

FOR A THEOLOGY  
OF  
CONSECRATED LIFE



Egidio Viganò

**Background to this text**

The text published in the following pages is an English translation of a reflection offered by Fr Egidio Viganò in the Faculty of Theology at the Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile in 1985.

The text was subsequently published by Elle Di CI in Italy in 1986 as part of its “Vita Consecrata” series.

**English translation:** 2023 by a member of the Australia-Pacific Province.

The translation is from the Italian edition.

**Text set in** Tex Gyre Pagella (Palatino).

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## Presentation

The author of this reflection is Father Egidio Viganò, Don Bosco's seventh successor at the head of the Salesian Congregation. Arriving in Chile in 1939, he studied theology there, obtaining a doctorate at the Catholic University with a thesis on the "Mystical Body". Ordained a priest in 1947, he carried out his ministry among young people. In 1949 he was professor of theology at the Don Bosco International Theological Institute, La Cisterna; his students were young Salesians from Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Uruguay.

Later, he was a professor at the Catholic University of Santiago and was sent to Rome, Leuven (Louvain) and Paris for work in ecclesiology and pastoral care. During those years, Fr Viganò was noted as a scholar who believed in the value of theological science as a function of true pastoral activity. He gave lectures, conferences, collaborated with various magazines and above all with Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez, archbishop of Santiago.

In 1962 he was chosen as a theological expert for the Council and took part in all the meetings of the Second Vatican Council, together with Cardinal Silva Henriquez. In this way he came to the knowledge of several bishops in Latin America. He would then be called to play an active part in the Latin American Episcopal Conferences at Medellin and Puebla and in various Synods of Bishops in Rome.

In 1971, the General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation elected him General Councillor for Formation. In 1977 he was elected Rector Major of the Salesians, and re-elected in 1984 for a second term.

In the years following the Council he collaborated in clarifying the new problems that arise for consecrated life in this final stage of the century. He made decisive contributions to various documents, for example *Mutuae Relationes*, which deals with the delicate problem of relations between bishops and religious.

In this reflection, carried out in the Faculty of Theology at the Universidad Católica of Santiago, Chile (August 1985), the author offers valid indications for those who feel engaged in sincere theological research in order to indicate the right ways for consecrated persons to respond to current challenges.



# Introduction

“Theology and consecrated life” is a very broad and difficult topic. Considering it not in the abstract but historically, in the context of the situation following on from the Council, we discover a very differentiated and complex panorama. This prompts me not to address it now in its entirety, but to limit myself to considering a few aspects of more universal interest.

The criterion for the choice of these aspects also stems from my responsibility as Superior General and animator of consecrated life in these years of transformation; and this at the level of the universal Church.

This criterion is accompanied by the concerns of those who wish to follow the developments of theology in the field of consecrated life and intend to remain faithful to the nature of theology or the science of God, without distortions with regard to its methodological requirements.

What the theologian Walter Kasper has written seems to me to be right on the mark: “it is unfortunately not a redundancy to say that, especially today, a theological theology is the need of the hour and the only appropriate answer to modern atheism.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, a “theological” theology not only does not separate itself from human reality, but rather seeks to penetrate it more in order to discover the presence and creativity of the Holy Spirit in it; it looks at consecrated life by privileging the consideration of its charismatic dimension, as a particular “experience of the Spirit” (MR 11) in the unfolding of human life, and takes historicity to heart without falling into historicism.

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<sup>1</sup> W. KASPER, *The God of Jesus Christ*, Crossroad, New York, 2000, p. 15.

# 1

## Conciliar perspective

For the first time in the history of ecumenical councils, Vatican II formulated a specific doctrine on consecrated life in the context of a “dogmatic” Constitution.

The term “religious”, in *Lumen Gentium*, was not taken in the sense of an “ontological-juridical definition” but rather as a “typological description”. The aim was to highlight the existential aspect of consecrated life in the Church as a witness and service of baptismal radicalism, going beyond the limitations of the “state of perfection”.

The long and difficult evolution of Chapters V and VI of *Lumen Gentium*<sup>2</sup> led to the explicit affirmation that consecrated life belongs to the divine constitution of the Church, specifying its original mode of presence in the world and bringing out its specific sacramental dimension in the People of God.

The direction taken by *Lumen Gentium* was affirmed and expanded by the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. It insists on the historical mission of the People of God, proclaiming that it is responsible, in its various states and with different forms of intervention, for a task of integral service for the benefit of mankind, by means of an evangelisation that is so incarnated that it also takes into account apostolically the proper promotion of the temporal order. Now, if the mission of the entire Church in the world moves within this missionary perspective, this means that Vatican II has described and launched consecrated life in the heart of human history.

In fact, this perspective of the Council has opened the doors to a true movement of renewal, both of consecrated life as an experience of the Spirit, and of its theological interpretation.

And this was precisely the purpose of a Council which sought to be specifically “pastoral”.

We know that after the Council consecrated life went through a great crisis. After 1965, a considerable decrease in the number of members took place in religious institutions due to losses and fewer entering: several male religious institutes registered 35% loss, and most of the others around 20%. A phenomenon of this magnitude is linked to many causes that have their roots in the profound socio-cultural transformations of this second half of the twentieth century. It is not our task here to enter into such a complex topic. But it was appropriate to recall it, because it has been a stimulus to experiential praxis and the search for a corresponding theology.

Evidently, both the experiences of renewal of life and the efforts of theological reflection have taken place within the overall perspective of a renewed ecclesiology.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. MOLLINARI - P. GRUMPEL, *Il Capitolo VI nella costituzione dogmatica sulla Chiesa*, in the journal “Vita consacrata”, vol. XX, Milan 1984, pp. 816-893.

## 2

# Typology and Theology

Vatican II, with its pastoral concern, has brought out the historical aspect of existential commitment in consecrated life. In this regard it urged all the Institutes to profoundly review their charismatic identity and their historical mission as a response to the challenges of the signs of the times: “Today the human race is involved in a new stage of history” (GS 4). “History itself speeds along on so rapid a course that an individual person can scarcely keep abreast of it... Thus, the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one; In consequence there has arisen a new series of problems, a series as numerous as can be, calling for efforts of analysis and synthesis”(GS 5).

