

**BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE
IN LIGHT OF CHURCH DOCUMENTS
AND ITS EXPRESSION IN CONSTITUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES**

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In our first meeting of 2001 we want to reflect on a topic of great importance; that is, the Biblical and theological identity of religious life in light of Church documents and its expression in Constitutions of religious institutes. My contribution to the reflection will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I will offer, first of all, a panoramic view of Church documents on religious life, beginning with Vatican Council II. Then, I will bring out the most important characteristics of the Biblical and theological identity of religious life in light of the dogmatic constitution “Lumen Gentium” and the decree on appropriate renewal of religious life “Perfectae Caritatis.” Finally, I will make some observations on developments of the question of the identity of religious life in the early post-Conciliar period and in the last years of the 20th century.

In the second part, I will help us reflect on a very interesting aspect, which generally is not sufficiently known: the Biblical and theological expression of religious life in the constitutions of religious institutes.

Part One

**THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CHURCH ON RELIGIOUS LIFE:
A JOURNEY OF LIGHT**

1. Orientations of documents of the Church on religious life

To have an overall view of orientations of the Church on religious life, it is useful first of all to know the journey of light to follow. That is, it helps to have available a list of the principal documents of the Council and of post-Council regarding the Biblical and theological identity of religious life. Therefore, I am offering a chronological list. The description, evaluation and analysis of the Christological elements of the individual documents have been done in a book by A. Pardilla, CHRIST’S WAY OF LIFE AT THE CENTER OF FORMATION FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE. The Biblical and Theological Picture of Formation, Ed. Rogate, Rome 2001, pp. 189-355.

- 1) Directions of the dogmatic constitution “Lumen Gentium” (1964).
- 2) Directions of the decree “Perfectae Caritatis” (1965).
- 3) Directions of the motu proprio “Ecclesiae Sanctae” (1966).
- 4) Directions of the instruction “Renovationis Causam” (1969).
- 5) Directions of the new “Roman Missal” (1970).
- 6) Directions of the “Rite of Religious Profession” (1970).
- 7) Directions of the exhortation “Evangelica Testificatio” (1971).
- 8) Directions of the exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi” (1975).
- 9) Directions of the document “Mutuae Relationes” (1978).
- 10) Directions of John Paul II in the early years of his pontificate (1978-1980).
- 11) Directions of the document “Religious and Human Promotion” (1980).
- 12) Directions of the document “Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life” (1980).
- 13) Directions of the document on vocation ministry (1982).
- 14) Directions of the new Code of Canon Law (1983).

- 15) Directions of the instruction “Essential Elements” (1983).
- 16) Directions of the exhortation “Redemptionis Donum” (1984).
- 17) Directions of a message of John Paul II to religious men and women of Brazil (1986).
- 18) Directions of John Paul II in a discourse to USMI (1988).
- 19) Directions of the letter to all consecrated persons (1988).
- 20) Directions of the instruction “Potissimum Institutioni” (1990).
- 21) Directions of the letter of John Paul II to religious of Latin America (1990).
- 22) Directions of the encyclical “Redemptoris Missio” (1990).
- 23) Directions of the document on vocation ministry (1992).
- 24) Directions of the new “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (1992).
- 25) Directions of the instruction “Fraternal Life in Community” (1994).
- 26) Directions of John Paul II in the catechesis on occasion of the synod on consecrated life (1994-1995).
- 27) Directions of the exhortation “Vita Consecrata” (1996).
- 28) Directions of the message of John Paul II for the celebration of the Day for Consecrated Life (1997).
- 29) Directions of the instruction “Inter-Institutional Collaboration for Formation” (1998).
- 30) Directions of John Paul II at the Jubilee celebration for Consecrated Life (2000).
- 31) Directions of the letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte” (2001).

2. Biblical and Theological Identity of religious life in light of the dogmatic constitution “Lumen Gentium”

The document *Lumen Gentium*, approved on November 21, 1964, is one of the two dogmatic constitutions of Vatican Council II. In the history of the Church a teaching regarding religious life had never been promulgated in such a solemn way.

The historical moment led to the emphasis especially of the great reality of ecclesial communion. Thus focus is on the common aspects of life of members of the people of God: common Christian initiation, common holiness, common perfection, common following and imitation of Christ. Chapter V has this very title: “The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness”. Therefore everyone is expected to live a life consistent with the common and obligatory perfection of the holy baptismal promises. (cfr. LG 40-41) It states that, in a basic sense, all have been consecrated (cfr. LG 44) and all must follow Christ poor, humble and carrying the cross (cfr. LG 40-41) and to become formed to his image. (cfr. LG 40)

However, the constitution is opposed to the idea of uniformity and the image of a monolithic Church: “the people of God...is composed of various ranks. This diversity among its members arises either by reason of their duties, ...or by reason of their situation and way of life, as is the case with the many who enter the religious state and, tending toward holiness by a narrower path, stimulate their brethren by their example.” (LC 13)

It is therefore true that the Council is clearly in favor of a Church of communion; but it is false that it wanted to promote a Church of confusion. The constitution, for example, reiterated the special value of the profession of the classical evangelical counsels and recognized the special place of religious men and women in the Church.

