

KEEP WATCH!

**To Consecrated Men and Women
Journeying in the Footsteps of God**

Keep Watch!

CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF
CONSECRATED LIFE
AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

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*Travelling always with that virtue
which is a pilgrim virtue: joy!*

(Pope Francis)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Let us continue with joy our journey towards the Year of Consecrated Life, so that our preparation may itself be a time of conversion and grace. By his words and actions, Pope Francis continues to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a life lived according to the counsels of the Gospel and the joy that lies in proclaiming this, as he invites us to go forward, to be “a Church which goes forth,”¹ according to a logic of freedom.

He urges us to leave behind us “a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings,” in order to breathe “the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel!”²

Consecrated life is a sign of good things to come in human civilisation, as it travels onwards “in exodus” along the paths of history. It is willing to come to grips with provisional certainties, with new situations and challenges as they develop, with the clamorous demands and passions of contemporary humanity. In this watchful pilgrimage it preserves the search for the face of God, lives in discipleship to Christ, and allows itself to be guided by the Spirit, so as to live its love for the Kingdom with creative faithfulness and ready diligence. Its identity as a pilgrim and prayerful presence on the threshold of history (*in limine historiae*) belongs to its very nature.

¹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 20-24.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

This letter is intended to hand down to all consecrated men and women this valuable heritage, exhorting them *to remain, with resolute hearts, faithful to the Lord* (cf. *Acts* 11:23-24) and to continue on this journey of grace. We would now like to review the steps taken over the past fifty years. In this, the Second Vatican Council emerges as an event of fundamental importance for the renewal of consecrated life. The invitation of the Lord resonates for us: “Put yourselves on the ways of long ago, enquire about ancient paths: which was the good way? Take it then, and you will find rest” (*Jer* 6:16).

In this resting-place (*statio*), each of us can recognise the seeds of life: both those that, finding a home *in a good and generous heart* (*Lk* 8:15), have come to fruitfulness, and those which have fallen along the wayside, on the stones or among the thorns, and have not borne fruit (cf. *Lk* 8:12-14).

We are presented with the possibility of continuing our journey with courage and watchfulness so as to make daring choices that will honour the *prophetic* character of our identity, “a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God,”³ so that people today may see “the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ the King and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvellously working in the Church.”⁴

To search the horizons of our life and our times, in watchful prayer; to peer into the night in order to recognise the fire that illuminates and guides, to gaze into the heavens, looking for the heralds of blessing for our dryness. To keep awake and watch, and to make intercession, firm in faith.

The time is short to align ourselves with the Spirit who creates:

“In our personal life, in our private lives”, continued the Pope, “the same thing happens: the Spirit pushes us to take a more evangelical path, and we [say]: ‘But no, it goes like this, Lord’ Do not put up

resistance to the Holy Spirit: this is the grace for which I wish we would all ask the Lord; docility to the Holy Spirit, to that Spirit who comes to us and makes us go forward on the path of holiness, that holiness of the Church which is so beautiful.”⁵

This letter is founded in remembrance of the abundant grace experienced by consecrated men and women in the Church, and also makes a frank call for discernment. The Lord is living and working in our history, and is calling us to collaboration and to collective discernment, so as to inaugurate new seasons of prophecy in the service of the Church, looking forward to the coming Kingdom.

Let us arm ourselves with the weapons of light, freedom, and the courage of the Gospel, and search the horizon, looking for the signs of God there and obeying him, making bold evangelical choices in the manner of the humble and the small.

³ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 84.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

⁵ FRANCIS, *The Spirit cannot be domesticated*, morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (16th April 2013).

DEPARTING OBEDIENTLY IN EXODUS

*At every stage of their journey,
whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle
the sons of Israel would resume their march.*

*If the cloud did not rise,
they waited and would not march until it did.
For the cloud of the LORD rested on the tabernacle
by day, and a fire shone within the cloud by night,
for all the House of Israel to see.
And so it was for every stage of their journey.*

(Ex 40:36-38)

With Open ears

2. The life of faith is not simply something we have, but a journey that has its bright stretches and dark tunnels, its open horizons and tortuous, uncertain paths. Out of God's mysterious self-abasement, coming down into our lives and our affairs, comes, according to the Scriptures, joy and amazement, gifts from God that fill life with meaning and light, and find their fulness in the messianic salvation accomplished by Christ. [Or is it the self-abasement that finds its fulfilment in Christ's messianic salvation?]

Before focusing our attention on the Second Vatican Council and its effects, let's take our cue from an iconic episode of the Bible to offer a living and grateful commemoration of the postconciliar moment of opportunity, its *kairos*, with its values that still inspire us.

The grand epic of the Exodus of the chosen people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land becomes an evocative icon. It suggests our modern stop and go, pause and resume, patience and enterprise. The decades since the Council have been a period of real highs and lows, of surges and disappointments, of explorations and nostalgic refusals.

The interpretative tradition of the spiritual life, which has taken various forms closely connected to the forms of consecrated life, has often found, in the great paradigm of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, evocative symbols and metaphors: the burning bush, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey through the desert, the theophany on Sinai; also the fear of the lonely wilderness, the gift of the law and of the covenant, the column of cloud and fire; manna, water from the rock, murmuring and the backsliding.

Let's take the symbol of the cloud (in Hebrew '*anan*'),⁶ which mysteriously guided the people on their journey: it did so by stopping,

sometimes for a long time, so causing inconvenience and provoking complaint; and then rising up and moving to indicate the pace of the journey, under the guidance of God.

Let's listen to the Word:

At every stage of their journey, whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle the sons of Israel would resume their march. If the cloud did not rise, they waited and would not march until it did. For the cloud of the LORD rested on the tabernacle by day, and a fire shone within the cloud by night, for all the House of Israel to see. And so it was for every stage of their journey (*Ex* 40:36-38).

The parallel text in Numbers (cf. *Nm* 9:15-23) adds an interesting element, focussing on the stops and starts:

Sometimes it stayed there for two days, a month, or a year; however long the Cloud stayed above the tabernacle, the sons of Israel remained in camp in the same place, and when it lifted they set out. (*Nm* 9:22).

Clearly, this style of presence and guidance on the part of God demanded constant watchfulness: both to respond to the unpredictable movement of the cloud, and to preserve faith in God's protective presence when stops became lengthy and the final destination seemed to be indefinitely postponed.

In the symbolic language of the biblical account, the cloud was the *angel of God*, as the book of Exodus affirms (*Ex* 14:19). In subsequent interpretation, the *cloud* becomes a privileged symbol of the presence, goodness and active faithfulness of God. In fact, the prophetic, psalmic and sapiential traditions would often revisit this symbol, developing other aspects, such as, for example, God's hiding of himself because of the fault of his people (cf. *Lam* 3:44), or the majesty of the throne of God (cf. *2 Chr* 6:1; *Jb* 26:9).

The New Testament sometimes uses analogous language to revisit this symbol in the theophanies – the virginal conception of Jesus

⁶ The term '*anan*' occurs 87 times in the Old Testament; 20 times in Exodus and 20 more in Numbers. The expression "pillar of fire and cloud" appears only once (*Ex* 14:24); generally it is referred to as a "pillar of cloud" or "pillar of fire." Both expressions describe the manifestation of the divine presence.

(cf. *Lk* 1:35), the transfiguration (cf. *Mt* 17:1-8), Jesus's ascension into heaven (cf. *Acts* 1:9). Paul also uses the cloud as a symbol of baptism (cf. *1 Cor* 10:1), and the symbolism of the *cloud* is always a part of the imagery for describing the glorious return of the Lord at the end of time (cf. *Mt* 24:30; 26:64; *Rv* 1:7; 14:14).

To summarise, the dominant perspective, already found in the characteristic symbolism of the exodus, is that of the cloud as a sign of the divine message, the active presence of the Lord God in the midst of his people. Israel must always be ready to continue its journey if the cloud starts moving, to recognise its faults and detest them when its horizon becomes obscure, to be patient when stops are prolonged and the destination appears unreachable.

To the complexity of the multiple biblical recurrences of the symbol of the *cloud* we should add further factors: the inaccessibility of God, his sovereignty watching over all from above, his mercy that parts the clouds and comes down to bring back life and hope. Love and knowledge of God can be learned only on a journey of discipleship, in an openness free from fear and nostalgia.

Centuries after the exodus, almost on the verge of the coming of the Redeemer, the author of *Wisdom* would recall that adventurous epic of the Israelites led by the cloud and by the fire in an eloquent phrase: "You gave your people a pillar of blazing fire, to guide them on their unknown journey" (*Wis* 18:3).

Guided by the cloud

3. The cloud of light and fire, which guided the people according to rhythms demanding total obedience and total watchfulness, speaks eloquently to us. We can glimpse, as in a mirror, an interpretive model for consecrated life in our time. For several decades now, consecrated life, spurred on by the charismatic impulse of the Council, has walked as if it were following the signals of the *cloud* of the Lord.

In the hearts of those who have had the grace to "see" the beginning of the conciliar journey echo the words of St John XXIII: *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, the *incipit* of the inaugural address of the Council (11th October, 1965).⁷

Under the banner of joy, the profound rejoicing of the spirit, consecrated life has been called to continue, in renewal, its journey through history:

"In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed towards the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church [...] perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary."⁸

St John Paul II called the conciliar event "the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings."⁹ Pope Francis has reiterated that "was a beautiful work of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

We can affirm the same thing with regard to consecrated life: the Council was a most positive experience of enlightenment and discernment, of strenuous efforts and great joys.

The consecrated have truly been on a "journey of exodus."¹¹ This has been a time of enthusiasm and audacity, of inventiveness and creative fidelity, but also of fragile certainties, of improvisations and bitter

⁷ JOHN XXIII, Address for the opening of the Council *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Rome (11th October 1962)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4,6.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6th January 2001), 57.

¹⁰ FRANCIS, *The Spirit cannot be domesticated*, morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (16th April 2013).

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 40.

disappointments. With the benefit of hindsight, we can recognise that truly *there was fire in the cloud* (Ex 40:38), and that by “unknown” paths the Spirit in truth led the lives and plans of consecrated men and women along the paths of the Kingdom.

In recent years the impulse of this journey seems to have lost its vigour. The cloud appears to enclose more darkness than fire, but the *fire* of the Spirit still dwells in it. Although at times we may walk in darkness and a lukewarmness that threaten to trouble our hearts (cf. Jn 14:1), faith reawakens the certainty that inside the cloud the Lord’s presence is not diminished: it is a [*glow of fire flaming in the night*] (Is 4:5), as well as being darkness.

