

Witnesses of Christ in the World

The Consecrated Life in View of the Celebration of the Jubilee Year 2000

By Camilo Maccise, OCD

Translated from the Spanish by Philip Gage, SM

Preface

The Conference of Major Superiors of Men is pleased to be able to make available to the English speaking world this excellent resource published in Spanish by CELAM (the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America). *Testigos de Cristo en el Mundo: La Vida Consecrada en la Perspectiva de la Celebración del Jubileo del Año 2000* (as the document is known in Spanish) is the first in a series of pamphlets published by the Latin American bishops to help integrate the message of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* into the celebration of the Church of Latin America. The pamphlet was written by Camilo Maccise, OCD, Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites and president of the Union of Superiors General in Rome.

The purpose of the document is to make available to religious for reflection and discussion an integration of key themes of *Vita Consecrata* with themes of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* as preparation for the millennium proceeds. For CMSM, making this document available in English is one way that the Conference can help facilitate that process for U.S. religious and offer further reflections on the teaching of *Vita Consecrata* itself. CELAM intends to publish two more documents for the years leading up to the millennium. *Los Religiosos como Signo de Fraternidad* (Religious as Signs of Fraternity) has already been published. Response of U.S. religious to this resource will help us decide whether to make that publication available next year and then plan for the third publication in the year 2000.

We have not attempted to change the language of the document from its appeal to Latin American religious. There is hardly a point made in the document that is not equally applicable in this country. Its significant contribution to integrating Trinitarian theology into reflection upon the religious life (a welcome and needed emphasis in this country) requires an extensive use of masculine images for God from Scripture and classical Trinitarian theology.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna in her classic book on the Trinity in contemporary theology¹ recognizes the ideological use that has been made of this masculine imagery, but also points out that substituting other images, such as mother, does not seem to solve the difficulties. She writes that “many feminist scholars now acknowledge that the problems with the Father-metaphor are more complex than previously realized, and substituting ‘Mother’ for ‘Father’ does not resolve the deep-seated problems of a unitarian theism.” LaCugna argues that at this point in time what is needed is a better development of the theology than the use of substitutional language that does not address the ideological difficulties. We have decided to simply translate the Spanish text and let the language concerns surface in dialogue. It would be a loss if we avoided this essential Trinitarian reflection because of a fear of using offensive language before we have all found a better way of dealing with the images.

The Conference hopes that this resource will help local communities, regional communities, and institutes engage in serious and timely reflection on *Vita Consecrata* and the implication of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* for religious life and its continuing renewal as it enters a new millennium. We are very interested in your reaction to this document. Is it meaningful for U.S. religious? Will it help your institute further study *Vita*

Consecrata? How will you plan to use it within your institute? It is on the basis of your comments that the Conference will make its decision to publish the next two pamphlets in the series.

This English version was translated by Philip Gage, SM

John Klein, FMS

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¹Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 18, note 7.

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Camilo Maccise, OCD

Foreword

“Witnesses of Christ in the World” is the title of this booklet dedicated to the consecrated life. It is proposed as an aid for Brothers and Sisters consecrated to God and so beloved by the Church to help them prepare for the celebration of the Great Jubilee of faith by following the plan of *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*.

The author, Camilo Maccise, OCD,¹ deserves our heartfelt thanks for his work. He is currently president of the Union of Superiors General and a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Preparation of the Jubilee Year 2000. This double role helps him link the spirit of the Synod on Religious Life with *Vita Consecrata*, the postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II and his Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* [“*As the Third Millennium Draws near*”]. And because of his personal and ecclesial experiences, he is able to make this link with a Latin American sensitivity.

This first text of the trilogy which we will be presenting in successive years links religious life to following and witnessing the Lord as seen from the viewpoint of the Year dedicated especially to the Person of Jesus Christ. This booklet treats in an impressive way the call to conversion and holiness of life as an expression of creative fidelity on the part of so many women and men who not only read the signs of the times but also write them with their own lives consecrated to the primacy of God.

We place this booklet in the hands of Our Lord and Our Blessed Mother Mary, model of the faithful women, so that each religious, man and woman, contemplating the face of Jesus in his passion and in his glory might be transformed into the image of the transfigured Jesus. We ardently desire that many young people, through such witness, might share the good fortune of consecrating their lives to the Lord and putting themselves at the service of all, especially those who suffer various forms of poverty and affliction.

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*Given in Bogotá, September 8, 1996
Nativity of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary*

Introduction

In his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II invites all Christians to “to celebrate the jubilee with renewed faith and generous participation.”²

As we move toward the third millennium, this same papal document divides the immediate preparation into two phases. The first phase has an ante-preparatory character, which seeks to “revive in the Christian people an awareness of the value and meaning of the Jubilee of the Year 2000 *in human history*.”³ The second phase is the one properly called *preparatory*, which will unfold during the three years from 1997 to 1999. The ideal structure for this three-year period, *centered on Christ* the Son of God made man, should be theological, that is, *Trinitarian*.⁴

The postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* begins with this trinitarian perspective and presents consecrated life in the light of that mystery, especially in the first chapter, which bears the title “*Confessio Trinitatis, Origins in the Mystery of Christ and the Trinity*.” Next, the second chapter highlights the fact that consecrated life is a sign of fraternity (*Signum Fraternitatis*) related to the Trinity. This trinitarian dimension of consecrated life appears anew in the third chapter, *Servitium Caritatis*, which treats mission intended to deepen the service of charity as an epiphany of God’s love in the world.

Presenting consecrated life in the light of the trinitarian mystery underlies the entire exposition of the Apostolic Exhortation. There are many references to the trinitarian dimension found in various aspects of consecrated life. We believe that this perspective is fundamental to *Vita Consecrata*, and it allows us to connect it with the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and to find, as a result, avenues of reflection and living as we stand on the horizon of the third millennium.

The second phase of preparation for celebrating the Jubilee Year 2000 started in 1997 and was dedicated to *reflecting on Christ*, “the Word of God, made man by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ It pointed out the “*distinctly Christological character of the jubilee ... [which] will celebrate the incarnation and coming into the world of the Son of God, the mystery of salvation for the whole human race. The general theme proposed by many cardinals and bishops for this year is: ‘Jesus Christ, the one savior of the world, yesterday, today and forever.’* (cf. Heb. 13:8)”⁶

The center of reflection, our Holy Father tells us, will be a *deep appreciation of Jesus Christ*, seen as savior and proclaimer of the Gospel, a deeper understanding of the mystery of his incarnation, and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. To achieve this, John Paul II invites us to return to *Scripture*, to rediscover *Baptism* as the basis of Christian living, which opens us to all our brothers and sisters in Christ in a commitment to *ecumenism* to work for the unity of all believers in him. “Everything ought to focus on the primary objective of the jubilee: the *strengthening of faith and of the witness of Christians ... 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.*”⁷ Mary should be contemplated in this first year of the preparatory phase in the mystery of her divine Motherhood and as a *model of living faith*.⁸

In the document *Vita Consecrata* we also find these same themes and the conclusions that can be drawn from them applied directly to consecrated life with a decidedly Christological character. Combining the ideas of both documents can be very useful for consecrated persons to respond to the pope’s invitation to conversion and renewal in creative fidelity to our charism and mission in the Church.

We hope that these pages will help members of consecrated life to become more conscious of the Christological dimension of their vocation to “become true signs of Christ in the world.”⁹ In this booklet we will focus successively on four points which flow in one way or another from the views highlighted by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*: a) the trinitarian aspect of consecrated life, b) how consecrated life aims at following Jesus, c) the importance of reading and meditating on Sacred Scripture to deepen the mystery of Christ, and d) conversion as creative fidelity to one’s vocation and mission.

Chapter One

Consecrated Life in Light of the Mystery of the Trinity

1. The Trinitarian Origin of the Charism of Consecrated Life

From the **trinitarian dimension**, the document *Vita Consecrata* presents consecrated life as a choice of the Father. From him comes the initiative which resounds in a person's heart so strongly that it leads to a response of acceptance and surrender.

