Bringing God’s Embrace: 
Living and Radiating the Joy of the Gospel
SANYASA Journal of Consecrated Life
A biannual published by Sanyasa: Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore, managed by the Claretian Missionaries, in view of fostering theological reflection on the life and mission of consecrated life in all its aspects, and in its essential relationship with other forms of Christian life in the Church, with specific reference to the Indian and Asian Reality.

Chief Editor
Xavier E. Manavath, CMF

Executive Editor
Martin George, CMF

Advisory Board
Felix Toppo, SJ (Bishop, Jamshedpur)
Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, CMF (Professor, ITVR, Madrid)
Diarmuid O’Murchu, MSC (Author and Lecturer, London)
Joe Mannath, SDB (Executive Secretary, National CRI, Delhi)
Joseph Mattam, SJ (Professor Emeritus, Gujarat Vidya Deep, Ahmedabad)
Shanthi, SAB (Superior General, Sisters of St. Anne of Bangalore)
Serena, MSA (Principal, Sophia College, Ajmeer)
V. Lawrence, CMF (Staff, Life Center, Dindigul)

Editorial Board
Arul Jesu Robin, CMF
Paulson Veliyannoor, CMF
S. Devadoss, CMF
Jacob Arakkal, CMF
George Lanihottam, CMF
Pushpa Joseph, FMM
Samuel Canilang, CMF

Review Editor
George Panthalany, CMF

Circulation Manager
Mathew Moothedam, CMF

Manuscripts for publication, books for review should be addressed to: The Executive Editor, and business communications (correspondence, subscription, change of address) to: The Circulation Manager

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE
Sanyasa, Carmelaram Post
Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India
Tel: 080 – 28439259; 28439944; Mobile: 099 6416 1332
E-mail: sjbancmf@gmail.com; sanyasac@gmail.com
Web: www.sanyasa.com

Published by SANYASA: Institute of Consecrated Life, Bangalore in collaboration with Claretian Publications, Bangalore, India
## CONTENTS

Editorial.................................................................................................... 5

**José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF**  
Mebasser: Prophets of Joy – New Evangelizers ....................................... 9

**P. Joseph Titus**  
Bringing God’s Embrace:  
Perspectives of the Hebrew Bible................................................................. 25

**James Kadankavil, SDB**  
Bringing God’s Embrace:  
Perspective of the New Testament ............................................................. 49

**Elizabeth C.S, SJT**  
Religious Vocation:  
A Joyous Response to the God of Love .................................................. 59

**Xavier E. Manavath, CMF**  
Resonances in Spirituality:  
Asceticism to Aestheticism ...................................................................... 75

**M. Michael Mariadass, CMF**  
Bringing Passion and Joy Into Religious Formation .................................. 93

**Teresa Peter, FS**  
Joyous Community Living:  
The First Mission .................................................................................. 111

**Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI**  
Radiating The Joy of The Gospel:  
The Spirit of Pope Francis ..................................................................... 123

**Sebastian Vadakumpadan**  
Radiating God’s Hospitality:  
A Perspective from the Prison Ministry ................................................. 141  
Book Review ................................................................................................ 157
We are in the Year specially dedicated to Consecrated Life. There has been a new awakening, manifested in the various seminars, workshops and symposiums that have been taking place at various levels. The Provincial Councils of many congregations have come out with different plans to re-vitalize the life of the members of their congregations in response to the new impetus given by the Holy Father Francis’s call to the religious to ‘wake up the world” with the joy of the Gospel. I humbly wish and pray that all these efforts may bring forth renewal and revitalization of this unique form of Christian living in the Church.

Sanyasa: Institute of Consecrated Life, as the only Institute in the whole country dedicated to the study and research in Theology and Formation of Consecrated Life, has made its own contribution by arranging two major events: (1) a one day get together for all the Major Superiors on the theme, Exercising Evangelical Leadership, intended to form the Religious Superiors in the manner and style of the leadership exercised by the Lord in the Gospels; and (2) a three day Seminar (CLW Seminar which is an annual event in SICL) on the theme, Bringing God’s Embrace: Living and Radiating the Joy of the Gospel, oriented to help the religious in symbolizing and mediating God’s loving embrace of humanity, in their life and ministries. Both these events, though arranged in the Institute, had a wide participation.

As announced at the Seminar, this issue of the Journal carries all the papers presented during the Seminar. Since there are nine papers, I regret to inform our readers that Part II of Joseph Rovira’s article on Moderator’s Role in Community will appear only in the upcoming issue of this Journal (January, 2016).

Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes, the inaugural speaker at the Seminar, explores the biblical concept of the Mebasser as the prophet of the good news of God’s embrace and leads the religious to rediscover their identity and mission in the style of the Mebassers in this new century. He proposes the kind of the message that these new Mebassers need to proclaim, the paradigm shift that is called for and the virtues that these contemporary mebassers have to emulate in their life.

The paper by Joseph Titus begins by drawing our attention to the words of our Pope Francis addressed to the consecrated men and women: “The men and women
of our time are waiting for words of consolation, the availability of forgiveness and true joy. We are called to bring to everyone the embrace of God.” In view of helping the consecrated understand better the Pope’s urgent call to bear witness to God’s mercy, the article tries in the first part to discover the Lord who comforts and in the second part it attempts to identify three biblical personalities as models of carrying out the mission of bringing God’s embrace to the people.

James Kadankavil, deals with the theme from the perspective of the New Testament and presents Jesus as the one who brings God’s embrace to us. Instead of analysing all the books of the New Testament, he limits himself to some texts and points out that God embraces us continually and always in Jesus. He calls the religious to a deeper realization of God’s embrace, savoring God’s love, invites them to face up to the problems and perils on the way and to let the embrace of God take hold of their personal lives, making them share that embrace with others.

An authentic religious vocation is a joyous response to the God of love. Elizabeth C.S., explores this theme, using a qualitative research approach, following a phenomenological framework. The author presents religious vocation as an affirmation of God’s love, care and plan for one’s life and shows that religious people are happier and have superior social support compared to non-religious people. The study intends to understand the life experiences of religious, explore their perception of religious life, the determinants of the choice of vocation, and the benefits of consecrated life with the hope of encouraging those young men and women, embracing religious vocation.

