

## **A LIFE UNCOMMONLY BLESSED: CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY, CHALLENGES AND TRAJECTORIES**

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**Rev. Prof. Patrick Mwanja, CSSp**

### **Abstract:**

*Undoubtedly, all over the world, consecrated life is going through a difficult moment of transition. The society of today has changed enormously. This change that can be best described as pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized, and the one shaped by modern information and communication technologies, producer of new forms of poverty and exclusion. In this new context, any form of life centered on God and self-giving to others is considered clearly countercultural. Religious evangelical counsels do not seem appreciated, much less understood. They are considered inhuman and limiting human beings from true maturity and fulfilment. In other words, the evangelical counsels are something from which to free ourselves. Religious life appears in such an environment to be a sign counter to a variety of contemporary values, including (and not limited to) money and materialism, hedonism and body worship, individualism, and any form of authoritarianism. In short, religious life is very much challenged today; it is in a crisis. This paper aims at giving a theological insight into this crisis; it also proposes some reflections to map the way forward for consecrated life.*

### **Article**

#### ***Religious Life as God's Gift to the Church and the World***

In the *Code of Canon Law* of the Catholic Church, consecrated life is defined as:

a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having dedicated themselves to His honor, to the building up of the Church and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the Kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Code of Canon Law*, 573 § 1.

Religious is a precious gift that God bestows freely to the Church and the world in general. Consecrated life is understood as a gift which the Father has given to the Church by means of the Spirit so that, in faithfulness to the Gospel, the most characteristic traits of the life of his Son Jesus, the chaste, poor and obedient one (cf. Mt. 8:20; Phil. 2:8), and the unfathomable riches of his mystery (cf. Eph. 3:8), might be present in the world and might draw everyone towards the kingdom of God (cf. *LG* 43, 44, 46).

For it to remain a “good” gift of God to humanity, religious life needs to be constantly renewed. This renewal consists in both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes as well as the adaptation to the changed condition of our times. This renewal must follow the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Gift of God to Humanity in Crisis***

According to many who observe and evaluate the life of consecration both from within and from without, consecrated life today is in crisis; it is experiencing a fundamental difficulty. Religious life today appears to be facing much change. This does not necessarily mean something negative since sometimes changes are positive; they can be opportunities because they can be considered as invitations to discern the will of God through being open to God’s Spirit, which blows wherever it wills (cf. Jn 3:8).

Today, there is a general perception all over the world that consecrated life is at the crossroads and that something needs to be done urgently. Indeed, there is a feeling that this state of life is going through a difficult moment of transition: present structures seem no longer able to provide the answers like in the past, requiring new structures to emerge from a new spirit. There are specific challenges consecrated life is facing that need to be responded to in such a way that we can change what is problematic and in crisis into occasions of growth, and into a new stage, into a *kairos*.

One can say that the Church has already realized this difficulty, acknowledging the need for a paradigm shift in the way of understanding and living consecrated life today. This is however not very easy thing today. It is obvious that consecrated life finds it hard to offer to the present Christian life a new synthesis and an alternative that could touch and renew its identity and become a significant contribution to the Church and contemporary society.

Something significant is however already happening. Religious life today is trying to be more lay and less clerical; more from and with the poor; less secular; bringing about a mysticism of love, communion, and solidarity; less immersed in ecclesiastic “functionalism”; more centered on Jesus and in service. However, it seems that religious life cannot find the way to express all this.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, *Perfatae Caritatis*, No. 2.

And yet, the best thing about this ecclesial group is its constant effort to substitute barriers with horizons and to try to live in fullness.

One of the greatest obstacles in becoming a religious today is that religious life today is very challenging. The task of living a life of evangelical councils of Chastity, Poverty and obedience, a life that is fully God-centered, is no walk in the park. Religious life and indeed, Christianity lived to the fullest involves struggle. But is the struggle worth it? Often the skeptic will see the struggle and be deterred. What he or she may not see—perhaps a result of self-inflicted spiritual blindness—is the outflow of joy that permeates every saint's struggle; and if he or she does see it, he or she will not want it—not because he or she does not want joy but rather because he or she does not want joy *enough* to give up his or her everything, to denounce himself or herself completely for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Generally today there is a sort of *indifferentism* towards religion, a sort of a popular religious indifference that affects even practicing Catholics. This is one of the greatest modern tragedies arising out of an age of hedonism and "choose your own way" morality. In fact, one might call our times the "Age of Self-Sedation" in that, instead of people pursuing the supernatural high that explodes interiorly from personal union with God, as St. John Of The Cross and St. Teresa of Avila would regard it, the modern man is in search of that which brings him earthly satisfaction and pleasure: wealth, power and pleasure.

