

# **Biblical Understanding of the Evangelical Counsels**

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## **Introduction**

Man's search for God is expressed in various ways, forms and life-styles. Almost in all the traditional religions, religious life has played a vital role. In the history of Christianity, Religious life has been considered a sign of God's grace to the Church and a prophetic witness to the whole world.

By the work of the Holy Spirit, we have various forms of consecrated life. Consecrated life does not mean that one has to completely separate oneself from the secular world, ignore the society and be indifferent to the problems of the people. The contemplatives spend their life mostly in prayer, whereas the consecrated persons of apostolic congregations spend their time in doing various apostolates, without ignoring their prayer life, which is an important element of every religious. They dedicate their whole life for the service of the people of God through various ministries and apostolates. Community life or fraternal communion is also a special characteristic of the consecrated life.

Whether it be contemplative or apostolic way of religious life, it is founded on the three evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience. These evangelical counsels are not inventions of those who founded the Religious Orders and

Congregations. These three counsels are rooted in the Gospels themselves.

The goal of this article is to highlight the biblical foundations of the evangelical counsels. We want to theologially analyze the biblical passages that speak of these religious vows. We will make use of some Church documents as well for our study. This article is divided into two parts. The first part will present the basic concepts of Consecrated life and Evangelical Counsels in general. The second part will elaborately deal with the biblical passages concerning the three evangelical counsels and theologially explain those passages taken from both the Testaments.

## **1. Evangelical Counsels in General**

### **1.1. Religious Life: Its Origin and Various Forms**

We know that the origin of Religious life goes back to the third or the fourth Century, with a special reference to the hermetic experiences of the desert Fathers such as St Antony († 356) and St Pachomius († 346) and so on. St Basil the Great (327-379) is the founder of monastic life in the Eastern Church and St Augustine (354-430) in the Western Church. If we read the rules of monastic communities of that period, we can easily understand that their life was inspired by the Word of God. The religious live their consecration by professing and practicing the three evangelical counsels: Chastity, Obedience and Poverty. We, Catholics, believe that the origin of religious life is explicitly evangelical, rooted in the exemplary life of Jesus Christ and the Apostles, whereas the protestants do not agree with this point.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that we cannot find in the Bible an organized set-up of Religious life, nor a systematic theology of religious life as lived today. But the religious life is absolutely a *Sequela Christi* based on the Gospel teachings. The Gospels invite us to lead a life of perfection. As Jesus himself said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), religious life is an invitation to live a life of perfection. When we speak about the *Sequela Christi*, it is the disciples of Jesus, who immediately come into our mind. It is they who first followed Christ and set an example for us. Jesus asked them to get rid of excessive family bonds in order to follow him (cf. Lk 18:20-30).

The fraternal communion among the members of a religious community is modelled upon the life-style of the early Christian community as described by Luke (cf. Acts 4:32). Thus, we can observe that the theological basis for the origin of religious life is inspired by the Word of God. The Second Vatican Council puts this idea in the following words: "The importance of the profession of the evangelical counsels is seen in the fact that it fosters the perfection of love of God and love of neighbour in an outstanding manner and that this profession is strengthened by vows".<sup>2</sup>

Now we want to clarify the difference between the various forms of Consecrated life. J. Marippattu gives a very clear picture of this difference in the following words:

The code of Canon Law presents two kinds of institutes of consecrated life. The first is the institutes of religious life, in which members profess public vows to God which are accepted in the name of the Church, committing themselves thereby to separation from the world,<sup>3</sup> in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life for the sake of contemplation and of

various forms of apostolic service.<sup>4</sup> These men and women are properly called 'religious'. The second is secular institutes, in which members normally do not profess vows but rather make sacred promises as determined by their constitutions.<sup>5</sup> Members of secular institutes are thus consecrated persons who may be priests or laypersons and who live and work in the world, seeking to transfigure the world from within and to shed the light of the Gospel on temporal realities.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there are societies of apostolic life in which its members live in common but work in the world, pursuing a specific apostolic or missionary end according to their constitutions. They normally make neither vows nor sacred promises to God through the Church. Yet in many of them an explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels is made through sacred bonds officially recognized by the Church. These bonds with their societies are less radical than vows or sacred promises.<sup>7</sup>

## **1.2. The Bible and the Consecrated Life**

The Religious belonging to various Orders, Congregations and Institutions, have their own constitutions, norms, rules and regulations in accordance with their own spirituality. But, Bible is the 'first source' of spirituality of religious life. Going back to the evangelical roots of our Christian life is an urgent need for the renewal of religious life. This point is highlighted by the Second Vatican Council documents: "The up-to-date renewal of religious life comprises a constant return to the sources of the whole Christian life".<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the council asks the religious to give proper importance to the Bible: "members of institutes should assiduously cultivate the spirit of prayer and prayer itself, drawing on the authentic sources of Christian spirituality. In the first place, let them have the sacred scriptures at hand daily, so that they might

learn “the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by reading and meditating on the divine scriptures”.<sup>9</sup>

It is worthy to mention here that John Paul II, while presenting the book of the new *Code of Canon Law* and its importance as a law for the life of the Church, declared that the Bible is more important.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the religious, while following their constitutions and norms, should keep in mind that the truths and way of life recommended by the Gospels is much more important. The Word of God is the supreme norm of our Christian life, and thus for the consecrated life as well.

