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Becoming Fire that Ignites Other Fires

Ann Mary CMC

Carmelaram, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Consecrated Life is a sincere attempt to reincarnate Christ in our complex and conflicting life situations. It demands from the part of a religious person a relentless search and a deep hunger for interiority. A religious must find her/his interior health and wealth in and through a personal relationship with God. When our inner core gets supernaturally charged, naturally we start radiating the Holy Spirit, burning as if a fire is shut up in our bones - a Jeremiah experience (Jer 20:9) that transforms our life into a divine mission. Presenting Christ to the world through personal witnessing is the primary task of the consecrated (VC, 72). A vibrant spirituality that enhances life, a genuine fellowship that sustains and supports community life and a prophetic witnessing of Christ through the practice of Evangelical Counsels are essential parts of revitalizing consecrated life.

Introduction

Consecrated life is a call to become a fire that "lights up the heart" (Benedict XVI) and ignites other fires. However, often our tendency is to change everything else except ourselves. Consecrated life can flourish only through close association with Jesus Christ in line with the charism of the Founders and abandoning false securities of every sort. This demands radical reform, reassessing of structures and using them for revitalization and vibrancy of the consecrated life.

Consecrated life needs to be appraised from a communitarian

perspective. It should not remain an exclusive society that desist any interaction with the cultural milieu. Consecrated life is both a personal as well as an ecclesial venture that deems to be transformative, productive and radically evangelical. This presupposes openness to the advancements taking place in the Church and in the society at large. It is essential to develop an improved contextual awareness among the religious in order to develop a prophetic, wise and forward-looking attitude. A consecrated person who has a vision, zeal and energy to works for a paradise that needs to emerge alone has a role and relevance in today's Church and the society.

Burn the Boats

Consecrated life is presently undergoing a crisis all over the world. This is a critical time of transition. The structures of the past fall short to tackle the issues of the present. New formats need to evolve to support and sustain the demands to the time. New paradigms are to be worked out. We need imagination and decisiveness to initiate significant changes in its constitution and the lifestyle. Consecrated life at present finds it hard to offer the contemporary Christians a new synthesis and an alternative that could touch and renew its identity and become a significant role player in the Church and the current society. There is an attempt to shun the clericalism that gradually seeped in and to opt for the poor and the marginalized. Through bringing in the mysticism of love, communion, and solidarity; less immersed in ecclesiastic "functionalism"; and more centered on Jesus and service it is possible to recapture its original glory and vitality. Consecrated life has amazing history shedding its outdated adjuncts and getting rejuvenated in response to the signs of the time.

According to Carlos Palacio, "consecrated life today is suffering from an undeniable 'evangelical anemia,' both personal and institutional. To overcome this anemia it is necessary to redeem its passion for the person of Jesus Christ, the first love that consecrated religious life ought to radiate." José M. Arnaiz draws our attention towards the urgent need to dedicate ourselves to seeking a new sanctity open to the future that permits us to recuperate our traditional intuitions and renew them so that we can launch into new adventures, even in the midst of uncertainty and running the risk of possible failure. Beyond being needed or important what matters more is to be relevant in our particular missions contributing to the welfare of the society and to be an effective catalyst in its transformation. It is the poor and the marginalized in the society that the consecrated men and women should prioritize and cater for. This is where our future lies and the opportunity for becoming evangelizing leaven.

A Paradigm Shift

We cannot ignore the fact that the consecrated life in its present form — its structures, organization, work methods, lifestyle — does not respond adequately to the needs and challenges of a society that has changed and is changing rapidly. The present society can be described in many ways: pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized, shaped by modern information and communication technologies, producer of new forms of poverty and exclusion etc. In other words, drastic changes are taking place all around us that demands a change in our understanding of the human person and its relation to the world and to God; a change leading us to a new paradigm.

The consecrated life is a gift which God the Father has given to the Church by means of the Spirit so that, in faithfulness to the Gospel, the most characteristic traits of the life of his Son Jesus, the chaste, poor and obedient one (cf. Mt. 8:20; Phil. 2:8), and the unfathomable riches of his mystery (cf. Eph. 3:8), might be present in the world and might draw everyone toward the kingdom of God (LG, 43, 44, 46). During past decades, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has delved deeper into her nature and mission in the light of the ecclesiology of communion in order to understand more deeply her mystery rooted in the Trinity, her nature as a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race.