After the Council, further guidelines and directives accompanied and shed light on the effort to renew consecrated life.

The main ones are: the Motu proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (1966), the two Apostolic Exhortations *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971) and *Redemptionis Donum* (1984), the new *Code of Canon Law* (1983). In addition , the documents *Cum Admotae* (1964), *Religionum Laicalium* (1966), *Renovationis Causam* (1969), *Venite Seorsum* (1969), *Clericalia Instituta* (1969), *Ordo Professionis Religiosae* (1978), *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum* (1970), *Mutuae Relationes* (1978), the instructions of the SCRSI's *Religious and human promotion* (1980) and *Religious life and its contemplative dimension* (1980), Pope John Paul II's letter to the bishops of the United States of America with a summary-cum-guide of the teaching of the Magisterium on religious life (1983); finally, various documents of the Episcopate, among which those from Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) emerge.

But the decisive contribution of focus, reflection, research, debate, experimentation and revision was carried out when each Institute held their various General Chapters: first of all the “special” one requested by *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, and then at least two other subsequent Chapters to complete and define the task of renewal. The most important result of such a long and qualified work in which most of the members of each Institute have actively participated over a period of 15 to 20 years, are the new texts of the Constitutions or Statutes — which have usually been the subject of approval by the Apostolic See — and the Manuals of their own particular Law. In twenty centuries of Church history , a work of such far-reaching scope, of such exhaustive revision and of such a daring proposal for renewal had never been tackled and completed.

At the apex of this work was the typological concern privileged by Vatican II.

What first came to the attention of those responsible and committed to research and renewal experience is that there is no opposition between “typology” and “theology”, but rather that a correct typological description has an absolute need for a solid theological basis and justification. Orthopraxis inherently demands orthodoxy. The “type” or existential and historical model cannot be renewed unless it is enlightened by and based on a corresponding doctrine linked to revelation, tradition and theological investigation.

The novelty of the typological perspective does not lie in disregarding theology, but in the need for a keener relationship with existential reality, with the historical dynamism of the Spirit, and with the recent great challenges of the signs of the times. The pastoral option of Vatican II is based on a secure doctrine, since it is part of the heritage of the living tradition of the Church beyond possible different interpretations of it, since it leaves the way open to possible diversities of emphasis and perspective. Consecrated persons have moved with these basic doctrinal principles; they evidently felt the need to

deepen them, to enlighten them, to broaden them, thus resorting in some way to the collaboration of theologians.

I consider it useful and meaningful to list here some of the main issues that consecrated life has presented theology with.

### **1. Ecclesial character**

*The “ecclesial character” of consecrated life* is an explicit affirmation of Vatican II. Consecrated life belongs to the vitality and holiness “of the” Church (cf. LG 44); it is not simply a possible way of being “in the” Church. It is not part of its hierarchical structure, but it is a living and connatural element of its mystery.

In this regard the figure and the historical mission of the Founder, or Foundress, are an expression and development of the vitality of the “Body of Christ”. It is not a mere particular initiative possible within the whole of the “universal sacrament of salvation”, as if it were a kind of private propriety accepted (or tolerated) in view of its contribution ecclesial usefulness, but an initiative of the Holy Spirit, willed by Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, and by its very nature ordered to the organism of the Mystical Body to enliven its functions and activities.

Thus the organic communion of the Church, both in its spiritual aspect and in its hierarchical nature, derives its origin and vigour simultaneously from Christ and his Spirit. Rightly, therefore, and in this connection, the Apostle Paul has repeatedly uttered the formulas “in Christ” and “in the Spirit” in intimate and vital agreement (cf. MR 5).

This ecclesial character of consecrated life invites theologians to give more space, in their reflections and research, to the pneumatological dimension of the mystery of the Church.

### **2. Typological project of the Institutes**

The *typological project* of each Institute of consecrated life draws on this dimension of its pneumatological origin, but adds concreteness and historical variety to it. It refers, it is true, to a gift of the Spirit “of” and “for” the Church, but as an existential project deriving from the “type” or model of the experience of the Founder, or Foundress. It is a dynamic “experience” of the creative vitality of the Holy Spirit, initiated by a man or woman particularly sensitive to the mystery (cf. LG 45; PC 1,2), officially approved, with the discernment of the hierarchy, as an evangelical patrimony entrusted in the Church to a group of those called “to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth” (MR 11).

This typological project makes it possible to embrace a whole specific nature of styles of sanctification, communion and apostolate that enriches the Church’s “sacramentality” and catholicity for the benefit of mankind and makes her “as a bride adorned for her husband” (cf. Rev 21:2), thus expressing the multifaceted wisdom of God (cf. Eph 3:19).

This aspect gives great importance to the historical dimension of the mystery and requires that theologians show greater sensitivity and hermeneutic competence in investigating and promoting a historiography of holiness and catholicity over the centuries.

### **3. Special consecration**

The *special “consecration” on the part of God* is another topic of strong doctrinal renewal affirmed by the Council. In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* it is explicitly said that the religious, by

means of the profession of the evangelical counsels “divino obsequio intimius consecratur”, not in an active sense as if he “consecrated himself” (as many translations erroneously say), but in a passive sense of “being consecrated” by God. In fact, the theological commission of the Council, responding to questions and criticisms of the Fathers, officially explained the text: “Textus novus est ‘per eadem vincula divina obsequio intimius consecratur’ sub forma passiva, subintelligendo ‘a Deo’.”<sup>3</sup>

This expresses a novelty of “special consecration” that has led us to consider the state of consecrated persons not so much as a “state of perfection” with certain institutional characteristics, but rather as “a consecrated life”, that is, marked and sustained continuously by the gratifying and powerful grace of the Holy Spirit, to make consecrated persons, within the Church, special signs and proclaimers of the salvific qualities of the mystery of Christ.