Consecrated life finds in Jesus, the Son of the Father become flesh, the way to put oneself totally at God's service. "Living 'in obedience, with nothing of one's own and in chastity,' consecrated persons profess that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection."¹⁰ Thus they take up Jesus' way of living "as the expression of his relationship as the only begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit," and in a particularly intimate and fruitful way they share in Christ's mission.¹¹

It is the Holy Spirit who empowers those called to this vocation to configure themselves to Christ, the chaste, poor, and obedient one, prompting them to make Christ's mission of service to his brothers and sisters their own by means of the charisms proper to their various institutes.¹²

Each one of the different charisms of consecrated life finds a trinitarian orientation at its very origin: an orientation toward the *Father* seeking him and his will through the process of conversion expressed by living out the vows; an orientation toward the *Son* to live in intimate communion with him and to learn how to serve God and neighbor; an orientation toward the *Spirit* being guided by him and sustained by his strength. The Spirit is made manifest in the joy that comes even in the midst of hardships and in the "*Parrhesia*"¹³ to proclaim the Kingdom and its demands.¹⁴

2. The Evangelical Counsels and the Trinity

Committing oneself by vows to live the evangelical counsels is a gift from the Trinity which leads one to place the Kingdom and its values above all else and which gives the strength to live its radical demands with the help of Christ and the Spirit. The evangelical counsels lived like this will have the most profound meaning to express the love which the Son has for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Putting the counsels into practice the consecrated person lives the Trinitarian and Christological character of Christian life "with particular intensity." *Chastity* reflects the infinite love which unites the three divine Persons within the Trinity's life. Christ witnessed this with the gift of his own life, and through his Spirit he prompts us to respond in total love for God and our neighbor. *Poverty* proclaims God as a human being's only *true treasure*, and lived out in the light of Jesus' example it becomes a self-giving. *Obedience* lived and practiced in imitation of Christ shows forth, not a servile dependence, but the liberating beauty of filial dependence.

The loving response of consecrated men and women is to be lived out also in a trinitarian dimension. This highlights, in the relationship of love toward Christ, the intimacy to which Jesus calls his brothers and sisters to be disciples. It also underscores, in the relationship of love toward the Spirit, an openness to welcome in the depths of our lives his inspirations and calls. And in the relationship of love toward the Father, it recognizes that he is "the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life."¹⁵

3. Communal Life and the Mystery of the Trinity

Brotherly and sisterly life also witnesses to the Trinity. It is a witness to the Father, who desires to form the one human family, a witness to the Son, who came to establish fraternity in a divided world, and a witness to the Spirit, who is the bond of communion and unity in the Church and who raises up in the Church spiritual families and fraternal communities.¹⁶

The first fruit of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost is the *koinonia* of believers. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35) They

become a community of sisters and brothers gathered together in the name of the Lord. The Holy Spirit, who is the personal love in God, unites believers with the Father and among themselves. It is he who pours into us the love of God (Rom 5:5), who enables us to love, and who unites us in the diversity of gifts and services.

This dimension of communion manifests the presence of the Spirit and becomes concrete in four realities intimately linked to one another: the teaching of the Apostles, the *koinonia*, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

Above all, the community perseveres in the Word, that is to say, in deepening the message of salvation so that it can endure in faith, since one must undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22) Faithful to the Word, the community lives in brotherly and sisterly communion starting with faith in Christ Jesus. This includes, among other things, sharing all things in common. (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35) Along with the Word, the teaching of the Apostles and fraternal communion, goes the breaking of the bread, the Eucharist, which unites believers in Christ and commits them to live, in the concrete reality of each day, the demands of charity expressed in the proclamation of the Gospel and celebrated as community. Lastly, the Spirit who prays in us (Rom 8:26-27) prompts the community to persevere in prayer as the privileged moment in which are revealed and manifested God's presence and action bringing forth salvation in our history. The basic characteristic of the Jerusalem community's prayer is harmony and unity. And with that goes seeking the will of the Father. Perseverance in prayer prepares us to face God in faith and freedom, and it prepares us to welcome the power of the Spirit, who prophetically accompanies the decisions of those whom he has brought together in communion as disciples of Christ.

This Jerusalem community, the result of the Trinity's action, has been the model "to which the Church has looked whenever she has sought to return to her original fervor and to resume with fresh evangelical vigor her journey through history. The Church is essentially a mystery of communion, 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'" ¹⁷

Consecrated life within the Church has from its origins drawn inspiration from the apostolic community and from the early Jerusalem community. At the same time, communities of consecrated men and women see in the living unity of the three persons of the Trinity their model and unifying dynamism. In this way they can be "credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity." ¹⁸

In community life, it is the Spirit who leads us into relationship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (cf. I Jn 1:3) This he does by prompting us to a constant conversion toward the Father, by means of a love nourished by the Word and by the Eucharist, and by guiding community discernment how to respond to his bidding which comes through the signs of the times. ¹⁹

Communion is lived out in the midst of *conflicts*. On the one hand, this is because the Gospel reveals and proclaims the will of God, and it therefore rejects and repudiates opposed human decisions and opinions (Acts 5:28-30); and on the other, because within the community itself there will always be found weaknesses and inconstancy.

The trinitarian God proffers this dimension of the Spirit to the world and unites in Christ whatever has been divided. The Spirit is the gift that liberates and the love that unites. The Spirit makes the past present, recalling all that Jesus taught (Jn 14:26), and links the present to the future, leading to that full communion of which he is the first fruits and the down payment. (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5) As the profound principle of the Church's unity, the Spirit unites believers. If she allows herself to be guided by the Spirit, the Church will always be a *Church of communion*, organized into communities. It will be an imperfect communion lived out in tensions, but these tensions can be brought together in synthesis and can open up the unforeseeable paths of the Spirit.

In sum, the *communal life* of the consecrated, who come together in the Lord's name, witnesses to the Trinity as origin and model of the relationship among human beings. "The fraternal life seeks to reflect the depth and richness of this mystery, taking shape as a human community in which the Trinity dwells, in order to extend in history the gifts of communion proper to the three divine Persons." ²⁰

4. The Trinity and the Missionary Dimension of Consecrated Life

The *missionary dimension* of religious consecration places consecrated life, as the whole of Jesus' life was, at the service of the Kingdom under the Spirit's guidance to bring about the Father's plan.²¹ Commitment to service of the Kingdom should be lived from the paschal perspective of death and resurrection.²² The missionary dimension is realized, above all, by the witness of a life committed to following Jesus.²³

Connected to the trinitarian dimension of mission are *the signs of the times* and *the challenges* which they present. There is a theological meaning to these signs and challenges: they are calls from the Father to act according to his plan made manifest in Christ under the action of the Spirit.²⁴ From the very beginning of *Vita Consecrata*, institutes of consecrated life are asked to muster their abilities and vitality "to face in a spiritual and apostolic manner the new challenges of our time."²⁵

The *eschatological dimension* of the consecrated life is the other point which the first part of the document underscores.²⁶ This dimension forms part of mission. It makes consecrated persons witnesses of the Kingdom which is to come, and it leads them to live an active hope in both the gift and the commitment of Gospel expectation.²⁷ Here, too, the trinitarian perspective is expressed in the faith consecrated persons have on their way to the Father, who is the beginning and end of all history, guided by the Spirit who nourishes their hope, and directed to following Jesus in love of God and neighbor, and this way leads to perfection.

At the end of the Apostolic Exhortation there are two prayers. The first is addressed *to the Divinity*. It asks God to bless those whom he has called to praise in a wondrous way the greatness of his love, his merciful goodness, and his beauty, so that they may make these divine realities shine in our world. The prayer begs *the Father* to give strength to those who are consecrated to enable them to bear witness that he is the one source of love and liberty. *The Son* is asked to see to it that consecrated persons be dispensers of mercy and heralds of the future. Jesus is also asked to continue to draw men and women to follow him and to allow nothing to separate them from his love. *The Spirit*, who is love poured into our hearts, is asked to fill the consecrated with his gifts and to grant them the certainty of having been chosen. He is also asked to make of consecrated persons a luminous mirror of the divine beauty and to accord them the courage to face the challenges of our time.²⁸ What makes consecrated life understandable is a total commitment to the mystery of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the absolute, the Triune God who fills the life of consecrated women and men and places them at the service of the human family.