The most pressing need and the most difficult challenge faced by the religious in the new millennium is "evangelical witness": to be the living Gospel, a sacrament of Christ's love. Cardinal Suhard says: "To be a witness does not consist in engaging neither in propaganda nor even in stirring up people, but in being a living mystery" (Eruppakkatt, 2004). Pope Francis says:

if love is respectful, if love is in deeds, if love is in communicating, love makes sacrifices for others. Look at the love of parents, of so many mothers, of so many fathers who in the morning arrive at work tired because they haven't slept well in order to look after their sick child – this is love. This is respect. This is not having a good time. This is service. Love is service. It is serving others. When after the washing of the feet Jesus explained the gesture to the Apostles, he taught that we are made to serve one another, and if I say that I love, but I don't serve the other, don't help the other, don't enable him to go forward, don't sacrifice myself for him, this is n't love (Pope Francis, 26 June 2015).

The words of Henry Nouwen are particularly apt for the religious in this regard: "It is in intimacy with God, that we develop a greater intimacy with people and it is in the silence and solitude of prayer that we indeed can touch the heart of human suffering to which we want to minister." The formation of the future religious must assiduously concentrate on making them imbibe the spirit of the Gospel to be lived and made transparent in their lives, always and everywhere. This may mean radical revision in all areas of formation, even more, formators who are living Gospels (Pearl-Anne, 2000).

Force of love

In his homily, Pope Francis referred to the Gospel passage about Jesus' calming of the stormy seas, stating that the strength of Christ's love is a force "able to transform and renew creation". "The apostles were afraid", he noted, "but Jesus' trusting abandonment to the Father" is "total and pure". However, the Holy Father said, a "time will come when even Jesus will taste anxiety and fear," and this will be "a terrible storm, not cosmic, but spiritual". He continued: "But in that hour Jesus did not doubt the power and presence of God the Father, even if he had to experience the full distance of hatred from love, of lies from truth, of sin from grace". He experienced this tragedy in himself in a lacerating way, especially in the Garden of Gethsemane, before the arrest, and then during the entire Passion, until his death on the cross". "God never annuls that which is human, but he transforms it with his Spirit and he ordains it to the service of his plan of salvation". Padre Pio kept his natural gifts, and even his own temperament, but he offered everything to God, who has been able to freely use them to extend the work of Christ: to proclaim the Gospel, forgive sins and heal the sick in body and spirit". "From prayer, as from an ever-living source, love flowed". The love that he bore in his heart and transmitted to others was full of tenderness always attentive to the real situations of individuals and families" (Pope Francis, 2 February 2015).

The spirit is calling us today to exhibit the core of our commitment to Jesus and his Good News with the force of love in new and creative ways so that we can respond adequately to contemporary challenges. Therefore, a renewed sense of mission in the new context will lead us to discover not only new approaches to our existing ministries but also new forms of ministries. It is risk-taking.

Risk-taking

Two thousand years ago, Jesus said that the one who risked making radical renunciation for his sake would receive a hundredfold, and eternal life in addition. The one who holds on to his security would lose

it, while the one who courageously embrace insecurity would go beyond his wildest dreams. The Bible inspires us to take on life's challenges frontally than comfort-seeking, and to dare than to continue a sedate repose. The responsibility for risk-taking belongs to every Christian. The religious have received a double share of this responsibility by their very profession of vows. What is the concrete expression of these vows in daily life? Would you risk losing a position of honor you have reached as a religious superior or head of a prestigious institution? Would you risk losing your face or being blamed for a folly or taken for a failure? Would you risk to spend an afternoon in the slum, when the sun blazes so unkindly? Purchasing expensive gadgets to please a grumbling community may give a sense of security; on the contrary, clearing the health bills of some of the most helpless people in the neighborhood may mean risk-taking. But it is a risk worth taking because suddenly the grumbling community may find new generosity in their hearts, and a new motivation for a committed religious life.

Risk-taking is the very air that nourishes a religiously committed person. It is his/her daily bread. The risk of loving and forgiving, the risk of trusting, forgetting injuries, offering reconciliation, working for peace, joining hand together in a common endeavour, beginning all over again after a "grand failure", risk of friendship, of sharing, of communicating, of corresponding, of obeying, of living a simple life, of defending an absent person, of standing by the weak, risk of taking the Gospel seriously. Yes, this is the risk the religious have already taken on the day of their profession. We have taken the risk to announce the Good News. The risk in proclaiming the Gospel is that it may turn round and address us. It acts as a double-edged sword. It challenges the listener, but also disciplines the speaker. It can be hard on the soft and the sophisticated. It is risky to move "to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together" (Heb 4:12). In that holy sanctuary, the Gospel that has hurt them also can heal them and draw them together to unforeseen heights of achievement (Eruppakkatt, 2004).

