteps of Jesus Christ

The same strong Christological emphasis that marks chapter VI of *Lumen Gentium* is the most obvious characteristic of the entire Decree. In it the Council presented a Christ-like image of consecrated life, declaring that the evangelical counsels “above all... have the power to conform the Christian man more fully to that kind of poor and virginal life which Christ the Lord chose for himself and which his Virgin Mother embraced also”, urging consecrated persons to see to it that “the Church truly shows forth

Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers alike - Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the Kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 46).

The Decree echoes the words of the Constitution on the Church: "Religious, therefore, faithful to their profession and leaving all things for Christ's sake (cf. Mk 10: 28), should follow him (cf. Mt 19: 21) as the one thing that is necessary (cf. Lk 10: 42), listening to his words (cf. Lk 10: 39), and should be solicitous for all that is his (cf. I Cor 7: 32) (Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 5).

"The members of each Institute, therefore, ought to seek God before all else, and solely; they should join contemplation, by which they cleave to God by mind and heart, to apostolic love, by which they endeavour to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the Kingdom of God" (*ibid.*).

The renewal of the consecrated life, as the Council described it, should be lived through:

- ⊥ A return to the sources that are represented primarily by Sacred Scripture, therefore by the very person of Jesus Christ
- ⊥ A rediscovery of the authentic charism of the founders and constant sharpening of the same in the light of the signs of the times

The renewal of the Religious life, as we read in n. 2, "comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time" (*ibid.*, n. 2).

The Document continues, the first fundamental principle to obey and the priority commitment of every consecrated person is the *sequela Christi*

(following of Christ), as the Gospel teaches. This must be a constant aim of consecrated life: the patrimony of individual Institutes, the spirit and finality with which the founders and foundresses then inspired the development of the Religious Families that they founded, as well as sound traditions. This appears in particular in the presentation of the three vows. Community life where the Lord's presence in the community's midst is assured.

A broad renewal process

The renewal process is viewed very broadly. The great spirit of openness in *Perfectae Caritatis* can be seen even today. In fact, the Decree is directed to serving every form and every reality of consecrated life in the Church, from contemplative life to active life, from monastic and conventual life to secular Institutes.

The fundamental elements that constitute consecrated life are the three vows and community life. It is enough to think of the treatment of this topics, even without sacrificing any value of tradition, an unexpected openness to the contemporary world can be perceived which expresses at the same time both an appreciable optimism and sincere trust in the consecrated persons whom the Decree is addressing.

The Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life heralded a season of profound changes, the consecrated life was challenged to search new ways of living in community and new ways of apostolic service, radically transforming its way of being and working in the Church and in the world.

The general principles for reform articulated by the Council in its decree on *Perfectae Caritatis* as well as the specific norms for implementation, defined in *Ecclesiae Sanctae* need to be seen as a whole. The first part of the body of *Perfectae Caritatis* (sections 2-6) deals with the general principles governing the Council's vision concerning the reform or renewal of religious life. It is important to remember that the Council

does not propose giving religious communities a fundamentally new orientation, but rather to restore proper priority to traditional norms.

“Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule.” (PC, 2a) After this highest norm, each institute should faithfully honor “their founder’s spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions” (PC, 2b).

A third norm is that, “All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church’s undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social.” (PC, 2c). Fourth, “Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church.” This is so “they may be able to assist men more effectively.” (PC, 2d)

Lastly, the council reminds us:

The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will remain merely ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry (PC, 2e).

Ecclesiae Sanctae

The most obvious place where revision would be necessary was in liturgical practice, as reformed under *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. *Ecclesiae Sanctae*⁴ goes a bit further, recommending that institutes in the Latin Rite replace their Little Offices with part or all of the Divine Office, even though

the Little Offices are explicitly accepted by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*Eccl. Sanct.* 20; SC, 98).