There is no other reliable source than the Sacred Scriptures to know about the life of Christ. In order to better understand the theological foundations of the evangelical counsels based on the life of Christ, we have to carefully read the Bible with devotion, passion and interest. Only then, we can realize what the Bible says about the evangelical counsels.

## **2. Biblical Foundations of Evangelical Counsels**

The evangelical counsels are not just part of the Gospel teachings; rather they are at the very core of the Gospels. They summarize the whole teaching of the Gospels from the point of view of the economy of salvation. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*, John Paul II says that these three counsels are presented by the evangelists with some special characteristics. We want to quote here his words:

In the Gospel there are many exhortations that go beyond the measure of the commandment, indicating not only what is “necessary” but what is “better.” (...) If, in accordance with Tradition, the profession of the evangelical counsels has concentrated on the three

points of chastity, poverty and obedience, this usage seems to emphasize sufficiently clearly their importance as key elements and in a certain sense as a “summing up” of the entire economy of salvation. Everything in the Gospel that is a counsel enters indirectly into the program of that way to which Christ calls when He says: “Follow me.” It is chastity, poverty and obedience give to this way a particular Christocentric characteristic and imprint upon it a specific sign of the economy of the Redemption.<sup>11</sup>

The evangelical counsels are rooted in the Sacrament of Baptism. That is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every disciple. The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practicing chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty and obedience”.<sup>12</sup> In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, on the consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world, Pope John Paul II says that “the Consecrated life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus – the chaste, poor, and obedient one – are constantly made ‘visible’ in the midst of the world”.<sup>13</sup> Following the evangelical counsels is at the core of the life of the consecrated persons. Without these counsels, one cannot speak of a state of consecrated life. These counsels are called ‘evangelical’, because they are inspired by the Gospels and they have evangelical origin.

Before we start analyzing the biblical background of each evangelical counsel, we want to see how the Church documents on the consecrated life make use of the Sacred

Scriptures. The church documents that we want to refer to are: i) the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (chapters 5-6), ii) the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, iii) Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consacrata*. If one reads the biblical texts cited in these three church documents, one can easily understand the biblical background of consecrated life and evangelical counsels. We present here three lists of biblical texts of these church documents.<sup>14</sup>

**Biblical texts of *Lumen Gentium* (chapters 5-6):**

- *Ezekiel*: Ezek 34:14 (n.5).
- *Matthew*: Mt 5:3 (n. 42, n. 15); Mt 5:48 (dir., n. 40); Mt 6:12 (dir., n. 40); Mt 19:11 (n. 42, n. 15); Mt 19:21 (n. 42, n. 15).
- *Mark*: Mk 10:21 (n. 42, n. 15); Mk 12:30 (n. 40).
- *Luke*: Lk 18:22 (n. 42, n. 15).
- *John*: Jn 4:34 (n. 42, n. 15); Jn 15:13 (n. 42).
- *Romans*: Rom 5:5 (n. 42); Rom 6:22 (n. 40), Rom 13:10 (n. 42).
- *1 Corinthians*: 1 Cor 7:7 (n. 42); 1 Cor 7:31 (n. 42); 1 Cor 7:32-34 (n. 42).
- *2 Corinthians*: 2 Cor 8:9 (dir., n. 42).
- *Galatians*: Gal 5:22 (n. 40).
- *Ephesians*: Eph 1:4 (n. 39); Eph 5:3 (dir., n. 40); Eph 5:25-26 (n. 39).
- *Philippians*: Phil 2:7-8 (dir., n. 42); Phil 2:8-10 (n. 42, n. 15).
- *Colossians*: Col 3:12 (dir., n. 40); Col 3:14 (n. 42).
- *1 Thessalonians*: 1 Th 4:3 (dir., n. 39).
- *1 Timothy*: 1 Tim 3:8-10, 12-13 (n. 41).

- *Hebrews: Heb10:5-7* (n. 42, n. 15).
- *James: Jas 3:2* (n. 40).
- *1 Peter: 1 Pet 5:3* (n. 41); *1 Pet 5:10* (dir., n. 41).
- *1 John: 1 Jn 3:16* (n. 42); *1 Jn 4:16* (dir., n. 42).