If we have to live and radiate the joy of the Gospel, there has to be new way of understanding and living spirituality—a vision that belongs authentically to our Christian heritage that we may have ignored. The central concern of Xavier E. Manavath, in his paper on resonances in spirituality, is to call for a shift from a spirituality that is negative into one that is more positive and life-affirming as expounded in the Gospel. He argues for a re-articulation or a re-visioning of the myth of traditional asceticism. He invites us to treat the ascetic stories of the past as “form traditional stories,” and helps us discover the fundamental spiritual discipline of “aesthetics within the asceticism” that the great ascetics in all the spiritual traditions wanted to live and proclaim. He guides us through some of these ascetic ideals, helping us discover the aesthetic ideals that touch upon the primordial aspirations of humankind.
Moving on, we have, *M. Michael Mariadoss*, showing us the way to bring passion and joy in religious formation. The author, first of all, delves into the religious formation in present context with its entire new ambience and presents God as the supreme formator who calls human persons and forms them in passion and joy. Secondly, he highlights that the individual candidate is the prime one responsible for his own formation and then goes to explain the ways in which the formators can provide the right ambience and become exemplary witnesses of consistency and authenticity, models of passion and joy and be those who are able to transmit the same to the formees.

What follows is the article by *Teresa Peter* who explores the theme of community living as the first mission. Establishing community living as central to religious life, she explains the communitarian dimension of evangelical counsels and presents community living as a means of personal sanctification. She lists out also some of the important challenges involved in community living and speaks of ways of dealing with these challenges so that the religious communities become real signs and witnesses of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the human communities.

The main concern of *Shaji George Kochuthara*, in the following article, is to present an overview of the message of joy, mainly based on the various writings and homilies of Pope Francis. He also draws from *Rejoice*, the letter to consecrated men and women from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The author brings to light the various aspects of the “vocation to joy” to be manifested in the lives of all Christians, especially that of the religious men and women. He, then, goes on to elaborate on the spirituality of communion as foundational to the joy of the Gospel, narrates various aspects this communion and presents them as concrete ways of living and manifesting this joy, badly needed in the world of our times.

The concluding article by *Sebastian Vadakumpadan*, is an effort to exemplify a concrete ministerial forum through which we bring God’s embrace, namely, the Prison Ministry. He opens for us the world of the prisons with all statistical data, the problems that exist in this world, the various forms of suffering that the prisoners go through, and invites us to bring God’s hospitality to these people who are victimized in so many different ways. He challenges the conscience of the Church and its ministers and invites them to come out of their comfort zones and enter into this world of excluded people to bring to them God’s compassion.
We present the above articles to our readers, inviting them to reflect upon the various aspects of the theme, *Bringing God’s Embrace: Living and Radiating the Joy of the Gospel*. We can only pray that these reflections will stimulate our own thinking, open up horizons, and stir up hearts so that they lead us to change structures, revise positions, formulate policies and move us to concrete expressions of mediating God’s love and compassion.

**Xavier E. Manavath, CMF**
(Chief Editor)
This 13th Consecrated Life Week Seminar presents to us a very beautiful image: “God’s em-brace.” This is the Gospel, that we, as consecrated men and women, try to live and radiate. Gospel is the embrace of God with the whole humanity, the whole earth and the cosmos. This embrace has another name in the Bible: Covenant of Love! This covenant or embrace was represented biblically by two symbols: the rainbow and the chalice:

I will place my rainbow in the clouds, and it will become a guarantee of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, When the rainbow is in the clouds, I will notice it and remember the perpetual covenant between God and all living creatures of all kinds that are on the earth.(Gen 9:13.16).

The prophet Ezekiel and the book of Revelation interpreted the rainbow as the glory of God manifested to us (Ezek 1:28; Rev 4:3) around the throne of God and around the head of the powerful angel, descending from heaven to evangelize the earth (Rev.10:1). The rainbow becomes the signal of the loving embrace of God out of love for humanity and earth.

The other symbol of the Covenant is the chalice offered to us by Jesus in the Eucharist: “He took the chalice after they had eaten, saying: “This chalice that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).

Through the chalice we share the same blood and life of Jesus. The embrace of God is so in-timate that we become blood relatives. This blood of the new covenant is poured out for all.

José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF, is a Claretian Missionary, born in Spain. He is professor-catedrático at the Pontifical University of Salamanca (Spain) in the Institute of Religious Life (Madrid). He has been teaching theology in various theological faculties abroad and also in Sanyasa: Institute of Consecrated Life, Bangalore. He has authored over 100 books and numerous articles. His major contribution to the theology of consecrated life is: “Fundamental Theology of the forms of Christian Life (vol I and II), “Theology of Religious Life: Covenant and Mission” (5 vol.), available from Claretian Publications in Manila and Bangalore. He can be contacted at: cmfxr44@gmail.com.
Living and radiating the joy of the good News of God's embrace is the main purpose of this conference. Consecrated life tries to contribute to a new Evangelization, aware of so many obstacles we find today. First of all we try to experience God's embrace to us and so we can become witnesses of this love, of this joy.

The outline of this conference will be this: (a) “Mebasser” as the name of the Prophet of the good News of God’s embrace; (b) “Mebasser” as the name of our prophecy as consecrated men and women; (c) The message of the new Mebasser in this XXI century

1. **MEBASSER: THE NAME OF THE PROPHET OF THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD’S EMBRACE**

   In the Old Testament there were two kinds of prophets: *the prophets of disgraces* and *the prophets of grace, of joyful message*. The focus of the message of the prophets of disgraces was on the infidelities, idolatries, sins against the commandments of God, and as a consequence, the announcement of imminent disgraces and punishments; nevertheless, in this kind of prophecy there is always an open door to hope and salvation, coming from the faithful God.