The Way of the Counsels: A prophetic witness

People, in general, are becoming more and more aware of how life is lived in religious communities. They also notice a difference, in some cases a shocking one, between the ideal and the practice. If today some people have less respect for the religious, this could be the main cause. There are communities and even entire congregations in which one observes more of the worldly and less of the evangelical spirit prevailing. What is needed on the part of the religious is greater awareness of their call and commitment, more faithful observance of

their constitutions and their vows, greater loyalty to the Church and above all deeper love for God. Pope Francis made explicit reference to Pope Benedict XVI, "He said that the Church grows through witness, not by proselytism." The witness that can really attract is that associated with attitudes which are uncommon: generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness in order to care for others. This is the witness, the martyrdom of religious life.

The Church, therefore, must be attractive, to wake up the world! Be a witness of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord. A Religious follows the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up. Pope Francis states:

You should be real witnesses of a way of doing and acting differently. But in life it is difficult for everything to be clear, precise, outlined neatly. Life is complicated, it consists of grace and sin. He who does not sin is not human. We all make mistakes and we need to recognize our weakness. A religious who recognizes himself as weak and a sinner does not negate the witness that he is called to give, rather he reinforces it, and this is good for everyone. What I expect of you, therefore, is to give witness. I want this special witness from religious (Spadaro, 2014).

Prophetic Witness through Evangelical Counsels

Religious life is "a following of Christ" (PC, 2a), "a sharing in the life of the Church" (PC, 2c), a life in the Spirit (PC, 2e). The principal agent of renewal is the Holy Spirit who calls religious to return to Christ in faith and personal decision. Existing structures stand under judgment. They must be rethought and, as necessary, revamped in terms of authentic Gospel spirituality and the concrete realities of our day (PC, 2d). What is obsolete, that is, irrelevant (PC, 20; ES, 17), is to be deleted; what is valid is to be revived; and viable new ways of implementing the ideal are to be created. Religious life is baptismal life; otherwise it is a thief who "enters not by the door into the sheepfold but climbs up another way" (Jn 10:1). Religious life is a "special" way of the Christian life (LG, 44; PC, 1) because it is the way of the evangelical counsels institutionalized in the Church. The evangelical counsels, which are "manifold" (LG, 42) and meant for all Christians, are reduced in this case to the three values of chastity, poverty, and obedience (Larkin, n.d). These counsels can be lived independently of religious life (LG, 42) or concretized in an approved institute in the Church (LG, 43). In the latter case, they identify the religious life. The vows are servants of faith, hope, and charity; hence they are open to revision, that is, dispensation, when

the religious state, which is permanent, becomes a hindrance rather than a help to faith, hope, and charity. The evangelical counsels and the theological virtues, in other words, are the operative principles of religious existence, in the mind of the Council.

All of these citations, however, refer to grace offered, not to grace lived. The Council, as is well known, eschewed odious comparisons between one state and another and underlined the universal call to holiness in all the baptized. It refused to speak of states of perfection and took the personalist approach to different vocations in the Church by stressing the uniqueness of each call and the complementarity of all vocations. The mind of the Council is summed up in the dictum: "Your vocation is the best, indeed the only one, for you." It might have cited the words of O. W. Holmes: "Every calling is great when greatly pursued." In summary, we can maintain that a religious call is objectively a higher grace than the married vocation, but in the teaching of the Council one's state or way of life is as good as it is lived. Why then does a Christian choose the religious life? It is an "outstanding gift of grace" (PC, 12), a charism; and ultimately the conviction that one has been offered this grace is the only valid reason for entering religious life. But the judgment is made on the basis of self-knowledge whereby the candidate believes that in view of his limitations and potential this way of life offers him the best possibilities for his human and transcendent self-fulfillment. Given the appropriate emotional maturity presupposed for any life-choice, whereby the individual recognizes the values in each option and is free enough to choose either one, human or psychological factors enter the decision in favor of religious life as for marriage. The religious answers a call, but one heard in the depths of his own human aspirations (Larkin, n.d)

Religious life, in other words, is a human value as well as an otherworldly one. It is important today to see religious life under this double aspect. Otherwise, it may not appear as worth the burden to contemporary Christians, who deeply sense Karl Rahner's definition of man as "that being who must necessarily realize himself in love in order to correspond to his own being" (Burke, 1966). I shall try to develop these values by first showing the Scriptural basis for each of the evangelical counsels and then by indicating the positive values for the person, the Church, and the world in these evangelical counsels.