It is an absolute necessity, I think, that consecrated men and women today must strive to become relevant. What matters for the contemporary world is for the religious to be relevant in our particular missions seen as a contribution to society and a possible means of favoring its transformation; it means being significant to the poor and getting involved with them. This is where the future of consecrated life lies and the opportunity of becoming evangelizing leaven. The mission of consecrated men and women is more and more to become a leaven. Here lies the hope (Gal 5:9).

Unfortunately, consecrated life in its present form—structures, organization, work methods, lifestyle—does not seem to respond adequately to the needs and challenges of a society that is changed and is changing radically. The responses to today's needs seem however weak and fragile. In an article published about Consecrated Life, Fr. Carlos Palacio, SJ, affirms: "Consecrated religious life today is suffering from an undeniable 'evangelical anemia,' both personal and institutional.... To overcome this anemia it is necessary to redeem its passion for the person of Jesus Christ, the first love that consecrated religious life ought to radiate."<sup>3</sup>

The society today has changed and is still changing; It can be described in many ways: pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized, shaped by modern information and communication technologies, producer of new forms of poverty and exclusion. In other

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Palacio, SJ., *Luzes e Sombras da Vida Religiosa Consagrada nos dias de hoje em convergencia*, 416.

words, the change of an era is taking place, and it presumes a change in our understanding of the human person and its relation to the world and to God.

Vatican II in its Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* calls for the reading of the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. This is a call to reflect deeply on the events unfolding before our eyes and to respond to them out of mature faith.<sup>4</sup> This is what the life of consecration is called to today. Now rather than later, consecrated men and women are called to avoid spending their energies in internal and ideological criticisms, and instead live in a more positive manner, an alternative manner that is open to true pluralism, recognizing that the Spirit works in different ways to build up the Church and to develop people's lives.

Consecrated life must germinate the seed of a new society, according to the project of God's Kingdom, and of a new way of being Church, made-up of being community. All these presuppose great changes that every religious charism will have to incarnate in its original traditions. No one is exempt from entering into this wavelength. It is a wise viewpoint, profoundly marked by faith, and in continual cultural and religious dialogue, open to the poor of all times, including today's poor, and to all those who generate new thoughts and new ways of proceeding.

Consecration makes men and women religious persons who are given to God without conditions.<sup>5</sup> More concretely, it makes them "living memories of Jesus' way of being and acting," of his obedience, poverty and chastity. According to the *Decree on Renewal of Religious Life*, "religious faithful to their profession and leaving all things for the sake of Christ should follow him, regarding this as the one thing that is necessary and should be solicitous for all that is his."<sup>6</sup>

Religious life transforms men and women religious into signs and communicators of God's love for humanity. This is the first contribution that the religious can and should offer to God and to the Church. Unfortunately, this is not recognized today, or quite rarely. This is because a reductive anthropological model, very frequent today, robs from life its religious dimension, building it on short-term life projects. This is what happens with the myth of science, technology and economics and the illusion that progress is unlimited, condemning existence to the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, No. 5.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, No. 5.

immanence of this world without horizons of definitive transcendence since everything ends with death.

To a world centered on efficiency and production, on economy and well-being, the religious presents himself or herself as a *sign of God* and his grace and love. Jesus came to give us God and his love. This is God's good news! It is God whom, first and foremost, we can give to humanity. This is the great hope that men and women religious can offer to the world. It is their first prophecy. Indeed, as Pope Francis puts it, it is now that consecrated life is most challenged, bearing in mind the difficulties they are facing today like decreasing vocations and aging members, the threats posed by relativism and consumerism. They are called, amidst these challenges, to be a sign of hope to the rest of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that consecrated life being a life centered on God and self-giving to others is *clearly countercultural*. It appears as a sign counter to the absolute value of money and materialism, counter to hedonism and body worship, counter to individualism and any form of authoritarianism. Apparently, religious people live in a historical, cultural and social context in which the evangelical counsels are not appreciated, much less understood. They are considered inhuman and limiting human beings from developing into truly mature or fulfilled persons. In other words, the evangelical counsels are something from which religious are to free themselves.