It is always a question, in faith, of starting out on *an unknown voyage* (Wis 18:3), like our father Abraham, who *departed without knowing where he was going* (cf. Heb 11:8). It is a journey that requires radical obedience and trust, which only faith allows us to attain, and which in faith may be renewed and strengthened.¹²

the exodus, in Living Memory

4. There is no doubt that, at the end of the Council, consecrated men and women welcomed the deliberations of the Council Fathers with substantial adherence and sincere fervour. It was perceived that the grace of the Holy Spirit, invoked by St John XXIII to obtain a *renewed Pentecost* for the Church, had been at work. The intervening time, at least a decade, had seen clear evidence that a harmony of thought, aspiration and upheavals was occurring.

The apostolic constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* of 1947 recognised that a form of consecrated life could be lived by following the evangelical counsels whilst still “in the world.”

¹² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Audience*, Rome (23rd January 2013).

This was “a revolutionary gesture in the Church.”¹³ This official recognition came before theological reflection set out the specific outlines of secular consecration. In a way this recognition expressed a stance that would be at the heart of the Second Vatican Council: a sympathy for the world that gives rise to a new dialogue.¹⁴

In 1950 this dicastery, under the auspices of Pius XII, convened the first World Congress of the States of Perfection. The teachings of the pontiff opened the way for an appropriate renewal (*accommodata renovation*), an expression that the Council makes its own in the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. This Congress was followed by others, in various contexts and on various themes, making possible during the 1950’s and at the beginning of the following decade a new theological and spiritual reflection. On this well-prepared ground, the Council scattered profusely the good seed of doctrine and a wealth of concrete guidelines that we are still living today as a precious inheritance.

We are now about fifty years away from the promulgation of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican Council II, which took place on 21st November 1964. This is a memory of the highest theological and ecclesial value: “the Church has been seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’”¹⁵ It recognises the centrality of the people of God redeemed by the blood of Christ, on their journey among the nations (cf. *Acts* 20:28). Filled with the Spirit of truth and holiness, they are *sent to all men as light of the world and salt of the earth* (cf. *Mt* 5:13-16).¹⁶

This outlines an identity firmly founded on Christ and on his Spirit, and at the same time sets forth a Church that reaches out to all cultural, social, and anthropological situations.

¹³ Cf. FRANCIS, Audience with participants in the meeting organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, Allocution on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Rome (7th December 1965).

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 4

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 9.

...the Church is destined to extend to all regions of the earth and so enters into the history of mankind. Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God's grace, which was promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord, and moved by the Holy Spirit may never cease to renew herself, until through the Cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting.¹⁷

Lumen Gentium dedicates the whole of its sixth chapter to religious.¹⁸ After affirming the theological principle of the "universal vocation to holiness,"¹⁹ the Church recognises among the multiple ways to holiness the gift of consecrated life, received from its Lord and preserved in all eras by his grace.²⁰ The baptismal root of consecration, according to the teaching of Paul VI, is manifested in joy, while he indicates the way of life lived following Christ (*sequela Christi*) as a permanent and efficacious representation of the form of existence that the Son of God embraced in his earthly life. Consecrated life, finally, operates as a sign for the People of God in the fulfilment of the common Christian vocation, and manifests the grace of the Risen Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit, who works wonders in the Church.²¹

Over the course of subsequent years, these claims have remained vigorous and effective. One change that has already borne fruit today is an increased ecclesial sense, which marks out the identity of consecrated men and women, and animates their life and work.

For the first time in the course of an ecumenical Council, consecrated life was identified as a living and fruitful part of the Church's life of communion and holiness, and not as an area in need of "decrees of reform."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 43-47

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, chapter V

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 43.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 44.

The same intention guided a decree whose fiftieth anniversary we are preparing to celebrate, *Perfectae Caritatis*, promulgated on 28th October 1965. In it, the radical nature of the call resounds unmistakably: "Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule."²² This seems like an obvious and generic affirmation, but in fact it provoked a radical purification of devotional spiritualities and identities and their re-alignment with the primacy of ecclesial and social services, firm in the reverent imitation of their founders' aims.

Nothing can come before the centrality of the radical following of Christ.

The conciliar magisterium was also open to recognising a variety of forms of consecrated life. For the first time at such an authoritative level, apostolic institutes received clear recognition of the principle that their apostolic action belongs to the very nature of consecrated life.²³ The lay consecrated life seems to be established and recognised as a "state for the profession of the evangelical counsels which is complete in itself."²⁴ The secular institutes emerge with their constitutive difference, secular consecration.²⁵ Groundwork is laid for the rebirth of the *Ordo Virginum* and of eremitical life, as non-communal forms of consecrated life.²⁶

The evangelical counsels are presented in an innovative fashion, as an existential project undertaken with its own specific means and with a especially radical way of imitating Christ.²⁷

Two more themes stand out, on account of the new language in which they are presented: fraternal life in common, and formation. The first finds its biblical inspiration in the Acts of the Apostles, which for centuries has inspired the aspiration to a "single heart and mind"

²² Second Vatican Council, decree on the renewal of religious life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2a

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, 8

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 11

²⁶ Code of Canon Law, promulgated by John Paul II (25th January 1983), cann.604 and 603.

²⁷ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12-14.

(*cor unum et anima una*, Acts 4:32). The positive recognition of the varieties of models and styles of fraternal life constitutes today one of the most significant outcomes of the innovative inspiration of the Council. Moreover, drawing upon the shared gift of the Spirit, the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* urges the dropping of ranks and categories so as to establish communities of a fraternal character, where all have equal rights and obligations, apart from those arising from holy orders.²⁸

The value and necessity of formation is laid down as the foundation of renewal: “Adaptation and renewal depend greatly on the education of religious.”²⁹ Because of its essential nature, this principle has functioned as an axiom: it has given rise to a determined and adventurous itinerary of experiences and discernment, in which consecrated life has invested intuition, study, research time and effort.

Joys and Struggles on the Way

5. On the basis of the conciliar guidelines, consecrated life has undertaken a long journey. In reality, this exodus has not been directed solely to searching for horizons pointed out by the Council. Consecrated men and women are encountering and coming to grips with unprecedented social and cultural realities; they are attending to the signs of the times and of different places, to the Church’s pressing invitation to implement the conciliar reforms, and the rediscovery and reinterpretation of their founding charisms, as well as rapid social and cultural change. These are novel situations, calling for new and shared discernment, whilst, at the same time, destabilising models and styles that have been repeated over time but now are incapable of conducting dialogue, in witness to the Gospel, with new challenges and opportunities.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

In the constitution *Humanae Salutis*, with which St John XXIII convened the conciliar assembly of Vatican II, we read: “Following the admonitions of Christ the Lord who urges us to interpret the *signs of the times* (Mt 16:3), among so much gloomy haze we see not a few indications that seem to offer auspices of a better era for the Church and for humanity.”³⁰

The encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, addressed to all men (and women) of good will, introduced as a key theological concept the “signs of the times.” Among these, St John XXIII recognises: the social-economic rise of the working classes; the entrance of women into public life; the formation of independent nations,³¹ the protection and promotion of the rights and duties of citizens, all aware of their dignity;³² the conviction that solutions for conflicts must be found through negotiation, without recourse to weapons.³³ He also includes among these signs the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, approved by the United Nations.³⁴

The consecrated have dwelt in and made sense of these new landscapes. They have proclaimed and borne witness to the Gospel above everything else, with their lives, offering help and solidarity of all kinds, collaborating in the most varied tasks under the banner of Christian neighbourliness, as people involved in an ongoing historical process. Instead of confining themselves to lamenting over the memory of past eras, they have sought to enliven the social fabric and its dynamics with the Church’s living tradition, tested for centuries on the crest of history, according to the disposition (*habitus*) of faith and of Christian hope.

The task presented to consecrated life by the historical landscape at the end of the twentieth century has required boldness and courageous

³⁰ JOHN XXIII, Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* convening the Sacred Ecumenical Council Vatican II (25th December 1961), 4

³¹ JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* on peace among all peoples (11th April 1963), 24-25.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 45-46.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 67

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 75.

inventiveness. For this reason, this epoch-making journey must be evaluated as a prophetic gift, religiously motivated: many consecrated made serious efforts to live the new evangelical awareness, which obliges us to side with the poor and the least, sharing their values and anguish, often at grave personal risk.³⁵

Consecrated life opens itself to renewal not because it follows self-generated initiatives, nor out of a mere desire for novelty, and much less because of a reductive focus on urgent sociological matters. Mainly, in fact, it does so out of responsible obedience to the creator Spirit, who “speaks through the prophets” (cf. the Apostles’ Creed),³⁶ and to the promptings of the Church’s magisterium, forcefully expressed in the great social encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), and *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). This has been a question – to return to the image of the cloud – of fidelity to God’s will, as manifested through the authoritative voice of the Church.

This vision of the charism of consecrated life – as something originated by the Spirit, oriented to conformation to Christ, marked by a community-based ecclesial profile, and in dynamic development within the Church – has grounded every decision of renewal; gradually, it has given rise to a true theology of the charism, applied in a clear way to consecrated life for the first time.³⁷ The Council did not explicitly apply this term, “charism,” to consecrated life, but it opened the way for this by making reference to some of the statements of Paul.³⁸

³⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter to the religious of Latin America for the fifth centenary of the evangelisation of the New World, *Los caminos del Evangelio* (29th June, 1990), 19, 21; *ibid.*, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March, 1996), 82, 86, 89-90.

³⁶ The first official use of the word “prophetic” on the part of the magisterium is found in a document of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Development* (in Latin: *Optiones evangelicae*) (12th August 1980), introduction and nos. 2, 4, 24, 27, 33. In *Vita Consecrata*, in addition to the two specific paragraphs (84-85), the term is used about thirty times, roughly a hundred if analogous expressions are counted.

³⁷ Cf. Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes - Sacred Congregation for Bishops, Directive criteria on relations between bishops and religious in the Church *Mutuae Relationes* (14th May 1978), 12, 19, 51.