Questions for personal and communal reflection

1. In this first year of the second preparatory phase for the third millennium, what conclusions do you draw from the trinitarian perspective of consecrated life with a view to renewing it and making it more dynamic?
2. To what does this trinitarian vision of the meaning and mission of consecrated life commit us?

Chapter Two

Consecrated Life as a Way to Follow Jesus

The Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* directs us to experience in a special way the Christological dimension of Christian life.²⁹ This means, essentially, following Jesus. When it touched on consecrated life, Vatican II insisted in several places on the basic reality of committing oneself to follow Jesus. The Council characterized this discipleship as the “ultimate norm”³⁰ of the consecrated person.

1. The Evangelical Sense of Following Jesus

The first encounter Jesus has with people when he begins to preach the Good News culminates in a call to follow him. (cf. Mk 1: 16-20) But before he calls, Jesus looks at the other person with something more than simply acknowledging that person’s presence. He gazes into the depths of the heart, which is precisely where his invitation reverberates. When Jesus looks, he chooses.

His call requires a decision made in trust and surrender, because it points to the future: “to become fishers of men,” “to carry one’s cross each day,” “to be with Jesus,” “sent to preach.” (cf. Mk 3:13-14) To follow Jesus means leaving many things behind and giving up security: the security of family, of one’s living and working conditions (cf. Mk 1:20), of material goods that guarantee success in the world (Lk 14:33), and of sound reasoning and common sense from which flows one’s self-affirmation. (cf. Lk 9:23)

One who wishes to come after Jesus must break any bonds which would compromise that commitment to follow him: attachment to social structures or human resources. (cf. Lk 9:57-62) The disciple needs to overcome fear in the face of persecution, to persevere in the midst of hardship and contradictions (cf. Lk 12:1-12), to avoid greed, and not to indulge in excessive concern for one’s life. (cf. Lk 12:13-31)

Discipleship is a free response to a gratuitous call, and Jesus takes the initiative. He goes out to meet the other. It is not so much that we seek God, but rather God seeks us. And this dynamic of call and response is constantly recurring. Hence the necessity of listening to the Word so as to act on it.

There is an ecclesial dimension in following Jesus. After all, he does not call people to live removed from one another. He con-vokes them. He invites them, precisely as a group, to form the community of his disciples. It is through the community that Christ continues to be present. (cf. Mt 18:20) Discipleship requires communion.

Little by little, following after Jesus becomes a life of communion with him (cf. Jn 1: 31-5 1): abiding with him, embracing his teaching, and surrendering to his person. Discipleship implies a personal experience of Christ, being transformed into a genuine disciple who listens to the Teacher attentively and eagerly so as to share his life and lot, forgetful of oneself even unto death. (cf. Jn 12:23-26)

Following Jesus comes about in a gradual way. It matures slowly amid the ups and downs of human resolve. By means of faith and a trusting, purifying love, weaknesses and infidelities are acknowledged and become part of our story. Following Jesus leads us to commit ourselves to God’s plan to make Christ-The Way present in human history. (cf. Jn 14:6)

2. Being Jesus’ Disciple in Consecrated Life

Analyzing the scriptural basis of religious life has helped to rediscover it as a way of following Jesus. Reflection on the biblical texts shows that, during the time Christ lived on earth, various groups of followers were coming after him, and that same phenomenon kept occurring in the life of the Church. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, who gives to the words of Jesus a perennial relevance, different specific forms of following Jesus have appeared. One of these is consecrated life. Similar to the group of apostles, but with its own proper understanding, consecrated life attempts to lead a life like that of Jesus and to witness to the truth that in him alone is fullness found.

Vita Consecrata reaffirms the vital link between the consecration that comes from *professing evangelical counsels* and *baptismal consecration*, and that link is the Trinity. The document further underscores the idea that religious consecration is a special and fruitful deepening of one's baptismal consecration, recognizing that the latter does not necessarily lead to celibacy, or the renunciation of one's possessions, or obedience to a superior in the way which characterizes the evangelical counsels. Profession of the counsels implies a special gift of the Spirit.

*"Consecrated persons will be missionaries above all by continually deepening their awareness of having been called and chosen by God... In this way they will become true signs of Christ."*³¹

When speaking of following Jesus, *Vita Consecrata*, points out that Christ is the one who takes the initiative and calls others to follow him. The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6), calls all those whom the Father has given to him (cf. Jn 17:9) to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. But of some, those called to the consecrated life, he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. Mt 19:27) in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes. (Rv 14:4) In the countenance of Jesus (cf. Mk 10:21), "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1: 15) and the reflection of the Father's glory (cf. Heb 1: 13), we glimpse the depths of an eternal and infinite love which is at the very root of our being. Those who let themselves be seized by this love cannot help abandoning everything to follow him. (cf. Mk 1: 16-29; 2:14; 10:2 1, 28) Like St. Paul, they consider all else loss "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ," by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as "refuse," in order that they "may gain Christ." (Phil 3:8) They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life. This leaving of everything and following the Lord (cf. Lk 18:28) is a worthy program of life for all whom he calls in every age.³²

Following Jesus means experiencing anew in our own lives what Jesus experienced in his humanity, working for what he worked for, and being willing to go through what he went through.

Following Jesus means experiencing anew what he experienced in his humanity: he experienced God as Father and others as sisters and brothers, and he experienced the world as the place to encounter God and his sisters and brothers. Jesus worked for the complete liberation of every human being, and he went through misunderstanding, persecution, death, and resurrection, as well.

Consecrated life is *one way* to follow Jesus. Those who do follow him in this way acknowledge that commitment to vows requires three things: a) that family be seen in the light of consecrated chastity and community life, through which we manifest the reality of our being a family gathered together in the Lord's name; b) that possessions be seen as relative in light of the vow of poverty; and c) that taking up our cross in fidelity to accomplishing our mission through the vow of obedience commit us to discern the ways of God with the help of the superior and the community.

3. Living the Spirituality of following Jesus

a) Living and giving witness to the graciousness of God

Reflecting on what it means to follow Jesus according to the Gospels leads us to acknowledge that, above all, this is the result of a gratuitous call from God. One comes to experience the *graciousness of God* that makes it possible to avoid complacency as well as discouragement. There is no quarter for complacency, because God's choice is gratuitous. And discouragement gives way in light of the realization that God is always present to whoever calls on him for help to embrace with humility and responsibility the mission he entrusts to us.

Experiencing this aspect of graciousness as we follow Jesus gives meaning to a life which could obviously be spent in other ways.

Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself to which one

can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life? Is the consecrated life not a kind of “waste” of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good, for the benefit of humanity and the Church?

These questions are asked more frequently in our day as a consequence of a utilitarian and technocratic culture which is inclined to assess the importance of things and even of people in relation to their immediate “usefulness.” But such questions have always existed, as is eloquently demonstrated by the Gospel episode of the anointing at Bethany: “Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.” (Jn 12:3) When Judas, using the needs of the poor as an excuse, complained about such waste, Jesus replied: “Let her alone!” (Jn 12:7)

This is the perennially valid response to the question which many people, even in good faith, are asking about the relevance of the consecrated life: Could one not invest one’s life in a more efficient and reasonable way for the betterment of society? This is how Jesus replies: “Let her alone!” Those who have been given the priceless gift of following the Lord Jesus more closely consider it obvious that he can and must be loved with an undivided heart, that one can devote to him one’s whole life and not merely certain actions or occasional moments or activities. The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love and thus transcending all “utilitarian” considerations is a sign of unbounded generosity as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord in order to devote oneself to his person and his mystical body. From such a life “poured out” without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house. The house of God, the Church, today no less than in the past is adorned and enriched by the presence of the consecrated life.