### **Biblical texts of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*:**

- *Psalms: Ps 39:9* (n. 14).
- *Matthew: Mt 5:16* (n. 25); *Mt 6:20* (n. 13); *Mt 6:25* (n. 13); *Mt 8:20* (n. 1); *Mt 8:20* (n. 13); *Mt 18:20* (n. 15); *Mt 19:12* (dir., n. 12); *Mt 19:21* (n. 5); *Mt 6:20; 6:25; 8:20; 19:21* (n. 13); *Mt 20:28* (n.14); *Mt 25:34-36* (n. 13).
- *Mark: Mk 10:28* (n. 5).
- *Luke: Lk 9:58* (n. 1); *Lk 10:39* (n. 5); *Lk 10:42* (n. 5).
- *John: Jn 4:34* (n. 14); *Jn 5:30* (n. 14); *Jn 10:14-18* (n. 14); *Jn 13:35* (n. 15); *Jn 17:21* (n. 15).
- *Acts: Acts 2:42* (n. 15); *Acts 4:32* (n. 35).
- *Romans: Rom 5:5* (n. 1); *Rom 5:5* (n. 15); *Rom 6.11* (n. 5); *Rom 8:1-13* (n. 5); *Rom 12:4* (dir., n. 7); *Rom 12:5-8* (n. 8); *Rom 12:10* (n. 15); *Rom 13:10* (n. 15).
- *1 Corinthians: 1 Cor 7:32* (n. 5); *1 Cor 7:32-35* (n. 12); *1 Cor 12:4* (dir., n. 8).
- *2 Corinthians: 2 Cor 8:9* (n. 13).
- *Galatians: Gal 6:2* (n. 15).
- *Ephesians: Eph 3:10* (n. 1); *Eph 4:13* (n. 1).
- *Philippians: Phil 2:7* (dir., n. 14); *Phil 2:7-8* (n. 5); *Phil 2:8* (n. 1); *Phil 3:8* (dir. n. 6).
- *Colossians: Col 1:24* (n. 1); *Col 3:3* (n. 6); *Col 3:14* (n. 15).

- *2 Timothy: 2 Tim 3:17 (n. 1).*
- *Hebrews: Heb 5:8 (n. 14); Heb 10:7 (n. 13); Heb 13:17 (n. 14).*
- *James: Jas 2:15-16 (n. 13).*
- *1 John: 1 Jn 3:14 (n. 15); 1 Jn 3:17 (n. 13); 1 Jn 4.10 (n. 6).*
- *Revelation: Rev 21:2 (n. 1).*

**Biblical texts of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consacrata*:**

- *Genesis: Gn 32:23-31 (n. 38).*
- *Exodus: Ex 33:11 (n. 94); Ex 34:33 (m. 38).*
- *Leviticus: Lv 19:18 (n. 71).*
- *Deuteronomy: Dt 6:5 (n. 71).*
- *1 Kings: 1 Kgs 18-19 (n. 84).*
- *Psalms: Ps 18(17):3 (n. 91); Ps 34(33):9 (n. 36); Ps 45(44):3 (dir., n. 15); Ps 119(118):165 (dir., n. 91); Ps 133(132) (n. 101).*
- *Wisdom: Wis 9:10 (n. 71).*
- *Isaiah: Is 40:5 (n. 27); Is 53:2-3 (n. 24).*
- *Jeremiah: Jer 20:7 (dir., n. 19).*
- *Baruch: Bar 3:38 (n. 94).*
- *Matthew: Mt 4:4 (n. 7); Mt 4:18-22 (n. 22); Mt 4:18-22 (n. 93); Mt 5:3,8 (n. 59); Mt 5:6 (n. 36); Mt 5:14-15 (n. 59); Mt 6:10 (dir., n. 27); Mt 6:21 (dir., n. 26); Mt 6:33 (dir., n. 26); Mt 7:1-12 (n. 42); Mt 7:16 (n. 62); Mt 9:37-38 (n. 64); Mt 10:37 (n. 16); Mt 17:1-9 (dir., n. 15); Mt 17:4 (n. 15); Mt 17:4 (dir., n. 29); Mt 17:4 (dir., n. 40); Mt 17:4 (dir., n. 75); Mt 17:5 (dir., n. 17); Mt 17:5 (dir., n. 19); Mt 17:6 (dir., n. 35); Mt 17:7 (dir., n. 40); Mt 18:20*