³⁸ Cf. for example Second Vatican Council, decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*, 1, 2, 7, 8,

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, Paul VI officially adopts this new terminology³⁹ and writes:

...the Council rightly insists on the obligation of religious to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity. In this it finds one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria for judging what each institute should undertake.⁴⁰

This Congregation, a witness to this journey, has accompanied the different phases of rewriting of the Constitutions of the various institutes. It has been a process that has altered long-standing equilibriums and changed obsolete traditional practices,⁴¹ while it has reinterpreted the spiritual patrimony with a new hermeneutic, and has tested new structures, to the point of reshaping programmes and presences. In this renewal, faithful and creative at the same time, we should not conceal certain dialectics of confrontation, tension, and, even, painful defection.

The Church has not stopped this process, but has accompanied it with careful teaching and wise vigilance, identifying seven main themes concerning the primacy of the spiritual life: the foundational charism, life in the Spirit nourished by the Word (*lectio divina*), fraternal life in common, initial and continuing formation, new forms of apostolate, the exercise of authority and attention to different cultures. Consecrated life over the last fifty years has been measured and shaped according to these requirements.

Reference to the letter of the Council allows us to “find its authentic spirit,” and avoid mistaken interpretations.⁴² We are called to commemorate together a living event in which we, the Church, have recognised our most profound identity. At the closing of the Second Vatican Council, with a grateful mind and heart Paul VI affirmed:

14, 15; decree on the missionary activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*, 23

³⁹ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* (29th June 1971), 11, 12, 32

⁴⁰ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* (29th June 1971), 11.

⁴¹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*, 3.

⁴² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Homily, Holy Mass for the opening of the Year of Faith, Rome (11th October 2012).

The Church has gathered herself together in deep spiritual awareness [...] to find in herself, active and alive, the Holy Spirit, the word of Christ; and to probe more deeply still the mystery, the plan and the presence of God above and within herself; to revitalise in herself that faith which is the secret of her confidence and of her wisdom, and that love which impels her to sing without ceasing the praises of God. *Cantare amantis est* (song is the expression of a lover), says St Augustine (*Serm.* 336; P. L. 38, 1472).

The council documents – especially the ones on divine revelation, the liturgy, the Church, priests, Religious and the laity – leave wide open to view this primary and focal religious intention, and show how clear and fresh and rich is the spiritual stream which contact with the living God causes to well up in the heart of the Church, and flow out from it over the dry wastes of our world.⁴³

The same loyalty towards the Council as an ecclesial event and as a model of behaviour now requires that we turn with trust to the future. Is the certainty alive in us that God always guides our journey?

In its wealth of words and actions, the Church leads us to interpret our personal and community life in the context of the whole plan of salvation, to understand which direction to take, what future to imagine that is in continuity with the steps taken previous to our own day, and invites us to a rediscovery of the unity of the witness of praise, faith and life (*confessio laudis, fidei et vitae*).

The “memory of faith” (*memoria fidei*) gives us roots of continuity and perseverance: this is a powerful identity allowing us to see ourselves as part of a tale, a history. Letting faith reinterpret in the journey that has been made is not limited to the big events, but also helps us reinterpret our personal history, helpfully dividing it into episodes.

⁴³ Cf. PAUL VI, Allocation on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Rome (7th December 1965).

STAY AWAKE AND KEEP WATCH

*Elijah Climbed to the top of Carmel
and bowed down to the earth, putting his face between his knees.
“Now go up,” he told his servant “and look out to the sea.”*

(1 Kgs 18:42.44)

With Open ears

6. Let's look for more light in the biblical symbolism, asking for inspiration for the journey of prophecy and of exploring new horizons of consecrated life, which we would now like to consider in this second part. Consecrated life, by its very nature in fact, is intrinsically called to serve as a witness, presenting a sign of the Church (*signum in Ecclesia*).⁴⁴

This is a function that belongs to every Christian, but in consecrated life it is characterised by the radical nature of Christian discipleship (the *sequela Christi*) and the primacy of God, and at the same time by its capacity to live the evangelising mission of the Church with truthfulness (*parrhesia*) and creativity. St John Paul II rightly reiterated that "The prophetic character of the consecrated life [...] is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom."⁴⁵

In the patristic tradition, the biblical model of reference for monastic life is the prophet Elijah, because of his life of solitude and asceticism, his passion for the covenant and fidelity to the law of the Lord, and his audacity in defending the rights of the poor (cf. *1 Kgs* 17-19; 21). This was also recalled by the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, in support of the prophetic nature and function of consecrated life.⁴⁶ In the monastic tradition, the mantle that Elijah symbolically let fall upon Elisha at the moment of his ascent into heaven (cf. *2 Kgs* 2:13) is interpreted as the passage of the prophetic spirit from father to disciple and also as a symbol of consecrated life in the Church, which, always new, lives by memory and prophecy.

Elijah the Tishbite suddenly appears in the narrative of the northern kingdom, with a peremptory admonition: "Elijah the Tishbite, of

Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "There will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word." (*1 Kgs* 17:1). He stands for a rebellion of religious conscience in the face of moral decadence, into which the people are led by the insolence of Queen Jezebel and the indolence of King Ahab. The prophetic sentence that shuts heaven is an open challenge to the special function of *Baal* and the *baalîm*, who were reckoned to control fecundity and fertility, rain and abundance. From here begins the sweeping narrative of Elijah's actions in episodes that, rather than telling a story, present dramatic moments of great inspirational power (cf. *1 Kgs* 17-19, 21; *2 Kgs* 1-2).

In every event Elijah lives out his prophetic service, undergoing the purifications and enlightenments that characterise his biblical profile, until the culminating moment of his encounter with God in the soft and silent breeze on Mount Horeb. These experiences are also inspirational for consecrated life. This too must pass from the solitary and penitential refuge in the *wadi* of Cherith (cf. *1 Kgs* 17:2-7) to the encounter with the poor fighting for their lives, like the widow of Zarephath (cf. *1 Kgs* 17:8-24); must learn from the brilliant audacity represented by the challenge of the sacrifice on Carmel (cf. *1 Kgs* 18:20-39) and by the intercession for the people devastated by drought and the culture of death (cf. *1 Kgs* 18:41-46). It must defend the rights of the poor, trodden down by the high and mighty (cf. *1 Kgs* 21), and warn against those forms of idolatry that profane the holy name of the God (cf. *2 Kgs* 1).

One particularly dramatic episode is Elijah's deadly depression in the desert of Beersheba (*1 Kgs* 19:1-8); but there God, offering him the bread and water of life, is able to turn his flight into a pilgrimage to Mount Horeb (*1 Kgs* 19:9).

This is an example for our dark nights, which, as for Elijah, precede the splendour of the theophany in the gentle breeze (*1 Kgs* 19:9-18) and prepare the way for new seasons of fidelity, which become stories of new callings (as for Elisha: *1 Kgs* 19:19-21), but also bring bold-

⁴⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

⁴⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 84.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

ness to intervene against the perversion of justice (cf. the murder of Naboth: *1 Kgs* 21:17-29). Finally, we are moved by his affectionate farewell to the communities of the children of the prophets (*2 Kgs* 2:1-7), in preparation for the final crossing of the Jordan, up to heaven in the fiery chariot (*2 Kgs* 2:8-13).

We might feel drawn to the spectacular actions of Elijah, to his furious protests, his direct and bold accusations, to his encounter with God on Horeb, when Elijah goes so far as to accuse the people of planning nothing but destruction and ruin. But let's consider that at this historic moment, there are some lesser elements that have more to say to us, which are like little signs to inspire our steps and choices in a new way in this modern age in which the footsteps of God seem to vanish, as religious sensibility becomes a desert.⁴⁷

The biblical texts offers numerous "lesser" symbols. We can highlight: the *scarce resources* for life at the brook Cherith, and the *ravens* that obey God in bringing the prophet bread and meat, in a gesture of mercy and solidarity. The *generosity*, at the risk of her own life, of the widow of Zarephath who has only *a handful of flour and a little oil* (*1 Kgs* 17:12) and gives them to the famished prophet. The *powerlessness* of Elijah in the face of the dead boy, and his cry of doubt together with his desperate embrace, which the widow interprets in a theological way, as the revelation of the face of a compassionate God. The long struggle of the prophet, prostrate in intercession – after the spectacular and rather theatrical clash with the priests of Baal on Carmel – imploring rain for the people, exhausted by the sentence of drought. It is a team effort by Elijah, the boy who goes up and down from the crest, and God who, rather than Baal, is the true lord of the rain; and the answer finally comes in a *little cloud*, the size of a man's hand (cf. *1 Kgs* 18:41). A tiny answer from God, which nonetheless quickly becomes a great rainfall, restoring a people on the brink of exhaustion.

Another outwardly poor yet effective response comes a few days later with the *loaf* and the *jar* of water that appear beside the prophet in his deathly depression in the desert: this is a resource that gives him the strength to walk forty days and *forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb* (*1 Kgs* 19:8). And there, in the cleft of a cave where Elijah takes shelter, still bristling with anger against the destructive and sacrilegious people threatening even his own life, he witnesses the destruction of his conceptions of threat and power: *The Lord was not... in the impetuous wind, in the earthquake, in the fire, but in a sound of a gentle breeze* (*1 Kgs* 19:12).⁴⁸

This is both a sublime page for mystical literature, and a sheer drop into reality for all of the prophet's "holy rage" he has to recognise the presence of God outside all traditional conceptions, which tried to keep him prisoner. God is whisper and breeze, not a product of our need for security and success, he leaves *no visible trace of his passing* (cf. *Ps* 77:20), but is present in a true and efficacious manner.

In his fury and emotion, Elijah was about to ruin everything, deceiving himself that he alone had remained faithful. God, meanwhile, knew well that there were seven thousand faithful witnesses, and prophets and kings ready to obey him (*1 Kgs* 19:15-19), because God's story was not limited to the failure of a depressed and surly prophet. The story continues, because it is in the hands of God, and Elijah must look at reality with new eyes, allowing himself to be reborn in hope and trust by God himself. His crouching posture on the mountain when he is begging for rain, which so strongly resembles the unborn child in its mother's womb, is also revisited symbolically on Horeb when he takes refuge in the cave. Now it is now completed with the prophet's new birth to walk upright and regenerated on the mysterious paths of the living God.

⁴⁸ In Hebrew, *qôl demamâh daqqâh*; the translation is not easy or straightforward, because each word has several meanings. *Qôl* means voice, sound, wind, rustling, murmur, breeze, whisper; *demamâh* means silence, void of death, suspension, breathlessness; *daqqâh* means light, faint, fine, subtle, tranquil. The Septuagint translates this into Greek as *phonè aúras leptês*, Jerome into Latin as *sibilus aurae tenuis*.