We cannot hide the fact that the profession of evangelical counsels of chastity consecrated to God, of poverty and obedience involve, in comparison to the common baptismal renunciation, a new renunciation: “the renunciation of certain values which undoubtedly merit high esteem”. (LC 46) But that renunciation must be explained not purely as a negation, but as the consequence of a new and special positive element: the positiveness of a consecration “under a new and special title”. (LG 44) Those who profess the typical values of the three afore-mentioned gospel

counsels are “more intimately consecrated to divine service”. (LG 44) Religious have “their consecration” (LG 46), which involves a fuller conformation to Christ (cfr. LC 42, 44, 46) and a special closer following of Christ. (cfr. LG 42)

There exists in the Church the right and the duty to cultivate common or baptismal perfection in each of the states of life. But there is also the possibility to cultivate, with a positive spirit and special renunciation, “an excellence surpassing what is commanded.” (LC 42)

After careful reflection the Council believed it necessary to dedicate a special chapter to illustrate the program of special holiness and perfection of the state of life of religious: Chapter VI, entitled precisely “Religious”. Every believer is held “to the holiness and perfection of their state”. (LG 42)

The married Christian, for example, although consistent with the holy promises of baptism, does not respect, and does not have to respect, the program of holiness and perfection of the religious state. The married faithful can and must live according to the demands of perfection in the love and chastity of the married state, without living according to the characteristics of undivided love (cfr. 1 Cor 7:32-34) and perfection of “total continence embraced on behalf of the kingdom of heaven”, (LG 42) and which “has always been held in particular honor by the Church”. (LG 42)

According to the constitution, religious must be described first of all as a continuation or representation of the life of Christ: “the religious state...continually represents in the Church the form of life that the Son of God accepted” (LG 44) as supreme missionary of the Father who had sent him. (Cfr. LG 46) The evangelical counsels are not abstract realities, but rather concrete and determinative aspects of Christ chaste, poor and obedient to the point of death on the cross. (cfr. LG 43) The spiritual identity of a religious needs to be sought principally in the evangelical figure of Christ, totally docile and open to the Father. The Jesus who fully accepts consecration and the Father’s mission, and who fulfills himself in complete harmony with the Father’s plan, remains the supreme model, the ultimate foundation, the insuperable prototype of every religious life.

Putting together the content of this constitution with that of the dogmatic constitution “*Dei Verbum*” (cfr. DV 4, 17) and of the pastoral constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*”, (cfr. GS 19, 22), we can establish that, on the level of objective reality, embracing the program of religious life is to develop to the maximum the meaning of the dignity of the human person. It is necessary to admit, in the first place, that “an outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God”. (GS 19) Secondly, we must recognize that “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnation of the Word does the mystery of man take on light.” (GS 22) Thirdly, we can observe that some persons, by special vocation and grace of God, contemplating the mystery of the incarnate Word, feel called to live in his same way of life, that is, to reproduce in their own humanity, as though embodying them, the shining aspects of the incarnate Word, totally consecrated to the Father in obedience, chastity and poverty. Therefore, we can state that only in the way of life of the incarnate Word does the mystery of religious find true light: “the religious state...continually represents in the Church the form of life that the Son of God chose for himself”. (LG 44, cfr. LG 46)

Christ, in the richness of his mystery, is also the source of the identity or the distinctive spirituality of various institutes in the Church. All institutes must represent Christ obedient, chaste and poor. Some then are called to present with special intensity his person as praying, while others have the task of showing more strongly the different aspects of his person as missionary. (cfr. 46)

Religious life also has its special positive Marian aspect. In fact, choosing to assume the lifestyle of Christ, it also assumes the Virgin Mary’s type of life: “the counsels are especially able to pattern the Christian man after that manner of virginal and humble life which Christ the Lord elected for Himself, and which His Virgin Mother also chose.” (LG 46)

Closely connected with the presentation of Jesus as supreme example of religious men and wo-

men, the Council also offers, as Biblical type of the religious life, the evangelical figure of the disciples who follow Jesus in his lifestyle, participating intimately in his consecration and mission: “the religious state...continually represents in the Church the form of life that the Son of God...proposed to the disciples who were following him.” (LG 44) Religious, therefore, must make their own the life plan proposed by the Father to those who, leaving all, followed Jesus to be with him and to be sent by him in mission of witness of life and of evangelization.

3. Biblical and theological identity of religious life in light of the decree “Perfectae Caritatis”

After having dedicated all of Chapter VI of the dogmatic constitution “Lumen Gentium” to describing the special place of religious in the Church, the Council attended to them also in the decree “Perfectae Caritatis” approved October 28, 1965.

The decree on the appropriate renewal of religious life repeats the great doctrinal principles of the constitution (cfr. PC 1) and applies them to the concrete reality of religious life.

In line with the constitution, the decree reaffirms the objective excellence of the program of consecrated life, that is “the surpassing value (praestans valor) of consecrated life through the evangelical counsels” (PC 1), a value that has a pre-eminently Christological weight.

In religious life, a daily intimate encounter with Christ must take place in Sacred Scripture, especially in the Gospels, and in the Eucharist. To renew religious life is above all to bring it as close as possible to the virginal, poor and obedient form of life, of which Christ is the supreme “model”. (PC 25) In this sense, “the following of Christ proposed in the Gospel” (PC 21) must be considered by all religious as “the supreme rule.” (PC 2a)

For religious men and women, the most important model of life after Christ is the Virgin Mary, from whom they can learn every virtue. (cfr. PC 25)

The special consecration and special mission of religious are characterized principally by a profound Christological significance. They “are consecrated in a special way to the Lord”. (PC 1) Therefore their consecration is “a special consecration” (PC 5), which implies a special configuration to the consecrated Christ.

Religious consecration is a reality formed by a divine element and a human element. The divine, which implies “a surpassing gift of grace” (PC 12), is the privileged element. But the human element of free commitment is required also as essential. Only in that way can one explain the spousal character of religious consecration. (cfr. PC 12)

The religious community, a continuation of the community of the apostles who left all to follow Jesus, must have the same dynamism of “a real family united in the name of the Lord”. (PC 15)

The apostolic action of religious must proceed “from their intimate union with him”. (PC 8)

4. The Crisis of “emptiness” in the post-Conciliar period

In spite of the light of the Council orientations, many religious experienced a crisis of identity during the post-Conciliar period, which could be described as a crisis of “emptiness”, of “non-meaning”, or of the perception of a lack of a positive reality in the specific characteristics of one’s own religious life. This crisis had a strong negative repercussion at the time of confirming one’s fidelity to religious life and at the time of proposing an effective ministry for vocations to religious life.