In this regard the theologian Y. Congar, in his recent three-volume work on the Holy Spirit, recognises precisely that “Religious profession is a consecration and it is not difficult to understand why early Christians included it among the *sacramenta*, at a time when that term was less precisely defined than it is today.”<sup>4</sup>

From this point of view, consecrated life calls for a more “theological” theology which deepens the three complementary moments of God’s initiative: it is he who “consecrates” to himself and helps [those thus consecrated] to be faithful, it is he who “sends” them into the world!

#### 4. The mission

*The constitutive incisiveness of the “mission”* is an element that influences and typologically determines the very nature of consecrated life. The question of “mission” characterised the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II, precisely because it sought to be a “pastoral” Council.

In dealing with consecrated persons (specifically institutes of apostolic life) the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* (no. 8) makes a bold statement of renewal.

It refers to a very original form and unified synthesis in considering the mutual ordering between “consecration” and “mission” without dichotomies of antithesis. This aims to overcome a one-dimensional and essentialistic dimension of consecrated life and to deepen two themes of extraordinary concrete relevance: on the one hand, the incisiveness of the “grace of unity” and, on the other hand, the originality of the “type of activity” that is proper to consecrated persons in institutes of apostolic life. The “grace of unity” animates and drives “apostolic consecration” from within, infusing consecrated persons with a synthesis of vital unity between interiority and exterior activity.

The “type of activity” requires that it be an apostolic activity that springs from intimate union with Christ (even if its matter belongs to the temporal order), that it be entrusted to the consecrated person by the Church herself to carry out in her name, that it be inspired by the radical nature of baptism and that it permeate the entire consecration of constant apostolic projection (cf. PC 8).

This important aspect of the vital unity between consecration and mission, lived with such originality and exemplarity by the Founders and Foundresses, has not yet had a proper and exhaustive theological reflection.

#### 5. Baptismal radicalism

*Baptismal radicalism* is one of the topics most taken into consideration after the Council, both in its overall aspect of “following the Lord” and in the consideration and deepening of each single

3 Cf. *Schema Constitutionis dogmaticae de Ecclesia*, Modi V, caput VI *De Religiosis*, p. 7, Resp. ad 24.

4 Y. CONGAR, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3, Crossroad Herder, New York 1983, p. 270. Note that this English edition combines all three volumes in one.

evangelical counsel. The Christological character of consecrated life has been greatly enriched in recent years.

One particular aspect gave rise to some difficulties and requires greater attention and in-depth study: the *kenotic* dimension of the following of Christ. The incalculable progress of the human sciences has imposed a considerable change of perspective on anthropology. And since any ascetic project necessarily presupposes an anthropological basis as objective as possible, the urgent need to rethink the entire area of asceticism was felt. Some anthropological disciplines speak of self-realisation, but the *sequela Christi* proclaims again and always proclaims *kénosis*. Such disciplines exalt the dignity of the person in the name of freedom, but the evangelical counsels and the beatitudes insist again and always on the dimension and paradox of love that gives of itself through sacrifice.

It is probably in this area, emptied and weakened by an exaggeratedly anthropocentric view of secularised culture that consecrated life urgently needs the help of a theological reflection that is more sensitive to the perennial values of the mystery of Christ, the greatness of his freedom and his love in obedience, and the indispensable and very realistic contribution of the theology of the cross, in proper harmony with the current new understanding of the human being.

## 6. Community option

*The community option* is another vast subject for the renewal of the consecrated life of religious. It is the duty of the members of such institutes to be “experts in communion” among the people of God. And here we need to meditate (as many renewed Constitutions have already done) on the vital reflections of the central mystery of the Trinity as the ineffable source of the whole communal reality of the Church.

The process of socialisation is one of the signs of the times that has brought a clearer awareness of “active participation and fraternity into this area: which led to a re-examination of the structures of religious institutes and their approaches to community. Decentralisation, subsidiarity, and responsibility have had a profound (sometimes even perilous) impact on some institutional elements of religious life, provoking the urgency of a more adequate theological reflection on the delicate and important pair: “institution and charism”. It should be remembered that ecclesial issues (and therefore those of religious life) cannot be adequately analysed or correctly resolved simply on the basis of sociological findings; their nature is rooted in the mystery and always, ultimately, needs theological enlightenment.

On the other hand, the urgent process of socialisation has had a considerable influence on another aspect of religious life: it has given a new emphasis to the social and community dimension of the very elements that constitute its characteristic life: praxis in the witness of vows, the exercise of authority, apostolic commitments in situations, new relations with secular (lay) members of the Church. These are subjects that require a truly ecclesial theological reflection, even if it must take into account many conclusions and suggestions of the anthropological sciences, without ever diminishing the specific nature of the values of consecration.

## 7. Profession of total oblation

Finally, the overall meaning of *the “profession of total oblation”* required special theological and liturgical reflections. It is the act of personal response to the Lord who calls and consecrates; it begins and ultimately characterises the entire life of a consecrated person: is the entirely conscious and free personal and public act in which the fundamental choice of the baptismal covenant is renewed in order to witness it in the Church with greater clarity and particular radicalism.

It is a commitment that is not just limited to the vows, but to the entire typological project of the institute in which the professed remains incorporated. In fact, the aspect of consecration by God, with the consequent empowering and inventive assistance of the Holy Spirit, embraces both the practice of the evangelical counsels and the specific mission of the institute and fraternal communion according to the evangelical project authentically described in the constitutions they profess.

The lack of a renewed theology of “profession” has been felt in this area, faced with the danger of seeing it reduced to a formal act of almost arbitrary value, open to other parallel commitments that are weakening and, concretely, gradually adulterating its character as a “fundamental choice” publicly recognised by the Church. “Religious” obedience has its own theological style of human sacramental mediation that cannot be suppressed by arbitrary theories.

## 3

# Theology and Renewal of Consecrated Life

The Second Vatican Council was a kind of earthquake for theology. It woke it up, offered it wider horizons; it rejuvenated it and enriched it with a more significant citizenship in the world. However, a price had to be paid for all this. A not always “theological” effervescence was noted during the two decades following the Council, even if it was more inserted into history. We will not focus here on any judgement of the consequences of this crisis. We are interested in the positive aspects of authenticity and relevance of various theological disciplines as they have offered and do offer consecrated life new lights for its renewal.