For many today, for example, obedience seems to attack the fundamental rights of the human person, the freedom to decide for oneself, to be self-determined and self-fulfilled. Chastity is seen as a deprivation of the good of marriage, and the renunciation of having a person with whom to share the beautiful as well as the ugly moments of life, its joys and sorrows, successes and failures; it is the renunciation of being parents, of tenderness, and of everyday intimacy. Poverty is even less appreciated in a world that has made well-being and finances as supreme values. For these people today, poverty is considered as an evil to be overcome, an evil from which to free oneself in order to become completely autonomous, without having to depend on anyone. The important thing is *to have in order to be*; not to be deprived of something, and to seek forms of life that are secular and consumerist. This makes us insensitive to the poor and incapable of serving the neediest.

Undoubtedly, this socio-cultural and ecclesial context influences consecrated life and provokes a

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, No.3.

critical situation manifested by various symptoms, even some of which are alarming: decrease of those entering, increase in departures, aging of the members, weighty institutions, excessive and stressful activism on the part of the persons in charge of the works, the weakening of communitarian life, fraternity and the spiritual life, frequent financial problems, together with the preoccupation over an uncertain future. For some, the actual form of consecrated life in the world is touching bottom. For others, it is suffering from evangelical “anemia” translated as diminished passion and weak conviction leading to frustration and disenchantment. The power of disenchantment is quite vast. Becoming aware of it and reacting properly will lead consecrated life to be re-born in a way that is more alive and stronger than ever. It is here that the words of St. John Paul II become relevant when he invites religious to stand firm and clarify and testify to the profound anthropological significance of the counsels because “evangelical counsels should not be considered as denial of the values inherent in sexuality, in the legitimate desire to possess material goods or to make decisions for oneself.”<sup>8</sup>

It is obvious that we need conversion and growth to resolve those distortions that have weakened the life and witness of the Church, including religious life. We have become too accustomed to privileges, considering our call an “office,” or worst yet, a “dignity.” We have become insensitive to our lack of austerity in regard to others, and infrequently do we question whether or not our life is coherent with the “image” of the servant who gives his life so that others can have life.

Our way of being must really be configured with that of the suffering Servant of Yahweh. Consecrated persons should understand that “the more they stand at the foot of the Cross of Christ, the more immediately and profoundly they experience the truth of God who is love.”<sup>9</sup> It is the duty of consecrated men and women today to question themselves with honesty and humility, and see whether the life they live and the kind of activities they perform are structured according to the principles of efficacy and utility, proper to this logic, or according to the countercultural witness of self-giving as unconditional love, of which Jesus gives us the example.

Certainly religious life was born as a countercultural reality, and one criteria of its fidelity to the mission is precisely that of maintaining itself as an alternative meaning. Religious life today and

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<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, No 87.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, No. 24.

the Church in general are invited to honestly re-look at the criteria on which they base and organize their activities. Is their preoccupation merely with making them efficient and productive? Are they ready to incarnate the logic of gratuity and trust, even if it implies the risk of failure? Do they believe that in the concrete experience of “failure,” God is manifested in a privileged way? It should not be forgotten that the Lord’s death on the cross was a real failure in the eyes of the world. And neither should it be forgotten that Paul was convinced that in his weakness the glory of God was made more clearly manifest.

### ***Some Concrete Proposals to the Way Forward***

Challenges are positive in that they can be real opportunities, *kairos* moments in transforming situations to something better. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated Life (2014) invites the Church and consecrated men and women to consider renewing themselves and their appreciation of the life they have been called to. In spite of all, the difficulties various forms of consecrated life are experiencing: decreasing vocations and ageing members, economic problems, issues of internationalization and globalization, the threats posed by relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance ... still to be able to “look at the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope”.<sup>10</sup> The following are some of the proposals for the way forward.

