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The Consecrated Life

During the month of October 1994 the ninth general assembly or world Synod of Bishops engaged in a consideration of the consecrated life. John Paul II concluded the work of the Synod and promised to develop the fruits of its deliberations in a future document. *Consecrated Life* appeared in March 1996 in the form of an “apostolic exhortation.” The document does exactly what the Pope had intended, namely, it brings together many of the ideas and points which had been raised during the Synod and expands upon them.

In his concluding homily, the Pope laid the theological cornerstone for his future exhortation. He said:

Baptism is the first and fundamental consecration of the human person. Beginning new existence in Christ, the baptized—man or woman—participates in this consecration, in this total donation to the Father which is proper to his eternal Son. It is he himself—the Son—who incites in [someone’s] soul the desire to give oneself without reservation to God . . .

Religious consecration, with its distinct eschatological dimension, is inserted on baptismal consecration. . . .

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1 This article appeared in 1997, initially entitled “Religious Life and Its Tensions.”

Consecrated persons have the duty of reminding everyone of this.3

All the key ideas that would later appear in the Exhortation can be found here: the theological and spiritual priority of Christian baptism, the deeply Trinitarian nature of Christian religious experience, the call of God as mysterious and unfathomable, the eschatological (or “already/not-yet”) character of Christian existence, and the fundamental religious responsibility toward the people of God on the part of all those who choose to embrace one of the many forms of the consecrated life.

Although the Exhortation elaborated these basic ideas considerably, seasoned religious will probably not discover in the document anything fundamentally new or revolutionary, with the possible exception of one emphasis that I shall come to later. The papal Exhortation made extended use of the transfiguration episode to provide a contemplative backdrop for its presentation of the mystery underlying the consecrated life, and it took great pains to show the vital connection between every form of the consecrated life and the Church.

The Pope left no doubt as to how greatly he and the bishops of the world esteem every way of life governed by the evangelical counsels. He recognized the enormous good accomplished by men and women religious over the centuries both for the Church and for the world at large, he welcomed the new forms of the consecrated life which have been recently emerging in the Church, and he encouraged older religious to lose neither vision nor heart in an age which has witnessed so

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much diminishment. Indeed, the Apostolic Exhortation might well be the best single document articulating the Church’s understanding and expectations of religious life today.

Yet the document is not without a number of tensions. There is nothing unhealthy about tensions, of course; the existence of tension in our thinking indicates that our imaginations are alive. In fact, the presence of tension in the Exhortation was probably unavoidable, because religious life itself is something of a parable and parables are notoriously tensive and open-ended. The parables Jesus told keep playing on our minds long after we hear them.

No document could definitively sum up what the consecrated life is all about. Religious life was not formed and did not develop in the abstract but within the ever-changing circumstances and challenges of human history. Even the sacred texts of the Bible could never do full justice to the mystery of God’s self-revelation. Because men and women of faith are constantly growing, seeking, attempting, daring, struggling, and contemplating, the divine reality to which their lives bear witness will always exceed what can be recorded in words.

Perhaps the deeper reason why the papal document had to remain a work in progress, however, is that our theology of the laity and our theology of the Church are still in the process of developing. Religious life exists in and for the Church, and its underlying spirituality does not exist independently of the rest of the people of God.

**All share the same baptism**

The first tension within the document arises from the fact that Christian existence is rooted in our common baptism. All of us have been called to a perfect following of Christ. Whether
married or single, whether religious or cleric, whether old or young, whether fresh convert or Catholic by birth and by social heritage, all have been sacramentally clothed with Christ. All have died and risen with him to a newness of life that allows for no qualitative distinctions. Every effort to understand the nature of the consecrated life must begin with this absolutely central acknowledgement.

But what then becomes the rationale for embracing the life of the vows or the consecrated life? After all, both Christian marriage and religious life are governed by the gospel’s call to moral perfection and holiness. Both of these graced ways of being human, with their distinctive challenges, opportunities and forms of asceticism, can lead people to experience the mystery of God. It would strike many Catholics as arrogant, if not downright nonsense, to assert that religious life as one form of Christian existence is superior to the life publicly pledged to mutual and lasting fidelity.