Ecclesiae Sanctae also refers especially to chapters 5 and 6 of *Lumen Gentium* for the renewal's norms (*Eccl. Sanct.*, 15). There we find that the mission of the Church is "to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom" (LG, 5). We also find that the Church is a sheepfold whose shepherd and gate is Christ. It is where God dwells among men, a Temple built of living stones. The Church on earth seeks heavenly things, until the day her hidden life will appear in glory. (LG, 6)

Ecclesiae Sanctae prescribes that the reformed laws or constitutions of each institute should ordinarily include (a) evangelical and theological principles of religious life in accordance with the aims of the founders and their own traditions (per PC, 2b), and (b) necessary juridical norms, which "should not be excessively multiplied". (*Eccl. Sanct.*, 12) Both the spiritual and juridical elements are necessary; "care must therefore be taken that a merely juridical or purely exhortatory text is not composed." (*Eccl. Sanct.*, 13)

The fundamental code or constitution of an institute was expected to have permanence, so *Ecclesiae Sanctae* prescribed that matters which are obsolete, or subject to change with time or place should be excluded. Those norms which correspond only to present needs and particular circumstances, as well as "the physical and psychological conditions of the members," should be written in supplementary codes or directories. (*Eccl. Sanct.*, 14)

To ensure that the general principles of *Perfectae Caritatis* (2a-e) should pervade religious life, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* recommended (1) that all members, including novices, should study and meditate on the Gospels and all Sacred Scripture; (2) the theological, historical, and canonical aspects of the doctrine of religious life should be explained; and (3) "the institutes should strive for a genuine knowledge of their original spirit, so that faithfully

preserving this spirit in determining adaptations, their religious life may thus be purified of alien elements and freed from those which are obsolete.” (Eccl. Sanct., 16)

Returning to *Perfectae Caritatis*, we find that any reforms to constitutions must be approved by the Holy See or the local Ordinary where prescribed by canon law. Superiors should also take counsel from the members of their order prior to reform. “For the adaptation and renewal of convents of nuns suggestions and advice may be obtained also from the meetings of federations or from other assemblies lawfully convoked” (PC, 4). Yet “the hope of renewal lies more in the faithful observance of the rules and constitutions than in multiplying laws” (PC, 4).

Guided by perfect charity

“Perfect Charity” was to be the guide for renewing religious life in the way of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The challenge for many communities in responding to it has been striking a wise balance between a genuine return to the charism of the founder(s) and a creative adaptation to the needs of contemporary world realities. We are all familiar with the saying: “Virtue lies in the middle.” How difficult it is to strike a balance. In most cases, the focus moved more heavily toward one or the other. I believe the challenge for religious life today across communities is finding and/or maintaining that balance towards which Vatican II’s *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) is calling the Congregations while remaining rooted in the greatest teaching and call of all: Jesus Christ. We need to take a look at Vatican II’s *Perfectae Caritatis* which instructed the following:

The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church, must be advanced according to the following principles:

a) Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule.

b) It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore let their founders' spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions-all of which make up the patrimony of each institute-be faithfully held in honor.

c) All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church's undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social.

d) Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church. In such a way, judging current events wisely in the light of faith and burning with apostolic zeal, they may be able to assist men more effectively.

e) The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry.

Every Religious Congregation took specific direction under the guidance of the Spirit and their leaders and made attempts to bring about renewal according to the above principles. This called not only for due attention to the "founders' spirit and special aims" but also to "adaptation to the changed condition of our times."

The adaptation and renewal of the religious life as per Vatican II's *Perfectae Caritatis* includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to

the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, must be advanced under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church.

In *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Council reminds religious: that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin (cf. Rom. 6:11) but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone... Since the Church has accepted their surrender of self they should realize they are also dedicated to its service. This service of God ought to inspire and foster in them the exercise of the virtues, especially humility, obedience, fortitude and chastity...It is necessary therefore that the members of every community, seeking God solely and before everything else, should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him, with apostolic love, by which they strive to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God. (PC, 5)

While upholding the primacy of the contemplative life, the Council affirms that this very renunciation of self requires service to the Church, which has accepted their vows. (This is properly applicable only to those in orders.) This service, in turn, facilitates the exercise of virtues conducive to the contemplative life. Accordingly, religious are exhorted to join contemplation with apostolic charity. Further they, "should resolutely cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer," as well as reading Scripture and participating at Mass. (PC, 6) To this end, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* prescribed that "a larger place should be given to mental prayer instead of a multitude of prayers, retaining nevertheless the pious exercises commonly accepted in the Church..." (Eccl. Sanct., 20).

Renewal: A New Challenge for leader-servants

Many leader-servants with prophetic courage and vision had accompanied their religious in the great process of renewal desired by Vatican II. The challenge for leader-servants in religious communities was and is even today, guiding while enabling individuals to own responsibility for their

actions and their lives personally, within community, and within the world. In this way, leaders we believe, understood the gospel mandate, recognized the call in *Perfectae Caritatis*, and endeavored to facilitate the Spirit's direction of the post-Vatican II journey that the Congregations were invited to take up.