### ***Reinvigoration of Consecrated Life***

Consecrated life in our world has to work at recuperating the *mystical aspect that comes from the prayerful reading of the Word of God*, which is at the heart of being Christian and consecrated, and which leads to an impassioned following of Jesus and sharing with the poor. Consecrated life must be fire that gives hope to the world. Consecrated people are to draw near the people of our time in a new manner, with a new language and new attitudes; they are to know how to dialogue and allow themselves to be enriched by the questions of contemporary men and women; offer them, through their witness and words, the proposal of a life full of meaning, marked by generosity, compassion, generous self-giving service, acting in a way that is inspired by freedom, truth and love. All this is accomplished through a vital and deep relationship with the Lord whom religious wish to follow with a style of life and mission to which they are dedicated full

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, No, 1, 2, 3.

time and with their whole heart.

Indeed, a renewed commitment to holiness by consecrated persons is more necessary than ever because it is in being themselves holy that they are able to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbor, especially the most needy.

There are very important steps to be taken, for consecrated men and women to renew their commitment to the kind of life they have chosen. There is a need to pass from an *external* conduct lived out of requirements and regulations, to one experienced *from within*, a more demanding one, one that requires *more Jesus and less Church*, more kerygma and less paralyzing hermeneutics, more service and fewer impediments, more intensity and less quantity. It is the new face of consecrated life which implies the replacement of lapsed structures, overcoming disenchantment, recognizing new meanings, returning to the Word of God and the foundational charism, responding to the signs of the times, the ability to dialogue, and the value of encounter especially with the poor and with the laity.

Some people today even say that religious life must be reinvented, and a new *paradigm* is to be found. It may be quite difficult to know what this statement exactly means, but I think it expresses the desire for significant change. For me it means, no more and no less, than to return to Jesus, to go back to the Gospel, and almost forget everything else. To meet this important challenge and find that new paradigm, it is *necessary to intensify prayer, community life and mission; but it is also necessary to point to the needed change in order to understand and experience the sense of consecrated life in our present epochal change* (DA<sup>2</sup> 44).

### ***Preferential Option for the Poor of our Times***

Consecrated life is a way of life not out of the world but a life in the world. Consecrated life therefore cannot ignore the great social and environmental challenges that threaten humanity's future in the world today. It cannot withdraw inward, only thinking of itself. It needs to radiate outward, impelled by the Spirit towards the whole of humanity awaiting salvation. In the words of Pope Francis,

the Holy Spirit draws us into the mystery of the living God and saves us from the threat of a Church which is gnostic and self-referential, closed in on herself; he impels us to



open the doors and go forth to proclaim and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, to communicate the joy of faith, the encounter with Christ.<sup>11</sup>

At the heart of the life of every consecrated person and indeed the whole Church is the fact that the poor, the needy, the downtrodden, are a presence of Christ himself. Blessed Charles de Foucauld, was deeply convinced that Jesus is in these ‘little ones,’ in the sinners, in the poor he encounters.<sup>15</sup> Just as we must recognize Jesus in the bread of the word and the bread of the Eucharist, so must we see him in the face of the poor, whom the Church is called to love as “part of her constant tradition.”<sup>12</sup>

If consecrated people recognize Jesus in the poor, then they, like Jesus will be moved in the deepest part of themselves by the sufferings and anxieties of our world. Vatican II made this the point of departure for its reflection on *The Church in the Modern World*: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”<sup>13</sup> This way they will be moved to be on the frontline in building a more human world, to contribute to the “development of peoples”<sup>14</sup>.

Consecrated men and women must therefore feel the very preoccupation of Jesus, that of defending life where it is threatened, particularly among the excluded. Listening must lead us to respond creatively to the new forms of dehumanization and poverty and to make the contribution of an eco-theological reflection for the defense of life threatened throughout the ecosystem. This encourages us to say, and even more so to achieve, what the voice of the Spirit suggests. The Spirit moans and cries out in us and in those suffering in our history and our present situation as a whole, in which several thousands of millions of human beings are the protagonists. According to Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, “Love — *caritas* — is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace.”<sup>15</sup>

The call to the consecrated life is the ecclesial spearhead of all life that is threatened, and it is the defense of another world that is possible and necessary. Few things arouse as much admiration, surprise and attraction as to see religious who give themselves in favor of the impoverished and of those who, in one way or another, are considered the least of society,<sup>16</sup> who are where others don’t want to be. There is no doubt that it was the preferential option for the poor that configured the life and mission of Jesus (Lk 14.18). And it was the same option that configured the life of our congregations. All of them were born at the threshold of some type of inhumanity. Therefore our mission priorities cannot be with those who exclude others, but with the excluded. It can be

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<sup>11</sup> .Pope Francis Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost, May (19, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Charles de Foucauld, *Letter to Louis Massingnon*, (August, 1 1916).

