

***Vita Consecrata:* Implications and Challenges**

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Pope John Paul II writes the following in the Introduction of his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: "I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life in its three aspects of consecration, communion, and mission."

This presentation hopes to contribute some reflection towards that deeper understanding which the Holy Father and all of us in the consecrated life desire. My reflection will be in the light of our Philippine situation. Every time I read *Vita Consecrata* to prepare a retreat, a conference, or a recollection, new aspects emerge from the document. It is simply impossible, therefore, to make a comprehensive presentation.

1. The Theological Approach: *Confessio Trinitatis*

Before the Synod of Bishops on Consecrated Life began, two approaches to theological reflection on Consecrated Life were debated by way of the feedback to the *Lineamenta*. One was the *deductive* approach beginning with the mystery of consecrated life as a reflection of the mystery of God in Jesus, followed by necessary conclusions regarding mission. I might call this method an approach from above: *from consecration and communion to mission*. The second is the *inductive* approach beginning with the contemporary challenge of the world and the existential situation of consecrated life that is responding to the challenge, followed by a reflection on the nature of consecrated life as impacted by the situation. I may call

this method an approach from below: *from mission to consecration and communion*.

Much of the feedback to the *Lineamenta* favored the latter approach. It is after all the kind of theological reflection that is favored in the Third World. We in the Philippines have been using this type of theological approach since the 1970's. The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod respected this desire and developed a very fine survey of the pastoral situation of the world from which flowed a reflection on the nature and mission of consecrated life. The Synod Bishops generally felt that the *Instrumentum Laboris* was, indeed, an excellent working document. Some said that it should serve as a necessary companion document to whatever the Holy Father would subsequently develop in his post-synodal exhortation. Even when the Synod propositions were lined up in the traditional way, consecration to mission, I continued to believe that the post-synodal exhortation would be developed from below.

Yet *Vita Consecrata* begins with the Trinitarian mystery as the origin of Consecrated Life. Obviously an approach from above. Why? What happened? What are the implications for us?

To answer the first two questions we have to go back to the Synod of Bishops. One of the more impressive experiential observations by many at the Synod may be summed up in the following proposition: Consecrated life in the East emphasizes the prayer of Jesus on the mountain. Consecrated life in the West emphasizes Jesus in his ministry on the plain. Perhaps there is a need for the East to go down more frequently to plain as well as for the West to go up more frequently to the mountain.

Hence, the Synod's emphasis and insistence on contemplation, prayer and communion. Basically, the reason for this insistence seems to lie in the worldwide perception that consecrated persons seem to be recognized more by what they do — teaching, catechizing, taking care of the sick — than by what they are. (A side reflection here: this is at the heart of the reasoning at the Synod regarding the wearing of a distinctive symbol as a sign of consecration; a sign has to be recognizable, see VC 25; Prop. 25; also PC 17). As at the Synod of Bishops, so in the post-synodal exhortation. There is a ringing declaration that for consecrated persons there is a primacy of *being* over *doing*, that it is time for us to re-examine what we are doing in the light of what we must be.

At a subsequent meeting in Rome after the Synod I argued for an approach from below, believing that the primacy of *being* over *doing* could still be developed well by using the approach. This was not to be so. I was very disappointed. But reading over and over again the first chapter of *Vita Consecrata* in all its beautiful spiritual richness, I am very grateful and happy that the Pope started with an inspiring and meditative *Confessio Trinitatis* rather than with a sober survey of the pastoral situation. One wonders how so much wealth could be mined by faith reflection on the icon of the Transfiguration. With this the document starts with beauty and exaltation, filled with gratitude for God's great gift of consecrated life to the church and the world. "Lord, it is well that we are here" and we wish stay here with you forever.

There is also a theological emphasis in the first chapter that we, as consecrated persons, need to reflect upon even more. This is the call inherent in consecrated life to conform our entire being to Christ chaste, poor, obedient, whose whole existence is turned both inward and also totally outward to what lies beyond history. "It is the duty of the consecrated life to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal towards which all things tend" (n. 16).