Scriptural Basis

Consecrated chastity, or virginity "for the sake of the kingdom," is a New Testament value explicitly taught by St. Matthew in these

words of the Lord: "...not all can accept this teaching, but those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born so from their mothers' womb; and there are eunuchs who were made so by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let him accept who can" (Mt 19:11-2).

Both the source and the goal of the charism of evangelical virginity are taught in this passage. Neither physical impotency nor psychological incompetence nor social pressure grounds the choice of celibacy over marriage for a follower of Christ. Celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" is a gift freely accepted, not out of timidity or selfish bachelorhood, but precisely "for the sake of the Kingdom." It is ordered to charity. This is its positive content: it frees the heart for love (PC, 12); it is a "sign and incentive of charity" (LG, 42). The charism of evangelical virginity makes it possible for a Christian to love God and his fellowmen intensely without the normative and natural support of marriage.

A second quotation in the New Testament is St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7, especially verses 25-35. Paul is addressing himself to practical cases in the Corinthian Church. In view of a parousia that may occur imminently, he advises the Christian converts to maintain their present status, married or virginal, waiting with a certain freedom and detachment as "this world as we see it passes away" (v. 31). The advice is ad hoc and pragmatic, in view of "the present distress" (v. 26). Even the general principles which he enunciates in the latter half of the passage are to be interpreted in the context of an imminent parousia:... He who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please God. Whereas he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife and his interests are divided (vv. 32-33).

In the context of the Corinthian Church, there is no doubt that in Paul's mind virginity is a better way. It disposes for contemplation, for "praying to the Lord without distraction" (v. 35), much as earlier in the chapter Paul allows abstinence from intercourse by mutual consent by husband and wife in order that they may give themselves to prayer (v. 5). Is Paul also teaching as a universal principle that virginity practically speaking is a better way for the Christian than marriage? Exegetes generally

seem to have thought so, but some recent commentators restrict the teaching to the extremely eschatological perspective of the Corinthian problem. In this reading, Paul is not explicitly asserting a universal superiority for virginity. But there is no doubt in Paul's mind of the particular merits of virginity for the cultivation of what we call today the vertical aspect of Christian life.

Self-Emptying and Spiritual Freedom

The paragraph devoted to poverty in *Perfectae Caritatis* (n. 13) cites a number of texts which single out different aspects of the Old Testament theme of the *anawim*, the poor people of God. The first citation, 2 Corinthians 8:9, holds up Jesus himself, who "though he was rich, for our sakes became poor." Alan Richardson writes of these words: "It is Jesus himself who embodies the biblical idea of 'the poor man' who trusts only in God, and herein lies the real theological significance of his poverty" (Richardson, 1962). Other texts cited reinforce the interior attitude of trust in God (Mt 6:26), resting one's security in God and not in earthly treasures (Mt 6:20), being detached enough to share everything with the poor (Mt 19:21), with those in need (Mt 25:34-45; Jas 2:15-6), in effective acts of fraternal love (1 Jn 3:17) (Larkin, n.d). The interior attitude of trust, openness, and detachment is primary; but it thrives best in actual poverty, in renouncing riches in favor of the poor, and experiencing, therefore, the insecurity of the '*anawim*' (the poor of Yahweh) who are thrown upon the Lord's care and driven to hope in Him since they have no worldly prestige and influence on which to rest their security. Even Matthew 19:21 cannot be invoked as a proof text for voluntary religious poverty since the context indicates a universal norm of total renunciation for all Christians.

Religious life specifies that recommendation in an institutional form, whereby persons become poor "both in fact and in spirit" (PC, 13) in order to create the ideal disposition for centering their lives in God and giving generously to their fellowmen. The Scriptural basis for poverty, then, lies in the long tradition of the '*anawim*', celebrated in the first beatitude in both Matthew, who extols poverty of spirit and Luke, who proclaims actual poverty. While religious poverty is not primarily a socio-economic condition, it cannot be reduced to a mere lack of ownership or legalistic dependence on superiors' permissions. Religious poverty is an experience of emptiness and felt the need for God created by the lack of significant worldly resources. It is a visible witness to the pilgrim status of the Church, but it's essential spirit animates rich and poor alike in the Church who place their resources at the service of others.