1. First of all, *in general*, theology has helped the faithful to properly appreciate the remarkable progress of the biblical and liturgical areas as the foundation and animation of their lives. It has insisted, at least through its best exponents, on the centrality of the Trinitarian mystery. It has proposed a more dynamic understanding of the history of dogmas and a new vision regarding some basic aspects such as “salvation”, “sin”, “holiness”, “testimony”, “sacraments”, “eschatology”. In a particular way it has enriched the presentation of the doctrine of baptism as a sacrament of faith for the *sequela Christi*, and a more genuine vision of the evangelical counsels and the spirit of the beatitudes.

2. Moreover, several theologians have been able to deepen the values of the *Council response to the signs of the times*. Faced with the “process of secularisation”, they privileged the study of the Church as the “mystery” of the real presence of God in history. Faced with the “process of liberation”, they dedicated themselves to developing a theology of “mission” and of the “Kingdom”, highlighting the originality of “pastoral theology” and illustrating the peculiar participation of consecrated life in the historical task of the People of God. Faced with the “process of promoting the person”, they sought to more relevantly re-interpret the paradoxical values of the “Pasch”. Faced with the “socialisation process” they have developed new forms of “participation” and “communion” and have insisted on the evangelical dimension of authority understood as service. Faced with the “process of inculturation” they have helped to develop awareness of the “local Church”, they have analysed the pedagogy of the “incarnation”, they have fostered ecumenical dialogue and have renewed the fundamental meaning of the one and universal Church guided by the providential ministry of the Successor of Peter.

3. *Some theological topics* that touch very closely on consecrated life have been the subject of special attention. The study of these issues has brought very valuable insights, although further development and maturation are still necessary. Let us recall the main ones: “The presence and mutual complementarity of Christ and the Spirit” in the Church; the “relationship between consecrated life and ecclesial ministries”; and “the Mariological dimension of the charisms of consecrated life”.

*Christ and the Spirit* are, at the same time but in a different way, the vital principle of organic unity and dynamic, sanctifying multiplicity. They are the generative and constitutive bond of the unity and multiplicity of the universal Church and of the communion of the particular Churches, of the indispensability of the hierarchy and vitality of the charisms, of the magisterium of the pastors and of the prophetic mission of the People. In this way they guarantee total harmony between “hierarchical communion” and “charismatic dynamism”, excluding any arbitrary abuses (cf. MR 5).

This topic also sheds light on the delicate problem of *the relations between “ecclesial ministries” and “consecrated life”*. For example, the oft-discussed problem of the mutual complementarity between

priest and lay religious in the same institute of consecrated life. Arguments of exclusively sociological or psychological extraction are not enough to solve this problem, nor are arguments of general theology on the values common to all institutes. Theological-historical studies are required according to the specific type and nature of each institute in particular.

Finally, the *new Mariological reflections* have been of particular interest to consecrated life. This has served to highlight that Mary's maternal intervention played, according to the testimony of the Founders themselves, a part of primary importance in the foundation and history of the institutions. It is an intervention that theology spontaneously compares with the fecundating initiative of the Holy Spirit, harmonising pneumatology and Mariology: a creative synergy throughout the centuries. A historical research carried out with educational criteria that respond to the current moment, and a systematic reflection that takes into account the variety of data, would offer very rich and evocative material (today, unfortunately, still unexplored) and bring about a genuine renewal.

Alongside this Mariological aspect arises *the problem of women in the Church* and the problems of women's consecrated life, which represent a great challenge for theology. It is a very wide-ranging issue, in continuous evolution, and concerns aspects of family, social, cultural, economic, political life. It has important resonances in ecclesial life, in which it raises problems and takes unprecedented positions with respect to the recent past.

This issue obliges us to review certain social and ecclesial models of the past and present, and develop a new project of society and a more adequate model of the Church. In this new model, the dignity and human and Christian capacities of women must be further promoted (cf. RM 49.50) and anthropological and ministerial differences must be truly complementary. Behaviour, in fact and in law, equal in dignity even if differentiated in the ministry, is required in view of the establishment of relationships of genuine reciprocity, without pretence of undue subordination.

Theological reflection on this vast and delicate problem requires, as it is easy to guess, an effort of interdisciplinary investigation with the cooperation of biblical scholars, historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, dogmatic theologians and pastoral theologians, grounding the final synthesis in the atypical insights of the mystery and following the official directives of the Magisterium.

Ministry issues and the women's question are still evolving theological problems.

4. It is also appropriate to point out with serious concern that a "theological" theology realistically experiences the need to *overcome the anti-metaphysical crisis of current culture*. This crisis implies, ultimately, a disease of intelligence, since it considers it incapable of transposing absolute values both ontologically and ethically. Hence a background of agnosticism and relativism, lacking in critical objectivity and good hermeneutics; in fact, there is a lack of openness of intelligence to the total "being" as an intelligible foundation of the objective reality of things.

In particular, renewed theology requires philosophers to scrutinise the human being's energy in depth, the historical dimension, evolutionary process, especially creative subjectivity, that is, not only the "being" but also the "acting" which is ultimately a way of being. There is no separate action of the person's being, as if it were something that comes later. The aphorism "agere sequitur esse" must be interpreted with ontic objectivity: "acting" does not come after "being"; it presupposes it and is inseparable from it; it constitutes and reveals it; it springs from it and gives it identity; it proclaims its fundamental indispensability and expresses its dynamic fullness. It does not come "later", but is "within"! This theologically designed philosophical insight into the mission of the Church and its pastoral ministry can open up new, highly fruitful horizons. To achieve this goal, theology needs a metaphysics of the total "being" freed from certain antiquated implications and the conditioning of essentialism, so that it helps it to highlight the figure of the integral man, the protagonist of his own history.

A healthy doctrine of consecrated life depends, in no small part, also on a theology that is expert in the metaphysics of the person: “The Christian” in fact “is a man driven by his own faith to be a philosopher” (U. von Balthasar).