There are many implications of this approach and theological understanding.

1.1. The Challenge of Re-Rooting Consecrated Life

It is now ten years since the Philippines passed through a most turbulent period of history. Consecrated Life passed through the same ferment. The mission to be prophets was foremost. Issues of justice, peace, and development preoccupied large groups of Religious, whether individually or in a number of cases congregationally. In a few cases, congregations were split. For many, the old religious formation had not prepared them for the stormy period of the 1970's and early 80's. A false dichotomy between consecration and mission emerged. Many left consecrated life in favor of mission. Others withdrew further into their own consecrated life, as they understood it, at the expense of religious-social prophecy.

Today the methodological approach of *Vita Consecrata* and its first symphonic movement, *Confessio Trinitatis*, call for a reexamining and a re-rooting of our sometimes hyper-active consecrated life. The christological aspect of consecrated life is probably the stron-

gest dimension in our life. We view ourselves naturally as followers of the poor, chaste, and obedient Jesus, and called radically to be such. Most recently, the pneumatological aspect has received emphasis because of a greater awareness of the role of the renewing Spirit in our lives. This is due to a great extent to the lay charismatic movement, spread throughout the world in the late 1970's.

However, God the Father has not been well recognized except as the One called 'Father' by Jesus. And even now a radical fringe of the feminist movement would want to change that biblical fact, too, so that the "Our Father" becomes simply "Our God in heaven" or even "Our God, Father and Mother." There are, indeed, feminine images of God in the Bible as there are masculine. But the feminine images should not be forced into the masculine and vice-versa. Each image has a validity of itself. The *Our Father* is certainly part of Jesus' *Abba* experience of God and a re-reading to suit contemporary gender sensitivity would be an injustice to the self-knowledge of Jesus.

How conscious are we of the overarching trinitarian nature of our consecrated lives? Have we reflected on it enough? Is it imbedded deeply in our psyche so as to be a solid religious, psychological, affective, support as well as a dynamic force of our contemplative-active spirituality? One time at prayer I went through these same questions and discovered that much of my prayer life is about *per Filium* ("in the footsteps of the Son"), some of it about *in Spiritu* ("consecrated by the Holy Spirit"), and precious little about *a Patre ad Patrem* (the Father's initiative). I believe my consecrated life is the poorer for it. I asked the same questions as I have; then I asked the Carmelite nuns in Jolo during their annual retreat, and one of them gave me the life. of Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity to read! I was deeply affected by her life, such a young Carmelite nun so steeped in the Trinitarian life that I expect she could teach expert theologians a bit more about the mystery of the Triune God.

This trinitarian root of our consecrated life tells us about the core of who we are. If I were then a formator, I would have to speak about the Blessed Trinity to *formandi* sometime during the Novitiate year, a little bit about what theology has to say about this ineffable community of Three Persons. And now that I know about Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity, I would want to use her life to tell novices what this infinitely loving Triune God means to the consecrated person, to the community, and to the community-in-mission.

1.2. *The Challenge of Forming Ordinary Mystics*

In reading *Vita Consecrata* I would suggest that Chapter III, *Servitium Caritatis*, be read always in the light of two realities, namely, the reality of the God who calls us to communion with him in the Kingdom of God, and the reality of our contemporary socio-economic, political, religio-cultural challenges. These two realities must be inseparable. One calls for a loving confession, a deeply felt profession of faith, while the other calls for committed engagement in the mission of salvation and liberation. And not even "Institutes devoted to contemplation" can be absolved from the latter commitment. For as *Vita Consecrata* itself declares, they "bear witness to God's lordship over history and anticipate the glory which is to come" and "contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God" (n. 8).

This brings up the age-old problem of contemplation and action, of prayer and work. There is a clear insight suggested by *Vita Consecrata* regarding this problem. The vital linking and blending of the first movement of the document's symphony (*Confessio Trinitatis*) and its third movement (*Servitium Caritatis*) are possible only through Communion, as developed in the second symphonic movement (chapter II, *Signum Fraternitatis*), a communion ultimately rooted in the Blessed Trinity. The unity, communion, of contemplation and action, prayer and work, consecration and mission is preserved less by religious rules regarding what prayer and work have to be done, how long they have to be done and where. That unity basically depends on inner convictions and attitudes, gradually formed through the years of initial formation, tested and nourished through life.