⁴⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 86.

At the foot of the mountain, the people were still fighting against a life that was no longer life, against a religiosity that was a profanation of the covenant and a new idolatry. The prophet must take upon himself that fight and that desperation, he must retrace his steps (*I Kgs* 19:15), which now are God's alone, and re-cross the desert. The desert, however, now blossoms with new meaning, so that life may triumph and new prophets and leaders may faithfully serve the covenant.

the prophecy of Life in Keeping with the Gospel

7. The time of grace that we are living through, with Pope Francis's insistence on placing the Gospel and what is essentially Christian at the centre of things, is for consecrated men and women a new call to watchfulness, to be ready for the signs of God. "There shall be neither dew nor rain these years except at my order."⁴⁹ We have to fight against eyes weighed down with sleep (cf. *Lk* 9:32), so as not to lose the attitude of discerning the *movements of the cloud* that guides our journey (cf. *Nm* 9:17) and to recognise in the *small and frail signs* the presence of the Lord of life and hope.

The Council has given us a method: the method of reflecting on the world and human events, on the Church and Christian existence, beginning with the Word of God, God who reveals himself and is present in history. This method is supported by an attitude: one of listening, that opens itself to dialogue and enriches the journey towards the truth. Returning to the *centrality of Christ and of the Word of God*, as the Council⁵⁰ and the subsequent magisterium have insistently invited us to do⁵¹ in a biblically and theologically grounded way, can

be a guarantee of authenticity and quality for the future of our lives as consecrated men and women.

This is a listening that transforms us and makes us proclaimers and witnesses of the intentions of God in history and of his efficacious activity for salvation. Amidst today's needs, let's return to the Gospel, quench our thirst with the Sacred Scriptures, in which we find the "pure and perennial source of spiritual life."⁵² In fact, as St John Paul II aptly put it: "There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God."⁵³

The Gospel, the Supreme Rule

8. One of the characteristics of the conciliar renewal for consecrated life has been the radical return to following Christ (the *sequela Christi*):

Indeed from the very beginning of the Church men and women have set about following Christ with greater freedom and imitating him more closely through the practice of the evangelical counsels, each in his own way leading a life dedicated to God.⁵⁴

Following Christ, as proposed in the Gospel, is the "ultimate norm of religious life" and the "supreme rule"⁵⁵ of all the institutes. One of the earliest names for monastic life is "evangelical life."

The different forms of consecrated life bear witness to this evangelical inspiration, starting with Anthony, the pioneer of solitary life in the desert. His story begins with listening to the word of Christ: "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (*Mt* 19:21).

⁴⁹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 84.

⁵⁰ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5; *ibid.*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 21, 25.

⁵¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 84; JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6th January 2001), II. "A face to contemplate" (16-28); III. "Starting afresh from Christ" (29-41); Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25th December 2005); Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, instruction *Starting afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium* (19th May 2002).

⁵² Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 21.

⁵³ JOHN PAUL II, apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6th January 2001), 39

⁵⁴ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

From Anthony on, the monastic tradition makes Scripture its rule of life: the first Rules are simple practical norms, without any pretence of spiritual content; because the only rule of the monk is Scripture, no other rule is admissible: “We take care to read and learn the Scriptures,” writes Orsiesius, a disciple and successor of Pachomius, “and to consecrate ourselves incessantly to meditating on them.... The Scriptures guide us to eternal life.”⁵⁶

Basil, the great master of Eastern monasticism, when he wrote the *Asceticon*,⁵⁷ destined to become the manual of monastic life, refuses to call it a *Rule*. His point of reference is instead the *Moralia*,⁵⁸ a collection of biblical texts commented on and applied to situations of life in community (*santa koinonia*). In the Basilian system, the behaviour of the monks is defined through the Word of God, the God, always present, who examines hearts and minds (cf. *Rv* 2:23). This constant presence before the Lord, *memoria Dei*, is perhaps the most specific element of Basilian spirituality.

In the West, the journey moves in the same direction. The rule of Benedict is obedience to the Word of God: “Let us listen to the voice of God that speaks to us every day....”⁵⁹ *Listen, my son*:⁶⁰ this is the opening of the *Regula Benedicti*, because it is in listening that we become sons and disciples, in welcoming the Word that we ourselves become word.

In the twelfth century, Stephen of Muret, founder of the Order of Grandmont, concisely expressed this condition of being rooted in the Gospel: “If someone asks you of what profession or what rule or what order you are, respond that you are of the first and principal rule of the Christian religion, meaning the Gospel, the wellspring and principle of all rules; there is no other rule than the Gospel.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Cf. *Pacomio e i suoi discepoli. Regole e Scritti*, L. Cremaschi (ed.), Magnano 1988, p. 409

⁵⁷ Basil, *Moralia* (PG, 31, 692-869); Ibid., *Regulae fusius tractatae* (PG, 31, 889-1052).

⁵⁸ Ibid., *In Regulas Brevius tractatae* (PG, 31, 1052-1305).

⁵⁹ Benedict, *Rule*, Prologue, 9.

⁶⁰ Benedict, *Rule*, Prologue, 1.

⁶¹ *Monastic rules of the West*, Magnano 1989, pp. 216-217.

The emergence of the Mendicant Orders makes, if possible, the movement of return to the Gospel even more incisive.

Dominic “showed himself everywhere to be an evangelical man, in words as in works.”⁶² he was a living Gospel, capable of proclaiming what he lived, and who wanted his preachers to be “evangelical men” as well.⁶³

For Francis of Assisi, the Rule is: “The life of the Gospel of Jesus Christ;”⁶⁴ for Clare of Assisi: “The form of life of the order of four sisters... is this: ‘To observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.’”⁶⁵ In the rule of the Carmelites, the fundamental precept is that of “meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night,” in order to translate it into concrete action: “All that you must do, do it in the word of the Lord.”⁶⁶ This foundation, common to so many religious families, remained unchanged with the passing of centuries.

In our own time, James Alberione affirmed that the Pauline Family: “Aspires to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the full,”⁶⁷ while Little Sister Magdeleine has said: “We must build something new. Something new that is old, that is the authentic Christianity of the first disciples of Jesus. We have to take up the Gospel word for word.”⁶⁸ Every charism of consecrated life is rooted in the Gospel.

Passion for the biblical Word is evident and significant in many of the new communities that today are flourishing all over the Church.

Today, returning to the Gospel sounds to us like a “pro-vocation”; it takes us back to the source of every life rooted in Christ, and is a

⁶² *Libellus* 104, in P. LIPPINI, *San Domenico visto da i suoi contemporanei*, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna 1982, p. 110.

⁶³ *First constitutions* or “*Consuetudines*”, 31. Because of this “often, both by voice and by letter, he admonished and exhorted the friars of the Order to study the Old and New Testament continually... He also carried the Gospel of Matthew and the epistles of Paul with him and studied them so much that he almost knew them by memory” (Deposition of Fra Giovanni di Spagna, in Domenico di Gusmán, *Il carisma della predicazione*, introduction by P. Lippini, EDB, Padova 1993, p. 143).

⁶⁴ *Regola non bollata*, Titolo: FF 2.2. The *Regola bollata* begins with the same tone: “The Rule and life of the friars minor is this, to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1, 2: FF 75).

⁶⁵ *Rule* I, 1-2: FF 2750.

⁶⁶ *Rule of Carmel*, cc. 10 and 19; cf. B. Secondin, *Una fraternità orante e profetica in un mondo che cambia. Rileggere la Regola del Carmelo oggi*, Perugia 2007, pp. 8 e 11.

⁶⁷ G. Alberione, “Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae”. *Storia carismatica della Famiglia Paolina*, Rome 1977, n. 93.

⁶⁸ *PICCOLA SORELLA MAGDELEINE, Il padrone dell'impossibile*, Casale Monferrato 1994, p. 201.

powerful invitation to undertake a journey back to the origin, to the place where our life takes shape, where every rule and norm finds meaning and value.

The Holy Father has often urged us to trust in and entrust ourselves to this life-giving dynamic: “I invite you never to doubt the power of the Gospel, nor its capacity to convert hearts to Christ Resurrected, and to lead people on the path to salvation, which they are waiting for deep within them.”⁶⁹

Formation: Gospel and Culture

9. Formation according to the Gospel and its demands is an imperative. In this context, we have been asked to undertake a specific revision of the model of formation that accompanies consecrated men and in particular consecrated women on the journey of life. Spiritual formation is a pressing need, although very often it is limited almost entirely to simple psychological companionship or to standardised exercises of piety.

Impoverished, repetitive and vague in its content, this formation can trap the candidates in infantile and dependent levels of human growth. The rich variety of ways followed and suggested by spiritual authors remains almost unknown to direct reading, or is recalled only in fragments. It is essential to ensure the patrimony of institutes is not reduced to cursory outlines, detached from their life-giving original content, because this is not an adequate introduction to the Christian experience or to the experience of the charism.

In a world in which secularisation has become selective blindness towards the supernatural and men have lost sight of the footsteps of God,⁷⁰ we are called to rediscover and study the fundamental truths of the faith.⁷¹ Those who render the service of authority are called

⁶⁹ FRANCIS, Discourse to prelates of the episcopal conference of Madagascar on their visit *ad limina apostolorum*, Rome (28th March, 2014).

⁷⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March, 1996), 85.

⁷¹ It could also be helpful here to read and assimilate the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which presents a sys-

tematic and organic synthesis, in which the richness of the teaching that the Church has received, guarded and offered, emerges. “From Sacred Scripture to the Fathers of the Church, from theological masters to the saints across the centuries, the *Catechism* provides a permanent record of the many ways in which the Church has meditated on the faith and made progress in doctrine so as to offer certitude to believers in their lives of faith.” BENEDICT XVI, apostolic letter in the form *motu proprio*, *Porta Fidei* with which he proclaimed the Year of Faith (11th October, 2011), 11.

to foster in all consecrated men and women a well-founded and consistent understanding of the Christian faith, supported by a new love of study. St John Paul II exhorted: “Within the consecrated life itself there is a need for a *renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life*, for dedication to study.”⁷² It is a reason for profound regret that this imperative has not always been accepted and far less received as a demand of radical reform for consecrated men, and in particular for consecrated women.