Alan J. Roxburgh in his book *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* writes:

“Liminality requires leaders with the theological, political, and social skills to elicit new *communitas*. This involves not just technique but the art of memory and expectation in which the lived experience of the past is *indwelt* in order for it to become our experience once more. This requires leaders whose identity is formed by the tradition rather than the culture. It also requires leaders who listen to the voices from the edge. This is where the apostle, the prophet, and the poet are found. These are the metaphors for congregational leadership today. The pastor's ears must be attuned not primarily to the popular, the latest trend, or the expert, but to those who recognize that marginality is the church's reality”⁵

Recognizing renewal from the horizon of the larger Church

The voices from the edge, from the margins are ever more powerful today. The vision of Vatican II for the renewal of the life and mission of the Church and in particular the Renewal of Religious Life has to be looked at the greater horizon of the larger Church. Each Congregation has its particular expressions of post-Vatican II renewal and adaptation. However it is important to remember that the great reality of renewal at times overemphasizes the merely human attempts at religious renewal within single Congregations and the Church.

“This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected

people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity. And the church is Mother; the church is fruitful. It must be. You see, when I perceive negative behaviour in ministers of the church or in consecrated men or women, the first thing that comes to mind is: 'Here's an unfruitful bachelor' or 'Here's a spinster.' They are neither fathers nor mothers, in the sense that they have not been able to give spiritual life. Instead, for example, when I read the life of the Salesian missionaries who went to Patagonia, I read a story of the fullness of life, of fruitfulness."

Renewal of religious life can be seen from the Daughters of the Cross, Daughters of the Church, and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians perspective. And it is indeed interesting to read about the renewal of religious life from different perspectives within the horizon of the larger Church. After Vatican Council II, many religious Congregations went through a major shift. Some found that the woman they had thought was their foundress it turned out wasn't. And some even discovered that what they were founded to be about wasn't teaching and healing, but peace through justice. Certainly, there are many ways to go about that ...including teaching and nursing. Some others discovered the sense and purpose of their religious consecration in a deeper manner. How true the words of Albert Schweitzer are: "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." The post Vatican renewal of Religious Life has indeed rekindled in many religious the spark of holiness and renewed commitment to the Lord and the people around.

In the process of renewal some congregations have even lost some of their members. Some people even say that the things religious didn't do well in the post Vatican II renewal period was to explain to the outside world why they were changing and how they were changing. A better dialogue with their brothers and sisters in the human family would have been most

welcomed. Mere attempts to modernize religious life by successfully secularizing it were eventually self-defeating. The institutions where these errors have been most persistent have suffered the maximum loss in membership as they were drifting away from their reason for being. It is a known fact that soon after the Second Vatican Council, there was a disastrous drop in vocations for monastic orders and congregations throughout Western Europe and North America. It is a challenging task to be constantly in touch with the original vision of our Founders' and the current reality of our times. Contextualization of the Charism making it ever relevant to the cries of the people of today was indeed a daring mission.

Renewal, an ongoing process of discernment

Renewal is a dynamic ongoing process of constant discernment. The post Vatican Renewal has truly helped to improve lives and give quality to it. It also helped to gain better understanding of our vision and mission of our religious congregations. It challenged religious to be more committed to their mission. It helped us to understand and gradually to be convinced that that our Congregations still has a mission and vocation to the whole universal Church and specifically to the local Church.

In many cases the post Vatican Renewal urged religious to do a critical re-reading of their mission. There emerged tendencies to give Peace and Justice an undeservedly co-equal status to Evangelization and Catechesis. This led to constant re-reading and better clarification of the mission of the congregation. The Magisterium of the Church also did a fine job in helping to get a better grasp of the reality. Pope Paul VI and in particular Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* have made it clear that the work for peace and justice is irreducibly a constitutive part of evangelization and therefore catechesis. What we need to be attentive is the type of peace and justice we are working for. A secular version of peace and justice would

ultimately be a sham, and a lie. A Gospel that could be proclaimed without the truths of peace and justice simply would be something less than the Gospel. Love of God, as St. Thomas makes it clear, means a love for the common good, the universal good, which is a love for all that God has willed in creation, for the sake of God. The common good is in fact Christ, the Totus Christus, which includes the recapitulation of all of creation, the entire material and temporal orders. Working for peace and justice in the right sense, is always eschatological, and always/already a part of the work of the Kingdom.