   By contrast, the focus of the message of the prophets of grace was the announcement of good news, of the victory of God’s fidelity to his covenant in the midst of his People. This second kind of prophets were called “Mebasser” in Hebrew language. We find such prophets in the book of Isaiah, chapters 40, 52 and 61. It correspondens to the part of the book assigned to the Deutero- and Trio-Isaiah. Let us pay attention to two of these texts: Is 40: 1-11 and Is 61: 1

1.1. **Vocation-Mission of Deutero-Isaiah’s Vocation as Mebasser of Zion (Is 40: 1-11)**

   The text of Is 40:1-11 is the narrative of the prophetic vocation of Mebasser, who in this case is the Deutero-Isaiah. The stage of this call is the heaven. There sound different voices, transmitting the will of God. Finally a heavenly voice addresses the prophet saying: “Go up on a high mountain, O Mebasser of Zion, shout out loudly, O Mebasser of Jerusalem! Shout, don’t be afraid! Say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”, Look, the sovereign Lord comes as a victorious warrior… Like a shepherd he tends his flock; he gathers up the lambs with his arm” (Is 40: 9-11).

   There are two commands of God in this narrative: the first one is addressed to some one in heaven: “Comfort, comfort my people. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and convince her that her time of warfare is over, that her punishment is completed” (Is 40: 1-2). The second one is addressed to the same prophet, who is called with the
name of his job “Mebasser” or “Mebas-seret”:

Go up on a high mountain, O Mebasseret Zion (מֶבָּסֶרֶט שִׁיְּרוֹן). Shout out loudly, O Mebasseret Jerusalem (מֶבָּסֶרֶט יָרוּשָׁלָיִם)! Shout, don’t be afraid! Say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ Look, the sovereign Lord comes as a victorious warrior; his military power establishes his rule. Look, his reward is with him; his prize goes before him. Like a shepherd he tends his flock; he gathers up the lambs with his arm; he carries them close to his heart; he leads the ewes along (Is 40:9-11).

These two commands are interconnected. The prophet is the one called to console the people of God, to proclaim, publically, to the towns of Judah that God is at hand, is there, like a victorious warrior, that God will establish very soon his rule; that the time of the exile is at end; that the Glory of the Lord will be manifested to the whole people (Is 40: 3-5); and that the kingdom of God is at hand and God himself will be the Shepherd of his people, gathering up the lambs with his arm and carrying them close to his heart. Warmth and power will be the main traits of the coming Kingdom. The message must be proclaimed in public. The prophet is, at the same time, Messenger, herald. It is a beautiful event to see how the feet of the Mebasser are coming on the mountains to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God: For this reason my people will know my name, for this reason they will know at that time that I am the one who says, ‘Here I am’ (הינני) How delightful it is to see approaching over the mountains the feet of a messenger (מֶבָּסֶר) who announces peace, a messenger who brings good news, who announces deliverance, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Is 52:6-7).

1.2. Vocation-mission of the Trito-Isaiah as Mebasser of the Poor (Is 61:1-6)

The text of Is 61:1-6 is the narrative of the prophetic vocation of Mebasser, who in this case is the Trito-Isaiah. The stage of this call is Jerusalem in times of restoration, after coming from the exile.

The spirit of Adonai Yahweh (רְעָה אדֹנָי יָהוָה) is upon me, because the Yahweh anointed (מָשָׁה יָוהָה) me. He sends me (שָלָחֵנִי - selahani) to evangelize (לֶבָסֵר - lebasser) the poor (אֲנָוָים - anawim), to cure the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives, and to the prisoners a luminous horizon; to proclaim a year of grace when the Lord will show his favor, the day when our God will seek vengeance, to console all who mourn, to strengthen those who mourn in Zion, by giving them a turban, instead of ashes, oil symbolizing joy, instead of mourning, a garment symbolizing praise, instead of discouragement (Is 61:1-3).
The prophet presents himself as possessed and anointed by the Spirit, as a permanent gift. This anointing is interpreted as mission (“he sent me”) and as mission of “evangelizer” (“sent me to evangelize”). The content of that mission of Mebasser is explained with six verbs: 1) to evangelize the poor; 2) to cure the brokenhearted, 3) to proclaim freedom to the captives, 4) to proclaim a year of grace; 5) to console all who mourn in Zion; 6) to strengthen. This prophet tries to maintain the perseverance and hope of the people in the midst of so many difficulties in the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

1.3. Jesus as the true Mebasser of the Kingdom of God

Jesus identified himself with this kind of prophet the Mebasser. The hebrew word was trans-lated into Greek by the word “euaggelion.” The evangelist Mark entitles his book “euaggeliou Iēsou Christou huiou Theou.”

According to the Gospel of Luke 4:16-21, when Jesus came to Nazareth and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath, he stood up to read precisely the text of Trito-Isaiah which presents his vocation as Mebasser:

> Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me (echrisen me) to proclaim good news to the poor (euaggelisasthai ptōchois). He has sent me (apestalken me) to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to tell them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled even as you heard it being read’ (Lk 4: 17-19).

The Gospel of Matthew presents us Jesus as the new Mebasser, going up on a high mountain and saying to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” as a victorious warrior, who establishes his rule in favour of the poor: “When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain. After he sat down his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them by saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them” (Math 5:1-3).

We know now the meaning of Mebasser and of Evangelizer: the one proclaiming the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of his love for those who are an-wim. The whole life of Jesus can be summarized in this word: “euanggelion” (“euaggelion”).

The consequence of our reflection until now is that the Mebasser is the prophet of Joy, be-cause he or she announces the fulfilmentment of the dreams of the People o
God, the manifestation of the Glory and Beauty of God. The Mebasser addresses his message of Joy in a special way to the poor, those are in trouble, who mourn, and those of brokenheart. The true Mebass-er is Jesus himself, annointed by the Spirit, moved by the Spirit, who announces the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God and who makes it present in his deeds and words. This activity of the Mebasser is called in the New Testament “evangelization.”

2. “MEBASSER”: THE NAME OF OUR MISSION AND IDENTITY TODAY AS CONSECRATED LIFE

The recent Synod on “New Evangelization and the transmission of faith” and the apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, are for us a call of God to become the new Mebassers in times of globalization, postmodernity, and of changing paradigms. In constrast, we are not called to become prophets of disgraces and punishments. Pope Francis, in his letter at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated life, invites us to become “witnesses of joy”, that means Mebassers, to look to the future where the Spirit in sending us in order to do even greater things than in the past (cf. VC, 110).