Self-Sacrifice in Faith

Obedience in the Bible is the equivalent of hearing that is, responding to the word of God; hence for Christians it is an exercise of faith. According to Paul, Abraham “believed in God” (Rm 4:3), while in Genesis Abraham “obeyed God’s voice” (Gn 22:8; 26:5). The decree presents Christ’s example of love and obedience to the will of his Father Jn 4:34 recognized in the institutions of his own earthly existence (Hb 5:8) in total service of his fellowmen Mt 20:28 as the root of religious obedience. Voluntary choice of submission to a religious regime beyond the hierarchically constituted structures of the Church is not taught explicitly in the New Testament. Religious obedience, therefore, is a development. Theologians have endeavored to work out a theory of religious obedience (for example, K. Rahner, Hillman, Tillar, Orsy). The following reflection assimilates some of this thinking.

Religious institutes are charismatic interventions of the Holy Spirit approved by the Church but not part of the hierarchical structure. The community is the bearer of the charism; hence the exercise of authority and obedience in the group is eminently collegial. But religious communities are not free-floating bodies independent of the Church. They exist in the Church, and the superior is the link between the teaching and ruling authority in the Church and the religious community. While religious obedience, therefore, cannot be reduced to a simple equation of the superior’s will and God’s will in a magical fashion, still the superior remains the authority, the last word, as it were, in debate and dialogue (PC, 14). In summary, religious obedience finds its justification in the individual members subordinating themselves to a community effort guided by the Holy Spirit in a life-form of service that has the guarantee of the Church for its evangelical validity.

Unique and Total Love Offering

The new ordering of the three counsels, with chastity placed in the first place, is intended to bring out the radical and central role of evangelical celibacy in the formation of a religious life. It is the charism which sets an individual and a community apart. Celibacy implies close companionship with Christ, an affinity for prayer, and the freedom to dedicate all one’s energies to the kingdom. Poverty is a condition for this positive content of chastity. Like celibacy itself it aims to create an emptiness and responsibility so that one is free to “use the world as though not using it” (1 Cor 7:31), having nothing but possessing all things. Obedience is the way of ensuring the ecclesiastical character of this venture. Chastity forms a celibate community of love in the

Church. Without poverty the celibate community gives no witness; without obedience it lacks a mission. The poverty must be visible, and obedience must be responsible search by the whole community for the Spirit. All three counsels together, therefore, structure the gift of the Spirit which is religious life (Larkin, n.d).

Values of the Evangelical Counsels

We shall consider the meaning of the vows on four different levels suggested by Cardinal Doepfner in a conciliar speech at Vatican II. These four levels are the ascetical, the ecclesial, the apostolic, and the eschatological, all of which are designated values in paragraph 5 of *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Ascetical Value

The ascetical value, which refers to the vows as means of personal sanctification, corresponds to the first principle of renewal, personal union with Christ (PC, 2a). The ascetical significance is the key. Whatever the role in the Church of a particular community, “the members of every community, seeking God solely and before everything else, should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him, with apostolic love, by which they strive to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God” (PC, 5). The religious vocation is a call to contemplation and apostolate addressed to all religious.

The vows are renunciations of recognized earthly good for the prosecution of this double personal goal. If, however, sexuality, property, and the exercise of personal judgment and decision are the raw material for growth into personhood, as is recognized today, will not the vows frustrate the maturity which is presupposed for a life of prayer and action? Why then renounce these human goods? The answer is that the vows do indeed presuppose a basic adult self-possession, freedom, and responsibility. This is why only balanced persons, who relate well to their peers, the opposite sex, and superiors, who have a healthy psychic as well as physical development, should be accepted for the religious profession (PC, 12). But the vows take human growth a step further to an even higher fulfillment.

The vows apply the paradox of human life and the gospel so that by giving we receive, by renunciation we possess. Ultimately the only renunciation is the way to the hundredfold and to full humanity (LG, 46). The counsels are not defenses against life, protections for an individualistic “spiritual life” against one’s body and the world. They

are secrets of growth in an age that has perhaps forgotten the necessity of renunciation for true love. If they are lived loyally and faithfully so that the limitations of human nature and of the finite are exposed, if they are renewed daily in the free choices that present themselves in an adult fashion, and not by legalistic, almost unwilling conformity, they promise the Resurrection as well as the cross and the fullest humanity (Larkin, n.d).