<sup>13</sup> . Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio*, No. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritatis Veritate*, No. 1.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vitae Consecrata*, No. 82.

said that the history of this option merges with the history of the consecrated life.

This involves a commitment to systemic change as a response to the cry of the poor and a supporting role in the construction of more just societies. It involves processes of awareness, formation and action that encourage and produce changes in mentality, culture and activities. It involves a spirituality and consistency of faith that react to the progressive deterioration of the living conditions of human beings, and that can contribute effectively to the elimination of hunger, the eradication of poverty, to environmental sustainability, to gender equality and the recognition of women, to reduction of infant mortality, to overcoming diseases such as malaria and HIV and AIDS, to recover the *sense of the poor* held by our Founders, which is very different from charity merely as assistance.

It also involves setting up religious life in *frontier areas*, as an expression of its mystical aspect, its prophecy and its defense of life. It involves making one's own the boldness of the Founders, the evangelical response where life calls, the commitment to migrants/refugees, the trafficking of persons, the environment, the poor, the elderly, the indigenous people, the woman; a response to integral and sustainable human development, and a systemic change that can humanize and unite.

These attitudes lead to prophecy in the face of runaway corruption, both in the world of economics as in the world of politics at all levels. They imply a culture of honesty, transparency and solidarity, as an alternative to the culture of corruption and selfishness, founded on a vision of the human person called to a transparent relationship with God, with all our brothers and sisters and with creation.

It is a challenge that requires us to renew, and to live profoundly, our option for the impoverished, those from all times and those of today (DA 407-430), starting from its radical theological motivations: the God of life does not want the life of his weakest ones to be taken away (DA 392). Once again, this option should get away from petty structural safety, and recover the original sense of the religious life as viewed by the Fathers of the desert and the charismatic intuition of our Founders. The consecrated life should continue to offer the path and the reality of an effective and relevant option for the poor.

***To be Witnesses of True Friendship and Communion***

In 1975, Paul VI made the powerful comment, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>17</sup> The most effective means to evangelize people today is by witnessing.

We can also call to mind here the saying of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta: “All our words would be in vain if they did not come from the heart; words that do not give the light of Christ only add to the darkness.”

The issue is clear, as Pope Benedict XVI stated in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*: “It is indispensable, through witness, to make this word credible, lest it appear merely as a beautiful philosophy or utopia, rather than a reality that can be lived and itself give life... The word of God reaches men and women ‘through an encounter with witnesses who make it present and alive’.”<sup>18</sup> Amid the clamour of the discordant voices of society, this “word” will only be attractive and compelling if it is brought by credible witnesses who have themselves been transformed by it. The same pontiff was quoted by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* as saying that “it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction”.<sup>19</sup> The apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods but rather on the eloquence of the life of consecrated men and women, which radiate the joy and the beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, living the Gospel to which they have been called, consecrated men and women today have to exercise a greater interaction between formulation and reality, theory and life. They have very clear policy formulations, but they are also very far from really leading to change, so much so that the reality is almost schizophrenically contrasted with the current formulations of religious life. Nowadays, consecrated life is faced with an opportunity and a very special task: that of creating, inspiring, enlivening and sustaining everywhere authentic fraternal communities that radiate friendship, incentive, support and reconciliation. Consecrated life must strengthen community life, to which new generations are very sensitive. It must accommodate the cultural and spiritual diversity of its members, knowing that living community is already mission. It ought to be open *ad extra*, towards all those excluded from history. We can ask ourselves: *what is required of a community so that it can transmit to others the appeal of living together, united*

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<sup>17</sup> Paul VI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, No. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, No. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*, No. 1.