This is not an easy issue. We are sourrended and tempted by so many disgraces, troubles, interior and exterior problems, that at times we are more witnesses of sadness, of depression, of lack of hope. How to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom when it seems that God is afar of us? Like the the young virgin Mary to the angel Gabriel we can also ask: “And how will this be?”

2.1. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, has anointed and sent you”: the Spirit of the ‘New Evangelization”

New evangelization “means change and change involves risk, stepping from the known to the unknown.” Not only in the past, but today also it remains to be true that “the Spirit gives witness” (Rom 8: 14-16), that She speaks through the prophets and that the Spirit anoints and sends his Mebassers today. Saint Peter, in his first sermon to the crowds on the day of Pentecost, evoked Prophet Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy… So then, exalted to the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he has poured out what you both see and hear (Acts 2:16-18,33).
According to this interpretation, the outpouring of the Spirit was not only over those in the Cenacle (Upper Room) but also over the sons and daughters, the youth and the old ones in Israel, over men and women; and also on those who at that time, coming from many places, were visiting Jerusalem: “Partians, Medians, Elemites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Capadocia…” (Acts 2: 5). They were filled with wonder because each one heard them speak and proclaim in their own language of the marvels of God’ (Acts 2,7.11-12).

More still the expression ‘all flesh,’ points to an outpouring of the Spirit on the life of the planet (Jürgen Moltmann): “The Spirit of the Lord fills the earth” (Wisdom 1:7). With this certainty and experience of the Spirit, we can undergo with confidence this service of Heralds of the Gospel, of Mebassers.

In this context the mission of the Mebasser is above all to evangelize, to bear the good news of God’s embrace, of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with humanity, with the earth. We, members of consecrated life, are called neither to solve the problems of humanity, nor to answer the main challenges, but, according to our own charism, to be credible messengers of the good news by deeds and words. This good news is not a generical proclamation of the Kingdom of God, but a concrete manifestation of the loving presence and action of God’s Spirit in our world.

If the Spirit of the Lord fills the earth, we are called to discern and adore her presence in ‘the others’. Respect for the Spirit, present everywhere, converts our proclamation into dialogue. In authentic dialogue, everybody listens, everybody communicates and is listened to. Inter-religious dialogue takes seriously the beliefs and doctrines of the other. This way of performing mission is called “missio inter-gentes,” not only “ad gentes.” Through its permanent mission the Spirit unifies and reconciles people, sums up everything in Christ, forms the Body of Christ which is the Church.

The protagonism of the Spirit never disqualifies us, the Church, humanity, or the energy of the cosmos. The Spirit generously spreads his gifts, his charisms and counts on the most spectacular collaboration that we can imagine: both the explicit collaboration of the Church, and the implicit collaboration of humanity and of the cosmos. The mission of the Spirit makes us Church; it also makes us humanity; it makes us world and cosmos. Therefore, when we speak of announcing God, we are humble collaborators with the Spirit: “The Spirit unites himself to our spirit to give witness” (Rom 8, 15-16).
2.2. Mebasser of the Discovery of God: Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton, whose centenary we celebrate this year (2015), in his book, *Seeds of Contemplation* highlights that the main actor in our discovery of God is God himself:

The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone. Our discovery of God is, in a way, God’s discovery of us. We cannot go to heaven to find Him because we have no way of knowing where heaven is or what it is. He comes down from heaven and finds us. He looks at us from the depths of His own infinite actuality, which is everywhere, and His seeing us gives us a new being and a new mind in which we also discover Him. We only know Him in so far as we are known by Him, and our contemplation of Him is a participation in His contemplation of Himself. We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us.

Those who seek God discover in themselves a ‘harvest of miracles’ because in every event and every moment there has been planted in them the Life of God. Thomas Merton shows us, religious, how to be Mebassers of the Kingdom of God in our time. Let us listen to a summary of his teachings.

To those who seek God we must proclaim that God loves them through nature, the atmospheric phenomena, that those who love God possess and enjoy all things and find in each one of them, in what they see, in what they hear and touch, that nothing is unclean, everything becomes holy and is the seed of contemplation and heaven. How beautiful is the sentence of a Sufi Muslim mystic: “If you take two steps towards God, God runs to you!”

Merton also tells us that, those who do not seek God, do not love him; instead they encounter a contradictory world, things that question them, and that keep them away from God. Although they reflect heaven, they produce the anguish of hell; those who do not seek God, instead of adoring him, adore themselves, which is ‘to adore nothingness and the adoration of nothingness is hell.’

In respect of the Holy Spirit, Thomas Merton teaches us sublime things: The Holy Spirit is he who teaches us who is Christ and who transforms us in Him; it is he who transforms us into Church which is the total Christ, his body. The Abba and Risen Christ are like the heart that pumps and spreads the blood of the Spirit to all parts and to members of the Body of Christ which is the Church. We also convert ourselves into new blood, pumped through the body of humanity ‘to do the work of Christ and fulfil the will of the Father.’ The blood of the Spirit is pumped to the whole body of humanity including the cosmic body.
This is the panorama of the evangelizing mission and proclamation which is presented to us. Our charisms are voices and instruments of a grand orchestra. We are not the only ones who proclaim the presence and action of God. However, it is upon us to interpret a beautiful score that says: ‘The Spirit of God is upon me, it has anointed me and it has sent me to proclaim the good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, a year of grace in the Lord.’ We want to be a consecrated life, directed by the Spirit and not by leaders who impose on us their own ideas and convert us into a sect. The Spirit makes us a ‘catholic’ consecrated life, that is to say, holistic, with a passion for all and integrated into the Church and into humanity and into nature.

3. THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW MESSAGERS IN THIS NEW CENTURY XXI

How to announce God in our time? How is it to be done, what content, what language? “Vita Consecrata,” no. 20 tells us that our religious life should become ‘an eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world’! The second letter to the consecrated life from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of apostolic life asks religious: “To keep the search for the face of God, to live to follow Christ, to be guided by the Spirit, to experience love for the Kingdom with creative fidelity and alacrity industriousness,” accepting, at the same time, “provisional measure with certainty, with new situations, with provocations in continuous process, with instances and passions cry contemporary humanity.”

