

A Genuine Christology as a Basis for Genuine Consecrated Life

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Introduction

This year being a special year for reflections on the Consecrated Life, I thought it best to reflect from my favourite subject Christology and see how far it could provide a basis for the consecrated life. What has to be cleared first in our mind is: what is genuine Christology? It is obviously a counterpoise to false Christology. A genuine Christology is based on Scripture and what the sacred authors have been telling us about Jesus Christ and of course it bears interpretations and interpretations can vary, sometimes wildly depending on who is making the interpretation. The self and selfish motives also can enter to twist one's view of Jesus Christ. *Tot capita tot sententiae* (there are as many opinions as there are heads) is an ancient scholastic refrain¹. It is the *Magisterium* that scrutinizes the different opinions and gives a correct ruling, basing itself on Scripture and received Tradition, assisted by the negative assistance of the Holy Spirit who sees to it that in momentous and binding decisions the Faithful are not misled. The *Magisterium* authenticates the thinking and formulates in a right manner the belief of the Church on a particular point of faith or morals.

Towards Correct Christological Formula

There have been many formulae in the course of the history of dogma. The Ebionites & Docetists of the first century denied the true humanity of Jesus Christ and said that the human body of Jesus was only a ghost like body. This simply downgraded the true nature of incarnation and the validity of the human body. On the contrary, St Ignatius of Antioch who was martyred towards the first decade of the second century was strong in affirming the true human nature of Jesus and his human body and suffering he underwent on the cross. The letters of John also affirmed the fact that the disciples of Jesus touched him, spoke with him and dealt with him in a human manner while he lived on this earth. In the second letter of John verse seven we have a strong statement that anyone who denies that Jesus had come in the flesh is an anti-Christ. Some of the Fathers of the Church like St Justin of the second century while they accepted that Jesus had a genuine human soul did not find any meaning in this fact. He would consider the Divine *Logos* (the Word) in him as the *hegemonikon* i.e., the guiding, ruling principle in him which uses the humanity as an instrument of the divine. Again, this also somehow belittles the genuine humanity of Jesus.² Leaving out many other Fathers of the Church for brevity's sake we move to Arius of the 4th century. He was a priest of the Alexandrian Church. As a popular hymn writer he composed hymns which were sung with enthusiasm but unfortunately the theology behind it was faulty and so he was pulled up. The main error was about the divinity of Jesus Christ. He said God the Son is lower than the Father and created. He could be called God only in a metaphorical sense. He is not consubstantial with the Father. For this he was

condemned at the first ecumenical council of Nicea in 325 AD. But he had another error which was also condemned. He had denied that Jesus had a genuine human soul and said that all those functions were done in him by the *Logos* (the Word). St Athanasius of Alexandria in opposing on this point had used the principle evolved by Origen a third century Father of the Church. Origen had said: in incarnation what is not assumed is not saved. So if Jesus did not have a genuine soul he was nothing more than a dead corpse since even animals have a body and animal soul and a human without a soul is only a corpse.

Apollinaris of Laodicea was a bishop in the 4th century who gave another opinion. He said Jesus had a soul but only a lower soul or psyche which is responsible for all emotions in us but he did not have the upper or rational soul which alone is responsible for thinking and decisions. The reason why he said this is because he argued that if Jesus were to have genuine human freedom then when the time of the passion came he would have said no and the whole purpose of incarnation would have been defeated. So in him he said the Word (the *Logos*) decided everything. The human Jesus was not an *autokinetos* (self moving) but only *tautokinetos* (doing the same thing) as the *Logos* decided or ordered him to do. This is a complete downgrading of the human in Jesus. The argument of Origen came in useful here too. Jesus would be only an animal since he would not have a rational soul. The consequence for our redemption/salvation would be that only our human body and psyche (or lower soul) was saved but not the upper or rational soul. If at all sin is committed, is it not done knowingly and willingly? How then could we say that Jesus did not have a rational soul? It would simply mean the

human being is not saved. What distinguishes us from animals is precisely because we have a human rational soul. Ever since the condemnation of Apollinaris in the last quarter of the 4th century³, routinely the Church documents will insist that Jesus had a rational soul or full human soul. The whole of the human being was saved and not only a part. Jesus is truly and fully human.