Displaying the masterpiece of God in the canvas of one's life

The Church recognizes several forms of consecrated life. In *Vita Consecrata*, the 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II wrote of the different forms of consecrated life as “the many branches which sink their roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church’s life.” These diverse forms include: Monastic Life, the Orders of Virgins, Hermits, and Institutes completely devoted to contemplation, Apostolic Religious Life, Secular Institutes, Societies of Apostolic Life, and new or renewed forms of the consecrated life (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 6-12).

Who are the religious? They are persons who freely and lovingly embrace the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in order to display the masterpiece of God in the canvas of their lives through their loving dedication to what God is asking them to do for their brothers and sisters. Florence Nightingale hit the nail on the head when she mused: “How very little can be done under the spirit of fear.” Convinced and interiorly liberated religious are consistently compassionate. It is all about letting their humanity shine out at work, at mission. They blend humanity with courage.

Founders and founding Charisms

Founders of Religious Congregations are leaders with Vision and Prophetic Courage. Founder, Foundress and Founding Charisms are always thought of with awe and wonder, respect and admiration. There is certain attraction into which a religious is drawn into as she/he reads the life of the founder/foundress. What is the secret behind this charisma? A quick glance into the life of a few founder may happily take us by surprise. Don Bosco, the father and teacher of youth, saw the city of Turin getting crowded with young people searching for jobs and he said: here is my mission among these poor young boys... St. Mary Mazzarello – Co-Foundress of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, familiarly known as the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco, had a vision and she heard a voice saying to her: “I entrust them to you.” To make that vision a reality she made education and education of poor and abandoned young girls her mission. Blessed James Alberione the media marvel of the 20th century Church and the founder of the Pauline Family had a very special vision: “to do something for the men and women of the new century.” He embraced the apostolate of the press to be his life, work and mission.

Today, to make religious life both relevant and meaningful, it is a must to revisit our founders with the new sensitivities of the present day. A close look at our foundresses and founders will take us to the simple, humble origins of our Congregations. Our pioneer leaders were certainly not protected by mighty structures. There was some kind of an extraordinary charm that attracted those around, including their close followers and collaborators. There was simplicity, poverty, freshness and of course sacrifice and sheer joy in abundance. They leaned not on their strengths but on that of the Lord Jesus. Trust in divine providence, with God everything is possible, St. Joseph, you please see to it, Mother Mary is in our midst etc. were their often repeated expressions. They were able to create an atmosphere of the divine in their communities and in their mission.

Sense of community and bonds of relationships

Hospitality, spirit of love, a true feeling of being loved and needed etc. are necessary attitudes we need to nurture in our communities. Here we have a very inspiring example: Until China and the Chinese came under the influence of Western ideas, every Chinese person's life image or life theme was community. "In this essay I claim community to be my life theme too."⁶ David Ng had profound experiences of lived hospitality as a son of immigrant parents, who grew up in Chinatown, San Francisco. He affirms that he never heard a lecture on Confucian values from his parents precisely because lived reality substituted such lectures.

"There were no lectures about inclusive hospitality or generosity. The lofty concepts of family, loyalty, mutuality, reciprocity, filial piety and such were not taught, at least not in so many words. I simply grew up in the Ng family who lived in Chinatown. Fifty years later while watching Bill Moyer interview Tu Weiming, a Confucian scholar, I knew immediately what Tu meant when he said that Chinese have a 'Confucian DNA'. I do."⁷

In its very essence, Christianity is profound relationship translated into humble service. Our profound experience of community life with its ever growing exposure to local and global manifestations, powered by the rapid growth in technology and social networks and our lived hospitality have to prompt us to nurture within us and among us, a deeper sense of mission, ministry and community. **Community life is the privileged place to rediscover the essence of Christianity in order to re-propose it for an appropriate enculturation of both the message and the attitude of Jesus Christ: love translated into service (Cf.Mt.20: 28).** As Jesus was so are Christians and more especially religious: marginal persons charged with the spirit of service in the footsteps of the Lord and Master.

The type of relationship that can blossom forth in religious communities is the one that makes us aware of the fascinating truth that we are children

of God made in the image and likeness of Him. And it is this awareness that urges religious to move forward to network for solidarity with similar marginalized groups and to work for the building of God's Kingdom. The renewal of religious life envisioned by Vatican II is an ongoing process coloured with many helps on the way.