The Exhortation does not seem to know how to render a fully satisfactory theological case for the consecrated life without underestimating the path to holiness that is Christian marriage. The idea that one state of life might be by its nature nobler or “higher” than another is simply incompatible with our renewed understanding of Christian baptism. In every state of life there can be an intensification of religious desire leading to a more complete and literal following of the crucified Jesus. Many of the characteristics which the Pope ascribed to the consecrated life could be similarly applied to Christian marriage: that it is prophetic, that it bears witness to an eschatological reality, that at its core it participates in the divine mission of redeeming the world, that it challenges the world and human society to inner transformation or conversion.
The new human being, which, ideally, a consecrated person represents, might also refer to a human couple remade and redeemed as a result of faithfully living out the marriage vows. The Trinitarian imprint upon religious life carries equally into marriage and family life, and the transfiguration episode could be rendered in a way that illumines the mystery of Christian marriage as easily as it is appropriated to illumining the nature of the consecrated life. Christian marriage must play as essential a role in the new evangelization of which the Pope has frequently spoken as religious life. Similar examples could be cited from other parts of the document, and the Pope readily concedes this. For instance:

those whom God calls to follow [Jesus] are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission. Fundamentally, this is true of every disciple. In a special way, however . . . (No. 72)

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 . . . (No. 35)

The 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 . . . (No. 82).

In short, to speak of “consecrated persons” is to speak of all the baptized; in all fairness, the rich resonance of this phrase should not be restricted to those who have pronounced the classical religious vows. “As a way of showing forth the church’s holiness,” the Exhortation reads, “it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, has an objective superiority” (No. 32; italics added). But do not fully sacramental Christian marriages likewise mirror the life of Christ, that is, life according to the Spirit of holiness? The first disciples became apostles, not consecrated religious,
and it is clear that they did not give up their marriages to follow Jesus. Otherwise Paul’s words would have made no sense:

Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? (1 Cor 9:5)

Celibacy appears to have been an accidental, not an essential feature of the life and ministry of Jesus. The essential feature of his life was his single-hearted dedication to the kingdom of God, which he proclaimed through his preaching and teaching, his practice of healing, exorcising, forgiving, and table-fellowship, his example of prophetic zeal and faith, and even in his death. A person could, like Paul, bear witness to Christ and the kingdom as an unmarried person. One could also be an apostle, and suffer martyrdom for Christ and the kingdom, while being married. For many religious today, to speak of the “objective superiority” of their way of life makes as much sense as claiming the usefulness of the foot over the hand.

What the Pope says about religious applies equally to all the baptized: “The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all” (No. 72). Furthermore, just as some institutes of the consecrated life have concluded that their charism and spirituality can be shared with the laity, as John Paul observes, so also the charism of sacramental marriage in its often heroic fidelity to a covenantal promise, its daily dying to self, and in its living radically for others, is a sacramental sign that can speak to, animate and encourage vowed religious.

What is needed, therefore, is a different footing in order to build the spiritual or theological case for the consecrated life. Such a footing will recognize the distinctiveness of religious life
while resisting every temptation to view religious life or ordained ministry as somehow competing with marriage for God’s favor. It seems to me that the choice to embrace religious life is soundest when people have recognized its Spirit-driven attractiveness, not when they think they are embracing a superior or higher state of life. In the case of the consecrated life what takes place is a sometimes sudden, but usually gradual perception of what is beautiful. This process or dynamic is every bit as wonderful and mysterious as falling in love and marrying. In fact, the Pope suggested such an alternative footing in at least three places in the document.

1. The first place is the document’s reminder that the consecrated life is an eschatological sign and a foreshadowing of the kingdom. Although the idea is not pursued, the eschatological perspective governs the whole of the document’s vision of life under the religious vows. Precisely in its ability to signal the possibility of a strikingly different and immensely beautiful way of being human together, the consecrated life works on the world’s deepest religious aspirations and sensibilities.

Through its fidelity to the religious vows, the consecrated life does not merely announce that there is more to human existence than what the eye takes for granted, or that there is another life beyond the present one. For baptismal existence as such signals this truth. Rather, by their identification with human beings and their societies who are so evidently and so painfully unfinished, men and women in religious life embody in every aspect of their existence the world’s longing for full redemption. Religious life points to the graced possibility of societies re-founded and remade in the image of divine justice and compassion.
2. This brings us to the second place in the Exhortation where our understanding of religious might be structured on a different footing. Those called to the consecrated life, the Exhortation states, “cannot fail to feel the commitment to bear in their hearts and in their prayer the entire world’s needs” (No. 73). And again:

The quest for divine beauty impels consecrated persons to care for the deformed image of God on the faces of their brothers and sisters, faces disfigured by hunger, faces disillumined by political promises, faces humiliated by seeing their culture despised, faces frightened by constant and indiscriminate violence, the anguished faces of minors, the hurt and humiliated faces of women, the tired faces of migrants who are not given a warm welcome, the faces of the elderly who are without even the minimum conditions for a dignified life. (No. 75) . . . And how could it be otherwise, since the Christ encountered in contemplation is the same who lives and suffers in the poor? (No. 82; italics added)

The religious person is someone who bears in his or her heart and prayer the great needs of men and women who suffer. And lest we pass over this point too easily, the Pope freshens our minds by recounting who those desperate men and women are. The religious or spiritual identity of consecrated men and women is forged above all in contemplating the Christ “who lives and suffers in the poor.” Not only must the consecrated life have a profound experience of God, as the Pope says; the call to the consecrated life must likewise be rooted in a profound experience of the world. The statement, “It is in the contemplation of the crucified Christ that all vocations find their inspiration” (No. 23), might even be turned around to read: “Today it is in the contemplation of the crucified people that every genuinely religious call makes itself heard.”
Perhaps, therefore, the categories we need to draw on in order to understand the role of celibacy in the consecrated life are solidarity and the option for the poor. The vow of celibacy reflects an intensification of the desire to live in solidarity with the poor, a love affair with the people of God. This way of formulating the intent of the vow seems consistent with what the Pope writes.

The consecrated life, like a school of the Spirit, is the place where men and women learn to find God. But the wisdom they discover is not for themselves alone. Their insight and the confirmation of their pioneering experience are intended for the whole Church. The spiritual consciousness of consecrated men and women, therefore, has to be rooted and grounded in the deepest solidarity with those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace. Precisely in this are religious men and women signs of the kingdom and living embodiments of humanity’s incompleteness, its groaning for full redemption, and its orientation towards a God who dwells among his people.

3. The third place we might look for an alternative footing is the theme of the beautiful. The transfiguring brilliance of the mystery of Christ is essentially a matter of a totally new kind of beauty. The Pope intimates as much when he draws on a passage from Saint Augustine’s commentary on the psalms: “Beautiful is God, the Word with God. . . . He is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb . . .” (No. 24). The consecrated life is as much a matter of aesthetics as it is a matter of asceticism. Comparing Christian states or ways of life (all of which are blessed) is like comparing works of art, each of which has its distinctive form and features. Because our religious sensibilities are different, no single way of life will have a universal appeal. Life in Christ, whatever form or “state”
it assumes, is always a thing of beauty. The consecrated life not only represents a quest for divine beauty, as the Pope puts it. There is a particular, even “special” form of evangelical beauty that emerges from within the lives of men and women who incarnate that consecration.

Three motifs, then, that the Exhortation could have brought into greater prominence for a richer understanding of the consecrated life today are (1) the eschatological nature of the evangelical counsels, (2) the importance of solidarity with the oppressed in forming one’s identity as a consecrated person, and (3) the beauty of the consecrated life as an expression of a mature Christian aesthetic.

Consecrated life and the Church

In keeping with the ecclesiological orientation of the Second Vatican Council, the document situated the consecrated life squarely within the mystery of the Church as communio or communion. It is neither an appendage nor a refuge for those disenchanted with life in the local church. There is nothing sectarian about the many forms of the consecrated life, and those who choose the life of the vows should never think that they are thereby joining a spiritual elite within the Church.

The consecrated life is fully inserted into the life of the Church. It prays from the same Scriptures, drinks from the same sacraments, and shares in the same mission. At the same time, the document insists on the duty of consecrated men and women to lead their lives in union with the successor of Peter and in fidelity to the Magisterium. “A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the bishops” (No. 46), the document notes. “Faithful adherence to the directives of the Magisterium” and “ready obedience to the bishops and especially to the Roman
Once again, however, we face the possibility of a certain tension. Perhaps the form of this tension is nothing more than the traditional one between institution and charism. “Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21) and not “in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48) will true worshippers discover the Father. Thus the scriptural tradition depicts the Spirit as essentially free and freeing: “the wind blows where it chooses. . . So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The consecrated life, indeed Christian existence itself, is at its core a charismatic reality. To obey the Spirit of God in thought and deed, to recognize and to lead one’s life according to the promptings of the Spirit, is by definition to lead a charismatic existence.