Further Confusions before the Correct Formula

A further complication arose due to Nestorians who though they correctly emphasized the true humanity of Jesus Christ seemed to have tripped on the question of Person in Jesus Christ. They appeared to say that Jesus Christ is son of Mary and so human but at the same time he is God the Son. So he is two sons and the unity is only a common personality an *akra henosis* a very close oneness as Theodore of Mopsuestia and his follower in this matter, Nestorius had said. They were opposed by St Cyril of Alexandria and the subsequent Council of Ephesus 431 AD condemned the opinion of Nestorius, upheld that Jesus Christ is one Person only: God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity and Mary is therefore rightly called Mother of God⁴. After two years a formula of Union between the two opposing groups was arrived at to the apparent satisfaction of all concerned⁵. The trouble erupted once again with the opinion of Eutyches a monk who began to teach that Jesus though he may have two natures before incarnation, has only one nature after, a kind of divinized human nature. This error was called *monophysitism* or one nature theory. The Patriarch of Constantinople as well as Pope Leo the Great opposed it in 449 AD.

The Correct Formula at Chalcedon in 451 AD

The correct formula was reached at Chalcedon in 451 AD. The council Fathers only wanted to reiterate the creed of Nicea and go home but at the insistence of the Empress Pulcheria, they constituted a study group and at the end hammered a formula which has stood the test of times in the Catholic Church. The document in brief says that Jesus Christ has two natures: divine and human. He is fully God and fully human. They are not to be mixed up nor separated into two persons but he is one Person only, the *Logos*, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son. The characteristics of the two natures are never to be mixed up as they come together in one *prosopon* or Person. There was, much later (two hundred years later) a controversy whether a compromise with *Monophysites* could be reached by saying that in Jesus there was only one will, perhaps a divinized human will? The third Council of Constantinople in 681AD settled the matter by saying that following Chalcedon we should also say that Jesus had two wills unmixed. He had a divine Will which is numerically identical with the Will of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Besides this in his incarnation he had a genuine human, free will which was in no way controlled by God. He was not dictated to but had to make his choices, though in his love for the Father, he always did the will of the Father (Jn 4:34; 5:30). Now we turn to the second leg of our consideration: genuine consecrated life which corresponds to such Christology.

Consecrated Life

The vocation to a consecrated life is not from below but from above. It is God's gift and at God's initiative. This is at

times sadly forgotten. Some think of it only from the angle of the individual and the individual's choice as if it rises from me and my desires. Is it not something that God has planted in the human heart of this individual right from his/her inception as a human being? From all eternity the Father has seen this person in and through his Son the icon in front of him⁶ and having seen loved him/her in the Spirit and created in course of time. Whatever discernment about the said vocation and due training accorded to the individual to fulfil the vocation it is only a God-given assistance and an ecclesial act. No one person needs to take credit for it.

Gift to the Church

At the same time it is a gift to the Church as Pope John Paul II says in his post-synodal document on *Vita Consecrata* (Consecrated Life)⁷. They are to uphold the life in God lived to its maximum while on this earth. In their life God is manifested. This is how in Jesus Christ was manifested the goodness of God: his providence, forgiveness, gentleness, welcoming all high and low. This is how Jesus identified himself with all. He is from God and to God. This is genuine Christology. This is what a religious is also called to be: from God for the people and leading them to God in the Spirit through Jesus Christ who became one of us and not one who is cut off or aloof. In an older style of spirituality practiced by some what was spelt out was their being cut away from the world. But even this was interpreted with charity by some of the Desert Fathers of the Church. They said they went into the deserts or lived as hermits to pray for their fellow Christians and to keep the evil one busy so that they are

spared of the trials which these hermits or anchorites undertook to face.

Is such a Life undertaken instead of or as Part of their Fellow Human Beings?

In Christology a soteriological (connected with salvation) question is raised. Did Jesus suffer instead of us or as one of us? While it is true that some of the Fathers of the Church would speak of Jesus Christ suffering instead of us (this is called vicarious suffering), there are Fathers of the church who would insist that Jesus suffered as one of us, in solidarity with us⁸. He was in every way like unto us except sin. Following this soteriological statement we could say that the person who has entered the consecrated life has also entered it not instead of others but as one of the human race: not only in union with fellow Christians but also with the whole of humanity. Is it not right to say that Jesus Christ died for all of humanity and not just for a few or for a select group?