The weakness and fragility in this area require us to recall, and forcibly to reiterate the necessity of continual formation for an authentic life in the Spirit, and in order to remain mentally open and consistent in the journey of growth and fidelity.⁷³ There is certainly no lack of formal acceptance of this urgent need, on a theoretical level, and there is an overwhelming consensus in scholarly research on this topic, but, if we are honest, the resulting practice is fragile, scarce, and often inconsistent, confused, and noncommittal.

A witness to the Gospel is one who has encountered Jesus Christ, who knows him, or better, who feels known by him, recognised, respected, loved, forgiven, and this encounter has deeply touched him, filled him with a new joy, given life a new meaning. And this shines through, it’s passed on to others.⁷⁴

The Word, the genuine source of spirituality⁷⁵ from which to draw *the sublimity of the knowledge of Christ Jesus (Phil 3:8)*, must inhabit our everyday lives. It is only in this way that its power (cf. *1 Thes 1:5*) can

⁷² JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 98.

⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁴ FRANCIS, Discourse to members of the Apostolic Movement for the Blind (MAC) and to the Little Mission for deaf-mutes, Rome (29th March 2014).

⁷⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum*, 25; JOHN PAUL II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 94; Benedict XVI, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30th September 2010), 86.

make inroads into human frailty, can grow and build places of community life, and correct our thoughts, affections, decisions and the dialogues woven in a spirit of brotherhood. Following the example of Mary, listening to the Word must become the breath of life in every moment of existence.⁷⁶ In this way our life will come together in a unity of thought, be revived in inspiration for constant renewal, and bear fruit in apostolic creativity.⁷⁷

The apostle Paul asked the disciple Timothy to *seek the faith* (cf. *2 Tm* 2:22) with the same constancy as he had showed when he was a young man (cf. *2 Tm* 3:15); in the first place, this consists in remaining firm in what he had learned, meaning the holy Scriptures: “All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright. This is how someone who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work” (*2 Tm* 3:16-17).

We should take this as an invitation addressed to us, so that no one may become lazy in the faith (cf. *Heb* 6:12). It is a life-giving companion allowing us to perceive with eyes that are always new the wonders that God works for us, and to dispose ourselves for an obedient and responsible answer.⁷⁸

The Gospel, the true norm for the Church and for consecrated life, must represent its normative character in the Church’s practice, its style and its way of being. And this is the challenge that Pope Francis has reissued. Calling for an ecclesiological rebalancing between the Church as hierarchical body and the Church as Body of Christ, he offers us materials for carrying out this operation, which can take place only in the living body (*in corpore vivo*) of the Church, meaning inside of us and through us. Evangelising does not mean bringing a message that is recognised as being useful for the world,

⁷⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30th September 2010), 27.

⁷⁷ Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, instruction *Starting afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium* (19th May 2002).

⁷⁸ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter in the form *motu proprio*, *Porta Fidei* with which he proclaimed the Year of Faith (11th October 2011), 15.

nor a presence that asserts itself, nor something that offends by its visibility, nor a blinding splendour; but, instead, it means proclaiming Jesus Christ, the hope within us (cf. *Col* 1:27-28), a proclamation made up of words of grace (*Lk* 4:22), with good conduct among men (*1 Pt* 2:12) and with faith that works by means of love (*Gal* 5:6).

the prophecy of Watchfulness

10. At the conclusion of the conciliar assembly, Pope Paul VI – with the vision of a prophet – said farewell to the bishops gathered in Rome, uniting past tradition and future:

In this universal assembly, in this privileged point of time and space, there converge together the past, the present and the future – the past: for here, gathered in this spot, we have the Church of Christ with her tradition, her history, her councils, her doctors, her saints; the present: for we are taking leave of one another to go out towards the world of today with its miseries, its sufferings, its sins, but also with its prodigious accomplishment, its values, its virtues; and lastly the future is here in the urgent appeal of the peoples of the world for more justice, in their will for peace, in their conscious or unconscious thirst for a higher life, that life precisely which the Church of Christ can and wishes to give them.⁷⁹

Pope Francis passionately encourages us to continue on our journey, with rapid and joyful steps: “...led by the Spirit, never unyielding, never closed, always open to the voice of God that speaks, that opens, that leads us and invites us to go towards the horizon.”⁸⁰

What countries do we live in, and what horizons are given to us to search?

Pope Francis calls us to welcome today, which is God’s, and his “*new things*”; he invites us to welcome “God’s surprises”⁸¹ faithfully,

⁷⁹ PAUL VI, Message to the Council Fathers on the occasion of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, Rome (8th December 1965).

⁸⁰ FRANCIS, Homily for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord - XVIII *World Day of Consecrated Life*, Rome (2nd February 2014).

⁸¹ FRANCIS, Homily for the Easter Vigil, Rome (30th March 2013): “We are afraid of God’s surprises! He always

without fear or resistance, in order to “be prophets, in particular, by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophesying.”⁸²

What resounds for us is the invitation to proceed on the journey while carrying in our hearts the expectations of the world. We notice that these are both light and heavy, while we look for the unpredictable arrival of the *little cloud*. This is the humble seed of an *Announcement* that cannot be silenced.

Consecrated life is living through a time of demanding transitions and new requirements. This crisis is a moment in which we are called to the evangelical exercise of discernment; it is the opportunity to choose with wisdom – like the scribe, *who draws forth from his storehouse things that are old and things that are new* (cf. *Mt 13:52*) – whilst remembering that history is tempted to preserve more things than can ever be used. We risk preserving sacralised “memories” that make it harder for us to come out of the *cave* of our comfort-zone. The Lord loves us *with everlasting affection* (cf. *Is 54:8*): this confidence calls us to freedom.

Together, We Search the Horizon

11. A disguised accidie (ἀκηδία) sometimes weakens our spirit, obscures our vision, enervates our decisions and numbs our steps, binding the identity of consecrated life to an old and self-referential model, to a narrow horizon: “A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum.”⁸³ Against this inertia of spirit and action, against this discouragement that saddens and extinguishes soul and will, Benedict XVI had already exhorted us:

surprises us! The Lord is like that. Dear brothers and sisters, let us not be closed to the newness that God wants to bring into our lives!”

⁸² A. Spadaro, “Svegliate il mondo!” Conversation of Pope Francis with superiors general, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/1), 7.

⁸³ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 83

Do not join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light – as St Paul urged (cf. *Rom 13:11-14*) – keeping awake and watchful. St Chromatius of Aquileia wrote: “Distance this peril from us so that we are never overcome by the heavy slumber of infidelity. Rather may he grant us his grace and his mercy, that we may watch, ever faithful to him. In fact our fidelity can watch in Christ (*Sermon 32, 4*).⁸⁴

Consecrated life is at a crossroads, but it cannot stay there forever. We are invited to make the transition – *an outgoing Church*, in one of the characteristic expressions of Pope Francis – into an opportune moment (*kairós*) demanding renunciation, asking us to leave behind what we know and undertake a long and difficult journey, like Abraham travelling to the land of Canaan (cf. *Gn 12:16*), or Moses towards a mysterious land linked to the patriarchs (cf. *Ex 3:7-8*), or Elijah to Zarephath of Sidon; each of them going to mysterious lands glimpsed only in faith.

This is not a matter of answering the question of whether what we are doing is good: discernment looks to the horizons that the Spirit suggests to the Church. It interprets the rustling of the morning stars, without looking for emergency exits or improvised shortcuts, and allows itself to be led on to great things by means of small and frail signs, and puts its meagre resources into play. We are called to a shared obedience that trusts in today, so as to travel together with “the courage to cast the nets on the *strength of his word* (cf. *Lk 5:5*) and not only from solely human motivations.”⁸⁵

Consecrated life, nourished by the hope of the promise, is called to continue its journey without allowing itself to be influenced by what it leaves behind: “There is nothing I cannot do in the One who strengthens me. All the same, it was good of you to share with me

⁸⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Homily for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord - XVII World Day of Consecrated Life, Rome (2nd February 2013).

⁸⁵ Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, instruction *The service of authority and obedience. Facientiam, Domine, requiram* (11th May 2008), 11.

in my hardships”(Phil 3:13-14). Hope is not built on the foundation of our strength or our numbers, but on the gifts of the Spirit: faith, communion, mission. The consecrated are people made free by the profession of the counsels of the Gospel who are willing to look in faith beyond the present, and are invited to “broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all.”⁸⁶

The goal of this journey is marked out by the rhythm of the Spirit; it is not a known land. In front of us appear new frontiers, new realities, other cultures, different necessities, *peripheries*.

In imitation of the team work of the prophet Elijah and his servant, we must recollect ourselves in prayer with a sense of passion and compassion for the good of the people who live in situations of disorientation and often of pain. Also critical is the generous and patient service of the servant, who climbs again to look out to sea, until he glimpses the little “signal” of a new story, of a “great rainfall.” That gentle breeze can be identified today with the many restless desires of our contemporaries, who are seeking wise and patient companions for the journey, their hearts capable of unguarded acceptance, facilitators of grace, not controllers of it, through new seasons of brotherhood and salvation.⁸⁷

Leadership “Behind the People”

12. It is also indispensable that the exodus be made together, conducted with simplicity and clarity by those who serve in authority, with the search for the face of the Lord as the primary goal. Let us invite those who are called to this service to exercise it in obedience to the Spirit, with courage and constancy, so that complexity and transition may be managed, but not slowed or stopped.

Let us encourage leadership that does not leave things the way they are,⁸⁸ that banishes the risk that “In the face of the resistance of some

members of the community and of certain questions that seem ir-resoluble, he or she can be tempted to cave in and to consider every effort for improving the situation useless. What we see here then is the danger of becoming managers of the routine, resigned to mediocrity, restrained from intervening, no longer having the courage to point out the purposes of authentic consecrated life and running the risk of losing the love of one’s first fervour and the desire to witness to it.⁸⁹

There is so little time for the small things, for the humility that knows how to offer a few loaves and two fish for God’s blessing (cf. *Jn* 6:9), and knows how to glimpse in the *little cloud the size of a man’s hand* the coming of the rain. We are not called to a preoccupied and administrative leadership, but to a service of authority that, with evangelical clarity, guides the journey to be undertaken together and in unity of heart, within a fragile present in which the future is waiting to be born. We do not need “simple administration,”⁹⁰ what we need is “to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.”⁹¹

We need leadership that welcomes and encourages with empathic tenderness the gaze of the brothers and sisters, even of those who force the pace or who impede progress, helping them to overcome haste, fears and attitudes of resistance. Some may hanker to return to the past, some will nostalgically emphasise the differences, others may brood in silence or raise doubts about the scarcity of means, resources, persons. We should not “cling to a nostalgia for structures and customs which are no longer life-giving in today’s world.”⁹²

We might hear an echo of Elijah’s servant who repeats, searching the horizon: There is nothing! (*1 Kgs* 18:43). We are called to the grace of patience, to wait and return to searching the sky even seven times,

⁸⁹ Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, instruction *The service of authority and obedience. Facientuam, Domine, requiram* (11th May 2008), 28.