In certain areas, only a part of the teachings of the Council on the faithful was accepted; that is, the part related to positive elements common to the life of every Christian. The part that presents the specific positive, Biblical and theological elements of religious life, instead, was neglected or refused. For some, the only valid part, that is, the only genuine part of the Council teaching is

that which speaks of the importance of common elements of holiness in the Church. The part, however, which speaks of positive values of religious life was considered fruit of a sad compromise and in contradiction with the other; and therefore, to be condemned to oblivion.

This way of choosing and interpreting Council doctrine led, in certain areas, to the crisis of “emptiness”. Let’s give an example. The dogmatic constitution “Lumen Gentium” states:

“...everyone should realize that the profession of the evangelical counsels, though entailing the renunciation of certain values which undoubtedly merit high esteem, does not detract from a genuine development of the human person. Rather by its very nature it is most beneficial to that development. For the counsels... are especially able to pattern the Christian man after that manner of virginal and humble life which Christ the Lord elected for Himself, and which His Virgin Mother also chose.” (LG 46) Someone who, because of prejudice, refuses the part that speaks of the special Christological and Marian value of religious life as erroneous and incorrect, that is, one who rejects the positiveness of the “greater configuration” to Christ and the Virgin Mary of the religious life program, can offer the religious life only the “emptiness of renunciation”: “the renunciation of values undoubtedly very estimable”.

An approach of this type to the Council teachings reduces religious life to a life of unjustified and unjustifiable renunciation, because it makes it become a life of renunciation for the sake of renunciation or of emptiness for the sake of emptiness. Objectively speaking, this nihilistic view of religious life is a kind of trampoline toward lack of fidelity, and in many cases in fact, it led to the abandonment of religious life.

The ill-omened manipulation of the Council’s doctrine was already strongly denounced by Paul VI. In his exhortation “Evangelica Testificatio” (June 29, 1971), which was defined the “magna carta” of Paul VI on religious life, the Pope grieves about the attacks on religious life and especially deplores the fact that those attacks are made even in name of the Council: “Has not appeal even unjustly been made to the Council to cast doubt on the very principle of religious life?” (ET 2)

The well-known scholar of the history of Councils, H. Jedin, in his memoirs (Story of my life..., p. 324), in describing from a global point of view the post-conciliar period, speaks of “crisis in the Church”, and among other things, says: “the crisis was present, it had risen because people no longer wanted to be satisfied with implementing it (the Council), but wanted to see it as the initial graft of radical innovations, while in reality they were turning their backs on the decrees of the Council.”

5. Identity of religious life toward the end of the 20th century

In the latter years of the last century a need was noticed to describe the identity of the various states of life in the Church more carefully: “in recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the specific identity of the various states of life, their vocation and their particular mission in the Church.” (VC 4b)

The response to that need came through the work of three Synods, whose fruits were gathered by John Paul II in three postsynodal Exhortations. On December 30, 1988 the post-synodal Exhortation on the laity “Christifideles laici” was published. On March 25, 1992 the postsynodal Exhortation on the formation of priests appeared, “Pastores dabo vobis”. On March 25, 1996 the postsynodal Exhortation on consecrated persons, “Vita consecrata,” was signed.

Aware of the deplorable attacks on the identity of consecrated life, sometimes launched even through the use of phrases of the Council, in the last Exhortation the Pope wanted especially to show the peculiar and positive identity of consecrated life in the Church. The Pope’s reflections, in fact, are centered on the Biblical and theological identity of consecrated life.

In his brilliant text, the Pope does not take an attitude of breaking with the past. Instead, he fol-

lows a line of continuity and development. He follows a line of continuity, because he presents an identity in tune with the Magisterium of the Council. The Pope declares explicitly that, both in his organized catechesis on consecrated life held during and after the Synod, and in his Exhortation, the Council “was an enlightening point of reference”. (VC 13d) He also follows a line of development, because he explains better the positive elements of the identity of consecrated life and because he intends to offer, fully aware, an authentic interpretation of the Council texts. For example, the Pope re-proposes (cfr VC 29b) the Council’s statement according to which the profession of evangelical counsels belong indisputably to the life and holiness of the Church (cfr LG 44) and, rejecting false interpretations, explains it authoritatively in this way: “This means that the consecrated life, present in the Church from the beginning, can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature.” (VC 29b) In his letter “Novo Millennio ineunte” (January 6, 2001), the Pope invites religious to cultivate carefully the positive values of their “special consecration” (NMI 46), implementing with new energy the program of “beginning afresh from Christ” (NMI 29), supreme consecrated One and missionary of the Father.

Part Two

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN LIGHT OF THE EXHORTATION “VITA CONSECRATA”

1. Life as “Christifidelis” or as believer in Christ

According to the Exhortation, consecrated life is called to express one’s Christian and ecclesial identity with greater clarity and depth. In line with the Council, the Pope insists on the fact that it is necessary to begin from the category “Christian life”: “By virtue of their rebirth in Christ, all the faithful share a common dignity; “ (VC 31)

So, we must state that the identity of religious includes a basic and indispensable Biblical and theological characteristic: being Christian, that is, being a new creature in Christ.

This situation, on the one hand, has the merit of framing the question of “ad intra” relationships well, because it underlines the fundamental meaning of communion and fraternity in Christ, which must reign among all persons who, having received the sacraments of Christian initiation, want to live the commitments assumed in a way consistent with holiness. On the other hand, it has the value of helping religious to determine and promote the essential values of their life choice, which cannot be reduced to the elements of other life choices, which are extraneous or which remain “ad extra” the dynamic synthesis of a Christian life plan.