To proclaim God today implies, above all, knowing what human beings think about him; what their doubts and difficulties are at the moment of receiving the proclamation. If Jesus made himself Jewish with the Jews and Paul Greek with the Greeks, do we not have to make ourselves women and men of our time to be able to proclaim our message? Our proclamation of God becomes extremely weak when what we proclaim does not interest, does not stimulate, does not inspire, and does not transform our contemporaries.

3.1. Paradigm Shift for the Era of Science

Humanity today has a lot of knowledge about the origin of the universe, about what it is made of, of life, evolution, human beings… The scientific data are so complex, so numerous that today science is more hypothetical than ever. There exists the growing conviction that we are in an ‘open world’ (Karl Popper), in a world of permanent creativity. The final enigma of the universe worries us and in the background we feel alone, disconsolate by the drama and enigma.
about God, it cannot respond honestly of its openness but rather of its hiddenness. There are those who, from a fideistic and naive attitude, think that science ‘stretches the mind’ and that faith opens it. It is said with some frequency in the Gospels that Jesus ‘opened the minds of the disciples that they would understand.’ I dare say that science also opens the mind through its investigation. And we should not avoid scientific knowledge with the excuse that faith is a superior understanding. We have to take risks to keep our minds open and be interested in the new understanding offered to us each day. Only from this enculturation, can we re-interpret the experience of God and proclaim it.

We must be thankful to the many theologians, thinkers and artists for their attempts to tell us about God within this new cultural paradigm, this scientific Era. We must not discount their theories, always provisional. They make God accessible in our time, more than we can imagine. We are convinced that the Book of Creation and the Book of Revelation have the same author. They both proclaim God to us.²⁰

I want to thank Javier Montserrat, a Jesuit and professor at the University of Madrid for having condensed into a great volume of 750 pages everything in an attempt to reconcile reason and faith. This work is entitled *Towards a New Council, the Paradigm of Modernity in the Era of Science*. He concludes in this work that ‘the new Council, the great Council required for our time and one of the most important in history, must introduce to the Church, in the modern age: its invitation, its plan and its content to respond to the logic of history after twenty centuries in the old paradigm.²¹

### 3.2. A Current Way to Speak of God and his Covenant

Some years ago, several authors proposed a new theological method which they called ‘narrative theology.’²² Others spoke about theological ‘storytelling.’ Storytelling is a language that everybody is able to understand and follow. It can be the language of proclamation. There are more and more theologians who are very aware of the horizons that narrative theology opens up to evangelization in our time.

At a time, dominated by images and by the preponderance of the mass media like television, the model of Christ continues to be significant and evocative. He points us towards the every-day experience, the parable: “He told them many things in parables ….. He did not speak to them without a parable” (Mt 13: 3.34). In his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Jesus did not speak to the minds of the people with a vague, abstract or ethereal language. Rather he won over the people by starting from where they were standing, so as to lead them, through the daily
events, to the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, the scene recalled by John becomes enormously significant: ‘Some wanted to arrest him but nobody dared to lay their hands on him. The guards returned. The high priests and Pharisees asked them: Why have you not brought him? They replied, ‘Nobody has ever spoken like this man (Jn 7, 44-46).

What our serious theological works don’t achieve are sometimes achieved by other writers that make the mystery more accessible in their stories. A recent example: ‘The Life of Pi’ by Yan Martel, a modern bestseller, begins with these words: “I have a story that will make you believe in God… I listened to that tape that I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was a story to make you believe in God.”

Another example is the bestseller of William Paul Young, The Shack which has the subtitle, “Where tragedy meets eternity.” In a world where religion appears to be ever more irrelevant, ‘The Shack’ proposes the age old question: Where is God in a world full of suffering? The answer is the story of a man broken by suffering who is allowed to spend a weekend in a shack in the depths of a forest. In it he encounters three mysterious persons who help him see ‘another dimension’ of reality: Papa, Jesus and Sarayu – that is to say the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Spirit, who in the novel is given the name Sarayu, presents in a unique form the persons of the Holy Trinity:

I- she opened her hands to include Jesus and Papa, I am a verb. I am that I am. I will be who I will be. I am a verb. I am alive, dynamic, ever active, and moving. I am a being verb. And as my very essence is a verb, I am more attuned to verbs than nouns. Verb such as “confessing”, “repenting”, “living”, “loving”, “responding”, “growing”, “reaping”, “changing”, “sowing”, “runiting”, “dancing”, “singing” and on and on. Humans, on the other hand, have a knack for taking a verb that is alive and full of grace and turning it into a dead noun or principle that reeks of rules: something growing and alive dies…. Verbs are what makes the universe alive.

The relationship among the persons of the Trinity (the famous ‘perichoressis’ of the theo-logians and mystics) are described in a sympathetic way by Mack, the hero of the novel: “He never had seen three people share with such simplicity and beauty. Each seemed more aware of the others than of themself… I love the way that you do it… It’s certainly not how I expected God to be.”

Finally Jesus expresses a desire, very important for humans: so that they too can enter into the Covenant circle: “We want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don’t want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me.”
Our service in announcing God is, above all, to transmit the Word of God with our own charismatic tonality; and always with conviction, credibility and passion. We want to offer the Word of God after so many experiences of the ‘silence of God.’ We do not communicate the Message of the Word as ‘soloists’ but as a ‘symphonic choir’, in community with ourselves, in communion with the Church, in solidarity and friendship with all men and women of good will.

3.3. Credibility of the Message: the Virtues of Contemporary Mebasser

Let me propose the main virtues that make credible our proclamation of the good News of the presence the God’s embrace

3.3.1. A New Humility

Past glories have no value for us, nor memories of better times. Everything has its moment. And ours is a time for humility, for smallness. When pride infiltrates into the heart of the consecrated life, the proclamation of the Gospel becomes hypocrisy, intolerance or even pride. We are turning from the language of ‘shared mission with the laity’ to the language of being volunteers in the projects that they lead. The consecrated life presents itself as a humble servant in someone else’s house, like Mary in the house of Zachariah and Elizabeth. It is there he proclaims, with the gesture of humble service to God.