⁹⁰ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 25

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹² FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 108.

⁸⁶ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 235

⁸⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 47.

⁸⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 25.

as many times as it takes, so that the journey of us all is not stopped by the indolence of a few:

To the weak, I made myself weak, to win the weak. I accommodated myself to people in all kinds of different situations, so that by all possible means I might bring some to salvation. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, that I may share its benefits with others. (*1 Cor 9:22-23*).

May we be given to know how to orient our fraternal journey towards freedom according to the rhythms and seasons of God. Searching the sky together and keeping watch means that we are all of us – individuals, communities, institutes – called to obedience so as “to enter into an order of values which is ‘other’, taking on a new and different sense of reality, believing that God has passed by even if he has not left visible footprints, but we have known him only as a voice of sounding silence,⁹³ and so have experienced an unthought of freedom that has brought us to the threshold of the mystery: ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts’” (*Is 55:8-9*).⁹⁴

This exodus intimidates our human logic, which wants clear goals and trodden paths, and a question rings out: who will strengthen our *trembling knees* (cf. *Is 35:3*)?

The action of the Spirit in complex and entangled situations manifests itself in the heart as someone who makes things simpler, highlights priorities and offers suggestions for proceeding towards the destinations towards which he wants to take us. It is best, always, to set out in company with the Spirit’s breath of joy; “The Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words...for God’s holy people are always in accordance with the

⁹³ A more literal translation than *soft breeze* for *1 K 19:12*.

⁹⁴ Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, instruction *The service of authority and obedience. Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram* (11th May 2008), 7.

mind of God” (*Rom 8:26-27*). “There is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. The Holy Spirit knows well what is needed in every time and place. This is what it means to be mysteriously fruitful!”⁹⁵

The Mysticism of the Encounter

13. As “‘watchmen’ who keep the longing for God alive in the world and reawaken it in the hearts of many people, as well as a thirst for the infinite,”⁹⁶ we are called to be seekers of and witnesses to visible and life-giving Gospel plans. We need to be men and women of strong faith, but also with a capacity for empathy, for closeness, and with a spirit both creative and creating; not people who confine the spirit and charism to rigid structures for fear of losing them.

Pope Francis invites us to live the “mysticism of encounter:” “The ability to hear, to listen to other people. The ability to seek together the way, the method...also means not being frightened, not being frightened of things.”⁹⁷

The Holy Father continues: “If each of you is a precious opportunity for others to meet with God, it is about rediscovering the responsibility of being prophetic as a community, to seek together, with humility and patience, a word of sense that can be a gift for the country and for the Church, and to bear witness to it with simplicity. You are like antennas ready to receive the smallest innovations prompted by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the ecclesial community to take on this gaze of goodness and find new and bold ways to reach all peoples.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 280.

⁹⁶ FRANCIS, Discourse to prelates of the episcopal conference of Mexico on their visit ad limina apostolorum, Rome (19th May 2014).

⁹⁷ FRANCIS, Discourse to rectors and students of the pontifical colleges and residences of Rome (12th May 2014).

⁹⁸ FRANCIS, Audience with participants at the encounter organised by the Italian conference of secular institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

One conciliar paradigm was *solicitude for the world and for humanity*. Given that human beings – not in the abstract, but in concrete particularity – “[are] the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission,”⁹⁹ our efforts on behalf of the men and women of our time remain primary for us. This commitment has always existed, and always been imaginatively renewed: in education, in healthcare, in catechesis, in constant companionship to people with their needs, aspirations, and failings. People in their physical nature, in their social reality: this is the site of evangelisation. Consecrated life has gone to the outskirts of the cities, making a true “exodus” to the poor, addressing itself to the world of the abandoned. We must acknowledge exemplary generosity here, but also note that there has been no lack of tensions and risk of lapsing into ideology, above all in the first years after the Council.

The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the council. A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it. The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs (and these needs grow in proportion to the greatness which the son of the earth claims for himself). But we call upon those who term themselves modern humanists, and who have renounced the transcendent value of the highest realities, to give the council credit at least for one quality and to recognise our own new type of humanism: we, too, in fact, we more than any others, honour mankind.”¹⁰⁰

Our mission presents itself in terms of this “sympathy,” in terms of the centrality of the person who knows how to begin with the human. Bringing out all the richness and truth of humanity that the encounter with Christ demands and fosters introduces us, at the same time, to the understanding that ecclesial resources are important precisely as

⁹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4th March 1979), 14.

¹⁰⁰ PAUL VI, Allocution on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Rome (7th December 1965).

resources of true humanity and *human development*.¹⁰¹ But what sort of men and women do we have before us? What are the challenges to, and innovations necessary for, a consecrated life that means to live according to the “style” of the Council, meaning in an attitude of dialogue and solidarity, of profound and authentic “sympathy” with the men and women of today and their culture, their deepest “feelings,” their self-awareness, their moral coordinates?

Moved by the Spirit of Christ, we are called to recognise what is truly human. Otherwise our actions would (as Pope Francis has repeatedly said)¹⁰² take on the social character of a pious NGO, aiming to build a more just society, but one that is secularised, closed to transcendence, and ultimately is not just either. Goals of social development must occur in a landscape that presents and protects the witness of the Kingdom and the truth of the human being.

In our time, which is dominated by pervasive and global communication, and at the same time by an inability to communicate with authenticity, consecrated life is called to be a sign of the possibility of human relationships that are welcoming, transparent and sincere. Faced with humanity’s weakness and its alienating and self-referential solitude, the Church is counting on communities of brothers and sisters rich “in joy and the Holy Spirit” (*Acts 13:52*).¹⁰³ Consecrated life, a particular school of love (*specialis caritatis schola*),¹⁰⁴ is shaped in its manifold forms of fraternity by the Holy Spirit, because “where the community is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the community and all grace.”¹⁰⁵

We esteem community as a place rich in mystery and “*a special experience of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word*.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Cf. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Religious [persons] and human development*, Rome (12th August 1980).

¹⁰² Cf. FRANCIS, Homily at Holy Mass with the cardinals, Rome (14th March 2013).

¹⁰³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 45.

¹⁰⁴ William of St Thierry, *De Natura et dignitate amoris*, 9, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies* III, 24, I.

¹⁰⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 42; cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15.

One can perceive a gap between this mystery and daily life: we are called to move from a mere form of life in common to the grace of fraternity; from the *forma communis* to human relations after the pattern of the Gospel, by virtue of the love of God poured out into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rom 5:5*).

Pope Francis cautions us: “It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelise if this is the way we act?... No one is saved by himself or herself, individually, or by his or her own efforts. God attracts us by taking into account the complex interweaving of personal relationships entailed in the life of a human community.”¹⁰⁷

We are called, then, to see ourselves as a fraternity open to the complementarity of meeting in fellowship those who are different, so as to grow in unity: “Nor do people who wholeheartedly enter into the life of a community need to lose their individualism or hide their identity; instead, they receive new impulses to personal growth.”¹⁰⁸

The style of “dialogue” that “is much more than the communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue.”¹⁰⁹ We remember that “dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service.”¹¹⁰

May our communities be places where the mystery of the human touches the divine mystery, in the experience of the Gospel. There are two privileged “sites” in which the Gospel manifests itself, takes shape, and gives itself: the family and consecrated life. In the first of

these, the family, the Gospel enters into the everyday and shows its capacity to transfigure the manner in which we live this, in a landscape of love. The second sign, an image of the future world that puts every good of this world into perspective, becomes a place that mirrors the first and complements it, while it demonstrates in advance the fulfilment of life’s journey and places even the most rewarding of all human experiences in relationship to the final communion with God.¹¹¹

We become a “site of the Gospel” when we secure for ourselves and for the benefit of all a place of attentiveness to God, to prevent time from being filled entirely with things, activities and words. We are sites of the Gospel when we are women and men who desire: who await an encounter, a reunion, a relationship. This is why it is essential that our rhythms of life, community settings and all our activities become places that preserve an “absence”: an absence which is the presence of God.

“The community supports the whole of the apostolate. At times religious communities are fraught with tensions, and risk becoming individualistic and scattered, whereas what is needed is deep communication and authentic relationships. The humanising power of the Gospel is witnessed in fraternity lived in community and is created through welcome, respect, mutual help, understanding, kindness, forgiveness and joy.”¹¹²

The community in this way becomes a home in which we live according to the difference made by the Gospel. The style of the Gospel, human and sober, is shown in the search that aspires to transfiguration; in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom; in the search for and listening to God and his Word: in obedience that demonstrates the Christian difference. These are eloquent signs in a world that is turning back to seek what is essential.

¹⁰⁷ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 100, 113.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 235; cf. 131.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹⁰ PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (6th August 1964), 87; cf. FRANCIS, Audience with participants at the encounter organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹¹¹ Cf. JOHN XXIII General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Message to the people of God, 7th-28th October 2012, no. 7.

¹¹² FRANCIS, Discourse to participants in the General Chapter of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco (Salesians), Rome (31st March 2014).

The community that sits at table and recognises Jesus in the breaking of the bread (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35) is also the place in which each one recognises his frailty. Fraternity does not produce perfect relationships, but welcomes the limitations of all and takes them to heart and to prayer as a wound inflicted on the commandment of love (cf. *Jn* 13:31-35): a place where the Paschal mystery brings healing and where unity grows. This is an event of grace invoked and received by brothers and sisters who are together not by choice but by calling; it is an experience of the presence of the Risen One.

The Prophecy that Mediates

14. Religious families are born to inspire new journeys, suggest unforeseen routes, or respond nimbly to human needs and necessities of the spirit. Sometimes, an institution can become loaded over time with “obsolete prescriptions,”¹¹³ and society’s needs may turn Gospel answers into responses calibrated for “business” efficiency and rationality. It can happen that consecrated life loses its authoritativeness, the boldness of its charisma and its evangelical truth-telling (*parrhesia*), lured on by lights extraneous to its identity.