In connection with this I often react to request for prayers from the laity by asking them why they are asking me to pray for them. The answer has often been: because you religious people have enough and more time to pray while we laity are busy with so many things that we do not have the time to engage ourselves in prayer. So please pray instead of us. This of course is a falsity. All can pray and a Christian who has not explicitly made a will not to pray is actually praying but praying in a way he/she is unable to recognize. The Holy Spirit enables all to pray in the manner suited to their life and calling. So my answer to them would always be: please do not ask me to pray instead of you but you pray and I will join my own prayers with yours, in solidarity with you. Jesus

as our only mediator⁹ prays not instead of us but along with us. This is why most of our liturgical prayers end with: 'we ask this through Christ our Lord'. So a consecrated person or a religious is always called constantly to live a life not away from people but with the people. Even contemplatives living behind the grills of an enclosure are always in union with the people of the world for whom they pray day and night. Those who are in the active life imitate Jesus who went about serving all, curing their illnesses not even having enough time to eat or rest¹⁰. These services today could take on so many different shapes as Pope John Paul II says.¹¹

Iconic Representation of the Religious/Consecrated Life

An icon is a representation. They say we cannot look at an icon in the same way a second time because it keeps changing, revealing new vistas of life. It is like a window trellises through which you look at a magnificent scene which keeps changing according to seasons, times and situations. One such icon as a word picture is the description of the scene of Transfiguration¹² which Pope John Paul II uses effectively in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*¹³. He presents it from the angle of Trinity, Christology and Pneumatology and applies them to the Consecrated Life. Here only the Christological aspect needs to hold our attention. I find that in the scene the Father's voice presents Jesus as his Son in whom he is well pleased and the Father asks the disciples to hear him i.e., follow the ways of Jesus closely. I would see here dual advice: one is pointing to the consecrated person Jesus whom they have undertaken to follow and whom they should follow as closely as possible with the assistance

of the Holy Spirit. The other is in their turn to be the radiators of the glory of the Lord from and through their consecrated life. The triple vows are only manifestation of what they are in the presence of God for the whole world. Jesus came from the Father. He was sent and so is the consecrated person coming from the Lord and sent by the Lord, to take all through him back to the Father. They have not come to seek their own glory even as Jesus did not come to be served unto but to serve¹⁴ and be a ransom for all¹⁵. He came to take us all back to the Father and so are the consecrated persons to take all back to the Father in Jesus Christ and not gather people for themselves or their own earthly glory or prosperity. Such a service could involve even the laying down of one's life as was the case with Jesus¹⁶. We know to what great extent this could take us. But the consecrated persons, united in Jesus and with Jesus are ready for any sacrifice, anywhere as their vocation in obedience may draw them to and extend them. Their aim is only to do the will of the Father, as Jesus himself constantly did and declared.¹⁷ Church history bears witness to countless consecrated persons who laboured hard in the vineyard of the Lord in various roles: as contemplatives, as hermits, or in coenobitical life, in active life, in remote areas where many would not dare to go because it is difficult or insalubrious for one's health etc. It is simply the love that filled their hearts even as Jesus in this scene of Transfiguration is transformed and filled with the Holy Spirit under the brooding cloud. The scene of the transfiguration is not just a passing moment but an ongoing event in the life of the consecrated person who carries this vision wherever he/she goes. It forms a background for their consecrated life. We also notice that the disciples do not remain on Mount Tabor but had to come down and walk the way along with Jesus the way of the cross

but we are told that they could not understand¹⁸ and this happens to us also at times when we too do not fully understand all that the Lord is demanding of us and it becomes patent only as the circumstances and situations unfold in our lives.

Primacy to God

Genuine Christology cannot for a single moment forget that Jesus Christ is God as well as human. He is one Person in two natures complete and whole. His divinity does not interfere in his human decision or twist his human consciousness. How could we bypass what Jesus tells the man who ran up to him calling him 'good teacher' and Jesus' rejoinder that 'No one is good but God alone'?¹⁹ This should make us pause and ask whether we give the first place to God alone. If at baptism we are asked whether we love God with all our heart and soul how much more this question is valid in the life of a consecrated Religious? The vows are but expressions of giving this first place to God which the first parents refused to give God and attempted foolishly to topple God from his primacy and capture his place. This is how sometimes we could view the account in Genesis about the temptation of the first parents and perhaps the hidden reference to it in the ancient hymn in the Letter to the Philippians²⁰. By poverty we declare that God means more to us than money or wealth or even worldly honours; by chastity we proclaim that Jesus and the Father's kingdom or rule of God is for us 'the all' of our life and aim and not the continuation of the self and selfish interests in this life. By obedience we seek not our will but the will of God even as it was for Jesus during his passion when left to his human desires he would

have liked the chalice to pass from him²¹. The consciousness of Jesus in his public ministry can be seen very clearly in the Gospel of John where he says again and again that he is from the Father and is going to the Father. This exactly is the Christological dimension that is to be always present in the life of the person living a consecrated life. Nothing can come in between God and this person. Everything else is kept in line with this primary and at no time is God to be relegated to the second place.