3.3.2. Closeness to the Poor in view of the ‘Mutual’ Proclamation of the Gospel

We should not forget that the Spirit sends us to evangelize the poor but to be evangelized by them as well. They are also our teachers, our masters, our evangelizers and as such have to occupy in our communities ‘a privileged place, a position that excludes nobody’ (Message, 12). Their presence has the capacity to ‘change people more than a talk, teach fidelity, help to understand the fragility of life, demand prayer, lead to Christ’ (Message, 12). The evangelization is authentic when ‘it has the face of the poor’. Closeness to the poor is, before anything else, ‘a spiritual act’ (Message, 12).

3.3.3. Charity that Proclaims the Living Presence of God in a World of Suffering

When a human being suffers horribly, one asks: Where is God? The proclamation of God in the middle of suffering is done from silence, prayer of petition, sacramental contact, the chain of love, compassion: “Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal.” Jesus cried on seeing the suffering of others. When there are no words, actions say it all: that is the diaconia of charity, that which makes us credible. Jesus
cried on seeing the suffering of others. Benedict XVI also cried when he met victims of paedophilia. When there are no words, actions say it all: that is the diaconia of charity, that which makes us credible: ‘faith acts in charity’ (Gal 5,6). But we do not have to resign ourselves to suffering: we have to defeat it. In other times the Christian mission in relation to the sick had the great objective of teaching them and accompanying them with the ‘ars moriendi!’ Today what challenges us is how to accompany them in the ‘ars curandi.’ The charity of Jesus did not have borders; it was missionary, inclusive, open to dialogue.

3.3.4. From Solitude and Sharing

To proclaim God with credibility, we need to visit solitude and avoid anxiety. We are not angel messengers of God when our lives are filled with activity and strangled by attachments, when we try to attract everyone to non-stop activity, filled like ours, and when we are promoters of useless projects. We discover solitude when we are hungry and thirsty, have regrets, poverty or desire, or when we go beyond all the horizons without direction on where to move in a territory whose centre is everywhere. It is in such solitude where the deepest activities have their beginning. The love of Christ and the Spirit is transmitted through each one of us to others. “Thus, says Thomas Merton – all of us change ourselves into avenues and windows through which God shines his radiance to the interior of his own house.”

CONCLUSION

I have arrived at the end of my reflection about ‘Mebasser: Prophets of Joy: New Evangelizers’ and its implication for the consecrated life. Let us call to mind feminine figures, who have been Mebasseret, before Jesus: they are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Both women, the young and the old, proclaimed the novelty of God and collaborated with the Spirit in a new Genesis. They believed and thus they spoke! The two were changed into ‘mebasseret’ prophets. The two are shown filled with happiness; they shared the beatitudes and transmitted their joy to the people. They also accompanied Zacharias in his crisis. Finally, Zacharias recovered his faith, his voice with a magnificent song: the Benedictus.

The consecrated life wants to be a story inspired by these two icons. It wants to contribute to the presentation of God in a new period of the world. The Holy Spirit is the principal actor and among the secondary actors and actresses we are counted in the cast. In The Shack, Mack asks the Holy Spirit:
Let me ask you something. Is what I do back home important? Does it matter? … Sarayu interrupted him: “Mack, if anything matters then everything matters. Because you are important everything you do is important. Every time you forgive, the universe changes; every time you reach out and touch a heart or a life, the world changes; with every kindness and service, seen or unseen, my purposes are accomplished and nothing will ever be the same again.”

Endnotes

1The meaning of the verb bāšar is to bear tidings; the Mebasser is the one bearing good tidings”. The name Me-basseret is feminine; Mebasser is masculine. The meaning of the feminine in this contexto is that mebasseret is an office name or a collective name: Cf. Gregorio del Olmo, La vocación del líder en el antiguo Israel. Morfología de los relatos bíblicos de vocación, Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, Salamanca 1973, p. 327. Besides this text the Word mōbāšēr is also in Is 41, 27: “I first decreed to Zion, ‘Look, here’s what will happen!’ I sent a herald to Jerusalem.” Another very famous text is: How delightful it is to see approaching over the mountains the feet of a messenger who announces peace, a messenger who brings good news, who announces deliverance, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Is 52:7).


5Amos Yong, The Spirit poured out on all Flesh: world Pentecostalism and the reconstruction of Christian Theology in the 21st Century, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2005, &c 4,3.3.


10 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 44.

11 “For it is God’s love that warms me in the sun and God’s love that sends the cold rain. It is God’s love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God that feeds me also by hunger and fasting. It is the love of God that sends the winter days when I am cold and sick, and the hot summer when I labor and my clothes are full of sweat: but it is God Who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood. His love spreads the shade of the sycamore over my head and sends the water-boy along the edge of the wheat field with a bucket from the spring, while the laborers are resting and the mules stand under the tree. It is God’s love that speaks to me in the birds and streams; but also behind the clamor of the city God speaks to me in His judgments, and all these things are seeds sent to me from His will”: Thomas Merton, o.c., p. 17.

12 Thomas Merton, o.c., p. 18.


14 “For until we love God perfectly His world is full of contradiction. The things He has created attract us to Him and yet keep us away from Him. They draw us on and they stop us dead. We find Him in them to some extent and then we don’t find Him in them at all. Just when we think we have discovered some joy in them, the joy turns into sorrow; and just when they are beginning to please us the pleasure turns into pain. In all created things we, who do not yet perfectly love God, can find somethings that reflects the fulfilment of heaven and something that reflects the anguish of hell… But to worship our false selves is to worship nothing. And the worship of noth-ing is hell”: Thomas Merton, o.c., p. 25-26.

15 Thomas Merton, o.c., p.157.

16 “The Holy Ghost, Who is the life of this One Body dwells in the whole Body and in every one of the members so that the whole Christ is Christ and each individual is Christ”: Thomas Merton, o.c., p.157.

17 “It is the Spirit of God that must teach us Who Christ is and form Christ in us and transform us into other Christs. After all, transformation into Christ is not just an individual affair: there is only one Christ, not many. He is not divided. And for me to become Christ is to enter into the Life of the Whole Christ, the Mystical Body made up of the Head and the members, Christ and all who are incorporated in Him by His Spirit”. Thomas Merton, o.c., pp. 156-157; cf. also, pp. 165-166.