Pope Francis calls us to creative fidelity; to God’s surprises:

“Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelisation is always ‘new.’”¹¹⁴

At the Crossroads of the World

15. The Spirit calls us to modulate the *servitium caritatis* according to the insight of the Church. Charity “demands justice: recognition

and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion,”¹¹⁵ and the magisterium introduces us to a broader understanding: “The risk for our time is that the *de facto* interdependence of people and nations is not matched by ethical interaction of consciences and minds that would give rise to truly human development. Only in *charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith*, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanising value.”¹¹⁶

Other promptings of the Spirit call us to strengthen citadels in which thought and study may protect human identity and its aspect of grace, amidst the flow of digital connections and the world of networks, which express a real (and spiritual) condition of contemporary man. Technology nurtures and at the same time communicates needs, and stimulates desires that human beings have always had: we are called to inhabit these *unexplored lands* in order to tell them about the Gospel. “Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”¹¹⁷

We are similarly called to pitch our tents at the crossroads of untrodden paths. We are called to stand at the threshold, like the prophet Elijah, who made the geography of the periphery a resource of revelation: to the north at Zarephath, to the south at Horeb, to the east beyond the

¹¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29th June 2009), 6.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁷ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 87.

¹¹³ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 3.

¹¹⁴ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 11.

Jordan into penitent solitude and, finally, to the ascension into heaven. The *threshold* is the place where the Spirit groans aloud: there where we no longer know what to say, nor what to expect, but where the Spirit knows the *plans of God* (Rom 8:27) and hands them over to us. There is the risk, at times, of attributing our long-established maps to the ways of the Spirit, because we find it reassuring always to travel by the same roads. Pope Benedict declared himself open to the vision of a Church that grows *by attraction*,¹¹⁸ while Pope Francis dreams of “a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation... a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.”¹¹⁹

The joy of the Gospel calls us to weave a spirituality like a type of searching, exploring alternative metaphors and new images, and creating unprecedented perspectives. Humbly starting anew from the experience of Christ and his Gospel, it finds a wisdom that is experiential and often unarmed, like David before Goliath. The power of the Gospel, which we experience as salvation and joy, enables us wisely to use images and symbols suitable for a culture that soaks up events, thoughts, and values, and continually recasts them as seductive “icons”, an echo of “a deep longing for God in many peoples’ hearts, which is expressed in different ways and impels numerous men and women to set out on a path of sincere seeking.”¹²⁰

In the past one of the most vigorous themes of spiritual life was the symbol of the *voyage* or the *ascent*: not in space, but towards the centre of the soul. This mystical process, laid as the foundation of

¹¹⁸ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Holy Mass inaugurating the 5th General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean at the shrine “La Aparecida”, Aparecida, Brazil (13th May 2007).

¹¹⁹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 27.

¹²⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Letter to Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, on the occasion of the 12th Inter-Christian Symposium (Thessaloniki, 29th August - 2nd September 2011), 2.

the life of the spirit, today encounters other valuable ideas shedding light and offering meaning. These include prayer, purification, the exercise of virtues relating to social solidarity, inculturation, spiritual ecumenism, a new anthropology, the call for a new hermeneutic and, following ancient patristic tradition, new paths of mystagogy.

Consecrated men and women, familiar with the Spirit and well aware of the inner man in whom Christ dwells, are called to move along these paths, opposing the *dia-bolical* that divides and separates, and liberating the *sym-bolical*, meaning the primacy of the bond and relationship present in the complexity of created reality: “That he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything in on earth” (*Eph* 1:10).

Where will the consecrated be? The evangelical form of life they profess has freed them from their shackles; will they be able to stay, like watchmen, at the edge of things, where the gaze becomes more clear, more penetrating, and thought more humble? Will consecrated life as a whole be able to welcome the challenge of questions that come from the crossroads of the world?

The experience of the poor, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the complementarity of man and woman, environmentalism in a sick world, eugenics without scruples, a globalised economy, planetary communication, symbolic language: these are the new hermeneutical horizons that cannot simply be enumerated, but must be inhabited and brought firmly under the guidance of the Spirit who groans aloud in all of them (cf. *Rom* 8:22-27). These are epoch-making avenues of exploration that call into question values, languages, priorities, anthropologies. Millions of people are on a journey through worlds and civilisations, destabilising age-old identities and fostering mixtures of cultures and religions.

Can consecrated life become a welcoming dialogue partner in “in the search for God which has always stirred the human heart?”¹²¹ Will it

¹²¹ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25th March 1996), 103.

be able to go, like Paul, into the public square of Athens and speak of the unknown God to the *gentiles*? (cf. *Acts* 17:22-34). Will it be able to foster the ardour of thought needed to recognise anew the value of otherness and the ethical question of how difference may peacefully coexist?

Consecrated life, in its diverse forms, is already present at these cross-roads. For centuries, beginning with the monasteries, communities and fraternities in border territories have lived out their silent witness as sites of the Gospel, of dialogue, of encounter. Many consecrated men and women also live in the everyday world of today's men and women, sharing their joys and sorrows in the bustling pattern of time, with the wisdom and boldness to "find new and courageous ways to reach all" in Christ,¹²² and "to go beyond, not just beyond, but beyond and into the thick of things, where everything is at stake."¹²³

Consecrated men and women on the threshold (*limen*) are called to open "clearings," as was done in the distant past when spaces were opened in the woods for the founding of cities. As Pope Francis emphasises, the consequences of such choices are uncertain; they undoubtedly require us to leave the centre and travel towards the peripheries, and demand a redistribution of forces in which what predominates is not safeguarding the *status quo* and the bottom line, but the prophetic witness of Gospel choices. "The charism is not a bottle of distilled water. It must be lived energetically, reinterpreting it culturally as well."¹²⁴

Under the Banner of the Least

16. Let us continue our voyage of putting meditations together under the humble banner of the Gospel: "Never lose the impulse of walking

down the roads of the world, the awareness that walking, even going with an uncertain or halting stride is still better than standing still, closed off in our own questions or certainties."¹²⁵

The icons that we have meditated upon – from the cloud that accompanied the exodus to the events of the prophet Elijah – show us that the Kingdom of God is manifested among us under the banner of this least. "Let us believe the Gospel when it tells us that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways: like the small seed which grows into a great tree (cf. *Mt* 13:31-32), like the measure of leaven that makes the dough rise (cf. *Mt* 13:33) and like the good seed that grows amid the weeds (cf. *Mt* 13, 24-30) and can always pleasantly surprise us."¹²⁶

Those who stop at self-referentiality often have an image and awareness only of themselves and of their own horizons. Those who push themselves to the margins may glimpse and foster a more humble and spiritual world.

New pathways of faith are springing up today in humble places, under the banner of a Word that, if listened to and lived, will lead to redemption. The institutes of consecrated life and the societies of apostolic life that make decisions on the basis of little signs interpreted in faith, and in a prophetic role that knows how to intuit what is *beyond*, become places of life where the light shines and the invitation rings out calling others to follow Christ.

Let's plant a small and humble type of work and presence, like the mustard seed in the Gospel (cf. *Mt* 13:31-32), where the intensity of the sign should shine without any limits: the courageous word, joyful fraternity, listening to the small voice, the memory of the dwelling-place of God among men. We must cultivate "a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of indi-

¹²² Cf. FRANCIS, Audience with participants in the encounter organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ A. Spadaro, "Svegliate il mondo!" Conversation of Pope Francis with superiors general, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/I), 8.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 278.

viduals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered.”¹²⁷

Consecrated life finds its fruitfulness not only in bearing witness to the good, but in recognising it and being able to point it out, especially where it is not usually seen, amongst “non-citizens,” “half-citizens,” “urban remnants,”¹²⁸ those without dignity. We must move from words of solidarity to actions that welcome and heal: consecrated life is called to this truth.¹²⁹

Pope Benedict urged us:

I invite you to have a faith that can recognise the wisdom of weakness. In the joys and afflictions of the present time, when the harshness and weight of the cross make themselves felt, do not doubt that the *kenosis* of Christ is already a paschal victory. Precisely in our limitations and weaknesses as human beings we are called to live conformation with Christ in an all encompassing commitment which anticipates the eschatological perfection, to the extent that this is possible in time. In a society of efficiency and success, your life, marked by the ‘humility’ and frailty of the lowly, of empathy with those who have no voice, becomes an evangelical sign of contradiction.¹³⁰

Our invitation is to return to the wisdom of the Gospel, as it is lived by the least (cf. *Mt* 11:25): “The joy which we experience daily, amid the little things of life, as a response to the loving invitation of God our Father: ‘My child, treat yourself well, according to your means.... Do not deprive yourself of the day’s enjoyment’ (*Sir* 14:11, 14). What tender paternal love echoes in these words!”¹³¹

¹²⁷ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 71.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 207.

¹³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord - 17th World Day of consecrated life, Rome (2nd February 2013).

¹³¹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 4.

The current weakness of consecrated life also stems from having lost the joy in “the little things of life.”¹³² On the way of conversion, consecrated men and women should discover that the primary vocation – as we recalled in the letter *Rejoice!* – is the vocation to joy in welcoming the least and seeking the good: “Just for today I will be happy in the certainty that I have been created for happiness, not only in the next world, but also in this.”¹³³

Pope Francis calls us to allow ourselves to be “guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. The Holy Spirit knows well what is needed in every time and place.”¹³⁴

In Choir, in the Orans Posture

17. The horizon is open; we are called to prayerful watchfulness, interceding for the world. On the horizon, we continue to see little signs heralding an abundant, beneficial rainfall on our dryness, faint whispers of a faithful presence.

The journey we must make to follow the cloud is not always easy; discernment sometimes demands long and tiring periods of waiting; the light and easy yoke (cf. *Mt* 11:30) can become heavy. The desert is also a place of solitude, of emptiness. It is a place where the fundamentals of life are lacking: water, vegetation, the companionship of others, the warmth of a friend, even life itself. In the desert in silence and in solitude, each of us touches his truest image: he measures himself against the infinite, his own frailty, like a grain of sand, and his rock-like solidity as mystery of God.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ JOHN XXIII, Decalogue of Serenity, in *Journal of a Soul* (LEV edn, p.207)

¹³⁴ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 280.

The Israelites remained encamped as long as the cloud rested over the tent; they continued their journey when the cloud lifted from that dwelling-place. Stopping and departing again: a life that is guided, regulated, patterned by the cloud of the Spirit; a life to be lived in vigilant watching.