- (n. 42); *Mt 18:20* (n. 101); *Mt 18:22* (dir., n. 42); *Mt 19:10* (n. 30); *Mt 19:21.27* (n. 93); *Mt 19:27* (n. 18); *Mt 20:28* (dir., n. 75); *Mt 22:30* (n. 32); *Mt 22:37-39* (n. 71); *Mt 23:8* (dir., n. 60); *Mt 25:40* (dir., n. 82).
- *Mark: Mk 1:16-20* (n.18); *Mk 1:16-20* (n. 22); *Mk 2:14* (n. 18); *Mk 3:13-15* (n. 41); *Mk 3:32-35* (n. 41); *Mk 10:21* (n. 18); *Mk 10:21.28* (n. 18).
  - *Luke: Lk 1:38* (dir., n. 18); *Lk 2:49* (n. 22); *Lk 2:49* (n. 25); *Lk 3:6* (n. 27); *Lk 4:16-19* (n. 82); *Lk 5:10-11* (n. 22); *Lk 5:11* (n. 93); *Lk 9:31* (dir., n. 23); *Lk 9:31* (dir., n. 40); *Lk 9:43-45* (n. 23); *Lk 10:42* (n. 101); *Lk 10:42* (n. 101); *Lk 10:42* (n. 109); *Lk 11:28* (dir., n. 92); *Lk 18:28* (n. 18); *Lk 24:49* (n. 25).
  - *John: Jn 1:1* (n. 75); *Jn 1:14* (n. 75); *Jn 1:39* (dir., n. 64); *Jn 4:34* (n. 16); *Jn 4:34* (n. 21); *Jn 4:34* (n. 25); *Jn 4:34* (n. 91); *Jn 6:38* (n. 22); *Jn 6:44* (n. 17); *Jn 10:30* (n. 22); *Jn 10:36* (dir., n. 22); *Jn 10:36* (dir., n. 72); *Jn 12:3* (dir., n. 104); *Jn 12:7* (dir., n. 104); *Jn 12:32* (n. 23); *Jn 13:1-2.4-5* (dir., n. 75); *Jn 13:34* (n. 59); *Jn 14:6* (n. 18); *Jn 14:11* (n. 16); *Jn 14:11* (n. 22); *Jn 15:14-15* (n. 94); *Jn 10:36* (dir., n. 16); *Jn 15:1* (n. 17); *Jn 10:36* (dir., n. 16); *Jn 15:36* (n. 22); *Jn 15:16* (n. 25); *Jn 17:9* (n. 18); *Jn 17:19* (n. 22); *Jn 17:21* (dir., n. 2); *Jn 17:21-23* (n. 100); *Jn 19:26* (dir., n. 28); *Jn 19:26-27* (n. 23); *Jn 19:27* (dir., n. 28); *Jn 19:27* (n. 28); *Jn 19:34,37* (n. 23); *Jn 10:36* (dir., n. 16); *Jn 20:21* (n. 25).
  - *Acts: Acts 1:8* (n. 25); *Acts 1:13-14* (n. 34); *Acts 2:4* (n. 25); *Acts 2:42-47* (n. 41); *Acts 2:42-47* (n. 45); *Acts 4:32* (dir. n. 21); *Acts 4:32* (dir. n. 42); *Acts 4:32-35* (n. 41); *Acts 10:38* (dir. n. 22); *Acts 10:38* (dir. n. 83); *Acts 13:52*

- (dir., n. 45); *Acts* 15:31 (dir., n. 13); *Acts* 17:2. .... 3); *Acts* 20:22s (n. 92).
- *Romans*: *Rom* 5:5 (dir., n. 21); *Rom* 5:5 (n. 33); *Rom* 5:5 (n. 42); *Rom* 5:5 (n. 75); *Rom* 6:11 (n. 59); *Rom* 8:29 (dir., n. 60); *Rom* 12:2 (dir., n. 94); *Rom* 12:3-8 (n. 31).
  - *1 Corinthians*: *1 Cor* 7:7 (n. 93); *1 Cor* 7:8 (n. 7); *1 Cor* 7:31 (dir., n. 26); *1 Cor* 7:31 (n. 99); *1 Cor* 7:32-34 (n. 17); *1 Cor* 7:32-34 (n. 21); *1 Cor* 12:7 (dir., n. 67); *1 Cor* 12:31 (dir., n. 47); *1 Cor* 13:13 (dir., n. 47); *1 Cor* 15:24.28 (dir. n. 59).
  - *2 Corinthians*: *2 Cor* 2:15 (n. 105); *2 Cor* 5:14 (n. 71); *2 Cor* 5:14 (dir. n. 78); *2 Cor* 8:9 (dir., n. 21); *2 Cor* 8:9 (dir., n. 22).
  - *Galatians*; *Gal* 1:15-16 (n. 25); *Gal* 5:16-17.22 (n. 73).
  - *Ephesians*: *Eph* 1:17 (n. 96); *Eph* 5:27 (dir., n. 19).
  - *Philippians*: *Phil* 1:21 (dir., n. 15); *Phil* 2:5-11 (n. 9); *Phil* 2:7 (dir., n. 79); *Phil* 2:7-8 (dir., n. 22); *Phil* 3:8 (dir., n. 18); *Phil* 3:8.10 (dir., n. 93); *Phil* 3:12 (n. 76); *Phil* 3:20 (dir., n. 26).
  - *Colossians*: *Col* 1:15 (dir., n. 18); *Col* 1:24 (dir., n. 24); *Col* 2:20-22 (n. 73); *Col* 3:1 (n. 26); *Col* 3:1 (n. 26); *Col* 3:1-4 (n. 59); *Col* 3:3 (dir., n. 90).
  - *1 Timothy*: *1 Tm* 3:15 (dir., n. 46); *1 Tm* 5:5,9,9,10 (n. 7).
  - *2 Timothy*: *2 Tm* 1:12 (n.109); *2 Tm* 3:16 (dir., n. 94).
  - *Titus*: *Tit* 3:4 (n. 111).
  - *Hebrews*: *Heb* 1:3 (n. 18); *Heb* 10:5.7 (n. 22); *Heb* 13.14 (dir., n. 26).
  - *1 Peter*. *1 Pt* 1:3-6 (n. 26).