2. Christian Life-- distinctive and above all positive

Religious are Christians, but they are also consecrated persons. From a Biblical and theological point of view, consecrated life is a special form of life, desired by the Most Holy Trinity. The existence of that form of life corresponds to the “design of the Lord Jesus” (31a), always docile to the Father. (cfr. n. 22b) Consecrated life is one of the various lifestyles in which ecclesial life is lived, by will of the Holy Spirit, because “diversity is also a work of the Spirit.” (31b)

Consecrated life, therefore, has its own peculiar identity. This identity is, in addition, first of all positive. Certainly, consecrated life is characterized by some special renunciations, which the simple Christian life does not include. But these renunciations have their explanation in starting off from the positive nature of special gifts received from God. In the dynamics of an

authentic Biblical and theological setting these renunciations have no meaning in themselves. They are the consequence of a positive option. According to the Exhortation, the typical profile of religious is not a reduced secularity or something like that. Consecrated life of religious persons is first of all something positive. “The evangelical counsels are... first of all a gift of the Most Holy Trinity.” (20a) Like the life of Christ, consecrated life is above all positive: “The counsels, more than a simple renunciation, are a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ”. (16a) We cannot ignore “the special value of consecrated life” (32b) because “it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values”. (32b)

Consecrated life is so positive that, because of its special value of particular configuration to Christ, to Mary and the apostles, “...Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority (in En trans; “excellence” in Italian) of the consecrated life. (18c) That “objective excellence” (32b) is founded on a scale of values established on the basis of objective data of revelation brought to a close by Christ through his life, his choices and his words and gathered into the Gospel. Therefore, it is a question of an “evangelical excellence” (105c): “(it) appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth”. (18c)

3. Life of special configuration to Christ

According to the Exhortation, consecrated life must be first of all a living presence of Christ in the world: “The consecrated life truly constitutes a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word.” (22c) This is the most characteristic note, both among Christians and non-Christians: “Consecrated persons have the task of making present even among non-Christians (cfr LG 46; EN 69) the Christ who is chaste, poor, obedient, prayerful and missionary.”(77)

Along the lines of the beginning of Chapter VI of the constitution “Lumen gentium”, but with a Trinitarian specification, we must say: “The consecrated life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus---the chaste, poor and obedient one---are made constantly ‘visible’ in the midst of the world...” (1a)

To illustrate the Biblical and theological relationship that exists between consecrated life and the life of Christ, the Exhortation chooses direct and positive language, present also in the Council texts: “The consecrated life... ‘constitutes an abiding re-enactment in the Church’ of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme Consecrated One and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced...” (22a) In consecrated life one embraces the proposal of a “Christiform” existence (14b), which requires “conforming one’s whole existence to Christ in an all-encompassing commitment...” (16b) The aspiration of the consecrated person “is to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life.” (18b), with “an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him.” (18c) The supreme desire of religious must therefore be that of becoming “persons conformed to Christ.” (19b)

This Biblical and theological identity determines the nature of formation, which must have configuration to Christ as its core objective : “Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving, this must also be the principal objective of formation. Formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father.” (65b)

Still, wanting to emphasize that he does not intend to deny other Christians the element of common, baptismal and fundamental configuration to Christ, the Exhortation sometimes uses the language that characterizes the “more” formula, present also in the Council texts: consecrated life “imitates more faithfully” (22a) Jesus’ way of life, and is “a more explicit and

authentic configuration” of it. (30a) Still for the same reason, the Exhortation, like the Council, indicates that the way of consecrated life is a “special conformity to Christ”. (31d) This characteristic of the special conformity to Christ refers as much to the Biblical figure of Christ as “supreme Consecrated One...of the Father” (22a) as to his figure as “Apostle of the Father” (9b) or “supreme...missionary of the Father”. (22a) For this reason the Biblical and theological sense of the “new and special consecration” (30; 31d) and of the “special mission” (17a) of consecrated persons is a characteristic that is above all Christological.

4. Life of special communion of love with the Father

Religious are bonded to the Trinity not only because of sanctifying grace and the gifts received in baptism, but also because of the “grace of vocation”. (64b) They, in fact, receive a “grace of...special communion of love with Christ” (15c), which is also grace of special communion of love with the Father.

At the origin of the “special grace of intimacy” (16a), with which Christ calls some persons to the life of special following, “is always the initiative of the Father”, (14b) “source of love” (111b), “who attracts to himself” (cfr Jn 6:44) one of his creatures with a special love and in view of a special mission”. (17a) “The experience of this gracious love of God is so deep and so powerful that the person called senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating his or her life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future, and placing them in his hands.” (17b) For this reason consecrated life “proclaims what the Father...brings about by his love, his goodness and his beauty.” (20a)

Religious life has a “triple relationship” (36f), a “triple orientation: toward the Father, first of all”. (36c) Since consecrated persons “live with particular intensity the Trinitarian... dimension which marks the whole of Christian life” (21a) that witness must be turned toward the Father, first of all.

The consecrated person must realize that God Father is also his/her highest formator, because “God Father...is the educator par excellence of those who consecrate themselves to Him.” (66a; cfr 70fg) The Father is the most determinative agent of the whole work of formation, the divine agent who “fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women”. (66a) Like Christ, who during all of his earthly existence let himself be formed by the Father, living always “in an attitude of docility to the Father,” (22b) consecrated persons “docile to the call of the Father,” (1b) must uninterruptedly let themselves be formed by the same Father.