*in diversity, creating heartfelt and humanizing spaces that are open and joyful for each person and for others?*

To achieve this, it must progress from:

- (i) ***a life in common to a community of life*** rich in personal relationships, welcome, dialogue, discernment, responsible freedom, concern for the other and for what is diverse, where more than mere physical presence what is worth is the melding of spirit and the union of hearts;
- (ii) ***structures that make individuals childish to supports that can form people in freedom.***  
It is not uncommon that, even with good will, certain structural supports have been multiplied making people childish, without creativity or imagination; they were agents more loyal to executing orders than people able to discern, from their own responsibility and their own loyal knowledge and understanding to live the mission assigned them. We do not help people to grow in maturity and responsibility by forcing them, but by encouraging them.
- (iii) ***an impossible uniformity to communion in diversity.*** Every Christian and religious community is a pale image of the Trinitarian community. And the Trinitarian community is realized in difference not in uniformity: each divine Person is different and works differently. The unity of the Holy Trinity is made up of the oppositions and differences of the three distinct Persons, co-sharers in love.
- (iv) ***a fortified trench to an open field*** where we battle for the Kingdom. An introverted community is a neurotic community. Our communities would live in a healthier and more airy manner if they opened up their doors and windows to the world; or if they came down to the streets and accompanied the caravans of men and women, listening with their hearts to how much people suffer, struggle and love.

### ***Humanizing ourselves so as to humanize***

“The Glory of God is man fully alive,” said St. Irenaeus. Offering contemporary society and culture an alternative way of living the human condition is not a minor challenge. We need in the way how we live our life to make sure that our fraternity and union are more humane and humanizing. Indeed, our formation programmes should promote maturity in being holistically human. Human and affective formation consistent with the postmodern times in which we are living must be given much space and attention; this formation is to help all to walk through life with autonomy and mature responsibility.

### ***Moving from protagonism to service***

As men and women religious, we must move on to another time, a time of service that does not bother too much about roles or power, and not even about one’s “impact,” but instead focuses on authentic witness. Such time does not worry about “protecting one’s image,” but rather, “living

and serving with meaning.” Today’s crisis in the Church calls us to become a “little flock.” It offers an opportunity to present a new image of the Church, a more humble and less powerful Church, seeking to influence society only through the good news of the Gospel and the values of the Kingdom, and not through political or economic power. The crisis of consecrated life can be seen as a call to be a “little flock,” a helpless servant of humanity and a humble witness of God’s Kingdom. It is to be a consecrated life of modest and humble presence; with an intercultural presence of its members, a collaborator in the inter-congregational level, both as a community and with the laity in mission. The signs of the presence of this consecrated life will not be in large institutions and structures, but in its service and solidarity with the poor and the little ones of this world.

### ***Re-look at consecrated life from the perspective of our digital world***

We must be present in this new technological culture that every day expands with the rapid development of science, technology and communications. This digital world, also called the sixth continent, can accentuate the light culture which favors the new anthropological findings and ways of thinking already mentioned above. It leads us to listening to what refers to the contemporaneity of relations, openness to the diverse and the breadth of horizons.

It is necessary to deepen and promote global thinking that is universal and Catholic, and that moves beyond specific, contextual, and local practices. It is urgent to understand in depth—not only the knowledge and appropriate use of new information and communication technologies for “evangelizing oneself and evangelizing others”—but the anthropological, cultural, and religious implications of this great digital scenario. It is also important to integrate the digital culture in relationships and in the fulfillment of people. This infers that the new information and communication technologies will be incorporated in consecrated life and become instruments of evangelization in our mission and lifestyle, helping to achieve solidarity, avoid immediacy and overcome distances.

The great challenge for consecrated life is none other than the discovery of a form of life in which the person of Jesus and his project, in a process of true discipleship, becomes the heart of everything.

### **Conclusion**

To be relevant today, consecrated men and women have to become leaven that ferments the dough of the consecrated life, and to become a gift and a living and prophetic presence of the Spirit who wants to renew the Church. We cannot look back but forward, and offer alternatives. Religious will have to continue deepening the mystical, prophetic identity of the consecrated life

at the service of the Kingdom, founded on the Word and the Eucharist.

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