For me, this really involves the formation of that mystical attitude of "sensing God in everything," of being constantly aware of God's presence (or absence) and action in me and in others, and of being directed by the Spirit of God. It is to pray and work — live — constantly in a Godward personal environment. How is this achieved? How is it to be done? Lectures, conferences, workshops, seminars, spiritual reading, bible reading, sharing and other vehicles of learning will help. Ultimately this mystical attitude is learned effectively when one who lives such a life shares it with others. It is the pedagogical power and the unambiguous catechesis of an evidently Godward life that will teach others this mystical attitude. Religious Formators, indeed, carry a heavy burden.

The same observation applies to the question of becoming a person of "creative fidelity to religious charism" in responding to the challenges of context and culture. How does one become a person of "creative fidelity?" A well prepared on-going formation program would be significantly helpful. And we need all the help we can get from theology, spirituality and the social sciences. But one has simply to look at the example of founders and foundresses to see how they have been both creative and faithful to their own Spirit-given inspiration in responding to the needs of their times. Admittedly, in the history of Religious Institutes it is possible that this or that particular founder or foundress, having inspired the religious charism to flourish, might in time be left behind by the rapid changes that take place.

1.3. The Challenge of Consecrated Life as a Sign

Vita Consecrata speaks frequently of being a sign. Thus, earlier above, the consecrated life is a sign of the eschatological goal of everything, Jesus Christ. Likewise, "the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community and for the world" (n. 15). In addition, chastity is a sign of an undivided heart totally committed to the love and service of God, a sign then of the infinite love of the three Divine Persons (cf. n. 21). And so for the other two evangelical counsels. Further, the fraternal community of consecrated persons is a sign of communion in the Church (see the whole of chapter II), while the mission of consecrated life is seen as a sign of God's love in the world (chapter III). Finally, "consecrated women are called in a very special way to be signs of God's tender love towards the human race and to be special witnesses to the mystery of the Church, Virgin, Bride and Mother." Consecrated persons must be "true signs of Christ in the world" (n. 2). These are some of the many dimensions of consecrated life as a sign.

But precisely here we find a problem of recognizing, of knowing an epistemological problem if you will. Too often, the revelation is not manifest, it is hidden, or it is obscure. The meaning of the sign is not understood. The sign fails to reveal. It fails to witness. We know, of course, that the lack of fidelity to one's consecration manifested in public failures of chastity or poverty is clearly understood as a countersign. But even when 99.9999% of all consecrated persons are totally faithful, is the "eschatological" meaning of their

consecration clear to ordinary people? Is their practice of evangelical poverty understood by people as the total gift of self that it is? Does fraternal life really proclaim to people the harmony among the Three Persons? Does an observer see Christ when a consecrated person passes by? These questions can be multiplied and referred to every area where the theology of signs is applied.

The problem is at several levels. First, the sign refers to divine realities that are not themselves clearly understood; nor do people readily connect such signs with them, say, the eschatological meaning of the counsels. Second, the signs themselves are deeply theological, requiring a theological understanding that is not in the normal consciousness of the individual, even if religious or cleric. In a secularistic environment, theological understanding is not so common. And third, assuming that both of the above are overcome, signs often fail to reveal because the connection between the sign and what it manifests is obscure. For instance, it is sometimes said that obedience is a social protest to the use of dictatorial power. I once said this and a young religious said that to him obedience is exactly the opposite. It is an invitation to the imposition of power.

Do we conclude then that the theology of signs as applied to consecrated life is inutile? If not, what should we do to make certain that the sign of consecrated life can be understood, readily grasped and appreciated, that, indeed, when a consecrated person related to others, works with others, and prays with others, they see a person who, by the way this individual lives his/her life, clearly points to Jesus the Lord? For after all the consecrated person is called to be totally conformed to him.