Religious are criticized for immaturity, mediocrity, and lack of joy. Besides the inevitable human failings, the fault may lie in the beginnings, in the acceptance of candidates who are too immature to make the renunciations of the vows or in formation policies that preclude further development of the person. Communities should take a long, hard look at the age level and psychological condition of their candidates and the kind of novitiate and juniorate training that is given. Or the fault may lie in the failure of communities to create the atmosphere of openness and trust that will allow persons to carry out in freedom the implications of their vows. Liberty, not overbearing law, is the only atmosphere in which the Christian life of renunciation can thrive.

Ecclesial Value

The opening paragraph in *Perfectae Caritatis* makes clear that the rule of religious is a double one of being and function, consecration and apostolate, witness and mission. These roles overlap, but they correspond to the ecclesial and apostolic meaning of the counsels respectively; they also enter the final category of this paper, the eschatological value of religious life. Our division, therefore, is inadequate, but one that, hopefully, suits the purpose of exposition. This call to being, to consecration, to witness in the Church is the call to holiness, not in a purely transcendent, vertical fashion, much less in an individualistic way, but in the community as in the present manifestation of the kingdom before the visible return of Christ at the *parousia*.

Religious create communities of fraternal love. They are paradigms of the Church itself, either after the manner of the Jerusalem community as in the case of monastic orders or in the tradition of the Pauline Churches which looked outward as with modern apostolic communities. The structuring of these two types of community is different, one *ad intra*, the other *ad extra*; and each religious institute must choose between the two according to its own nature and goals. Too long have apostolic communities endeavored to live by a monastic schedule and mystique to the detriment of both professional excellence and religious growth. In

both monastic and apostolic communities, however, the witness value for the Church lies in visible charity that unites the members and, in the case of apostolic communities, creates community outside.

Celibacy needs the support of living community: "Let all, especially superiors, remember that chastity is guarded more securely when true brotherly/ sisterly love flourishes in the common life of the community" (PC, 12). Priestly celibacy is a problem where priests have to live without this human support. The religious house must be home for its members, where individuals can be themselves - accepted, welcomed, understood - where they are treated as persons and not functions or numbers that man the machinery of a rigid horarium and overcommitted apostolates, where genuine friendships prevail, in a word, where the religious like to return to from their apostolic labors.

The horarium and observances will depend on the nature of the community work, and the primary concern will be to create an atmosphere of peace and friendship. Where love is, God is; where two or three are gathered in His name, there is the presence of the Lord. This means among other things that recreation is as important as faculty meetings and cordiality as necessary as zeal. The celibate community complements the married community, and Christian love is at the heart of both. Celibate love manifests its own constellation of the qualities of Christian love: it highlights the freedom, the all-embracing, non-exclusive character of Christian love that gives without looking for a return (Larkin, n.d).

The consecrated person reserves identification for the Lord and bestows his love on the People of God freely. Even his intimate friends do not close him off from others, for he can call no one his own. His interpersonal relationships, therefore, have a phenomenology different from the friendships that lead to or exist in marriage. His way demands faith in God and trust in his fellowmen; but he stakes his very life on the principle that by giving he receives, by loving he is loved.

The other vows make the witness of celibate love a reality. Poverty in its Biblical meaning must be visible. Some ways suggested in the documents are the sharing of one's goods, one's time, one's love inside and outside the community, identifying with the poor and experiencing their insecurity by belonging to a religious family that is not obviously affluent but has to work hard and stint in order to survive. Experimentation and creative expression in new forms are needed to witness poverty, both personally and as a community, both to our affluent society and to the deprived and destitute peoples in our land.

Without real poverty, the witness of celibacy speaks to no one because the kind of charity that is its touchstone will not be seen.

Renewed obedience contributes to this witness insofar as it is more responsible, more collegial in character when “holy disobedience” need not be a contradiction in terms. An autocratically oriented Church with a strictly vertical obedience, in which the superior has all the answers and takes sole responsibility for decisions tends to keep people in a state of perpetual childhood and creates a “gimme” syndrome rather than a “giving” service. In adapting to democratic methods, obedience need not suffer; it does not become majority rule or the totally “dialogal” type condemned in the decree (n. 14). Authority remains, but “an active and responsible obedience” gives it balance and allows the whole community to be actively engaged in community service.