What in people’s eyes can seem a waste is, for the individuals captivated in the depths of their heart by the beauty and goodness of the Lord, an obvious response of love, a joyful expression of gratitude for having been admitted in a unique way to the knowledge of the Son and to a sharing in his divine mission in the world.³³

b) Living and giving witness to communion with Jesus

The spirituality of following Jesus, whether in Christian life or consecrated life, requires that we free ourselves from power, knowledge, and possessions – in other words, *from human security* – so that we can continue to grow in *communion with Jesus*. In this union with Christ, his cross will exert a powerful presence. (cf. Gal 6:12, 14) The disciple will experience the sufferings of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 1:5-7), his afflictions (Col 1:24), and his death. (cf. 2 Cor 4: 10) In a word, the whole life of Christ. (cf. 2 Cor 4: 10-11) Jesus becomes, in a certain sense, the agent of his followers’ actions: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) A Christocentric orientation belongs to the whole Christian life. Those who follow Jesus in consecrated life, however, are called to express this communion with that unique eloquence which comes from the radical nature of the profound dynamism of their vocation:

How good it is for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! Truly those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as if it were caught up in his splendor: He is “the fairest of the sons of men” (Ps 45:2), the one beyond compare. ... It is precisely this special grace of intimacy which in the Consecrated life makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels. The counsels, more than a simple renunciation, are a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ lived within the Church. In the unity of Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance “brightens the countenance of the Church.”³⁴

c) Living and giving witness to the community dimension of following Jesus

The Church is a community of those who follow Jesus, and following him bears a strongly communitarian stamp. It is precisely in the ecclesial community throughout history that the call to follow Jesus in different vocations is heard. Present as he is in the midst of his disciples, Jesus once again con-vokes and imparts to his

followers the various charisms for service in the community. There is a multiplicity of charisms but a unity and harmony of structure. Each charism is meant to be a concrete expression of Christian love, so that at one and the same time it is both the first fruits as well as the goal of following Jesus. Communion in Christ and the call to form ecclesial community create fraternal bonds among his disciples. A communion of hearts and the sharing of goods stand out as the ideal for Christians of all times. Love of neighbor, love of brother/sister, should be like the love Jesus had. Christian fraternity flows from the call to follow him, and it discovers in Christ the Teacher and in his teachings the full expression of what it is meant to be: gracious, universal, and totally self-giving.

Thus consecrated life is called to be a sign of the new fraternity in Christ, as *Vita Consecrata* recalls:

The whole Church greatly depends on the witness of communities filled “with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 13:52) She wishes to hold up before the world the example of communities in which solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness and each person’s commitment to communion is strengthened. The nature of the charism in communities of this kind directs their energies, sustains their fidelity and directs the apostolic work of all toward the one mission. If the Church is to reveal her true face to today’s world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which by their very existence contribute to the new evangelization inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the “new commandment.”³⁵

d) Living and giving witness to the commitment to be prophets and evangelizers

Vatican II reminded all Christians of their prophetic mission, rooted in Baptism. This is the mission to become witnesses to the life and resurrection of Jesus and a sign of the living God.

The prophetic character of the consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the synod fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole people of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life. The sign value which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life. Because of their pre-eminence, nothing can come before personal love of Christ and of the poor in whom he lives.³⁶

Jesus’ call to follow him is a call to mission, to witness to and to proclaim the Good News and, at the same time, to challenge our lives, both individually and collectively, in the light of the Gospel and its demands. When he recounts the call of the first disciples (cf. Jn 1:35-51), John highlights their profound experience: Jesus had invited them to come and see where he was staying, which immediately prompted Andrew to invite others to follow the Lord. He witnesses to Peter what he has seen, and he urges him to undergo the same direct experience of Jesus that will allow Peter to know and follow Christ. (cf. Jn 1:40-41)

Jesus proposes that following him is service which will lead to sacrificing oneself, even unto death. Thus he asks that one be willing to give up everything: family, property, reputation, and security, so as to be available for announcing the Kingdom and following Jesus to the cross, in living communion with him. The risen Christ continues to be present in history. We who are his disciples and followers are called to witness to his life and resurrection,³⁷ and to make known to others the signs of hope present in their lives. The community of Jesus’ followers is sent out as a “prophetic People to announce the Gospel or discern the Lord’s calls in history. They are to announce where the presence of the Lord’s Spirit is manifested, and they are to denounce where the mystery of iniquity is at work through deeds and structures that prevent more fraternal participation in the construction of society and in the enjoyment of the goods that God created for all.”³⁸

In its experience and reflection, the Synod discussed the prophetic dimension of consecrated life, underscoring the fact that a prophetic task belongs to the whole people of God. Nonetheless, consecrated life clearly has a particularly important role in this call to be prophetic. Accordingly, the Synod listed the criteria for

discerning authentic prophecy.

In relation to commitment for mission, to be a prophet presents a great challenge. It should begin with a radical experience of God and by identifying with the values of the Kingdom in order to proclaim its demands and denounce anything which is opposed to it either in society or in culture.

Prophecy enables us in a unique way to confront new problems and new pastoral concerns with creativity and *parrhesia*.³⁹ The Synod says, "Consecrated individuals, fully aware of their prophetic and charismatic role in the Church, are invited in a special way to take up new projects in order to face these new facets of mission."⁴⁰ In this way, we can seek to evangelize society, politics, economics, as well as all the ways they intersect, using new platforms or pulpits: science, technology, culture, and communication media.

e) Living and giving witness to following Jesus from the standpoint of a preferential option for the poor and a commitment to justice

A preferential option for the poor goes hand in hand with following Jesus. In all times and all ages the Church has mounted efforts to find solutions for the problems of the poor, esteeming this as part of her mission to give witness to God's plan. She has done this through the ages in accord with the prevailing view of society. As a result, there did not appear before, as is now the case, the structural roots of poverty and marginalization. In the new missionary social consciousness, the option for the poor has taken on much stronger qualities of solidarity and prophetic critique. To opt for the poor as a preference means something more in today's mission than merely being drawn toward them with mercy. There is also a question now of interrogating the systems that give rise to injustice, relying right from the start on a critical way of viewing the reality. The 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the close of Vatican II, pointed out that "the Church became more aware of her mission in the service of the poor, the oppressed and the outcast."⁴¹ The 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life touched on precisely the same point when it proclaimed that the cry of the poor spurs our consciences with concern to pay heed both to the dramatic misery which afflicts the greater part of humanity and to the demands of social justice according to the Gospel and Church teaching. Furthermore, consecrated individuals today, guided by a new awareness of "sinful structures" at work in society and inspired by the social dimension of Christian love, will work together to establish social justice with means appropriate to their vocation.⁴²

The postsynodal document, *Vita Consecrata*, confirmed that this Gospel option for the poor "is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way. The sincerity of their response to Christ's love will lead them to live a life of poverty and to embrace the cause of the poor. ... Serving the poor is an act of evangelization and at the same time a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in the consecrated life."⁴³

Ever since the publication of the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, we have been aware of the link that exists between evangelization and human advancement, development, and liberation. Paul VI noted the connection among these elements from an anthropological, theological, and evangelical point of view.⁴⁴ The challenge is to proclaim Christ and his liberating message in such a way so that individuals can open themselves up to it and be able to respond with confidence to the divine love, and that there will begin "a mighty movement of personal and social liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement *brings freedom inasmuch* as it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship* because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone make freedom and fellowship possible."⁴⁵

One of the great challenges which the Church has to face in fulfilling her mission of evangelization is *injustice*, which gives rise to inhuman poverty among the majority of earth's inhabitants. Poverty is a global human condition. It signals death, and the Church's task is to announce life, as proclaimed and ushered in by Jesus as the Kingdom of God. This implies a new kind of relationship among human beings, as well as between humans

and God and humans and material things.

Questions for personal and community reflection

1. What aspects of following Jesus in consecrated life do you consider the most urgent at the present time?
2. How can our commitment to follow Jesus, who is at the center of history and the cosmos, be renewed and made manifest today?
3. What concrete means can be taken to grow as individuals and as communities in our knowledge and love of Jesus as a wellspring for authentic commitment?