- *1 John: 1 Jn 1:3* (n. 42); *1 Jn 4:2-3* (n. 103); *1 Jn 4:6* (n.73).
- *Revelation: Rev 21:1* (n. 88); *Rev 21:2* (n. 19); *Rev 21:3* (dir., n. 45); *Rev 21:4* (dir., n. 27); *Rev 22:20* (dir. n. 27).

From the number of biblical citations (explicit and implicit) mentioned above, we can immediately understand the biblical density of these three documents. Pope John Paul's *Vita Consacrata* is exceptionally biblical. Regarding the biblical references from the *Vita Consacrata*, A. Pardilla comments:

the data of the list testify that the Exhortation cites Sacred Scriptures 186 times. This is a good average: a little more than one and a half citations per number. There are 66 direct citations (35.48%), that is a little more than a third.... These figures show that the biblical density of the document is not homogeneous.... The Exhortation particularly recommends diligent meditation on the Gospel texts and on the other New Testament texts that illustrate the form of life of the main biblical models of consecrated life".<sup>15</sup>

These biblical texts give great prominence to Jesus as the 'consecrated one' *par excellence*. He is the perfect model for the consecrated life. These texts give a vivid picture of how a consecrated person should live a life of holiness, in prayer, service and fraternal love.

It would be very interesting and useful if we comment on the biblical texts mentioned above and present their theological meanings in the context of consecrated life. But for practical reasons, we will take into consideration only some of the most important texts concerning the religious vows, in order to bring out their theological link with the three religious vows.

## 2.1. Chastity

God has created us in his own image as men and women. There is an anthropological, ontological, existential and theological sense in living with one's own sexuality, which is a gift of God. In this relationship between man and woman, there is sacredness that brings us closer to the divine. God established marriage as a Sacrament, but the renunciation of marriage and embracing celibacy has its value because it is practiced for the sake of the Kingdom of God. One must understand that the consecrated persons embrace the life of celibacy as a means to totally dedicate one's life to God's service and to give witness that he/she belongs to God alone.

### ***Chastity in the Old Testament:***

The Old Testament passages that speak of celibacy or chastity are very rare. We want to present here three examples.<sup>16</sup> The first one is from *Judges* 11:37-40. The daughter of Jephthah dies as a virgin. Their parents, her companions and friends weep for her because of her state of virginity and for the impossibility of her maternity. The second example is from the Book of Jeremiah. He is the only prophet of the Old Testament, who remains a celibate, by the Lord's command (cf. Jer 16:1ff). Jeremiah's celibate life becomes a strong prophetic sign for the people of his time, who were going towards destruction and ruin. The third example is the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem described as a virgin. "The virgin Israel has fallen, she will not rise again. She lies neglected on her land; There is none to raise her up" (Amos 5:2); "Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten me days without number" (Jer 2:32). In all these three examples, we see that virginity is considered as a sign of curse, punishment or disgrace.