18 Too optimistic seems to me “Vita Consecrata”, when it states: “the first duty of the consecrated life is to make visible the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world. To people’s astonishment they respond by proclaiming the wonders of grace accomplished by the Lord in those whom he loves… The consecrated life thus becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty.” (VC, 20).

19 The second letter to the consecrated life from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic life. Rome, 2014.

20 “When they allow themselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, consecrated persons can broaden the horizons of narrow human aspirations and at the same time understand more deeply people and their life stories, going beyond the most obvious but often superficial aspects. Countless
challenges are today emerging in the world of ideas, in new areas as well as those in which the consecrated life has traditionally been present. There is an urgent need to maintain fruitful contacts with all cultural realities, with a watchful and critical attitude, but also with confident attention to those who face the particular difficulties of intellectual work, especially when, in response to the unprecedented problems of our times, new efforts of analysis and synthesis have to be attempted. A serious and effective evangelization of these new areas where culture is developed and transmitted cannot take place without active cooperation with the laity involved in them”. (VC, 98)”.

21 J. Montserrat, _Hacia el Nuevo Concilio: el paradigma de la modernidad en la Era de la Ciencia_ (contraportada).

22 Christian Salmon, _Storytelling. Bewitching the modern mind_, 2010; Salmon unveils the workings of a “storytelling machine” more effective and insidious as a means of oppression than anything dreamed up by Or-well. The “reality-based community”—to use a phrase coined by an aide to George W. Bush—is now regularly outmaneuvered by public relations gurus and political advisers, as they construct story arcs for a population that has come to expect them.


25 Wm. Paul Young, _o.c._, p. 116.

26 “God in His Trinity of subsistent relations infinitely transcends every shadow of selfishness. For the One God does not subsist apart and alone in His Nature. He subsists as Father and as Son and as Holy Ghost, These Three Persons are one, but apart from them God does not subsist also as One. He is not Three Persons plus one nature, therefore four! He is Three Persons but One God. He is at once infinite solitude (one nature) and perfect society (Three Persons). One Infinite Love in three subsistent relations…”: Thomas Merton, _o.c._, p. 68-69.

27 Wm. Paul Young, _o.c._, p. 68.

28 Wm. Paul Young, _o.c._, p. 82.

29 “When I was your age, I lived in bed, racked with polio. I asked myself every day, ‘Where is God? Where is God? Where is God? God never came. It wasn’t God who saved me – it was medicine. Reason is my prophet and it tells me that as a watch stops, so we die. It’s the end. If the watch doesn’t work properly, it must be fixed here and now by us. One day we will take hold of the means of production and there will be justice on earth” (Kumar)… This was all a bit much for me. I said nothing. I was more afraid that in a few words thrown out he might destroy something I loved. What if his words had the effect of polio on me? What a terrible disease that must be if it could kill God in a man”: Yan Martel, _The life of Pi_, p. 16.

30 Wm. Paul Young, _o.c._, p. 131.

31 Ivonne Maria Werner, _Ars moriendi i kampen om det goda samhället_, Almqvist amd Wiksell, 2004.


33 “They are great promoters of useless work. They love to organize meetings and banquets and conferences and lectures. They print circulars, write letters, talk for hours on the telephone in order that they may gather a hundred people together in a large room where they will all fill the air with smoke and make a great deal of noise and roar at one another and clap their hands and stagger home
at las patting one another on the back with assurance that they have a done great things to spread the Kingdom of God”**: Thomas Merton, *o.c.*, p. 83.

34Thomas Merton, *o.c.*, p. 74.

35Wm. Paul Young, *o.c.*, p. 133.
The letter sent to the consecrated men and women by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life spells out clearly in n°8 in the words of Pope Francis the kind of mission that the consecrated could carry out today: “People today certainly need words, but most of all they need us to bear witness to the mercy and tenderness of the Lord which warms the heart, rekindles hope, and attracts people towards the good. What a joy it is to bring God’s consolation to others!” In other words, the mission of the consecrated men and women today is “to discover the Lord who comforts us, people of God, like a mother and to bring to the men and women of our time the consolation of God, to bear witness to his mercy.” The letter for the year of consecrated life titles this mission as “Bringing God’s Embrace” and explains in n°8 how this mission is more urgent today:

In a world of distrust, discouragement and depression, in a culture in which men and women are enveloped by fragility and weakness, individualism and self-interest, we are asked to introduce belief in the possibility of true happiness, in the feasibility of hope that does not depend solely on talent, superiority or knowledge, but on God… The men and women of our time are waiting for words of consolation, the availability of forgiveness and true joy. We are called to bring to everyone the embrace of God, who bends with a mother’s tenderness over us – consecrated women and men, signs of the fullness of humanity, facilitators and not controllers of grace, stooped down in a gesture of consolation.1

Thanks to Pope Francis, who has provided us with a striking image of “God’s embrace” to carry out our mission in a more meaningful manner. The Pope used

---

P. Joseph Titus is a catholic priest. He is Professor of Old Testament and Head of the Department of Biblical Studies in St. Peter’s Pontifical Institute, Bangalore. The author holds a Ph.D. from the Catholic University of Leuven and S.T.D from the Catholic University of Paris. At present, he is the President of Society for Biblical Studies in India. He is the Editor of Indian Theological Studies as well as a Member of the Editorial Board of Transversalités, a Theological Journal published by the Catholic University of Paris. He can be contacted at pjtitusj@yahoo.com
this image thrice in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: The Joy of the Gospel. In n°2, he speaks of “God’s redeeming embrace.” In n°91, he refers to “the embrace of the crucified Jesus.” The third time, he speaks of two “God’s embraces” in n°144: “…the baptismal embrace which the Father gave us when we were little ones…another embrace, that of the merciful Father who awaits us in glory...” Finally, the image of “God’s embrace” occurs in n°8 in the *Letter for the Year of Consecrated Life* in the context of mission. The letter invites the consecrated women and men “to bring to everyone the embrace of God.” What does “God’s embrace” signify? The act of embrace stands for affection and support. By providing this imagery, the pope invites everyone to experience God’s love and comfort in our spiritual journey and invites the consecrated men and women to bear witness in mission to the Lord who comforts.