Echoing Vatican II’s Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, both the Synod and the Pope have called upon religious communities to rediscover their founding charism. But recovering charism is not just a matter of rediscovering the spiritual insight, apostolic purpose and vision of founders and foundresses. It is also a matter of rediscovering the pivotal experience of evangelical freedom, the kind of freedom which makes it possible to risk and even to lose all things for the sake of the gospel. The consecrated life should be a constant testimony to the freedom, the profound liberation of mind, heart and imagination, which proceeds from an absolute and unconditional Yes to the Spirit.

Nevertheless, leading a charismatic existence is also tied in closely with one’s belonging to and responsibility toward the whole people of God. The major way in which the consecrated life expresses the reality of communio may be through the
profession of the vows, for the classical vows are a symbolic expression of a gospel-driven desire to lead one’s live in solidarity with the poor and suffering. In other words, the consecrated life would be meaningless, from a Christian point of view, if it did not manifest in concrete, recognizable ways a person’s solidarity with the people of God. As we have already seen, solidarity may be a crisper term than communion. *Communio* carries the sense of an interior union, based in the Spirit, with all members of the Church. Solidarity adds to this the note of concrete embodiments of such interior union through social location, civic and economic choices, political loyalties, and so forth. A clear, living, prayerful solidarity with the poor, we might say, is itself a manifestation of charismatic existence.

The document states:

Taking up the Lord’s mission as her own, the Church proclaims the Gospel to every man and woman, committing herself to their integral salvation. But with special attention, in a true “preferential option,” she turns to those who are in situations of greater weakness, and therefore in greater need. “The poor,” in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margins of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as “the least.”

The 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 [experience a solidarity with the poor?] in a very special way. (No. 82)

The Exhortation may be invoking this foundational loyalty to the people of God from a slightly different perspective when it calls upon religious to be involved in ecumenical dialogue. John Paul’s dedication to the cause of ecumenism throughout the course of his pontificate is well known. Thus he writes:
“There is an urgent need for consecrated persons to give more space in their lives to ecumenical prayer and genuine evangelical witness, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit the walls of division and prejudice can be broken down” (No. 100). Such dialogue may also assume inter-religious proportions: “religious institutes can also promote appropriate forms of dialogue, marked by cordial friendship and mutual sincerity, with the monastic communities of other religious” (No. 102).

Yet ecumenical dialogue, undertaken in genuinely prayerful openness to the Spirit of God, has the potential of becoming religiously prophetic. In matters of the Spirit, careful discernment is always necessary in order to determine what is and what is not of God. Nevertheless, the readiness to listen to the faith and experience of those outside the Catholic tradition supposes a readiness to be challenged by the Spirit.

An ancient Christian memory preserved in the Acts of the Apostles may be instructive here. The first Christians were overwhelmingly Jewish. Some were offended, but all appear to have been surprised when they learned that the gospel had been offered to, and received a warm reception among, the Gentiles. The early church set about discerning and deciding, although not all the community’s leaders were on board after the Council of Jerusalem gave Paul and Barnabas the go-ahead to continue their evangelizing efforts among the non-Jewish peoples of the ancient world.

The consecrated life, the document tells us, can play an important role in ecumenical dialogue and in fostering greater understanding among various religious groups and traditions. Understanding and dialogue build upon “participation in common prayer” and can lead both to a sense of spiritual communion and even to collaboration in works of charity and
service to the poor. As consecrated men and women reach the frontiers or doctrinal boundaries of their own religion, they may find themselves in the unenviable position of being confronted and challenged by the limitations which are inevitably present in all human understanding, particularly when it comes to the things of God. The scriptural text “So are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9) testifies to a wisdom painfully acquired by those who are learning to obey the Spirit in all things.

The Apostolic Exhortation is both comprehensive and balanced, respecting the diversity that exists among the various forms of the consecrated life. The actual strategies of renewal and growth that are called for today will almost certainly have to be discovered by communities themselves. The Exhortation’s vision of the consecrated life tends to be somewhat conventional, although at several points it raises the interesting, even exciting prospect of breakthrough moments.

Ultimately, however, the major difficulties the consecrated life is facing do not arise from the Gospel, but from our time and place in history. The cultural forces at work in our world are constantly affecting and shaping our consciousness of what it means to be human. Until those forces are recognized, understood and then evaluated in light of the gospel, the consecrated life will continue to suffer the pains of diminishment on the way to rebirth.