A story is told about the newly canonized Founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the missionary minded, indefatigable, and intense Bishop of Marseille, St. Eugene de Mazenod, that a fellow bishop reported to another: "I have visited Marseille; I have seen Paul." How does a person become a clear sign of another, even a sign of Christ? I certainly do not have a ready answer. The gradual formation of the person to think and act in the way of Christ is certainly necessary. Deep prayerful meditation and prolonged contemplation of Jesus will surely be indispensable. And so are total immersion in the Scriptures, practices of asceticism, joyful fidelity to duty. In the end, all these fail will fail unless what is contemplated is kept in the heart and acted upon, unless what is believed, prayed over, and interiorized flows into action.

This is a key challenge to spiritual directors and formators, a challenge as well to Superiors and communities of consecrated persons that have to provide the necessary environment for a person to grow in the image of Christ.

2. Communion: Community as *Signum Fraternitatis*

Vita Consecrata develops life in community and its relationships to others within the theological framework of Communion. The community of consecrated persons is a sign of the Trinitarian community and a sign of the Church as communion.

2.1. The Challenge to Build Community

However, a human community is not a given fact. The other day, we concluded the first Northern Luzon Pastoral Forum in Baguio City. It was attended by more than 150 delegates and observers from the 15 dioceses and apostolic vicariates of Northern Luzon. The North is not as solid as one thinks. In the Forum were a very rich variety of cultures, languages, customs, and indigenous peoples; differences of socio-economic class, professions, educational background, etc. There were bishops, priests, lay men and women, youth, farmers, lawyers, doctors, academicians, fisherfolk, housewives. We all professed to belong to one Church. But when the delegates began to speak about the Church, we began to realize that there were a hundred ways of understanding the Church, the Church as an institution, the Church as people, the Church as bishops, priests, and religious, the Church as a rock, the Church as a living body, the church as empowered lay people. One Church? A Church of Communion? A community of disciples of one mind and heart? Hardly, so it seemed. At the end, everyone from the Ilocos region to the Cordilleras, Cagayan valley, and Pangasinan was enthused about envisioning a new way of being Church—one of real Communion and Discipleship, a Church of the Poor, a Church of Solidarity. Filled with the Spirit of God, everyone went back to the local churches they were familiar with, eager to renew themselves and their churches into the Church they envisioned.

I imagine that every religious institute, humanly speaking, is a microcosm of the varieties and differences (surely much reduced by virtue of a common charism and years of formation), within the northern Luzon church. But individual differences remain real in

the religious community and sometimes they are volatile and can create little islands in the community. I remember one meeting of religious. Each Superior began his report with the words: A Report on our district Community. Until the last one who simply said: A report on our Archipelago.

How does one build community? It is always the question. And it is urgent. Unfortunately it is also always difficult to answer. Even if community is a gift of the Spirit, it must also be built by human minds and hearts, filled with varying interests and attitudes. One might generously say that every personal idiosyncrasy is one facet of the entire diamond that is the religious community. But this will be stretching the truth. The truth is that sometimes members of a community are hopelessly split into several camps, each one claiming the objective truth.

So again, how does one build community? I do not know. But surely it will be built tenderly, lovingly, and carefully. Group processes will help, although "One can group dynamize a community to death," as an expert in group dynamics once testified. Sincere, persevering individual efforts to grow towards the common charism and vision are necessary. Patience and understanding, kindness and tact, wisdom and constant mutual forgiveness, humility, openness; the list of virtues and human qualities seems to be endless.

In our culture of dependency, much depends on the charism of the Superior as inspiriter, formator, facilitator, spiritual director, admonitor, harmonizer, friend. She/he sets the atmosphere for growth. In a novitiate, she/he may exercise her role more heavily and more directly. But a good Novice Mistress/Master may not necessarily be a good Superior for those already professed.

Still, the building of a fraternal community is the work of all. Rules and regulations help, but in the final analysis community is built to the extent that each grows in the image of Jesus, the still the center of the community. When authentic community is built, the love, the joy, the sharing and serving within the community is clearly a sign that community in a fragmented world is possible.