Chapter Three

The Word of God in Consecrated Life

Tertio Millennio Adveniente invites all Christians during the course of the first year of proximate preparation for the Jubilee to turn “with renewed interest to the Bible, ‘whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids.’”⁴⁶

This will lead them, the document declares, “to recognize who Christ truly is.... In the revealed text it is the heavenly Father himself who comes to us in love and who dwells with us, disclosing to us the nature of his only-begotten Son and his plan of salvation for humanity.”⁴⁷

The *Working Paper* for the Synod, speaking of the ways to achieve an “authentic spiritual vitality of institutes of consecrated life,” mentions “personal and communal forms of *lectio divina*.”⁴⁸ At the same time, this *Instrumentum Laboris* presents consecrated life as an experience of the Spirit, highlighting the fact that it is the Spirit who raises up “through truly ‘spiritual’ men and women, charisms of spirituality and apostolic activity, with a creativity and opportuneness adapted to the needs of the time.”⁴⁹

During the actual Synod on Religious Life more than one intervention underscored the need for consecrated persons to live their lives attuned to the Word of God as expressed both in the Scriptures and in their lives so that they will be docile to the action of the Spirit and recognize Christ.

Similarly, in his postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* the Pope invites consecrated individuals to live listening to the word of God as the first source of all Christian spirituality. “It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will. It is for this reason that from the very beginning of institutes of consecrated life ... what is called *lectio divina* has been held in the highest regard. By its means the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit. ... As the Church’s spiritual tradition teaches, meditation on God’s word and on the mysteries of Christ in particular gives rise to fervor in contemplation and the ardor of apostolic activity.”⁵⁰

One of the great challenges facing religious life everywhere today is to renew its spirituality, which is nothing other than “life in Christ” and “in the Spirit.” We embrace this life through faith, express it in love, and live it out in hope within the ecclesial community and according to the characteristics proper to our charism.

Consecrated life is, like all Christian life, a life “in the Spirit,” listening to what the Spirit says so as to be able to respond to the Father’s plan and to follow Jesus as proposed in the Gospels, “our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Saviour.”⁵¹

The Council invited all Christians to maintain a posture of attentive listening before the Word of God. This invitation is addressed to religious in an even stronger way. The Constitution *Dei Verbum* states that the exhortation is made “especially to religious.”⁵² In the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* those who profess the evangelical counsels are asked again to “take the sacred Scriptures in hand each day by way of attaining ‘the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) through reading these divine writings and meditating on them.”⁵³

1. Consecrated Life, Attentive to the Word

To be able to remain attentive to the Word of God, religious need an existential approach to it. One starts with life and goes to the Word, and from the Word one returns to life.

a) An authentic re-reading of the word of God

Listening to the Word of God requires that we keep before us the true literal meaning of the biblical text so as to find a legitimate message in it for today and so that it can be understood with relative ease in its contact with life situations.

Re-reading the bible begins with the conviction that Scripture is not just another book from antiquity. It is a book that contains the Word of God, that Word which resounds with the authority to critique and question the circumstances of our daily lives. The Bible is a book which is kept ever alive within the community of believers who draw near to it, search into it for answers, and seek its light.

An authentic re-reading of the Word of God calls, above all, for an *attitude of seeking and openness* for hearing its basic message, which is disclosed by approaching its *meaning-in-itself* (historicliteral). In that meaning, and starting with that meaning, God manifests the *meaning-for-us*. To discover this sense requires that we start with life's problems, the questions that spring up from our real world, and we pose these to the Scriptures. We have an example of this in the early Christian community as it became aware of the Christ event and the meaning of his life and the life of his followers in contact with their own historical experiences.

Another important provision that consecrated individuals cannot forget for an authentic rereading of the Word of God is *to approach the Bible from their community situation*, including the particular as well as the universal Church. The composition of Scripture, in fact, takes place in the Church and for the Church. And the Church remains the same amidst historical and cultural changes.

In re-reading the Word we cannot overlook an objective point of reference which makes it possible for us to discern between the authenticity and the nonauthenticity of a reading. This reference point is none other than *God's plan*: that is, that we live as his children, become a family, a people of sisters and brothers who share the world. An authentic rereading should promote the fulfillment of this plan and denounce anything opposed to it. Intimately connected to this requirement of referring to God's plan is the requirement of *a praxis in accord with the plan*. The effort to live the demands of the Word is what affords the individual and the community a growing and existential understanding of what God has revealed.

b) Discerning the word of God in the signs of the time

The Bible is not just a book for reading and reflection, it is equally a *book of prayerful meditation* which leads one to discover God in everything, to seek his will in life's events, to see Christ in everyone, to make "correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things, both in themselves and in their relation to man's final goal."⁵⁴

Reading God's Word in the Scriptures trains us to discern the voice of God in the signs of the time. Vatican II invited us to maintain an attitude of attentiveness to these signs, interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.⁵⁵ The effort to read the signs of the times in the light of the Word of God in a community way will both imply and require *an attitude of faith* as a listening which allows us, even in the midst of ambiguity and risk, to understand and interpret what appears to be the voice of the Spirit of the Lord who "prompts the People of God in history to discern the signs of the times and to discover, in the deepest yearnings and problems of human beings, God's plan regarding the human vocation in the building up of society, making it more humane, just, and fraternal."⁵⁶

Reading the signs of the time as the voice of God, heard in association with the Word of God in the Bible, connects consecrated persons with the Church's spiritual tradition. That tradition has always emphasized how important it is in Christian life to discern what God asks of us and to carry it out. The roots of this tradition lie in the Gospel, which presents the signs of the time to us as the Word of the Lord. (Mt 16:1-3)

c) Living and celebrating the Word of God in the liturgy

The Second Vatican Council recommended that ministers of the Word read the Bible, exhorting them to "share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful ... especially in the sacred liturgy."⁵⁷

In consecrated life it is essential that one grow deeper in the liturgy, since it is the Word of God celebrated in hope, the Word which we first welcomed in faith, and whose precepts we have committed ourselves to live out in concrete and effective love.

It is in the Eucharist that the community, assembled in the Lord's name and finding nourishment in the

teaching of the Gospel and in the sacred liturgy,⁵⁸ reaches the greatest expression of its faith and its communion. Community, which is called together by the Word of Jesus, is built up, renewed, and brought to perfection gathered round him at his Supper. When we meet around the table we experience, in faith, the Risen Lord present, explaining the Scriptures (his Word) to us and letting us recognize him in the breaking of the bread. This is the bread of love which unites us and sends us out to proclaim to others the Good News of his presence, of how he accompanies us in history and of how he reveals himself in fraternity lived and shared. (Lk 24:1335)

The Liturgy of the Hours, for its part, should also be a real school of the Word. Through the psalms, consecrated persons learn how to ask and praise and thank the Lord, without removing themselves from daily life with its joys and sorrows, its problems and difficulties, its successes and failures. They get used to turning their personal story, as well as the group's history, into prayer. When praying with the psalms, if we start with the literal sense, then read them in the light of the New Testament, and re-read them from the context of our own life, we will learn by experience that praying means listening to God, dialoguing with him to commit ourselves for our sisters and brothers.

d) Listening to the word, biblical contemplation

The goal of listening to the Word of God is to become *authentic contemplatives*, in the biblical sense. Unlike the Greek notion of contemplation which withdraws from life and has an individualistic stamp, contemplation in Scripture takes place in action, within action, and with action.

The Word of God helps to build the contemplative experience with everything that seeking the Kingdom implies: longings, hopes, weariness, inconsistencies.

Besides personal contemplation, listening to the Word should also promote a community type of contemplation. That would mean being able to share the experience of God: discerning his ways, maintaining a constant dynamism of conversion, ever renewing an active hope. Reality will become transparent, and it will be possible to discover God in everything. The connection between Scripture and life makes us grow contemplatively, and that gives meaning to existence and history in any circumstance. This contemplation, nourished by listening to the Word, leads us to live profoundly Christian faith, hope, and love.