The vocation to religious life is a “call of the Father,” (1b) “an initiative coming wholly from the Father.” (17b) Revelation (cfr Jn 17:11) presents the Father as “Holy Father” (111b) and has us “see in the initiative of the Father, the source of all holiness, the ultimate origin of the consecrated life.” (22a) The Father is “first origin and supreme goal of consecrated life.”(21e) Therefore, to the decisive question “where do you come from?” and “where are you going?”, the religious can answer: “A Patre ad patrem” (17), “from the Father to the Father”, that is, from the “sublime beauty of God Father” (16d) to the glorious “house of the Father.” (52b)

5. Life of special communion of love with the Holy Spirit

The consecrated person has a singular relationship with the Trinity. (cfr 14b; 16d; 21a) As we have said, the consecrated person receives a “grace of... special communion of love with Christ,” (15c) which is necessarily also grace of special communion of love with the Father. (cfr 17a) The respect due to the Trinitarian harmony obliges us to think that that grace is also grace of special communion of love with the Holy Spirit.

Every Christian receives sacramental grace and the gifts of baptism from the “Holy

and sanctifying Spirit". (95b) The religious person, however, receives from the same Spirit a specific gift: "This call is accompanied, moreover, by a specific gift of the Holy Spirit, so that consecrated persons can respond to their vocation and mission." (30c)

It is "a special gift of the Spirit which opens the way to new possibilities and fruits of holiness and apostolic work." (30d) Therefore, religious are offered a singular gift, which has the power to transform them into "persons conformed to Christ"(Christiform). (19b) "Many baptized throughout history have been invited to live such a life 'in the image of Christ'. But this is possible only on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit." (14b) In this way the special following of Christ has also "an essential ... pneumatological meaning". (14b) Religious must cultivate "in a particularly vivid way" (14b) together with the orientation "toward the Father" (36c) and the orientation "toward the Son", (36d) also the orientation "toward the Holy Spirit". (36e) It may never be forgotten that "the call to the consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit". (19b) "It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire...; it is he who shapes and moulds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, poor and obedient One, and prompting them to make his mission their own." (19b)

By nourishing "fidelity to the Holy Spirit", (62g) cultivating with special care the "life in the Spirit" (71b), religious will truly be faithful to their own identity" (71b) and will reach "deep serenity". (71b) The Spirit will let them taste his "friendship", (111d) will fill them with his "joy" (111d) and his "comfort", (111d) and will make them a "mirror of the divine beauty." (111d)

6. Life of special configuration to the Virgin Mary

The mystery of religious life, seen in the light of the Gospel life of the Virgin Mary, acquires a new splendor. As a matter of fact, as the Exhortation confirms, Mary "is the sublime example of perfect consecration, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him." (28b)

Therefore "Consecrated life looks to her as the sublime model of consecration to the Father, union with the Son and openness to the Spirit, in the knowledge that acceptance of the 'virginal and humble life' (LG46) of Christ also means imitation of Mary's way of life." (28c)

All consecrated persons are called to cultivate with greater penetration the Marian value of their spiritual life: Mary's presence has "fundamental importance both for the spiritual life of each consecrated person and for the solidity, unity and progress of the whole community." (28a)

Mary is a model of consecrated life: "ready in obedience, courageous in poverty and receptive in fruitful virginity". (112c) Mary is a teacher of prayer, (cfr. 34b) in "proclaiming the wonders" (112b) of the Lord, in "bringing Jesus", (112b) and in her union with the suffering Christ". (cfr 23c)

The Exhortation invites readers explicitly to do a Biblical study on the Marian dimension of consecrated life, meditating assiduously "the words and examples...of the Virgin Mary". (94a) "Every mission begins with the attitude expressed by Mary at the Annunciation: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word.' (Lk 1:38)" (18d)

The communion of a consecrated person with the Virgin Mary is a special communion of love: "In the Blessed Virgin Mary, consecrated persons also find a Mother who is altogether unique". (28d) The consecrated person responds to Mary's "special motherly love" (28d) by "loving her and imitating her in the radical manner which befits their vocation". (28d)

7. Life of following Christ in the manner of the Apostles

According to the Exhortation, religious life must be presented clearly as a life of following Christ in the manner of the Apostles: “Those who now follow Jesus, leaving everything for his sake, remind us of the Apostles who, in answer to his invitation, gave up everything. As a result, it has become traditional to speak of religious life as ‘apostolica vivendi forma’.”(93c) Like the apostles, religious are called to leave “everything” (93c) and “to make him the ‘all’ of their lives.” (72a)

When one wants to explain the Biblical and theological significance of religious life, the Gospel figure of Christ must always occupy the central place. This, however, does not prevent that, in close relationship with Christ, great attention be given to the persons of his closest followers. The Exhortation offers forcefully and explains often this formula present in the Council texts. “In every age there have been men and women who... Like the Apostles, ...have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as he did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters.” (1b; cfr 14a; 18b; 22a; 29c; 41a)

The Exhortation adopts the usual expression “follow Christ” in a positive, technical and direct sense. Still, so that it will be clear that the following of religious is not only the common and obligatory following of every Christian, it sometimes prefers to use the determinative style: “to follow....wherever”; (18a; 23c) to follow “more closely”. (72a; 80b; 82b; 104d)

The Exhortation expresses a very important Biblical idea, describing the apostolic group as a “new family”, (41a) inaugurated by Jesus. Meditating on the program of communion proposed by Jesus to the Twelve, being inspired by the “experience of complete sharing with Christ lived out by the Twelve”, (41a) is the best way to discover the Biblical and theological value of “life in community” (42a) of a “religious community”. (60e)

The apostolic following implied a membership in a common life with persons, which necessitated committing oneself to behave as group companions, brothers and members of the same family. In Israel the Passover Feast was the greatest family feast. The Israelites had to obtain “one lamb per family, one lamb per household.” (Ex 12:3) During the time of Passover, many Israelites who respected Jesus and followed his teaching as a prophet of God, but did not belong to the group of Twelve, rightly celebrated Passover with the members of their natural family. The sons of Zebedee, however, did not go with their father, nor did they celebrate the Passover in their own home, because, in virtue of their special following and consecration, they had renounced their own family to belong to a new type of family, “inaugurated” (29c) by Jesus. It was a family of companions and brothers, united in the name of Jesus. It was a family of persons committed to live with Jesus and like Jesus, a family whose members accepted Jesus as leader, model and father or older brother, and who remained united around him on the day of the supreme manifestation of the family spirit, or the day of the Passover celebration.