## 4

# Pastoral Challenges

The renewal of consecrated life has had to deal extensively with its concrete “mission” in history. The Council gave great importance to the “mission” of the Church in the world. The theology of mission has thus undergone an intense evolution, both in the overall study of the Church itself, and in relation to the identity of the Institutes of consecrated life .

The mission, to be effective, must be clothed in history; by being embodied in different human situations it becomes “pastoral”.

“Pastoral ministry” is not identified with “mission” but it is intrinsically related to it, because it is its operational concreteness, guided and coordinated through the “Pastors” (cf. AG 6; AA 2).

As a derivation of the unique mission of the Church, there are, therefore, different “pastoral approaches” according to times, places, cultures, people, etc.

This pastoral pluralism is not provoked, in itself, either by mission, or by theology, or by the arbitrariness of pastors or by some lack of fidelity, but by human multiplicity itself in its varied forms of becoming: the signs of the times, nationalities, historical situations, socio-cultural, economic and political conjunctures, age, sex of people, etc., to which the Spirit also always grants renewed charisms. Pastoral ministry would not be a true concreteness of the mission if it did not consider and strive to adapt to human evolution and its practical needs of evangelisation. The cultures themselves, the result of centuries of social experience, are today energised by the explosion of some important signs of the times and by mutual exchanges that continually intensify due to the acceleration of history. It is urgent to evangelise not only cultures in general, but particularly the events that drive them towards new emerging modes. In this way, pastoral ministry presents new and urgent challenges to both theology and consecrated life. For example, the processes of socialisation, promotion of the person, of liberation, of secularisation, of inculturation propose new human values, new problems, new ambiguities and also arise together with new actions that challenge pastoral approaches, demanding an update of the practice with which the mission is carried out.

A great, complex and creative work for evangelisation is thus in the offing. Consecrated life, which is a practice animated by the Spirit of the Lord, cannot wait for the conclusions of a science, even a theological science, to commit itself in this task in which it participates by specific vocation: life precedes scientific analysis, even if this is then very useful for further revision and planning.

On the other hand, theology, which is the science of a saving faith and charismatic mediation of a gospel that must be a message for today, cannot ignore the consideration of the presence of God in these processes and the reinterpretation of revelation as a response to current concerns and research, considering as a function prior and superior to its own that of the Magisterium and the living and authentic moderation of the people and bodies responsible for the institutes. Hence the need for theology to intelligently open up to real life by entering into dialogue with the human sciences (historical, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, political, pedagogical...) while not ignoring the official guidance the Church. Pastoral theology in fact also needs the contribution of these sciences and the light of the magisterium of Pastors.

To meet this need, it is necessary that, in view of the theological reflection of a biblical, historical, dogmatic and liturgical nature (considered first as the only true theology), the “theological-pastoral” study of ecclesial practice in the right sense of its insertion into life is also developed with an

appropriate methodology. Any number of concrete problems require, among other things, a serious study of the objective situation of human life in its various aspects; they also need, in harmony with the Magisterium of the Church and with the authentic model of the institutes, a pedagogical and methodological reflection on strategies for action, the study and programming of times, approaches, processes, means – in other words the development of projects in order to move from the situation being analysed to the one which is being aimed at.

Such a reflection is taking place today in various centres, in dialogue with the humanities and the Magisterium, by a new “pastoral theology” that strives to be scientifically objective and formally “theological”. A lively and faithfully “theological” theology, as I recalled at the beginning, is an imperative of the present moment. It is not a question of changing the interpretation of revelation, but of directing its light on the real situation. This pastoral theory is not driven by occasional fashions, easily exploited by ideologies without metaphysics, but moved by the intelligence of a faith that also knows how to reflect philosophically on real situations.

While it is a “particular theology”, it does not claim to be a “universal theology”; it fits into the vast theological area as a vital and important part, but not as a whole or as the only valid criterion of the whole. The epithet “Pastoral” does not seek to change the formal nature of theology; above all, it must not change it when it turns its attention and reflection on something concrete and urgently vital. If the urgency of reflection is precisely theological, that is to say, polarised by revelation and the light of the mystery of Christ under the guidance of the Magisterium, it would be a grave error to deprive it of this innate polarisation, replacing it with a horizontalist perspective that would claim to manipulate the interpretation of Christianity at will.

“Praxis and experiences, which always arise from a specific and limited historical situation” the Sacred Congregation for the Faith reminded us recently “help the theologian and oblige him to make the gospel accessible for the present time. However, praxis does not replace or produce the truth, but remains at the service of the truth delivered to us by the Lord. Therefore, the theologian is called to decipher the language of the different situations — the signs of the times — and to open this language to the understanding of faith (cf. Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 19).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Note on the volume: *Chiesa: carisma e potere*, 11 March 1985. Tip. Poliglotta Vaticana, p. 5.

## 5

# Pastoral Options and Proper nature

“Pastoral theology” necessarily entails the need to review the ecclesial commitments of consecrated life; it is existentially involved in its renewal in practical terms. The lifestyle and programme of action of consecrated persons are confronted with the pastoral options of the Local Church.

Thus, for example, the second and third General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín and Puebla were characteristic guidelines; similarly in Italy the ecclesial conferences of Eur and Loreto; elsewhere, various other initiatives of the local Churches. Consecrated life is thus involved in a defined pastoral commitment with real impact. “In the light of the faith that we profess as believers” the Pastors at Medellín proclaim for example, “we have made an effort to discover God’s plan in the ‘signs of our times’. In our interpretation, the aspirations and laments of Latin America are signs that reveal the orientation of the divine sign operating in the redemptive love of Christ that speaks of these aspirations in the awareness of fraternal solidarity.”<sup>6</sup> This is why the Latin American Bishops proclaimed, in Medellín and Puebla, the ecclesial importance of consecrated life.

Document 12 of the Medellín *Conclusions* and Chapter 11.2 in Part Three of the Puebla Document speak directly to consecrated persons in the continent and offer guidance on their active participation in the pastoral commitments of the local Churches. Unfortunately, elsewhere, in important ecclesial conferences, adequate space has not been made for consecrated life. (The plenary assembly of the French Episcopate – Lourdes 1985 – which dealt extensively with the subject, deserves praise).