2. Consecrated Life at the Service of the Word

Listening to the Word of God is so basic and essential in Christian life that it is linked to the whole process of growth and development of the consecrated life, considered both personally and collectively. Creativity, spiritual dynamism, and the accomplishment of a prophetic mission all depend on fidelity to the Word of God.

a) Putting into practice the word that we hear

Throughout its history Israel hears the invitation to listen "today," the "today" that is ever new. "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe." (Dt 4: 1) Putting into practice what God asks of us also appears in Scripture as the means to deepen the act of listening, to understand existentially all the implications of the Word. Anyone who hears the Word and puts it into practice will be like the one who built on rock. (Mt 7:24)

How one hears is important. (Lk 8:18) We need to suppress superficiality and keep our heart free of cares, possessions, selfishness, and pleasures.

b) Attention to the word that focuses on God as the Lord Alone

When the people of Israel are asked in the Old Testament to listen to Yahweh's Word, Scripture points out, as the very first thing, that he is Lord alone and we are to love him with all our heart and with all our

strength. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Dt 6:4-5) This exhortation constitutes the point of entry for everything that is to be heard, and at the same time it signals the basic condition for welcoming the Word: *to make God the Lord Alone*, in all circumstances to focus our life on him, to love him with radical integrity. This means overcoming all idolatry, and it expresses fidelity to God, which is the attitude of the true listener to the Word of Yahweh.

C) Listening to the Word from an attitude of availability

The pages of Scripture highlight in a special way docility to God's Word heard in the events of history, our own personal history and the history of the community. A model of such availability to take up God's ways by attentive listening to his voice is, among other biblical characters, Samuel. In Samuel we find attentiveness and availability united. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (I Sm 3: 10) A similar attitude appears in Mary. Luke emphasizes her docility in welcoming and fulfilling the word which she heard revealing to her God's saving plan and the role she was to play in its accomplishment. (Lk 1:38)

Listening to the Word should lead consecrated persons through prayerful discernment, both personal and community, to become people open to God's designs, which are disclosed to those who seek and are enlightened by the Word. Openness to do God's will will make understanding the Word easier since it allows one to grow deeper in Scripture and in the signs of the times, read through the lens of Scripture. An attitude of availability will help us to let ourselves be led by the Spirit. It is the Spirit who makes us understand the Word of God and also guides us to all truth. (Jn 16:13) The practice of *lectio divina*, which joins listening to the Word and prayer, creates the space for a conversion of heart which, in a faith stance of availability, opens us up to the unforeseeable paths of the Spirit.

Questions for personal and community reflection

1. How can we transform *lectio divina* into something which will help our personal and community discernment?
2. In what ways can we experience the liturgy as Word of God celebrated in hope and with the commitment to live it in love?
3. Why is that we frequently do not know how to read the signs of the time as the word of God critiquing and challenging us?

Chapter Four

Conversion and Creative Fidelity in Consecrated Life

The starting point of this creative fidelity is an Interior transformation which helps one to bear the difficulties inevitable in renewal.

In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* Pope John Paul invites us to *conversion and personal renewal* “in a context of ever more intense prayer and solidarity with one’s neighbor, especially the most needy.”⁵⁹ This is to be a conversion, in other words, in the sense of changing our lives and our way of thinking. *Vita Consecrata* declares the same thing:

All the sons and daughters of the Church, called by God to “listen to” Christ, necessarily feel a deep need for conversion and holiness. But, as the synod emphasized, this need in the first place challenges the consecrated life. In fact the vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a “transfigured” existence. The final report of the second extraordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops made a significant observation in this regard: “Holy men and women have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult circumstances throughout the Church’s history.”⁶⁰

1. Creative Fidelity, an Expression of Conversion and Renewal

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* dedicates Paragraph 37 to *creative fidelity*. This theme represents the central focus, but united to it are other themes such as the challenges of the present day, the signs of the time, and inculturation.

The basis for living creative fidelity is the example of founders and foundresses. Consecrated persons are invited to propose anew the value, the enterprising initiative, and the concrete and creative holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world, with a dynamic fidelity to their mission.⁶¹

The starting point of this creative fidelity is an interior transformation which helps one to bear the difficulties inevitable in renewal. It is the Spirit who prompts religious Institutes to creative fidelity so that they can continue to offer service to respond to the challenges of our times.⁶² Creative fidelity also calls for a greater collaboration among institutes of consecrated life, with respect for their different charisms.⁶³

Connected to creative fidelity are the *signs of the time* and the *challenges* which they present. The signs of the time have real theological significance in that they are calls from God to act according to his plan with a genuine and fruitful insertion in today’s society.⁶⁴ Already in the Introduction of the document, institutes of consecrated life are asked to foster their ability and vitality to face “in a spiritual and apostolic manner the new challenges of our time.”⁶⁵ To achieve this, one must be familiar with today’s society.⁶⁶ Renewed brotherly and sisterly life, along with communion and collaboration with the laity, form an effective means of facing the great challenges of our time and of addressing them.⁶⁷

One of the main tasks of formation is to prepare people to respond to the challenges of our times.⁶⁸ The new evangelization response to such challenges requires a careful discernment in communion and dialogue at the level of the wider Church when pastoral commitments are involved.⁶⁹ It is especially necessary, in the area of the apostolate, to confront the new challenges that the communication media present. And at the same time, we must be open to being evangelized ourselves by a constant listening to the Word of God and the signs of the time.⁷⁰ The pope concludes his exhortation by asking the Trinity to give consecrated persons an evangelical courage to address the challenges of our time.⁷¹ It is necessary to look “to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.”⁷²

Challenges show up in the *signs of the time* in various places. Consecrated life should not limit itself simply to reading the signs of the time. It is also called upon to write some of them, in other words, to work out and to put into practice new evangelization projects for new situations.⁷³ Prayer which has become an individual and a community spiritual discernment humbly, joyfully, and steadfastly seeks the ways of the Lord through attentive reflection on the signs of the times.⁷⁴

One of the signs of the time that presents a special challenge to the Church and consecrated life is inculturation, which brings with it the need for renewal and creativity. In fact, what is called for is an inculturation of the charism in various contexts, but in such a way as to preserve unity in what is essential.⁷⁵ This inculturation, which means living according to the character of different peoples, will give rise to lifestyles and pastoral approaches which can bring enrichment to the whole institute, provided that they are consistent with the founding charism and with the unifying action of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶

This effort at *renewal* based on creative fidelity has been a characteristic of consecrated life throughout the history of the Church.⁷⁷

Renewal is the task of all institutes, including those of contemplative life, which can find associations and federations of monasteries useful for an “appropriate renewal.”⁷⁸ Without adequate initial and continuing formation it is impossible to take up renewal.⁷⁹ Growing deeper in the spiritual life represents a synthesis, as it were, of renewal.⁸⁰ The last paragraph of the document is an invocation to Mary which points out that she desires the spiritual and apostolic *renewal* of her daughters and sons in their response of love and complete dedication to Christ.⁸¹

2. Biblical Basis for Creative Fidelity

We find in Scripture the touchstone experience of salvation history. The sacred text is constantly concerned with responding to what God asks for in history. God’s calls are heard in everyday reality, scrutinized in the light of faith. Someone often has to pick up and leave, like Abraham, without knowing the exact destination. (Cf. Heb 11: 8) At the same time, we find in the Bible *the need to give new answers to new situations, and this gives rise to the critical moment, with the need for conversion to deal with it successfully and the presence of key figures who give guidance in seeking and in making decisions.*

a) New answers to new situations in salvation history. the challenge of the critical’ moment and “chaos”

One aspect of biblical experience is *gradualness*. Not everything was totally clear to the People of God at the outset of their existence. New circumstances called for new answers, and these mark advances, gradual steps forward, in revelation. The discoveries they made when the Word of God in Scripture ran up against the Word of God in life required the People of God to abandon former positions with their practical consequences, or at least to modify and refine them. The divine pedagogy helped them, in responding to new challenges, to work through the imperfect and temporal elements of a revelation which was unfolding little by little until it reached its fulfillment in Christ. (Cf. Heb 1: 1-2)