With his example, first, and also with his words, Jesus taught the community of the Twelve to live in docility to the Father, in fraternal love in humility, in service unto death, in generosity, in forgiveness, etc. Every religious community has much to learn from the program of life proposed by Jesus to the Twelve!

8. Life of profession of the evangelical counsels

One of the most important aspects of the Exhortation is the constancy and firmness with which, from the beginning (cfr 1a), it re-proposes the Biblical and theological language of the evangelical counsels. In this way the Pope confirms that the Gospel is not a monolithic block. To state that in the Gospel and in Christ’s life there exist only values that are obligatory for each and every Christian means entering a blind alley.

The language of the evangelical counsels help defend the common dignity of all believers and

the specific evangelical witness of consecrated persons. It makes us understand, for example, that also married lay persons can live fully consistently their own commitment to holiness and that they may not be treated with disdain, as though they were inconsistent, because the practice of the counsels “is not a necessary consequence” (30b) of baptismal holiness: “...baptism in itself does not include the call to celibacy or virginity, the renunciation of possessions or obedience to a superior, in the form proper to the evangelical counsels”. (30b)

The Exhortation states clearly that the origin of the reality of evangelical counsels is found “in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord”. (1a) They are, in fact, “the characteristic features of Jesus”. (1a) In line with the Council, the Exhortation presents the evangelical counsels not as abstract truths or as purely ascetic or renunciatory, but rather as aspects that are first of all positive: “The counsels, more than a simple renunciation, are a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ, lived within the Church”. (16a)

9. Life of new and special consecration

In line with the Council, but in a stronger and more explicit way, the Pope states: “Consecrated persons, who embrace the evangelical counsels, receive a new and special consecration which, without being sacramental, commits them to making their own---in chastity, poverty and obedience---the way of life practiced personally by Jesus and proposed by him to his disciples.” (31d; cfr 30t)

Therefore, there exists baptismal consecration, which is common to all Christians. But the consecration of religious is a “further consecration”, (30b) which “differs in a special way from baptismal consecration, of which it is not a necessary consequence”. (30b)

In the Biblical and theological view of the document, the new and special consecration is first of all a work of God, who “consecrates” (cfr 19t; 22a; 82a); then, it is also a commitment of the human person, who “consecrates him/herself”. (cfr 9a; 65a; 66a; 68c; 111b) The two elements, divine and human, are not the terms of a dilemma, but the essential components of a reality that is the result of divine action which respects the dignity and freedom of the human being.

It must be said of those who profess the evangelical counsels that they are “consecrated like Christ for the Reign of God”. (22t) The dual essential element of their consecration must be explained “in light of the consecration of Jesus”. (22a) It must be said of every consecrated person, as of Jesus, that the Father “consecrated him;” (22a) in addition, as in the case of Jesus, it must be specified that every consecrated person “accepting the consecration of the Father,...in turn consecrates himself to the Father”. (22a)

Consecrated life, like married life, is a covenant that requires the consent of the parties. In fact, one can say that the special consecration is a “particular covenant with God”, (93c) and more concretely “a spousal covenant with Christ”. (93c)

10. Indispensable element of the Church

The question of the ecclesiality of consecrated life is also a Christological and evangelical question. It is a question, basically, of knowing and maintaining the truth on the type of Church Christ wanted and passed on in the Gospel.

Taking up again and studying the Council teaching, the pope offers “this certainty”:

(3b) the profession of the evangelical counsels is “an integral part of the Church”. (3b) For a Catholic it must be clear the consecrated life can never be lacking in the Church: “...belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church”. (cfr LG 44) This means that consecrated life, present since the beginnings, can never be missing in the Church as one of its characterizing and indispensable elements, and as such expressive of its very nature. (29b) Consecrated life “will al-

ways be present and active in the Church”. (63c)

If Christ is the founder of the Church, He is also founder of consecrated life, an indisputable part of the Church. That is why the title “founder par excellence” belongs to Christ: “The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and other writings of the New Testament.” (29c)

11. Indispensable element of the transmission of revelation

Consecrated life is an indispensable element of the life of the Church because it is an indispensable element of Christ’s revelation and of its transmission.

Christ’s way of life is undoubtedly revelatory. The Pope emphasizes, for example, that the choice of a virginal form of life is an important part of revelation: “...Christ lives his life as a virgin, ...He thus reveals the sublime excellence and mysterious spiritual fruitfulness of virginity”. (22b)

The transmission of the spiritual treasure of revelation wrought by the Father in Christ cannot be accomplished only through the sacraments and words. Certain values can be transmitted only by living them, that is, through “life”. (DV 8)

Consecrated life is the ecclesial “living memory” (22c) and the ecclesial “living tradition” (22c) of “Jesus’ way of living and acting”. (22c)

12. Life of special mission

The Pope stresses that the mission of consecrated persons is a “special mission”, (17a; 35c) a “particular mission”. (31c) From the Biblical and theological point of view, that particularity consists especially in the special participation of consecrated persons in the mission of Christ, “the Apostle of the Father” (9b) or “missionary of the Father”; (22a; 77) “sent in mission”. (76) It cannot “be denied that the practice of the counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ’s mission...”. (18d; cfr 25a)