The whole of the Old Testament speak in favour of fertility and reproduction through a married life. We read it in Gen 1:28 (God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it"). According to the Old Testament, sterility is a sign of disgrace and curse (cf. Hos 9:11,14; Job 15:34). According to A. Aparicio Rodríguez, towards the end of the Old Testament period, a new line of thought emerges regarding this point.<sup>17</sup> This can be understood by reading the following passages: "the eunuchs will have a place in the house of God. They are not to be considered dry trees" (Isa 56:3-5); Judith is praised for her chaste and ascetic life (Jud 16:22-24). Thus, we note a slight change in the Jewish mentality to consider the celibate way of life and abstinence from sexual pleasures as a means to a close relationship with God.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Chastity in the New Testament:***

In the New Testament, we have two important texts (cf. Mt 19:11 and 1Cor 7). There are two other texts from the Gospel of Luke (14:26 and 18:29ff), that offer conditions to follow Christ. In Lk 14:26, Jesus says: "If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple". In another passage of the Lucan Gospel, Jesus declares: "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life." (Lk 18:29-30).

The Gospels present Jesus' celibacy as his total love for His Father. It is an eschatological gift that announces the

presence of the Kingdom of God. According to the Gospels, Christ is the supreme model of holiness and chastity.

There are many direct and indirect New Testament passages with a particular reference to the vow of chastity, e.g., Mk 12:25 and parallels, Acts 21:19, Rev 14:4, Gal 3:28, 2 Cor 11:2. These texts do not explicitly speak about the vow of chastity, but they just allude to this concept in an indirect manner. So, we limit ourselves to the following two important passages: Mt 19:10-12 and 1Cor 7:32-35. These are the two texts explicitly cited by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>19</sup>

The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry". He said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it" (Mt 19:10-12).

We read in the Gospels that Jesus gave very bold statements in favour of marriage union (cf. Mt 5:32; 19:9; Mk 10:11-12; Lk 16:18). At the same time he set an example of a celibate way of life for those who want to work for the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 19:10-12).<sup>20</sup> The Second Vatican Council documents and the post-conciliar documents cite the text Mt 19:10-12 as a valid basis for the practice of chastity. In this passage (Mt 19:3-12), Jesus not only speaks about the fidelity of marriage union, but also gives a very clear reference to the celibate way of life, which is strongly expressed in the following words: "eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12). "Not to marry is a renunciation, it entails being deprived of the goods of married life, living like a 'eunuch' (Mt 19:12).

Renunciation is not justified in itself, but it acquires meaning and value when one wants to reach a positive reality, in other words, when it is a way of reaching a value greater than the positive reality one renounces. The value is the 'Kingdom of Heaven', that is, the special way of living totally and solely dedicated to the magnificent reality of the kingdom of heaven".<sup>21</sup>

In the Jewish culture of that time, eunuchs were considered to be a curse to the society, because of the lack of capacity to become husbands and fathers. But Jesus, though living in the Jewish society, did not marry or have children, not because he was incapable of creating a family, but because he dedicated his whole life to build up the kingdom of heaven. That is why he invites those who are willing and capable, to embrace this lifestyle for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. It is not a commandment but an invitation/exhortation (cf. "He who is able to accept this, let him accept it" Mt 19:12).

In Mt 19:3-9, Jesus' words give a very strong emphasis on the indissolubility of marriage and the importance of fidelity among the married couples. He teaches the disciples about the inherent sacramental value of marriage. And then he offers an invitation for the celibate way of life to those who are capable of it for a greater cause that is for the kingdom of heaven. So, the religious who profess the vow of chastity certainly renounce the marriage but don't cease to recognize the inherent good values of this sacramental union between a man and a woman. The evangelical counsel of chastity is willingly chosen and practiced by the religious with commitment and seriousness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. We know for certain that all Christians are called to live a life of holiness and fidelity. Mt 19:10-12 offers a special

evangelical value, which is not an obligation for all Christians. It is a special call for those who can and are willing to profess and live the evangelical counsels. That the celibate state of life is a special gift that God has given to some people is stated by the second Vatican Council as follows:

The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by Our Lord to His disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state. This is a precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls, whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart. This perfect contingency, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honour in the Church. The reason for this was and is that perfect contingency for the love of God is an incentive to charity, and is certainly a particular source of spiritual fecundity in the world.<sup>22</sup>

The religious consider this as a special vocation and live it with God's grace. The virginal state of life of the consecrated persons is a visible sign of the Church's holiness. St Paul gives very practical reasons of the choice of virginity as follows:

I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and *his interests* are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord (1 Cor 7:32-35).

The vow of chastity frees the heart of man/woman in a unique way and allows him/her to live for God alone with an undivided heart. This total dedication is sustained by prayer life.

## **2.2. Obedience<sup>23</sup>**

The word 'obedience' comes from the Latin root 'ob-audire' and it means listening to the voice of God, who calls us to act according to His will. But according to the Bible, obedience is not just a listening; it is much more than that. We will see this concept in detail with the help of some of the passages from the Old and the New Testament.