The World Day for Consecrated Life

The World Day for Consecrated Life is a splendid opportunity for renewal and growth. What is the reason behind the celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life? In Pope John Paul II's words "it is intended to help the entire Church to esteem ever more greatly the witness of those persons who have chosen to follow Christ by means of the practice of the evangelical counsels and, at the same time, is intended to be a suitable occasion for consecrated persons to renew their commitment and rekindle the fervor which should inspire their offering of themselves to the Lord."

The gift of consecrated life is a gratuitous gift which God freely bestows on persons who are ready to listen and generous enough to respond to His call. To treasure this gift means to live in a constant attitude of thanksgiving to God in whole hearted availability to one's brothers and sisters. Consecrated life is a life of commitment, of dedication and of service. In a world that signs in quickly for short term commitments, this kind of life is a sweet reminder of long lasting commitments assumed consciously and signed up knowing thoroughly well the consequences. Jesus Christ is our most valued possession and this is exactly what we want to witness through our service and vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

At the heart of every vocational story, there is something unique, singular and special which can hardly be put into words. It is to this original experience that we consecrated persons need to return willingly and often, to get back the initial enthusiasm and vigour. Consecrated life offers us plenty of opportunities to taste and see how the Lord walks with us. Yes, to

muse on the mighty and the tiniest gestures of His unconditional love is nothing but rekindling the fervor to renew our lives. Consecrated persons, live their lives in watchful expectation of the Lord.

Religious life today is living a grace filled time. This particular time in which we live after the fifty years of Vatican II is indeed a grace filled time. The change in tone and language that our beloved Pope Francis has brought into the Church and into our human family as a whole is calling religious to a radical renewal.

Daughters of a grace filled time

We are living in a grace filled time. It is a time in which we render thanks to God the Father Almighty for the countless blessings and graces He has showered on our Congregations. How appropriate here are the words of Duke of Suffolk "O Lord that lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness."

It is also a time to become ever more aware of our vocation and mission in the Church and in the World in order to respond to the challenges of today in a significant way. The call to return to the sources becomes ever more urgent in this sense. A retrospective glance at our founders is meant to be a cenotaph of our heart. Through it we acknowledge with gratitude, the foreseeing love of God that has accompanied our Congregations and made manifest in multiplicity of ways.

The post Vatican renewal is one that respects the freedom of the person and the action of the Holy Spirit in the person. The history of every Congregation is made up of persons, places and events. Each of these has stories to narrate and messages to communicate. The Charism of different Congregations has taken deep roots in various cultures thanks to our pioneer missionaries and thanks to all those who boldly dared to follow Jesus more closely without counting the cost.

Passion for Christ and compassion for humanity has been spelt out by various founders in myriad ways. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, most of them have seen the growth and expansion of their Charism. Their humble beginnings were never serious blocks for many to go beyond the place of origin and to grow and branch out. The growth of the Charism is indeed a strong reminder to recapture the "*original spirit*" and to make it alive today in creative fidelity, that every one may have life and have it in abundance (Jn 10:10). "There is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed." says Albert Schweitzer

Generating lives

The post Vatican Renewal in Religious Life has need of religious who are capable of journeying with the Church. It needs religious who know how to allow people to grow and blossom. What other mission is so beautiful than that of generating lives in Jesus Christ. The Financial Times wrote about Pope Francis: "He conveys his concerns and anxieties with a sincerity and authenticity that no world leader can match" and Pope Francis has courageously made known what the Church needs:

"I see clearly," the Pope continues, "that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.... and you have to start from the ground up."⁸

In the journey of the Institutional Church, to re-earn trust, as Pope Francis has suggested, we religious can "listen to the needs, desires, disappointments, despair and hope" of the people. Religious must engage in

agonising self-reflection and come up with creative proactive alternatives to re-earn trust. A “revolution of tenderness” and genuine simplicity are very much needed coupled with sincere efforts to put on daily a little more of Jesus for this is exactly what religious life is all about. We, religious today have to embellish our Founder’s Charism with our personal holiness. Is not holiness the key that opens every difficult road to the heart of the human person?