“*Chaos*” appears in the Bible when the people face unfamiliar realities or unknown situations, the kind that makes them disoriented or disillusioned or can even bring about despair. We find an example of this in the Exile, a trial that destroyed Israel’s whole symbolic universe: the temple, place of God’s presence and source of security; Jerusalem, capital of the Kingdom and sign of religious and national identity; the monarchy, bond of unity and means of cohesion. Something similar occurs in the New Testament when the disciples of Jesus suddenly comprehend the contradiction of his crucifixion and death. “We were hoping that he was the one who would set Israel free. Besides all this, today [is] the third day since these things happened ...” (Lk 24:21)

In biblical revelation it appears that God allows “chaos” to make the people realize again that he is Lord alone prompting them to place him again at the center of their lives. (Dt 8:1-4; Am 8:1112) Thus, “chaos” does not only mean formlessness. It also has the dynamic seeds of creation, life, and order. The fact that chaos is

indeterminate, obscure, and empty provides an opening for multiple possibilities which, under the action of the Spirit, challenge creativity and make a certain refoundation of the People of God possible to begin a new stage of its history with a renewed sense of identity and greater maturity.

b) Personal and community conversion, key to creativity

The unfolding of revelation in salvation history points to the final goal of eliciting from individuals, as well as from the whole people, a response to God's loyal and merciful action. This response cannot be achieved without a deep conversion, understood as a change of our lives and our way of thinking. (Cf. Mk 1: 14 "Reform your lives...") Only conversion can position a person to face reality in a new and different way, and only conversion can promote that creativity which leads to renewal. Renewal, in turn, once again orients one's life in fidelity and creativity regarding convictions, attitudes, and structures.

Christ preached a conversion which leads to a new idea of God and of the place where God will be manifested and experienced. This includes a different way of looking at others and at the reality of the world. It leads to a Gospel discernment done in a personal as well as a community fashion so as not to "stifle the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; retain what is good." (I Thes 5:19-21) Jesus invites us to give up self-sufficiency, the support of riches, and the security of works. (Cf. Mk 10:21-25; Lk 18:9-14)

Jesus describes what is essential in conversion when he invites a person to start all over again, to change and become like little children. (Cf. Mt 18:3) With that attitude, a human being stops relying on himself and starts to rely boldly on God, placing all his hopes in God and opening himself to God's ways.

c) The role of the prophets at times of crisis

The prophets always sought new answers to new situations. They lived committed to God and to the times in which they lived. They denounced injustices, proclaimed the judgment of God, and announced a better future, the gift of God and also the result of human collaboration.

The role of the prophets was to be the "conscience" of the People of God at times of crisis. Immersed deeply in existential problems, they knew how to ponder the events of history, how to evaluate them, and how to proclaim loudly what these meant, along with what the failings of the people were and what God was demanding. More than predicting the future, the prophet reveals the authentic dimension of the present that challenges and requires creativity to prepare for a future which God ordains with goodness and fidelity, at the same time counting on human cooperation.

Prophets insist that we must not return to the past to find refuge in it as in a golden age or go back nostalgically to do it over. They prompt us to return to the past so as to remember the wonders God has wrought and to be filled with confidence in his presence and action, in the present and in the future. As Jesus, the great Prophet, said, "nobody sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak.... People do not pour new wine into old wineskins." (Mt 9:16-17) We must remain open to God's unforeseeable ways. Yahweh takes the initiative to refound Israel in the light of three basic values which the prophets emphasize: dependence on God, justice, and love. The prophets stand as Israel's creative, dynamic, and challenging memory. They point out the way of returning to the inspirational moment of its origins so that, based on the way Israel opened itself up to the new and unknown, it would "remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!" (Is 43:18-19) Prophets are able to pass judgment on the present in the light of the past, but for the sake of offering viable alternatives for the future.

3. Creative Fidelity from a Theological Perspective

Seen from a theological perspective, creative fidelity is intimately linked to the *experience of God as the Lord alone*, to the *reading of the signs of the time*, and to the founding *charism*, what it means and what it calls for.

a) The experience of God as Lord Alone, source of creativity

Consecrated life takes its origin in the Spirit. Thus it needs to move on a journey of faith. On the other hand, it is a reality incarnated in human life and is therefore, subject to life's vicissitudes, changes, and the constant flow of history. Such an existence requires three basic attitudes from a Christian, lived intensely: faith, hope, and love. These three make one able to experience God as the Lord alone amid the ups and downs of rapid and profound changes in the world.

With the light of faith we perceive a God who breaks through in the midst of the instability of all reality and the fleetingness of persons, structures, and things. The challenge that then emerges is to be purified of all attachment, stripped of all the stuff that provides security in our personal and community lives. This "stuff" anchors us and enables us to overlook the ties that bind us and restrain us from being free to love God and neighbor.

Our experience of "chaos" in the present moment of consecrated life is, at bottom, an invitation from the Spirit to return humbly to God, the Lord alone. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Dt 6:4) Here lie the roots of creative fidelity which ushers us into the mystery of the creative and transforming power of God. We become capable of seeing everything as relative that is not God. Traditions, structures, works, plans, and organizations all appear in their true light, as means, and this allows us to act with creative freedom, just as our founders did in their times, to trace new thoroughfares of consecrated life.

To the degree that we keep focusing on God, by means of prayer as an attitude of life, we will be able to let go of anything that prevents us from being open to his ways, and we will be able to face challenges with Christian freedom and with a creativity revitalizing to our religious families.

This experiencing God as the Lord alone helps to overcome the temptations of fundamentalism and restorationism. Each of these, in its own way, seeks security in codes, practices, and structures. Both of them refuse to accept that human existence is lived out in insecurity. Because human existence is one that is always in progress, it is subject to interpretation, discernment, and the vagaries of everything that is not God. A deep spiritual experience of God, present in history and guiding it from within, provides the antidote against the temptation to return to the security of a meaningless past.

To discover the Lord of history in everything, to contemplate him present in our sisters and brothers, and to seek and find his will in events, all this constitutes the source of authentic refounding, which proclaims that while "all things are passing, God changeth not." At the same time, this prompts us to creative, free, and innovating action to open ourselves to the needs of our time and place.

b) The signs of the time as challenges from the spirit

The first Christians were convinced that they were experiencing the presence and action of the Spirit, and this led them to live in an attitude of discernment and from a faith stance to discover him in events and to distinguish in these events the Spirit's calls and challenges. (Cf. I Thes 5:19-21) This experience of the first Christians was not theirs exclusively. Biblical revelation emphasizes, first, that the Spirit is always near, with and in the Christian community to guide it to all truth (cf. Jn 14:16-17, 16:13) and, secondly, that it is he who moves the Church in all periods and times so she can give witness to Christ and continue to make God's plan for the human race a reality. (Cf. Acts 1:4-8)

As in the early Church, so in each age, there are signs that allow us to discover the Spirit and to heed his calls from within the very heart of life. His action reaches even those who do not know Jesus Christ. For the Lord "wants all to be saved and come to know the truth." (I Tim 2:4)⁸²

Vatican II invites us at all times to read the signs of the time and to discover God's call in the deepest human longings.⁸³ At the same time that the Council opened the Church to the signs of the times, it also sparked an historical change of enormous scope. It did this by making us aware that we live inserted in history,

which is subject to rapid and profound changes.⁸⁴ These will, of course, also affect consecrated life.

In the spheres of *society* and *Church* the signs of the time demand great creativity from consecrated life. For signs in the *social* sphere, we could list: becoming aware of the reality of the injustice in which humanity finds itself, with the consequent needs of a new international economic order and the defense of human rights and the ecology; a growing appreciation of the values and diversity of all cultures; longings for peace; post-modernism; validation of science and technology; the collapse of Eastern European walls; the challenges of genetic engineering; the rise of new nations; new roles for women in society; and the yearnings for freedom and liberation. As for signs of the time in the *Church*, we would point out: the awareness of the need for a new evangelization which would involve a faith commitment with working for justice; a preferential option for the poor and for new forms of poverty; the growing prominence of laypeople (women and men) in evangelization; the emergence of a new, more vital and incarnated spirituality; theological pluralism; ecclesial movements with their spiritual currents; and, following the nod from Vatican II, new structures of participation and co-responsibility in the universal Church and in local Churches.