Elijah, curled up in a ball, crushed by pain and by the infidelity of the people, bears his suffering and betrayal on his back and in his heart. He himself becomes prayer, a prayerful beseeching, a womb that intercedes. Beside him, and on his behalf, a boy searches the sky, to see if in answer to God's promise a sign is appearing from the sea.

This is the pattern of the spiritual journey of each one of us, through which man truly becomes a friend of God, an instrument of his divine plan of salvation, becomes aware of his vocation and mission on behalf of all the weak of the earth.

Consecrated life in the present time is called to live with particular intensity the posture (*statio*) of intercession. Let us be aware of our limitations and our finiteness, while our spirit is passing through desert and consolation, through darkness and light, in search of God and the signs of his grace. In this prayerful posture what is at stake is the rebellious obedience of the prophetic function of consecrated life, which makes itself a passionate voice on behalf of humanity. Fullness and emptiness – as a profound perception of the mystery of God, the world, and the human – are experiences we go through with equal intensity on the journey.

Pope Francis has a direct question for us: “Do you struggle with the Lord for your people, as Abraham struggled? Suppose they were fewer? Suppose there were twenty-five? And suppose they were twenty? (cf. *Gn* 18:22-33). This courageous prayer of intercession.... We speak of *parrhesia*, of apostolic courage, and we think of pastoral plans, this is good, but the same *parrhesia* is also needed in prayer.”¹³⁵

Intercession makes itself the voice of human poverty, arrival and outcome (*adventus et eventus*): preparation for the response of grace, the fertility of arid soil, the mysticism of encounter under the of little things.

The capacity to sit praying in choir makes consecrated men and women not solitary prophets, but men and women of communion, of a shared listening to the Word, capable of elaborating together new signs and significances, conceived and constructed even during times of persecution and martyrdom. This is a journey towards the communion of differences: a sign of the Spirit who breathes passion into hearts so that all may be one (*Jn* 17:21). In this way is revealed a Church that, sitting at table after a journey of doubts and sad, hopeless talk, recognises the Lord in the breaking of bread (*Lk* 24:13-35), clothed anew in the essence of the Gospel.

¹³⁵ FRANCIS, Address to the Parish Priests of Rome, 6th March 2014.

FOR REFLECTION

18. the paradoxes of pope Francis

- “When the Lord wants to give us a mission, he wants to give us a task, he prepares us to do it well,” just “like he prepared Elijah.” The important thing is “not that you’ve encountered the Lord” but “the whole journey to accomplish the mission that the Lord entrusted to you.” And this is precisely “the difference between the apostolic mission that the Lord gives us and a good, honest, human task.” Thus “when the Lord bestows a mission, he always employs a process of purification, a process of perception, a process of obedience, a process of prayer.”¹³⁶
- “Are they meek and humble? In the community, is there quarreling among them over power, are there battles due to envy? Is there gossiping? If so, then they are not on the path of Jesus Christ.” Indeed, peace in a community is “such an important feature.” “It is so important because the devil seeks to divide us, always. He is the father of division; through envy he divides. Jesus enables us to see this path, that of peace among us, of love among us.”¹³⁷
- In this regard it is important, “to be in the habit of asking for the grace to remember the journey which the People of God made.” It is also important to ask for the grace of “personal memory: what has God done with me in my life? How has he had me journey?” We also need to know how “to ask for the grace of hope, which is not optimism: it is something else.” Finally, let us “ask for the grace to renew each day our covenant with the Lord who has called us.” May the Lord, he prayed, “grant us these three graces which are necessary for one’s Christian identity.”¹³⁸
- It “is our destiny: to walk with a view to the promises, confident that they will become a reality. It is beautiful to read Chapter Eleven of the Letter to the Hebrews, where the journey of the People of God towards the promises is recounted. This people so loved the promises, they sought them even to the point of martyrdom. They knew that God was faithful. Hope never disappoints... This is our life: to believe and take

to the road” like Abram, who “trusted in the Lord and also journeyed amid hardship and difficulty.”¹³⁹

- Never lose the impulse of walking down the roads of the world, the awareness that walking, even going with an uncertain or halting stride is still better than standing still, closed off in our own questions or certainties. Missionary passion, the joy of the encounter with Christ that drives you to share the beauty of the faith with others, drives away the risk of staying stuck in individualism.¹⁴⁰
- Religious men and women are prophets. They are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father, poverty, community life and chastity. In this sense, the vows cannot end up being caricatures; otherwise, for example, community life becomes hell, and chastity becomes a way of life for unfruitful bachelors. The vow of chastity must be a vow of fruitfulness. In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophecy.¹⁴¹
- Vigilance: this is a Christian attitude. Vigilance over one’s self: what is happening in my heart? Because where my heart is, there my treasure will be. What is happening there? The Eastern Fathers say that I must know well if my heart is in turmoil or if my heart is calm... then, what do I do? I try to understand what is happening, but always in peace – to understand in peace. Then peace returns and I can perform the *discussio conscientiae*. When I am in peace and there is no turmoil: “What happened today in my heart?” And this is keeping watch. Keeping watch is not a matter of entering a torture chamber, no! It is watching one’s heart. We must be masters over our heart. What does my heart feel, what does it seek? What made me happy today, and what didn’t make me happy?¹⁴²

¹³⁹ FRANCIS, Morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (31st March 2014).

¹⁴⁰ FRANCIS, Audience with participants in the encounter organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹⁴¹ A. Spadaro, Interview with Pope Francis, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* III (2013), 449-477.

¹⁴² FRANCIS, Discourse to rectors and students of pontifical colleges and residences in Rome, Rome (12th May 2014).

¹³⁶ FRANCIS, Morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (13th June 2014).

¹³⁷ FRANCIS, Morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (29th April 2014).

¹³⁸ FRANCIS, Morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Rome (15th May 2014).

- Thanks be to God, you do not live or work as isolated individuals but as a community: and thank God for this! The community supports the whole of the apostolate. At times religious communities are fraught with tensions, and risk becoming individualistic and scattered, whereas what is needed is deep communication and authentic relationships. The humanising power of the Gospel is witnessed in fraternity lived in community and is created through welcome, respect, mutual help, understanding, kindness, forgiveness and joy.¹⁴³
- You are a yeast that can produce good bread for many, the Bread of which there is so much hunger: someone to listen to people's needs, desires, disappointments, hopes. Like those who have preceded you in your vocation, you can restore hope to young people, help the elderly, open roads to the future, spread love in every place and in every situation.

If this does not happen, if your ordinary life lacks witness and prophecy, then, I repeat to you, there is an urgent need for conversion!"¹⁴⁴

- Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have left or are indifferent. The ones who leave sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.¹⁴⁵
- And in the consecrated life we live the encounter between the young and the old, between observation and prophecy. Let's not see these as two opposing realities! Let us rather allow the Holy Spirit to animate both of them, and a sign of this is joy: the joy of observing, of walking within a rule of life; the joy of being led by the Spirit, never unyielding, never closed, always open to the voice of God that speaks, that opens, that leads us and invites us to go towards the horizon.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ FRANCIS, Discourse to participants in the General Chapter of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco (Salesians), Rome (31st March 2014).

¹⁴⁴ FRANCIS, Audience with participants in the encounter organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹⁴⁵ A. Spadaro, Interview with Pope Francis, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* III (2013), 449-477.

¹⁴⁶ FRANCIS, Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord for the XVIIIth World Day of Consecrated Life, Rome (2nd February 2014).

Hail, Woman of the New Covenant

19. To walk following the signs of God means experiencing the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ,¹⁴⁷ centre of life and source of decisions and actions.¹⁴⁸

The encounter with the Lord is renewed day after day in the joy of a persevering journey. "Always on the road with the virtue that is of pilgrims: joy!"¹⁴⁹

Our days call for the necessity of vigilance:

"Keeping watch. It is watching one's heart. We must be masters over our heart. What does my heart feel, what does it seek? What made me happy today, and what didn't make me happy?... This is for the purpose of knowing the state of my heart, my life, how I am walking on the path of the Lord. For if there is no vigilance, the heart goes everywhere, and the imagination follows behind: 'go, go ...' and then one might not end up well. I like the question about vigilance. These are not ancient things of times past, we haven't gone beyond these things."¹⁵⁰

The consecrated person becomes *memoria Dei*: he or she recalls the action of the Lord. The time given us to follow the cloud requires perseverance, faithfulness in keeping watch "like someone who could see the invisible" (*Heb* 11:27). It is the time of the new covenant. In fragmented days with only short breathing-spaces, we are asked, like Elijah, to keep watch, to search the horizon without weariness looking for the *cloud, as small as a man's hand*; we are asked to keep up bold perseverance and a clear vision of eternity.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic letter in the form motu proprio *Porta Fidei*, with which he proclaimed the Year of Faith (11th October 2011), 2.

¹⁴⁸ Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, instruction *Starting afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium* (19th May 2002).

¹⁴⁹ FRANCIS, Audience with participants in the encounter organised by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (10th May 2014).

¹⁵⁰ FRANCIS, Discourse to rectors and students of pontifical colleges and residences in Rome, Rome (12th May 2014).

Our time remains a time of exile, of pilgrimage, of watchful and joyful expectation of the eschatological reality in which God will be all in all.

Mary “was the new Ark of the Covenant, before which the heart exults with joy, the Mother of God present in the world who does not keep this divine presence to herself but offers it, sharing the grace of God. Thus, the prayer says, Mary really is the *causa nostrae laetitiae*, the ‘Ark’ in whom the Saviour is truly present among us.”¹⁵¹

Hail Mary, Woman of the New Covenant, we call you blessed because you have believed (cf. *Lk* 1:45) and have known how to “recognise the traces of God’s Spirit in events great and small.”¹⁵²

You sustain our watching in the night, until the light of dawn anticipates the new day. Grant us a prophet’s voice to tell the world about the joy of the Gospel, about the blessedness of those who search the horizons of new lands and heavens (cf. *Rv* 21:1) and anticipate their presence in the human city.

Help us to proclaim the fecundity of the Spirit under the banner of the essential and the small. Grant that we may perform, here and now, the courageous act of the humble, upon whom God looks (*Ps* 137:6) and to whom are revealed the secrets of the Kingdom (cf. *Mt* 11:25-26).

Amen.

*From the Vatican,
8th September 2014, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

João Braz Card. de Aviz Prefect
+ José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M. Archbishop’s Secretary

¹⁵¹ BENEDICT XVI, Homily for the solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Castel Gandolfo (15th August 2011).

¹⁵² FRANCIS, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November 2013), 288.