It is clear, for example, that the four pastoral options of Puebla also directly concern consecrated persons in Latin America. This has led to revisions, projects, programmes and initiatives. Hence the need for a theological reflection that examines the new set of problems and that guides the unthinkable pastoral insertion of consecrated persons in line with the authenticity of their charism. Consecrated life generously inserted into pastoral activity has a duty to extend its life and grow, precisely because of the very fact of its charismatic originality, that is, insofar as it is consecrated and the bearer of a specific divine initiative. In fact, it does not come from any social inspiration or generic altruism, but from a particular and concrete gift of the Holy Spirit, which spurs it to follow the person of Christ and to bear witness to his mystery. It is a bearer of God’s love, affirms his presence and spreads the experience of communion with him as the source of a lifestyle and activity. Any pastoral insertion that minimises the specific “charismatic” quality of consecrated persons, or ultimately dispenses with this, is harmful for the pastoral activity itself because it means it deviates from the gifts with which the Spirit of the Lord sought to vitalise it. It is therefore clearly noted that theological enlightenment is necessary, among other things, to analyse the way, the intensity, the priorities and the methodology with which the institutes of consecrated life accept and carry forward the pastoral options of the local Church.

In particular, it is also the task of theology to help reflect on some tensions that arise for consecrated persons from the needs of their pastoral integration. Tension is not conflict, but can become so if it is not perceived and if it is not seen as an invitation to simultaneously strengthen and enrich the two poles in question; both are an inseparable source of vitality. Instead, polarisation inevitably leads to a conflict that distorts the authenticity of a consecrated group’s proper nature, since it impoverishes

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<sup>6</sup> Medellín. *Testi integrali delle conclusioni*, Quaderni ASAL 11-12, Rome 1974, p. 43.

or suppresses — instead of enriching — one of the two poles. It is worth pointing out here some tensions that providentially arise when consecrated persons strive to concretise their mission in local and dynamic pastoral work.

### **1. The tension between the “contemplative dimension” and “apostolic activity”**

This is, as we have already said, a fundamental issue and until now not sufficiently clarified, in particular with regard to consecrated persons of active life.

### **2. The tension between “proper nature” and “ecclesial mission”**

The pastoral activity of the local Church must extend to all areas of its evangelising mission; consecrated persons participate in it with a particular style of sanctification and apostolate. It is not difficult to harmonise the two poles, but today there is a danger, in reality, of a pastoral “genericism” that does not take into account the specific contribution of each charism. Good theology should enlighten Pastors, at any level, so that they know, respect and promote the gifts that the Spirit makes present through the various institutes (cf. MR 9, b, c).

### **3. The tension between “unity” and “pluralism”**

World unity and communion within each institute of consecrated life is important: they are the basis of its charismatic identity. Obviously unity, which is not uniformity, must manifest itself in differentiated and multiple expressions in harmony with cultures, historical and pastoral situations. This is what has been done since the Council. The problem lies in avoiding regional or national polarisations that overestimate certain anthropological aspects to the detriment of communion, sharing and the charismatic identity of one’s institute.

### **4. The tension between “new presences” and the “validity of existing works”**

After Vatican II, pastoral options invite consecrated persons to a true new kind of presence. This means reconsidering and re-planning apostolic commitments. This does not mean, however, the abandonment of all previous operations, but a reconsideration of their location and *modus operandi*. “New presences” are needed in the poorest and most needy places, and in many other existing works but which must be renewed in their pastoral quality. It is a job that requires resourceful courage, pastoral criteria and spiritual discernment.

### **5. The tension between “community project” and “personal involvement”.**

Many new pastoral presences, the result of a preferential option of consecrated persons for the good of the poor, have come into being at various times. It is a positive sign that testifies to their specific charism. Evidently, in these new presences (even if they already exist) each consecrated person must in a certain way convert in order to feel personally involved in a pastoral renewal of research and current issues. The problem lies, for the “religious”, in doing so with a “community” lifestyle and planned activity, according to the spirit of their own Congregation and not only individually and perhaps even arbitrarily

## **6. The tension between “pastoral qualification” and “human promotion”.**

Evangelisation must be intimately and inseparably linked to everything that is human; however, it has its own nature, which gives it qualitative originality. We must evangelise by promoting the human being and promote the human being by evangelising. The problem is not to be reduced to being just “catechists” or just “promoters”. It is very easy to exaggerate one way or the other.

In this regard theology can do a supremely important and beneficial job. It is its competence to demonstrate the characteristic originality of the pastoral content and its function as a guide (for judgement and action) of every concrete activity of consecrated persons. In this field, deviations come rather from ideological or viscerally adversarial choices that need critical review.

## **7. The tension between “awareness of consecration” and “socio-political responsibility”**

This topic has been dealt with several times by the Church’s Magisterium. It is worth recalling here the document of the Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes on the theme of *Religious and human promotion*, where “involvement in politics” is studied as a fourth problem: “To establish the kingdom of God within the very structures of the world, insofar as this constitutes evangelical promotion in human history, is certainly a theme of great interest for the whole Christian community, and therefore for religious also; but not in the sense that they allow themselves to become involved directly in politics.”

A clear awareness of one’s proper nature, while reviving and strengthening the sense of social and even political (non-party) responsibility for the common good, helps at the same time to discern appropriately and critically what is partisan interest or an ideological fad. Evidently, in order to guarantee a genuine awareness of consecration, as renewed by the Council, the contributions of theology are essential.

## 6

# Charism and Charisms

Two series of statements can be distinguished in the documents of Vatican II on consecrated life: some highlight the nature of this life in general as a “divine gift”; others emphasise the specific action of the Holy Spirit in the Founders and Foundresses who initiated the multiplicity of institutes.

The Council never explicitly uses the term “charism” in this regard, but it favours it and implies it. It would be used immediately after the Council to indicate both consecrated life in general, and the nature of each institute in particular. The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* officially adopts the expressions “charism of the Founder”, “charism of religious life” for the first time (ET 11). The term was then accepted and thoroughly explored by the document *Mutuae Relationes* (MR 11).