Apostolic Value

The practical contribution of religious institutions to the social apostolate of the Church is evident. Without this army of low-paid, dedicated workers, as Pope Pius XII remarked, the Church’s work of education and Service would collapse. But the external apostolate of religious is secondary. Paul VI scored “the false idea that the first place should be given to the works of the external apostolate, the second to concern for our spiritual perfection, as though such were the requirement of the spirit of our age and the needs of the Church” (*Magno gaudio*, May 23, 1964). The Council itself sees the apostolic work for the kingdom promoted in two ways, by “prayer or by active undertakings” according to the nature of a given order (LG, 44); and in the case of apostolic orders it inserts “charitable activity” into “the very nature of the religious life” (PC, 8). The mission of religious in the Church, indeed of the whole redemptive apostolate of the Church, lies on a deeper level than the pragmatic.

The apostolate springs from union with Christ and consists in participation in the Paschal mystery of kenosis and resurrected life as expressed by prayer and work. More concretely, the apostolate of the Church is the same as Christ’s, to break down the middle wall of partition (Eph 2:14), creating a community inside and outside the local religious community itself. It is the work of charity, of self-emptying, that allows God’s love for mankind to filter into the lives of others through the agency of those who are bearers of that love. They must possess this love before they can be its instruments. To live and express fraternally this gift of God’s love means “the bearing about in our bodies of the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus may be manifest in

our bodily frame” (2 Cor 4:10); in this way “death is at work in us, but life in [the community]” (ibid, v. 12). The apostolate, in other words, is charity, expressed in prayer or action. Far from being opposed to the witness of religious life, the apostolate is practically identified with the community. Community and apostolate in the Church are thus correlatives and mutually interdependent. Neither one is pure means to the other. In a given institute, especially when it strives to remain faithful to its particular “spirit and special aims” (Pc 2b) in the midst of pressing local needs of the Church, there will be tensions in the structuring and implementation of the two aspects. But in general, the type of community life will depend on the institute’s apostolate. A harmonious balance between the common life and apostolic involvement according to the institute’s identity is the desideratum. Once again renewal is more important than adaptation since ultimately both community and apostolate are mere expressions of the one union of charity, of death-resurrection in the Lord (Larkin, n.d).

Eschatological Value

The Biblical notion of virginity, especially clear in the New Testament, contains a strong eschatological note. The state anticipates the future messianic marriage with Christ, “that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse” (PC, 12). Thus, religious life is a “splendid” (PC, 1) and “unique” (LG, 44) sign of the heavenly kingdom. It is customary to equate this eschatological or transcendent quality of the religious vocation with an exclusive love of Christ that avoids the distraction and competition of a divided heart (1 Cor 7:32-5). But this is the vocation of all Christians. All Christians are called to a unique love of God that does not allow any creature to be placed on the same level as God; otherwise we have idolatry. In the effort to cultivate this unique love of God religious bypass one sign, that of marriage and property and independence, and assume another sign, that of physical virginity lived in poverty and obedience.

The celibate community does highlight the eschatological character of Christian life, just as the married community reflects more clearly the incarnation aspect. As two ways to the kingdom, they are not as two ways of living Christian love, totally exclusive of each other; they complement each other as witnesses of the Church’s love for Christ. The hazard of the celibate community is to lose sight of the world and people, whereas the hazard of the married community is to forget the transient, passing character of the historical moment and lose sight of the Christ who is to come. Religious, therefore, are dedicated to an

eschatological existence as a bias and emphasis, but not as an exclusive concern (Larkin, n.d).

Especially in the light of incarnational theology that identifies Christ's presence in the person and community, religious today are not absolved from temporal concerns, from making their contribution to human development and the building of the earth. They can engage in the same works as the laity, such as teaching, social work, any human endeavor; only their bias will be different. They come to human tasks with an eschatological eye to the future, to what is not yet, to what will come in the final age, already begun, in Christ. In this sense, they live in hope. No matter how important the classes they teach or their social involvement, they bring to their work in the world a sense of the person of Christ who is to be revealed in the *parousia*.

Religious are not "strangers to their fellow men or useless citizens of the earthly city" (LG, 46). On the contrary, they embrace the world in its truth and reality. They see it as inchoate glory, as the kingdom of God in embryo, and yet as "no lasting city," as a moment in an evolutionary process, and as less than the ultimate Good that is Christ reappearing and handing the kingdom over to His Father. In a word they live in hope, and this hope is the secret of the joy that must be their witness if it is to be true. For them as for the married; joy is the surest index that they are living their vocation in Christ. Two practical questions may be raised here. First, what does the eschatological vocation contribute to the Church and the world at large? Second, how does the eschatological emphasis affect the prayer life and self-denial of religious?