An important footnote. As at the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II), so at the Northern Luzon Pastoral Forum. The Religious were asked to lend their expertise in building community to the pastoral thrust of building Basic Ecclesial Communities in Northern Luzon.

2.2. *The Challenge of Communion with the Local Church*

Vita Consecrata echoes what PCP-II had said about the integration of Institutes of consecrated persons into the pastoral thrust of a particular church while retaining their charism and autonomy. This issue received a good number of synodal interventions. Many Bishops complained about the failure of Religious institutes to collaborate with parish or diocesan pastoral programs or about their lack of consultation with the local Bishop regarding changes of assignments. *Vita Consecrata* presents a balanced view, indicating that Bishops should also respect the particular charisms of Institutes. The solution is dialogue animated by charity. Dialogue is at the heart of communion.

Vita Consecrata suggests that diocesan seminarians be taught about the theology and spirituality of consecrated life so as to prepare them for better collaboration with consecrated persons in pastoral work.

Since the Synod, a new era of collaboration in the Philippines has begun. The Philippine Bishops' Mixed Commission is presently studying ways by which more consultation and participation by Religious at the Bishops' level could be operationalized. The times are opportune. The ideological and political aspects in the 1970's and early 80's that had served as a wedge keeping both groups apart seem to be largely a thing of the past.

What is important for everyone is the development of a spirituality of communion which *Vita Consecrata* asks consecrated persons to be experts of (n. 46) and which consists in a way of thinking, speaking and acting, summed up in the classic Ignatian phrase, *sentire cum ecclesia*, a constant and lively sense of the Church so dearly held by Founders and Foundresses.

Being signs of communion, institutes of consecrated life received a special tasks: "The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnics hatred or senseless violence" (n.51).

Perhaps one can reflect on this special entrustment in the light of the protests participated in by some clergy and religious in south-

ern Mindanao against the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and development.

3. The Challenge of Formation, Integral and Inculturated

It is now axiomatic that formation should have a character of wholeness, involving all the dimensions of the person, since consecrated life is the total giving of self (n.65). Personal dialogue should be the chief instrument of formation (n.66) which should be directed towards growth in commitment to the charism and mission to the Institute (n.65), to community and to "the essentially missionary dimension of consecration" (n.67).

The training of formators should preferably take place where they are "in contact with the culture in which their pastoral service will later be carried out. In the work of formation, the more solidly established Institutes should help those of more recent foundation by contributing some of their members" (n.66). Formation should "enable candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative" (n.67).

For consecrated persons, an inculturated formation is to include the development of "a critical judgment, based on the gospel, regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work" (n. 67). And since it is in the nature consecrated persons to be disponible to assignments in varying cultures, inculturation would mean the development of a respectful openness to different cultures, the ability to immerse oneself in a culture, and at the same time the ability to uproot one self from that culture in order to be open to another.

All Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life as asked to draw up as soon as possible a ratio institutionis, "a formation programme inspired by their particular charism, presenting clearly and in all its stages the course to be followed in order to assimilate fully the spirituality of the Institute" (n. 68).

What I would like to plead for is the need for Religious Institutes to assist in the formation of diocesan seminarians. It is a fact that most diocesan seminaries lack Professors, Formators and Spiritual Directors. Vincentians, Jesuits, Dominicans, Columbans and Divine Word missionaries are assisting as best they can with this

important task. But other Religious Institutes could also help in various areas of formation. We could use the services of at least three more formators in the Regional Theology Seminary in Vigan right now. The same can be said regarding the need of personnel to help in continuing formation.

4. *Servitium Caritatis*

4.1. *The Challenge of Mission and the Witness of Life*

Faith to the idea that being is more important than doing, *Vita Consecrata* states: "Indeed, more than in external works, the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge, this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for salvation" (n. 72).