The special mission of religious, as every authentic mission, is first of all a gift and a task that comes from God; then, it is also a human commitment and a responsible service to others. The apostle or missionary does not send himself, but is sent by the Father through Christ in the Spirit. Depending on the characteristics of an institute’s charism, religious express certain aspects of the missionary Christ with greater importance. For example, some dedicate themselves specifically to witness “the mysterious apostolic fruitfulness” (8b) of the “praying” Christ; (cfr. 8a; 14c; 24b; 32d) others, leaning over human suffering, offer a clear witness of Christ “divine Samaritan”; (83b) others are the living presence of Christ teacher. (cfr 97a)

13. Life with an appropriate program of prayer

The particular Biblical and theological identity of religious must be expressed also in an appropriate program of prayer. Their life must also be, by special title, a life “in praise of the Trinity”. (cfr. 16d) Every religious, on the personal and community level, must praise, bless and thank the Trinity also for the special gifts received as member of a specific institute. “In practice this involves great fidelity to liturgical and personal prayer, to periods devoted to mental prayer and contemplation, to Eucharistic adoration, to monthly retreats and to spiritual exercises.” (38a) The supreme model of consecrated persons, also for their prayer life, is Christ, that is, the praying One par excellence, of whom they must be the living presence: “consecrated persons, in fact, have the task of making present... Christ who is...prayerful.” (77)

Every consecrated person, then, must be a praying person in dynamic fidelity to a program con-

sistent with the specific charism of his/her vocation in the Church. Some are called to structure their whole life on the axis of the praying Christ: “Men and women religious completely devoted to contemplation are in a special way an image of Christ praying on the mountain.” (32d; cfr LG 46) Others are called to “bring anew to their own times the living presence of Jesus...the One sent by the Father” (9b), “fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cfr Phil 2:5-11), so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic work by contemplation.” (9b)

14. Life of special prophetic witness

Religious life, besides the common prophetic dimension of every Christian life, has its special prophetic character, because it is “a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office.” (84a) The prophecy of religious is a special reflection of that of Christ, the prophet of the fullness of times, and is expressed “with their lives, with their lips and with their actions.” (84b) The prophecy of consecrated life is a special prophecy: “a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life”. (84a) Consecrated persons must always keep in mind that “True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word”. (84b) Letting her/himself be guided by God, the consecrated person can “speak in the name of God” (84b) and respond to the “three major challenges” (87) addressed to the Church.

“In our world..., a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren.” (85a)

Part Three

THE EXPRESSION OF THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE CONSTITUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

1. The “norms” of 1901

During the final phase of the 19th century the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars followed definite concrete norms in the approval of institutes of simple vows. These norms were published on June 28, 1901 with this title: “Norms according to which the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars usually proceeds in the approval of new institutes of simple vows,” Rome 1901. The original text, written in Latin, is divided into 321 numbers. According to these norms, Constitutions must be a book of an almost exclusively juridical nature. Members of institutes of simple vows will do very well to read the book of Sacred Scripture, books written by the founder/foundress, books of theology and spirituality. But these books are and must remain different books. In the Constitutions there must not be even a quotation from these books.

“Excluded from the Constitutions must be: quotations of texts of Sacred Scripture, Councils, the Holy Fathers, and of any book or author.” (n. 27)

“There is no place in the Constitutions for ascetic instructions, openly spiritual exhortations and mystical considerations, all things that are treated more adequately in ascetic books. The Constitutions in fact must contain only the constitutive laws of the congregation and the decisions of the acts of the community, both as to what refers to the government and what refers to the disci-

pline and the norm of life.” (n. 33)

“The code of Constitutions must contain the things that regard information and disposition: 1) on the nature, the members and the way of life of the Institute; 2) on the government, the administration and offices of the Institute. All these things can be arranged in two, three or four parts. Brevity, clarity and maximum order are especially recommended.” (n. 35)

“In the Constitutions there must be the formula of profession, In it, excluding all superfluous things, there must be a statement, in simplicity and clarity, that (the person) makes to God the three simple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Constitution of the Institute.” (n. 99)

2. The 1917 edition of the “norms”

In 1917 the “Code of Canon Law” was published. Logically, all religious institutes had to revise their constitutions. For the occasion, a new edition of the 1901 norms was published. In effect, with the decree of June 26, 1918, the Sacred Congregation of Religious ordered all religious institutes to amend their constitutions, making them conform to the prescriptions of the new Code.

According to the 1917 edition, constitutions must be a book of a predominantly juridical nature; that is, a book in which juridical aspects have a clear and strong predominance. The prohibitions of 1901 about quotation of Scriptural texts remain in effect.

The newness lies in the fact that a window is opened on spiritual aspects, through this addition placed at the end of what was the content of n. 33: “However, brief teachings of spiritual and religious life are feasible.” (35)

3. The 1921 edition of the “norms”

In 1921 a new edition of the norms was published. The prohibitions of 1901 and 1917 remain fully in effect. The addition of 1917 on spiritual aspects is transferred to the beginning of the paragraph and is reformulated as follows: “Even though brief teachings on spiritual and religious life are opportune, they must however exclude verbose ascetic instructions, openly spiritual exhortations, mystical considerations...” (n. 22i)

4. The 1937 edition of the “norms”

On March 19, 1937, the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith published a special instruction for religious institutes dependent on that office, with which it communicated, among other things, the general rules for the composition of their constitutions according to law. Those rules are in a certain sense a compendium of the norms of 1901. The content is divided into 14 numbers.

The idea that the constitutions must be substantially a juridical book remains in full effect: “The following must be excluded from the text of the Constitutions: ... transcription of texts of Sacred Scripture or of any book or author...; ascetic instructions, spiritual exhortations and mystical considerations...” (n. 12)

5. The 1949 edition of the “norms”

The same Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith again published the compendium of the 1937 norms on June 29, 1949; and in the same book made the first edition of an outline of constitutions composed according to the criteria of the norms. The content of the

outline is divided into 195 numbers.