The first question is answered admirably in *Lumen Gentium*. Religious are "a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation" (LG, 44). Why is this assertion made? Because religious represents the presence of Christ Himself "contemplating on the mountain, announcing God's kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed... doing good to all" (LG, 46). The second question is more complex. Since prayer and self-denial are founded on the eschatological dimension of Christian life, it is to be expected that religious life will be characterized by these acts. But both prayer forms and the practices of self-denial must become more incarnational. Prayer should become the loving awareness of Christ present in human manifestations. Such prayer is nourished above all by Sacred Scripture and the liturgy, the only two sources of "the spirit and practice of prayer" explicitly signaled out by *Perfectae Caritatis* (n. 6). Thus mental

prayer as a confrontation with the word of God is more important than a multiplicity of devotions (ES, 21).

For religious as for the whole people of God the liturgy weds the human and divine and is the summit and source of the Christian life (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 2, n. 10). Self-denial too will take on a more human dimension. The cross is one's daily life, and it is present wherever Christians endeavor to be an Easter people. The self-denial of religious, therefore, will be the self-renunciations inherent in being all things to all men, in fostering community, in giving generously in the apostolate. As a disposition for this life a discipline is necessary. Today this discipline would better consist in the cultivation of the openness, understanding, welcome, and patience that are the necessary framework in which charity can operate rather than in the corporal penances and often meaningless gestures of some religious rules (Larkin, n.d).

Conclusion

Become fire that ignites other fires (Lk 12:49). This is our mission. Each of us is sent into this world for a particular purpose – to do with our lives what God wants us to do. We are not here to do what we like or find easier but to do what we are sent for. A religious congregation, to be vibrant and attractive, must be clear about three things – identity, mission and community life. Thus a Carmelite should be clear about what it means to be a Carmelite, what the core of his/her mission is, and the essential expressions of Carmelite community life. These cannot be changed as we like. When a sister, wonderfully happy and compassionate nun, died, all who had known her said, "Unlike many funeral speeches, all the good things people will say today about her, are true. She was truly a good person." She knew the poor people of the neighborhood and reached out to them. She used to ask her friends for money to help the poor students. Her admirers called her the "Mother Teresa" of that neighborhood. This is what mission is about – that we are gripped by something larger than ourselves, to which we are deeply and happily committed. Since we believe in it, we are more than ready to make sacrifices, to adjust to people and situations, to collaborate with others – all for the mission we find worthwhile.

The heart of religious life, the fire that gives it its typical glow, lies elsewhere. It lies in one's faith in that man, who lived long ago, wrote no books and held no public office, and died young, ridiculed and tortured. God raise him up and made him the central point of human history. In his life, death and new life lie the meaning of all human life. Once we believe in Jesus, once we start taking him seriously, everything else pales into secondary position – money, family, sexuality, career, nay life

itself. Those who have seen that light, see everything else differently. If the prophets, mystics, saints could change the world, we can transform the world around us as that ordinary bunch of twelve nobodies did in the first century. Or in other words, God can work his wonders, not just through us, but through the men and women who agree to put their hands in His hands and allow themselves to be guided (Mannath, 2014).

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Experiential Knowledge of Self, God, and the World As Key Components for Transformation

Joseph A. D'Mello

Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India

Abstract

Every religious has a desire to lead an authentic life. This authenticity can be realized only through an integral transformation in life. Often we come across consecrated people, who are disheveled, disheartened and disappointed as a result of their failure to live the ideals of religious life. The self, God, and the world are the three important elements in any religious ideals. This article is an attempt to show that an experiential knowledge of the self, God and the world, especially the poor, is an effective and essential component to facilitate both individual as well as collective transformation.

Introduction

Transformation is a frequently used term in religious life. We uphold the view that the goal of religious formation is transformation. The grace for transformation is one of the common petitions in our prayers. However, we are aware of the fact that transformation would not take place in a vacuum; rather it needs medium and mediation. One of the effective ways to bring about transformation in an individual is to expose that person an experiential knowledge of the self, God and the world, especially the poor. Let us explore these three components and see how they facilitate transformation.