The dual level referred to in the use of the term “charism” has been the subject of special studies (in particular in the USG – Union of Superiors General), leading to the overcoming of a certain uniformity of consideration of consecrated life, not applicable to the objective and multifaceted diversity of institutes. The path taken to properly define the “charism of the Founder” and “the charism of religious life” has not been easy. This is also proven by the painstaking history of some general chapters in recent years.

As for theologians: those who have dealt with the “charism of religious life” in general (and they *are* the majority) have limited themselves to stating that the common charismatic aspects are configured in different concrete forms and with a different harmonisation of their constituent elements; those, on the other hand, who insisted first of all on the consideration of the Founder’s charism have stressed that consecrated life is not lived in the abstract but with historically determined styles, highlighting the originality of each of them. Noting the abundance of theological literature in this regard, the harmonisation and development of an adequate theology of the Holy Spirit in the practical consideration of his charisms still do not seem entirely satisfactory.

As it seems to me, this development and harmonisation needs a more careful study of the “historicity” of the different forms of consecrated life and the analogy of their mutual relationships.

In fact, consecrated life is not an abstract ideal separable from its historical practice. We have seen that the history of the Church presents a considerable multiplicity of forms of consecrated life, which differ not only in their outward style or in their apostolic purposes, but also in their constitutive elements: their spirit, their way of sanctification, their relationships with the world, their very experience of God. Each of these forms (which can include — as we will see — different homogeneous institutes) seeks to carry out a complete project, while knowing that it is not the only one, of the *sequela Christi*. In this they all show a common radical unity.

But each takes its impetus from its own own particular reading of the mystery of Christ, which becomes the organising synthesis of a special “type” of *sequela* to proclaim the prophecy of redemption in history according to how it has evolved and been transformed.

This interesting diversity of forms of consecrated life has given rise to a conviction that must stand as a given: the terms “consecrated life” and “religious life” indicate an evangelical experience that is not “univocal” but “analogous”, with a rich variety of forms.

This entails, among other things, the need and painstaking care to revise certain theological approaches that start from a general theory on consecrated or religious life, thus applying it with surprising generalisation to any type of institute. Thus, some authors have noted certain

simplifications and forced applications that do not correspond to the charismatic reality found in the Church. The typological classification itself in the new Canon Law has had a very difficult journey and has aroused not a few cases of resistance. One has the impression, at times, that certain authors (even religious) when speaking of the charism of consecrated or religious life in general, take their starting point from a sectorial perspective of a specific charism (for which they perhaps have greater affinity through knowledge and experience) and then judge the whole from such a narrow angle.

A theology of consecrated life convinced of the history inherent in the multiple gifts of the Spirit, must be based on a precise analysis and a historical and spiritual interpretation of the different concrete forms of consecrated life itself.

The diversity of forms can also explain why different theologies of consecrated or religious life have arisen over the centuries.

Practice and theory, experience and analysis, sectorial investigation and systematisation all affect and interpenetrate each other in this area.

# 7

## Towards a Theology of Consecrated Life

During the period from the closing of Vatican II to the 1980s, theology — as we have seen — studied consecrated life and its various problems with some degree of commitment.

1. *In the immediate post-conciliar period*, theologians had limited themselves to commenting on and investigating the Council's texts: in particular *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, considered in the general framework of the renewed ecclesiology. It was immediately clear that these texts did not claim to offer an exhaustive theological doctrine on the subject. We know, in fact, that the purpose of the Council was the promotion of renewal, and not the presentation of an exhaustive organic doctrine.

2. Therefore, *around the 1970s*, various theologians entered upon a new line of research, critically based on revelation and Christian experience. More precisely, they address the problem of the biblical foundations of consecrated life, the problem of its specific identity in the face of other forms of Christian life, and they also made an attempt to interpret its historical-phenomenological future.

3. *Between the 1970s and the 1980s*, critical studies were also attempted on directions for renewal resulting from general chapters (especially the “special” ones) and essays appeared on various topical problems: the contemplative dimension and the “Deo summe dilecto totaliter mancipatur”, the evangelical mission, the option for the poor, insertion in the world of work, the confrontation with charismatic movements, relations with the local Church, the complex problem of acculturation and inculturation, etc.

4. *Studies on “the charism” of the Founder and his or her Institute* have reached a particular consistency (especially within the individual institutes) through gradual deeper understanding: first, the analysis of the “constituent elements” of that person's experience in the Spirit; therefore, the “historicity” of this experience, distinguishing what is permanent from what is transient; and finally, the theological statement on the meaning of “founder” from a historical-theological point of view, determining the criteria of discernment for its permanent vitality.

5. The *theological literature* resulting from these years of renewal is *materially abundant*. Juan Manuel Lozano in his volume *La sequela de Cristo*, which sought to be a historical-systematic theology of religious life (appearing simultaneously in English and Italian),<sup>7</sup> presents 27 pages of bibliography in this regard. If we compare the fruitfulness of this period with the decades immediately prior to the Council, a significant increase in the quantity and quality of the theological reflection on consecrated life is evident. There is progress but we are not there yet. I do not believe that we can speak today of a developed and systematic “theology of consecrated life”. Rather, it is a question of monographs, some overviews of certain aspects, specific arts, increasingly enriching research. A simple glance at the cited bibliography clearly confirms this. Those 27 pages would increase enormously if we were to add the historical, doctrinal and spiritual studies that appeared in institutes on their experience of the Spirit. Their authors are not always known as renowned theologians, but the writings often offer very valuable theological contributions.

Faced with this exuberance of divine theological exploration that in all probability is moving towards a new and robust theology of consecrated life, I am certainly not thinking of a kind of treatise,

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<sup>7</sup> J.M. LOZANO, *La sequela di Cristo*, Ancora, Milan 1981. In English, *Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life*, Claret Center for resources in Spirituality, Chicago, 1980.

but of a more objective and global pneumatological vision of the People of God in which the analysis of the charisms of consecrated life and the study of their fundamental convergences are described with historical and doctrinal objectivity to confirm the concrete fruitfulness of the “life and holiness” of the Church.