Jesus was not exempt from Temptations

Genuine Christology upholds along with the church that Jesus was *de jure* sinless. This is to say that Jesus was not only *de facto* sinless but also he could not sin because of who he is deep down as the Divine Son who cannot be separated from either the Father or the Holy Spirit even for a moment. But this does not mean a mixing up of the divine with his genuine humanity. In his humanity he faced temptations like any one of us. The Letter to the Hebrews is very clear on this point. It tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way like anyone of us but he did not sin. Because he was tempted and also suffered in many ways, he knows very well how to sympathize with us who are tempted and who face umpteen sufferings²². The letter also points out that it was not easy for Jesus to obey. Sometimes we may think that it was easy for him but the garden of Gethsemane shows us that he had to *learn to obey* despite all his loud crying!²³ This is but another way of saying that though we may become persons who have entered the consecrated life, though we are flooded with God's living, loving and vibrant presence through the divine

inhabitation and an ever growing life of Grace, we are not exempt from trials and temptations of various kinds. But the basic choice that God made of us when he called us and we said our 'yes' always remains. Though it could happen that we forget him and go away he does not abandon us because of who we are deep down: chosen by God, loved by God and sent on a life mission by God. We may be unfaithful but he is never unfaithful. He understands our human weakness and provides for us the path of continuous reconciliation.

The Paschal Mystery in the Life of the Consecrated Persons

The paschal mystery looms large in the life of Jesus. He realizes that he had to suffer and die and then only rise to new life²⁴. His is not to calculate when the kingdom has to come in fullness and glory. It will come in its own time slowly and steadily according to God's will.²⁵ He has to lay down his life like all the prophets. God alone is to be glorified in his life. This again is portrayed in the life of the consecrated persons who are not to seek the time of the coming of the kingdom or try to see the restoration. It will come in its own time. They are to struggle and suffer if need be in order that God alone may be glorified through their life. The hope of resurrection that filled Jesus' life also fills our life. They could as well say as Jesus did: destroy this temple and in three days I will restore it. The sufferings, pains and struggles that the person in consecrated life undergoes are not without meaning and the meaning is pointing in the direction of the paschal mystery.

Jesus had to live a Life of Faith, Hope and Charity

Christology points out to the life of faith, hope and charity to which Jesus was called. True humanity is a call to walk in faith. We do not know the future, what it holds for us. But we are conscious of the love of the Father for us, his loving providence in our life. If Jesus is truly human as genuine Christology upholds, then he had to walk in faith like any one of us trusting in his Father's love and providence. We have many passages in the New Testament that speak of the loving way in which Jesus describes his own experience of the Father and his invitation for us to trust in the Father similarly²⁶. Jesus had a human consciousness like anyone of us. Karl Rahner in his writings²⁷ mentions that often enough people do not sufficiently reflect on the complex nature of human consciousness. Explaining his many divisions and distinctions of types of consciousness, in particular he points out that the consciousness of Jesus had a subject pole and an object pole of consciousness. Here subject pole would refer to the non-reflected, non-verbalized convictions attached to the subject pole which gradually moves in course of time to the object pole of consciousness. Answering the question whether Jesus was aware that he is the divine Son of the Father, Rahner's answer would be both 'yes' and 'no' depending on which pole we are referring to. If it is to the subject pole that we are referring then he certainly knew it as a deep down conviction, if we were referring to the object pole then he did not know with 100% certainty. There would always be a gap which is bridged by an act of Faith²⁸. It is not only on this question but on many other issues he had to exercise the act of faith e.g., after his baptism when he is announced as the 'Beloved Son' in whom the Father is pleased or in other words that he is

the Messiah, it is not told to him what type of Messiah he is to be. He has to find it out and the Spirit impelled him to the desert to discern from among the many expectations which model of work he should follow. In his human consciousness he has to decide on these issues in a spirit of faith like anyone of us. In the consecrated life there are occasions when though we may be convinced of certain matters we have to discern, make sure and make our act of faith. For that matter our vocation itself is a matter of faith. We are convinced of our vocation. This conviction is attached to the subject pole of our human consciousness. This moves from this subject pole to the object pole due to various events in our life: the many ups and downs of our life and the discernment that we exercise with the many helps providence provides, we understand our vocation at a deeper level. One may sometimes wonder: did I really think my vocation was like this or that; these twists and turns that life brings about. This precisely is what Karl Rahner seems to be indicating about human consciousness of Jesus as well since he had a genuine human consciousness which cannot be confused or mixed up with his divine consciousness²⁹ which is numerically identically same as that of the Father and the Holy Spirit. If at all one speaks of the proper consciousness (i.e., belonging only to him) it has to be the human consciousness. We realize that this consciousness has so much space for the act of faith and we are called to exercise it so many times and we are encouraged by the fact that Jesus had to go through the same process in his genuine human consciousness.