As consecrated life experiences the Spirit calling and challenging in these signs, it feels drawn to a creative revitalizing of its identity with everything which that implies of change and evolution in its internal structures and evangelizing commitment.

4. Conversion and Renewal from the Perspective of the Future

The theme of *creative fidelity* emphasized in the Apostolic Exhortation makes us aware of the dynamic character of the world in which we live. In this history, in constant evolution, the need is greater than ever for quick and creative responses.

Before the Synod on religious life began, the Union of Superiors General in Rome organized an International Congress (November 22-27, 1993), which produced a *Theological Synthesis*. In that document we read that consecrated life was hoping that the Church would grant it “an open statute which will allow it to be faithful to the eschatological prophecy that characterizes it and that stimulates it to situate itself in the deserts, on the margins, and at the frontiers of the mission in order to be ‘*evangelica testificatio*.’”⁸⁵

The postsynodal document, *Vita Consecrata*, has been a positive reply to that desire. In fact, it offers a stimulus to renew our confidence and hope in the Spirit’s life-giving power and to imitate our founders and foundresses. “Institutes of consecrated life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world.”⁸⁶

It so happens that we are living in a time of enormous transition and change, which calls for creative renewal. We certainly feel fragile faced with the challenges of refounding. Consecrated life feels tempted to despair. As in the time of the People of Israel in exile, some are saying, “our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off.” (Ez 37:11) Still, in many ways we will hear again the Lord’s reply, “I will put my spirit in you that you may live.” (Ez 37:14)

In *Vita Consecrata* John Paul II invites us to look to the future with vibrant hope in order to live *creative fidelity* when he tells us, “You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things. ... Be always ready, faithful to Christ, the Church, to your institute and to the men and women of our time. In this way you will day by day be renewed in Christ, in order with his Spirit to build fraternal communities, to join him in washing the feet of the poor and to contribute in your own unique way to the transfiguration of the world.”⁸⁷

Questions for personal and community reflection

1. What are the principal obstacles you find to living the demands of creative fidelity as the way to

conversion and renewal?

2. What other signs of the time can you point to in your social, church, and consecrated life situation?

Conclusion

Mary, model for Consecrated Life of Following Jesus

In the interior dynamism of the life of charismatic discipleship peculiar to consecrated life, Mary has been regarded as “the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord,”⁸⁸ and, therefore, the perfect model of consecrated life. The Virgin of the Magnificat announces the break with an old world and the beginning of a new history in which God casts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the poor. It is with them that Mary throws in her lot and proclaims how God acts in history. Consecrated life has always seen Mary as a model of total dedication to the Kingdom of God. Seeking to hold the Word of God as the core of everything, consecrated life has discovered in Mary the embodied ideal of what it means to listen to that Word in Scripture and in life, and to believe in it, in all circumstances, in order to live its demands. And this it seeks to do without understanding many things, treasuring everything in the heart (Lk 2:19, 50-51), until the light arrives.

Consecrated life has seen in Mary its ideal and inspiration for service to others. Along with her openness to God, she lived close to the needs of her sisters and brothers, concerned about them. (Lk 1:39-45, Jn 2:1-12, Acts 1:14) Consecrated life contemplates in Mary “the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe,”⁸⁹ and that helps it to understand the meaning of its own mission. Furthermore, the trinitarian perspective appears in *Vita Consecrata* when it speaks of the Virgin Mary as a model of consecration and of following Jesus. She reminds consecrated individuals of the primacy of the divine initiative, and she is a model of following Jesus and of docility to the Spirit. Consecrated persons find in her a mother who is near.⁹⁰

In its invocation to Mary at the end of the document, *Vita Consecrata* asks her to help consecrated women and men to live out a spiritual and apostolic renewal with an attitude of availability to the Father’s will, following Christ in service especially to the poor, the hungry, those without hope, the least and the last – the little ones, and all those who with a sincere heart seek the glory of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁹¹

- 1 Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites
- 2 Tertio Millennio Adveniente, n. 59.
- 3 Ibid., n. 3 1.
- 4 Ibid., n. 39.
- 5 Ibid., n. 40.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., n. 42.
- 8 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 43.
- 9 Vita Consecrata, n. 25.
- 10 Vita Consecrata, n. 18.

- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 19.
- 13 Boldness and confidence in speaking. Cf. Eph. 6:19; 2 Cor 3:12.
- 14 Cf. Vita Consecrata, n. 36.
- 15 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 21
- 16 Ibid., n. 21.
- 17 Ibid., n. 41.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 42.
- 20 Ibid., n. 41.

- 21 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 72.
- 22 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 23-24.
- 23 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 25.
- 24 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 81.
- 25 Ibid., n. 13.
- 26 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 26.
- 27 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 27.
- 28 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 111.
- 29 Cf. Tertio Millennio Adveniente, n. 40.
- 30 Cf. Vatican II, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), n. 2.

- 31 Vita Consecrata, n. 25.
- 32 Ibid., n. 18.
- 33 Ibid., n. 104.
- 34 Ibid., n. 16.
- 35 Ibid., n. 45.
- 36 Ibid., n. 84.
- 37 Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), n. 38.
- 38 Puebla, [Document of the Second General Assembly of CELAM, in Puebla, Mexico, 1979], n. 267.
- 39 "Boldness, or confidence in speaking." See Footnote 13, above.
- 40 Synod of Bishops, 1994. *Elenchus Unicus Propositionum*, Proposition 36.

41 The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Session of the Synod of Bishops. Message H. Particular Decrees of the Synod, D. The Church's Mission in the World, 6. Preferential Option for the Poor and Human Promotion. In *Origins*, December 19, 1985. [Vol. 15, #27]

42 Synod, 1994. *Elenchus Unicus Propositionum*, Proposition 42.

43 *Vita Consecrata*, n. 82.

44 Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Dec. 8, 1975, n. 31.

45 George Soares Prabhu, *The Kingdom of God - Jesus' Vision of a New Society*, p. 130-131. Quoted in the Union of Superiors General: "Consecrated Life Today International Congress on Consecrated Life, Rome, November 22-27, 1993.

46 *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 40, with reference to *Dei Verbum*, n. 25.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Working Paper, (June 20, 1994), n. 86. In *Origins*, June 30, 1994. [Vol. 24, #7, P. 128]

49 *Ibid.*, n. 45. *Origins*, [Vol. 24, #7, p. 114]

50 *Vita Consecrata*, n. 94.

51 Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), n. 18.

52 *Dei Verbum*, n. 25.

53 *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 6.

54 Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), n. 4.

55 Cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), n. 4.

56 Puebla, [Document of the Second General Assembly of CELAM, in Puebla, Mexico, 1979], n. 1128.

57 *Dei Verbum*, n. 25.

58 Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 15.

59 *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, n. 42.

60 *Vita Consecrata*, n. 35.

61 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 37.

62 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 62.

63 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 53.

64 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 81.

65 *Ibid.*, n. 13.

66 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 38.

67 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 54-56.

68 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 65-67.

69 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 81.

70 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 94.

71 Cf. *ibid.*, n. I 11.

72 *Ibid.*, n. I 10.

73 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 81.

74 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 94.

75 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 51.

76 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 80.

77 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 37.

78 *Ibid.*, n. 59.

79 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 65-71.

80 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 93.

81 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 112.

82 Puebla, [Document of the Second General Assembly of CELAM, in Puebla, Mexico, 1979], n. 208.

83 Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

84 Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 4-11.

85 “Consecrated Life Today Charisms in the Church for the World” International Congress on Consecrated Life. (Rome: November, 22-27, 1993). *Theological Synthesis*, n. 35.

86 *Vita Consecrata*, n. 37.

87 *Ibid.*, n. I 10.

88 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Marialis Cultus*), February 2, 1974, n. 37.

89 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “Mother of the Redeemer” (*Redemptoris Mater*), March 25, 1987, n. 37

90 Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 28.

91 Cf. *ibid.*, n. 112.