Meanwhile, all those who deal with the development of post-conciliar theology must necessarily note that there has been a real awakening of interest, research and theological production on consecrated life. For this reason, any ecclesiology that does not provide sufficiently large and up-to-date space for the topic of consecrated life would necessarily be incomplete and lacking today; and, first and foremost, any pastoral approach that practically disregards the special charisms of such a life or seeks to manipulate them would also be defective and reductive.

6. *Differentiated reflection.* I think it is essential, however, to add yet another demanding observation, which is both a finding and a challenge for research and reflection. In presenting the institutes of consecrated life, Vatican II classifies them (if it can be put this way) into three large groups within which there are numerous somewhat homogeneous institutes; the three groups differ quite strongly from each other.

The Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* speaks of

- institutes entirely dedicated to contemplation (no. 7);
- institutes (clerical or lay) dedicated to the various works of apostolate (no. 8);
- secular institutes, even if they are not properly “religious” (n. 11).

In turn, the decree on missionary activity speaks in the same sense of:

- institutes of contemplative life;
- institutes of active life;
- secular institutes (AG 40).

This grouping is certainly imperfect and not adequate enough for the extraordinary multiplicity of charisms. We must recognise that the Holy Spirit does not allow himself to be so easily classified within our mental schemes.

But this distinction of groups (which also has its own value) serves at least to avoid developing an overly unambiguous theology on consecrated life. The three groups present well-differentiated projects of evangelical life, although coinciding in special consecration by God and in a total oblation of self to him to love, witness to and serve him in the Church.

In each of the groups, a “contemplative dimension”, an “apostolic dimension” and a “secular dimension” are present, indeed they are practically essential for each institute. These dimensions are experienced and achieved in practice in all groups, but with a strongly differentiated typology from one group to another.

It would therefore be improper and misleading to elaborate a theology of consecrated life, for example, only with a “monastic” approach or only with an “apostolic” concern or only with a “secular” perspective.

Certainly, the practice of the evangelical counsels (common to all) offers ample horizons for a theology of the entire consecrated life, while taking great care, however, to avoid reductive preconceptions that surreptitiously identify consecrated life with the project-types of only one of the aforementioned groups.

A good theology should also be able to enlighten a spirituality; now, evidently, a religious-monastic spirituality is very different from a religious-apostolic one; just as a “religious” spirituality is very different from one of “secular” consecration.

It is necessary to avoid a subtle attitude of reductive preconceptions (starting simply from the fourth century with a certain form of religious life) even just to develop a sketch of the history of consecrated life over the centuries, and then letting oneself be led by an “evolved” explanation from that century on to the eleventh, thirteenth, sixteenth, nineteenth, twentieth centuries (as if the Holy Spirit were no longer creative and original in every new charism given to the Church). The researcher cannot overlook the theological insight inherent in the primary source of this special consecration, which is Jesus Christ himself. The substance of the consecrated person’s life project is their radical *sequela*. And this radical *sequela* began right around him or her from the outset and in different ways. Thus an institute of apostolic life, for example, feels more in tune with the apostles of the first century than with the desert hermits of the fourth century.

In a powerful volume on *The Christian State of Life*, H. Urs von Balthasar examines with theological acuteness the foundation and origins of the “state of the counsels”.<sup>8</sup> It is in the original mystery of Christ and in the living witness of the first disciples, docile to a special call, that we must seek the insights for a search and an adequate elaboration of a doctrine and a history of consecrated life in the Church.

There is still a long way to go!

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<sup>8</sup> H. URS VON BALTHASAR, *The Christian State of Life*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1983.

## Conclusion

The members of the institutes of consecrated life have moved in the direction indicated by the Council, often with boldness and determination. The path taken is positive. The awareness of the fundamental elements of radicalism in the following of Christ has grown; a more concrete sense of the Church, a more pneumatological vision of the Founder. Some new difficulties and risks have also appeared. This highlighted the need for a renewed theology of the ecclesial character of consecrated life in harmony with the character of each charism. It is desirable that a truly “theological” theology be developed more and more in dialogue with the human sciences, with a hermeneutic capacity for the historicity and historical practice of the Church, and also open to a renewed and healthy philosophical reflection.

Consecrated life and theology refer to each other for a worthy preparation for the advent of the third millennium of Christianity. Together, special consecration and its theology can contribute to the growth of a fruitful renewal in the People of God.

From the Council until today, there are not a few — as we have seen — interventions of the Magisterium that can enlighten research and development.

The Holy Father John Paul II in the letter (previously mentioned) to the Bishops of the United States of America offered a document (approved by himself) “as an aid” to their responsibility as guides and pastors. It gathered in summary the important points of the Church’s teaching on “religious” life, and was prepared by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.<sup>9</sup>

This document contains one evocative aspect that I like to mention as a conclusion.

We know that Mary is the eschatological icon of the Church and that theological reflection on her profoundly enriches ecclesiology. The doctrine of consecrated life also receives abundant light. The document says:

It is especially in Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, that religious life comes to understand itself most deeply and finds its sign of certain hope (cf. LG 68). She, who was conceived immaculate because she was called from among God’s people to bear God himself most intimately and to give him to the world, was consecrated totally by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. She was the Ark of the new covenant itself. The handmaid of the Lord in the poverty of the *anawim*, the Mother of fair love from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond, the obedient Virgin whose “yes” to God changed our history, the missionary hurrying to Hebron, the one who was sensitive to needs at Cana, the steadfast witness at the foot of the cross, the centre of unity which held the young Church together in its expectation of the Holy Spirit, Mary showed throughout her life all those values to which religious consecration is directed. She is the Mother of religious in being Mother of him who was consecrated and sent, and in her *fiat* and *magnificat* religious life finds the totality of its surrender to and the thrill of its joy in the consecratory action of God.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Letter of the Holy Father to the Bishops of the United States*, 3 April 1983.

<sup>10</sup> *Essential elements in the Church’s teaching on religious life as applied to institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate*. From the Vatican, Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 31 May 1983.