He exercised hope as all human beings have to exercise in their lives. For him it was hope against hope when we ponder over the passion he went through. Mark in his passion

account has Jesus crying out in the words of the Psalmist, asking his Father why is he silent? What he has suffered, is it not enough? The scoffers under the cross were challenging him to come down and they would believe in him³⁰. But the Father was silent. Deep down in his human consciousness he was convinced that his Father loved him and he too loved the Father. He had experienced his love and so he was sure that the Father would vindicate him and he will rise on the third day and so it was. Similar is the call in the life of the consecrated person to exercise hope at all times, come what may. The love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who dwell in our hearts is certain and we would never be abandoned though we may feel at times as if we were abandoned.

The life of charity that Jesus led is quite obvious and the way he went about spending himself tirelessly, without even proper rest is well known from the Gospel accounts. They were like sheep without a shepherd³¹ and he would not look for his own rest but would speak to them at length and cure their sick and free those possessed by the evil spirit. So we have a wonderful example for the Religious in the tireless heart of Jesus that longed to be poured out for the people in their service and to lead them to his Father.

Conclusion

This brings us to the conclusion and we say once again: Jesus is truly God and truly human and the consecrated persons can learn to belong truly to God wholeheartedly and to whom they have always to give the primacy and primary concern; but this can never mean that they cut themselves off from human society. On the contrary, all the more they

would be at the service of their Brethren and the whole wide world at large even as their Lord and Master embraced all: the high and the lowly.

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Endnotes

¹ Jose Miguez Bonino, (ed) (translated from the Spanish by Robert R. Barr) *Faces of Jesus—Latin American Christologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1984. Cf. also B. Joseph Francis, *Jesus Christ - Our Lord, God Brother & Saviour*, St. Pete's Guide Book Series no .1, Bangalore, 2011, pp.172-177.

² Cf. Karl Adam, *Christ of Faith*, Bk. 1, Ch. 2. There are many editions and publications of this work. This has the summary of the story of the understanding of Jesus Christ in Christian tradition down the ages. Cf. also the well known work of Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Traditions*. This has many details which an ardent student of Christology would find interesting.

³ Cf. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, TPI Publications, Bangalore, ND 603/7.

⁴ Cf. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, TPI Publications, Bangalore, ND 604-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ND 607-8.

⁶ Cf. Heb 1:2-3.

⁷ Cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 25-3-1996, no.2.

⁸ Cf. Rom 5:12-19.

⁹ Cf. 1 Tim 2:5.

¹⁰ Cf. Mk 3:20; 4:35-39; 6:30-32.

¹¹ Cf. *Vita consecrata*, no.96-99.

¹² Mt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-10; Lk 9:28-36.

- ¹³ Cf. *Vita Consecrata* nos. 14-16.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Mt 20:28.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Mk 10:45.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Jn 15:13.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Jn 4:34.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Mk 9:9-10.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Mk 10:17-18.
- ²⁰ Cf. Gen 3:1-7; Phil 2:6-11.
- ²¹ Cf. Mk 14:36.
- ²² Cf. Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-16.
- ²³ Cf. Heb 5:7-9.
- ²⁴ Cf. Mk 8:31 ff; Mt 16:21-28; Lk 9:22-27; 12:50; Jn 12:20-24 etc.
- ²⁵ Cf. Mt 13:1 ff the parables of the kingdom.
- ²⁶ Cf. Mt 6:25-34; 7:7-10 etc.
- ²⁷ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, article 9 (Dogmatic reflections on the knowledge and self-consciousness of Christ).
- ²⁸ It could even be represented mathematically by 99.999% or any number of 9s after the decimal point provided you do not come to the 100%. It is precisely this gap that is filled up by an act of faith.
- ²⁹ Cf. Council of Chalcedon 451 AD that we mentioned earlier. The council tells us clearly that the two natures and the characteristics that belong to each of these natures in Jesus are *never* to be mixed.
- ³⁰ Cf. Mk 15:25-34.
- ³¹ Cf. Mt 9:36.