### ***Obedience in the Old Testament:***

For the people of Israel, obedience to Yahweh and to His commandments was the most fundamental element of their faith. God Himself commanded them to obey His words if they want to be His people: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people" (Ex 19:4-5). The first and foremost duty of every Jew was to obey the commandments of the Lord. That is why the Psalmist says: "How blessed are those whose way is blameless" (Ps 119:1); "O! May your loving kindness comfort me, according to thy word to your servant" (Ps 119:76). In Ex 19:8, we read that the people of Israel gathered on Mount Sinai promised to Moses: "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do". This obedience to God's words is a sign of their fidelity and makes a constituent element of God's covenant with them. Thus, obedience to God is the first priority of the Israelites. Now let us see how Jesus himself, born as a Jew, was obedient to God, His father.

***Obedience in the New Testament.***

In the New Testament, Jesus is the best example of obedience *par excellence*. We have a number of references for this in the synoptic Gospels. When Jesus was lost and found in the temple of Jerusalem, he asks his mother: "Did you not know that I had to do my father's business?" (Lk 2:49). His priority of life was to do the will of the Father. The evangelist Luke adds: "Jesus went down to Nazareth and was obedient unto them" (Lk 2:51). Though he was Son of God, his submission to Mary and Joseph was an act of obedience. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, he responded: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word of God" (Lk 4:4). The day before his death, Jesus prays: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet it not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). He gave precedence to the God's will, as an act of obedience.

In the Gospel of John, the evangelist repeatedly makes it clear that Jesus' mission was to do the will of his Father: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to accomplish His work (Jn 4:34); "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (Jn 5:30); "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent me" (Jn 6:38). Following the footsteps of their master, the apostles too obeyed God above all. Obedience to God was considered most important by the Apostles: "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

St Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, highlights this act of obedience: "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). It is through the obedience

of Jesus that we all were saved: "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19).

Thus, Jesus himself is the perfect model of obedience for the Religious, who profess the vow of obedience. Practice of obedience is not to be understood as an act of losing one's self-identity and losing one's right to make decisions, rather religious obedience is an act of complete freedom, which is an expression of submission to God's will. That's why religious obedience is not just obeying the superior, observing the constitutions, rules and norms; it means more than that. "To understand this obedience better we must not forget that it is the greatest expression of freedom. If it sets limits to freedom, they are only the lowest limits. At its upper limit freedom is perpetually open to the infinite. By nature and grace, the person is a sovereign master, subject to no one (1 Cor 9:1)... I do not obey merely because the law commands or because you want me to obey, but because I myself have chosen to obey: "Because I have chosen to, I obey your commands". I have decided to do this because I have understood that nothing can keep me from God who is manifested in everything".<sup>24</sup>

### **2.3. Poverty**

Like the other two evangelical counsels, poverty is also founded on the biblical teachings. Jesus, though He was rich, became poor for our sake, so that by his poverty we might become rich<sup>25</sup> (cf. Mt 8:20; 2 Cor 8:9). Thus, poverty voluntarily embraced by Christ is a constituent element of his redemptive

mission. Inspired by this exemplarity of Christ, the religious profess the vow of poverty.

In the Old Testament, poverty is considered as an evil. We have a number of Old Testament passages that speak about the poor and the oppressed. It is the duty of every Jew to fight against poverty and liberate the poor from the sufferings. In Ex 21:1-27, we read God's ordinances to give freedom to the slaves and the oppressed. Ex 22:20-27 is an important passage that speaks in favour of the poor, orphans, widows, etc. God listens to the cry of the poor. That is why the psalmist says: "God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap" (Ps 113:7). Thus, the Old Testament presents Yahweh as a loving God who listens to the cry of the poor. It also teaches the people of Israel to take care of the poor and fight against sufferings and poverty.

But we don't see in the Old Testament, the renunciation of richness as a religious value. Poverty, with all its negative aspects is an evil for mankind, but Jesus brought a new spiritual dimension to poverty through his life and teachings.<sup>26</sup> Various dimensions of the vow of poverty include: total surrender to God, detachment from all richness, sharing our resources with the needy, moderate way of life, trusting in God's providence than in wealth and money, solidarity with the poor, transforming material poverty into spiritual richness, etc.

The Gospels say that Jesus lived a poor life. He was a carpenter, which means he did not belong to the elite and rich category of the society. In his sermon on the mountains, Jesus preached "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). He was with the poor; he ate with the sinners and the people of lower class. During his

mission, he was an itinerant man, going from one place to another to establish the kingdom of God. He himself said. "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Mt 8:20). The Evangelist John says that when Jesus died, he was not buried in his own tomb. He was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, a new one, in which no man had been laid (cf. Jn 19:41-42). It is a sign of Jesus' poverty.