I have seen consecrated persons both men and women slowly burn themselves out in the mission to accomplish many things. There is hardly any time to rest or even to pray. They must be always doing something, planning this or that, organizing people, and teaching here and there. It is, of course, true as *Vita Consecrata* itself says that "the witness of life and the witness of works of the apostolate and human development are equally necessary" (n. 72). Still, the primacy of witness holds and this calls for a certain deliberate serenity in mission, where success or failure is measured not exactly by the amount of things done but rather by the religious message and meaning communicated and shared when one works in the name of the Lord.

4.2. *The Challenge of Creative Discernment in Mission*

Vita Consecrata appeals to institutes of consecrated persons for an open discernment to new fields of mission and to the new faces of the poor. It presents three contemporary challenges to the evangelical counsels. A major challenge is "materialism which craves possessions." Evangelical poverty is intimately linked with preferential love for the poor (n. 90). Consecrated persons, by virtue of evangelical poverty, have to challenge the idolatry of money. They should be involved in the care for the integrity of creation, train future leaders who will "be committed to eliminating structures of

oppression and to promoting projects of solidarity for the benefit of the poor" (n. 89). Secondly, in the light of the evangelical counsel of chastity they should respond to the challenge posed by a hedonistic culture and also respond, in the light of obedience, to false notions of freedom in the world today.

A spiritual discernment is necessary with regard to the creative use of the traditional apostolates regarding these challenges. Family life apostolate, schools, mass media apostolate; these need a re-examination and perhaps a re-orientation so as to respond more directly to materialism, hedonism, and excessive liberalism. I feel a certain tragic sense of frustration when I see young ladies in the uniform of Catholic schools in Manila exhibiting wasteful consumerist attitudes regarding their time and money in big shopping malls. My mind goes back to little children in torn, dirty, browned clothes and running around barefoot in the remote mountain *barangays* of San Emilio, Ilocos Sur.

The mission is essentially communitarian. It is not enough for individuals to respond to its challenge, especially when mission is confronted not with individual personal sin but powerful structures of injustice and secularization. The response to be given must somehow be corporate, communal, congregational. It seems to me that the time has long since arrived when religious, considered "doing their own thing" among people in the margins of society should be given full congregational support so as long as they are responding not out of any ideological or political agenda but in the spirit of the congregation. The more I come to know indigenous peoples the more keenly I hear the call of God for religious to be among them. And is not God calling us today in the South to the task of inter-religious dialogue for the sake of peace and development?

5. The Challenge of Spirituality

The Philippines is a nation where faith is separated from life, where poverty massive because of injustice, where peace is insecure. It seems to me that the greatest contribution of consecrated persons would be to become clear, unequivocal signs of authentic discipleship, in solidarity with the poor through preferential love, and signs of fraternal community where justice and peace flourished. This will require deep rootedness in the Trinitarian life and communion. And also a total configuration to Jesus chaste, poor, and obedient.

This calls for a total self-giving spirituality, requiring as an essential dimension a committed sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. The transfiguration of the Religious by consecration is in view of mission, to share in the self-emptying of Christ through his passion and death for the world's own transformation and salvation. No mere sacrifice is adequate for the spirituality of religious. It has to be total self-donation in the manner of Jesus.

The greater the sacrifice and the more clearly it is witnessed, the greater the attraction of religious life to idealistic youth. Is this not perhaps the reason that so many young men and women feel called to the more austere, the more simple and unencumbered, the more rigorous forms of religious life today. They seem assured of getting in touch with Jesus in all his servanthood. "It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men of women of our day, who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness" (n. 93).

Because everyone is called to be spiritual and to be holy, more than anything else today institutes of consecrated life have to be schools of spirituality not only for its members but for people in general who feel the assault of secular forces on their own religious sense. This I believe would be your greatest contribution to the new evangelization.

Let me conclude this extended reflection with a reorganized excerpt from the same prayer that ends the document *Vita Consecrata*:

To you, our Mother, who did the will of the Father, ever ready in obedience, courageous in poverty, and receptive of fruitful virginity, we address our confident prayer. Obtain from your divine Son that all who have received the gift of following him in the consecrated life may be enabled to bear witness to that gift by their transfigured lives. We ask you this, that in everyone and in everything glory, adoration, and love may be given to the Most High Lord of all things, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. □