For example, as concrete example of what is found in n. 99 of the 1901 norms, this formula of profession is suggested: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I n.n. make a vow and promise to Almighty God, to the ever blessed Virgin Mary (to our blessed father Benedict, Dominic, Francis...), into your hands, n.n., and in the presence of our ordinary (or delegate) poverty, chastity and obedience... according to the constitutions of the congregation.” (n. 54)

6. The revision of constitutions requested by the Council (1965)

The dogmatic constitution “Lumen gentium” (1964) of Vatican Council II states: “The religious state, in addition, imitates more closely and continually exemplifies in the Church the way of life that the Son of God embraced”. (cfr. LG 44) The decree “Perfectae caritatis” (1965) or decree on the renewal of religious life presents a supreme rule, also valid on the level of constitutional text: “Since the fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the gospel, such is to be regarded by all communities as their supreme law.” (PC2a) Consequently the evangelical, theological and spiritual view of religious life was to be introduced into the constitutions of religious institutes: “For this reason constitutions, ... are to be suitably revised and brought into harmony with the documents of this sacred Synod.” (PC3) According to the Council, therefore, the constitutions cannot be considered a text that is almost exclusively or predominantly juridical. They must assume a literary genre that harmoniously includes fundamental aspects: biblical, theological, spiritual, and juridical.

7. Orientations of the motu proprio “Ecclesiae Sanctae” (1966)

On August 6, 1966, Paul VI published his motu proprio “Ecclesiae Sanctae”, that is a letter with norms for the application of the renewal requested by the Council. Some of the norms for application of the decree “Perfectae caritatis” are dedicated explicitly to the revision of constitutions.

These norms advise, even more decisively and concretely, that the constitutions cannot be an exclusively or predominantly juridical text. The spiritual element must be included harmoniously with the juridical element. Certainly, the constitutions must contain all the juridical points necessary to determine canonically the nature, end and healthy traditions of the institute. But they must contain, first of all and as basic points, the evangelical and theological principles of religious life; that is, its Biblical and theological identity in the Church. That identity must be drawn above all from chapters V and VI of the dogmatic constitution “Lumen gentium” and from the decree “Perfectae caritatis”. They must also contain, as essential points, suitable formulae for expressing the spiritual patrimony of the institute; that is, its specific charismatic identity in the Church. The new norms recommend, at least implicitly, a careful choice of quotations of Sacred Scripture, texts of the Council and of writings of the founder or foundress.

“For every institute the general laws (constitutions, standards, rules or whatever they are called) will ordinarily include the following elements:

- a) Evangelical and theological principles about religious life and about its union with the Church and suitable and sure expressions thanks to which “loyal recognition and safekeeping should be accorded to the spirit of founders, as also to all the particular goals and wholesome traditions which constitute the heritage of each community”. (PC 2b)
- b) Juridical norms necessary to define clearly the character, end and means of the institute. These norms must not be excessively multiplied, but must always be expressed adequately” (ES II, 12) “The union of these two elements, spiritual and juridical, is necessary so that the fundamental texts of the institute will have a stable basis and that the true spirit and life-giving rule may per-

meate them; it is therefore necessary to keep from composing a text either solely juridical or purely exhortative.” (ES II, 13)

“The norms and spirit to which the renewal must respond appropriately must be sought not only in the decree *Perfectae caritatis*, but also in other documents of Vatican Council II, especially in chapters V and VI of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*”. (ES II, 15)

8. Directions of the “Rite of religious profession” (1970)

In 1970 the Latin text of the “Rite” was published, and in 1975 its Italian version appeared. The directions of the Council are applied to the liturgical area through a great variety of texts.

Among others, a sample formula for profession is suggested, which begins with a reference to the Biblical and theological elements of consecration and the following of Christ:

“I n.n. for the glory of God, with a firm will to consecrate myself more intimately to him and to follow Christ most closely for my whole life, before (name Bishop) and my brothers/sisters into the hands of n.n. vow chastity, poverty and obedience according to (the Rule and) Constitutions n. and I entrust myself wholly to this family, to live in perfect charity in the service of God and of the Church, with the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of the Virgin Mary.”

9. Constitutions after the Code of Canon Law (1983)

With the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law, on January 25, 1983, the Church reached another goal of stability in post-Conciliar legislation. Religious institutes had to make the necessary modifications to adapt the constitutions to the canons of the Code.

For our topic, we need to emphasize especially the effect of the Council and of the *motu proprio* “*Ecclesiae Sanctae*” on the structure of the book of Constitutions remaining in effect. The Biblical and theological identity of religious life and the spiritual heritage of the institute always had to be fundamental elements.

According to the Code every institute must have “a fundamental code, or constitutions” (Can. 587.1) “to protect more faithfully the particular vocation and identity”. (Can 587.1) “In this code spiritual and juridical elements are to be suitably joined together”. (Can 581.3)

10. Constitutions after the Exhortation “Vita Consecrata” (1996)

In the Exhortation of March 25, 1996, John Paul II asks “fidelity to the Rules and Constitutions”, (73c) stating also that “there is a pressing need today for every Institute to return to the Rule, since the Rule and Constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church”. (37b) The constitutions are the incarnation of the specific Christological aspect of the institute. (cfr. 36f)

On the other hand, we cannot forget that “in recent years there has been felt the need to clarify the specific identity of the various states of life”. (4b) For that reason the Pope, in his Exhortation, has explained more fully the Biblical, theological and spiritual identity of the religious state. That means that every religious man or woman will do very well to place the text of the Exhortation beside the text of his/her constitutions. Certainly, not to let both texts become covered with dust, but to read them carefully, meditate them lovingly, and let themselves be guided by their directions in their daily life. On many points, the clarifications of the Exhortation will help religious men and women evaluate the text of their constitutions better.

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