Describing the Incarnation of Jesus, St Paul says. "Though He existed in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:6-7). The strong verb 'to empty oneself' highlights the supreme act of Jesus' self-sacrifice for our redemption. St Paul insists on the value of Jesus' poverty in his second letter to the Corinthians: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus' poverty consists in his act of emptying himself, his willingness to be stripped of everything, his humbling himself (*kenosis*) for our sake.

It is by offering everything to God the Father that Jesus becomes the consecrated. He offers even his own life on the cross. His consecration consists in offering everything, not just the material objects, but his own body and the blood on the cross. Regarding this John Paul II says: "The depth of his poverty is revealed in the perfect offering of all that is his to the Father".<sup>27</sup>

How to imitate the Christ in practicing the vow of poverty? The religious should completely offer themselves to God and to His people. The vow of poverty frees the religious from

attachment to money, power and material wealth. There is nothing wrong in handling money or using the material resources and wealth, provided it is used for the welfare of others, not just for one's own egoistic gratification and pleasure. Here comes the importance of readiness to share one's material resources, intellectual and spiritual richness with others. As the early Christians lived a life of communion and sharing (cf. Acts 2:44), the religious, who profess the vow of poverty, do not have personal possessions but they put everything in common. The vow of poverty is a way to live a life of simplicity and humility. The religious, who profess the vow of poverty, commit themselves to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and the oppressed, living with and for them. To take a vow of poverty implies a commitment to justice in our modern society. Religious life must open itself to new forms of presence in the world in order to build a just society, where all can live equally God's children.

## **Conclusion**

Religious life is a special vocation to commit oneself to a life of holiness and perfection, by professing and living the evangelical counsels of chastity, obedience and poverty. This article highlights the biblical radicalism of the religious program of life. The prayer of every religious, who live the evangelical counsels, echoes the prayer of the psalmist: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Ps 119:105). It is not only the Religious, but every Christian has to consider the word of God as the ultimate rule of life.

In this new millennium, it is a great challenge to live meaningfully the religious life. To be a good religious, one should take into serious consideration the following elements:

regular reading of the Word of God, constant effort to grown in psycho-spiritual maturity, regular prayer life, faithful commitment to the rules and norms of the Order/ Congregation, fraternal love and respect for the community members, openness toward the reality of the world in which we are living, etc. These are some of the concrete and practical things to be followed to live a life of holiness as a consecrated person. In living the religious commitments, rooted on the word of God, the religious have to be realistic, concrete and committed. Only then the choice of religious life can become meaningful and pleasing to God. Let us always be open to renew the call of God by repeating the same words of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word” (cf. Lk 1:38).

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. P. Fernández Rodríguez, “Consigli Evangelici”, in *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata* (a cura di T. Goffi – A. Palazzini), Editrice Ancora, Milano 1992, p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, c. 617.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Vita Consacrata*, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, c. 712.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Vita Consacrata*, 10.

<sup>7</sup>J. Marippattu, *Following Christ in Chastity, Poverty and Obedience*, Extract of a Doctoral Dissertation, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome 2009, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Pardilla, *Christ's Way of life at the Centre of Formation for Religious life*, Rogate, Rome 2003<sup>2</sup>, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Redemptionis Donum*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 915.

<sup>13</sup> *Vita Consacrata*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> The goal of presenting the list of biblical texts is to help the readers to understand how the consecrated life and the evangelical counsels have strong basis on the living Word of God. The three lists of biblical texts have been taken from: A. Pardilla, *Christ's way of Life at the Centre of Formation for Religious Life*, pp. 29-30; 36-37; 39-41.

<sup>15</sup> A. Pardilla, *Christ's Way of life at the Centre of Formation for Religious life*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> A. Aparicio Rodríguez, "Castità", in *Dizionario di vita consacrata* (a cura di T. Goffi – A. Palazzini), Editrice Ancora, Milano 1992), pp. 214-215.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Pardilla, *Christ's Way of Life at the Centre of Formation for Religious Life*, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> A. Pardilla, *Christ's Way of Life at the Centre of Formation for Religious Life*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J.L. Espinel Marcos, "Obbedienza", in *Dizionario di vita consacrata* (a cura di T. Goffi – A. Palazzini), pp. 1145-1154.

<sup>24</sup> L. Boff, *God's Witnesses in the Heart of the world*, Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, Religious Life series: vol. 3, Chicago – Los Angeles – Manila 1981, p. 148.

<sup>25</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. V. Casas García, "Povertà", in *Dizionario di vita consacrata* (a cura di T. Goffi – A. Palazzini), p. 1245.

<sup>27</sup> *Vita Consacrata*, 22.