Women religious can play a significant role to promote interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. Pope Francis recalled that the Second Vatican Council “decided to look to the future with a modern spirit and to be open to modern culture.” “The Council Fathers knew that being open to modern culture meant religious ecumenism and dialogue with non-believers. But afterwards very little was done in that direction,” he lamented. “I have the humility and ambition to want to do something.” Today, to be a religious is to be interreligious. Religious who are convinced of their vocation can become effective persons who promote genuine ecumenism. Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue can be very well promoted by religious. Community life can set the tone and offer suitable language for a genuine interreligious dialogue.

Calling Charisms into a dynamic dialogue

It is amazing to hear religious expressing the need to come together to share the Charism and mission. It is indeed a wonderful way of getting to know each other. Such sharing can certainly create *communitas*. “*Communitas* is not circumscribed by space and time, but is always contemporary.”⁹ Coming together of religious has to be done in simplicity and openness and will open the way to liberation of human capacities. According to Turner “Those who experience *communitas* have a feeling of endless power.” The spirit of renewal is a call to go beyond with the mind

and heart of Jesus Christ making the Gospel ever relevant to the daily life situations of the people whom we minister to.

“Jesus was truly the new marginal person who was not only in-between but also in-both worlds. He was the man who lived in-beyond racial, cultural, gender, and class divisions, but was also the man of the whole world. He was therefore the new marginal person par excellence.”¹⁰

Following Jesus in the footsteps of our Founders is a constant challenge. Nothing is impossible because Jesus the new marginal person par excellence journeys with us and the little what we do is done in His name with the vision and mission of our Founders with an open mind to go much beyond. As we religious, look forward to the Year for Consecrated Life 2015, prepared in the context of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and, more specifically, on the 50th anniversary of the publication of the conciliar decree on the renewal of consecrated life *‘Perfectae caritatis’*, may the Spirit of the Lord lead us into ever green pastures.

Contemplative mystics on the move

“There is no surprise more wonderful than the surprise of being loved; it is God’s finger on man’s shoulder” opines Charles Morgan. Religious life is truly fascinating for those who have found a cause to live and a cause to die for. Leaning on the Lord for whom we have given up everything and everyone and making our hearts ever more elastic and flexible to take the Good News of the Father’s love to all as did Jesus, the post-Vatican renewal challenges us to be contemplative mystics on the move. What else on earth can offer greater sense and reason for our following of Christ if not our being rooted in His love? It is our intimate personal relationship with the Lord Jesus that gives sense and purpose to our consecrated life. All that we religious are and do in the 21st century should be in accord with the Founders’ vision translated creatively into today’s reality. Contemplation will offer us

the necessary light to discern every reality and mysticism will help us to be daring prophets of today, ambassadors of God's love to those around us, open to the realities of the world and courageous enough to illumine that very same reality in the light of the Gospel. "Brothers and sisters, good evening, pray for me." This heart warming appeal of Pope Francis is very relevant for every religious today: "pray for us." We need your prayer; we need your love and affection to be what we are called to be in the Church. As Pope Francis asked our superior generals, we want to 'awaken the world' with our prophetic witness, above all with our presence at the existential margins of poverty and thought.

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(Footnotes)

¹ John XXIII, Letter to Women Religious, 2 July 1962, 4.

² To commemorate the 40th anniversary of that event, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life organized a Symposium to review the journey made in these years by the consecrated life, guided by the Holy Spirit. The Symposium aimed to recreate signs and guidelines that will help all consecrated persons to be, as the Holy Father Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has emphasized, "witnesses of God's transfiguring presence".

³ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Initial Message, 20 April 2005; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 27 April, 3.

⁴ Apostolic Letter on the Implementation of Documents of Vatican II Council: *Christus Dominus, Presbyterorum Ordinis, Perfectae Caritatis & Ad Gentes*, 6 August 1966.

⁵ Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 1997, 57.

⁶ David NG, *A path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community in Journeys at the Margin Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, Peter C. Phan, Jung Young Lee (Editors) Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1999, [81-102], 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ This interview with Pope Francis took place over the course of three meetings during August 2013 in Rome. The interview was conducted in person by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal and printed in the edition of 1 October. Father Spadaro conducted the interview on behalf of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *Thinking Faith*, *America* and several other major Jesuit journals around the world.

⁹ Victor TURNER, *Pilgrimage and Communitas in Studia Missionalia* 23 (1974), [305-327], 318.

¹⁰ Jung Young LEE, *Marginality: the Key to Multicultural Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress press, 1995, 72.