Against this background, this article likes to offer perspectives from the Hebrew Bible about this mission of “bringing God’s embrace” to the people. This article is divided into two parts: first of all, it attempts to discover in the Hebrew Bible the Lord who comforts. Secondly, the article likes to propose to the consecrated men and women as models three Biblical personalities who carried out this mission of bringing God’s embrace to the people of their times.

1. **DISCOVERING IN THE HEBREW BIBLE THE LORD WHO COMFORTS US**

Jack Miles’s book, God: A Biography, translated into sixteen languages, won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 1996. Jack Miles examines how God is depicted in the Hebrew Bible. He makes a surprising discovery: he finds no evidence that God feels love for humanity in the early books of the Old Testament. It is not until God declares his “everlasting love” for Israel in Isaiah (54:4-8) that God’s capacity for such emotion is revealed in the text:

> Until this point in history, the Lord God has never loved. Love has never been predicated of him either as an action or as a motive. It is not that he had no emotional life of any sort. He has been wrathful, vengeful, and remorseful. But he has not been loving. It was not for love that he made man. It was not for love that he made his covenant with Abraham. It was not for love that he brought the Israelites out of Egypt or drove out the Canaanites before them. (Miles, 237)

As attentive readers of the Bible, we cannot accept such views of Jack Miles on the Hebrew Bible. God has revealed his love and grace to mankind from the beginning of the Bible. However, some seem to have rejected through the centuries
the Hebrew Bible because of its depiction of God as violent. Marcion, the 2nd century heretic, rejected the Old Testament in total, because he believed that the Old Testament God was evil and tyrant. Perhaps there are still people who think like Marcion about the Old Testament as a book filled with wrath and judgment, doom and gloom, atrocity and injustice. Such a dichotomy, however, should be abandoned. The Old and New Testaments are united in their affirmation that the God of the Bible is a merciful and compassionate God. Hence, we shall attempt to discover in the Hebrew Bible comforting and consoling God. There are in the Hebrew Bible several biblical images which depict a comforting God; however, our study confines itself only to five Biblical images.

1.1. Yahweh, a God for the Humans

Right from the beginning of creation, God manifests himself as a God for the humans, a God who is interested in the human welfare. In the first creation story in Gen 1, God created first the world, all the nature and all the living animals and at the end he created the humans. This order of creation gives the impression that the humans are created when everything is kept ready for his coming. The same concern of God is reflected in the second story of creation. The story seems to portray God as one who works. For example, like a gardener, God plants garden (2:8) and makes the trees grow (2:9). By such actions, God supplies food and rest in the garden for the humans (2:9,15a). Like a tailor, God makes garments of skin and supplies clothing to them (3:21). Thus, God appears in the biblical story as one who works for the welfare of human existence. God’s goodness towards the human beings dominates the narrative; he supplies several gifts to them (gifts of life, food, land, rest, garments, etc). Such a biblical divine image is unique in connection with the surrounding cultures, which tend to describe the reverse situation: the gods created humans to relieve them from work and to lead an idle and happy life. Therefore, the biblical divine image is indeed subversive in relation to the ancient Near Eastern myths; the biblical creation story portrays God as one who pays attention to human needs and also, in Gen 2:18, God observes that the man is alone and then he takes initiative to relieve the man from his loneliness by creating the woman. After creating the woman, God brings her to him. This depicts God as one who is at the service of the human life for its well-being. God takes human decision into account when shaping new directions for the creation. Divine decisions interact with human decisions in the creation of the world. All these observations demonstrate that the two creation stories portray God as one who is for or acts for humans.
1.2. Yahweh, a God who Fights for the Humans

The book of Exodus depicts Yahweh as a warrior who wages war against Pharaoh in favor of the liberation of Israel from Egypt (Ex 15:3). This kind of image of God is something consoling and comforting, when it is compared to that of ANET, where the gods engage in war among themselves and in order to save their power and position. They never engage in battle on behalf of the humans. A common feature can be observed in ANE creation stories: a cosmogony is expressed in terms of a chief god winning over his enemies. In Babylonia, Marduk kills Tiamat and forms the world from her body. At Ras Shamra, Baal kills Yam (sea) and Nahar (flood) and is proclaimed king; the universe becomes his temple. Thus creation proceeds from a theomachy, and the title of hero is given to the victorious demiurge. On the contrary, in the Bible, Yahweh is indeed a hero, but only because of his deeds in behalf of Israel, his interventions during the exodus, and the conquest of the Promised Land.  

1.3. Yahweh, a God of Boundless Kindness and Goodness

One of the fascinating revelations in the Hebrew Bible is to know Yahweh as a God of boundless kindness and goodness.

(i) Ex 20:5-6 could be one of the first texts which highlights clearly how God is more merciful than punishing: “The Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Here the prohibition against worshipping images is followed by a warning of judgment and a promise of blessing (vv. 5b–6). Note the impressive contrast. God’s judgment on disobedience is limited, whereas his blessing on obedience is unlimited. In vivid contrast to this specific limitation of judgment is the unlimited response of Yahweh to those who love him, who keep their promise to set him in first place, and so keep his commands. The Midrash states that God’s inclination to love and be merciful is at least 500 times greater than his inclination to punish. Again the Rabbis tell us:

R. Eliezer, son of R. Yosé the Galilean, says, ‘Even if 999 angels argue against a person, and a single angel argues in his favor, the Holy One, blessed be he, still inclines the scales in his favor.’ And that is not the end of the matter… even if 999 aspects of the argument of that single angel argue against a man, but a single aspect of his case of that single angel argues in favor, the Holy One, blessed be he, still inclines the scales in favor of the accused.’ (y. Qidd. 1:9; cf. b. Shabb. 32a)
In other words God's love inclines himself to be always for us, not against us. He is faithful to his creation because he said he would be, because he loves his people, and because it is his. Rabbi Nathan taught that the world was built on God’s *hesed* (Abot. R. Nat. 4). And the Babylonian Talmud says “Torah begins with deeds of loving kindness [*hesed*] and ends with deeds of loving kindness” (b. Sotah 14a). “The greatness of God’s *hesed* consists in his refusal, even in the face of rejection, to give up on his people, to set aside the responsibility he took upon himself.” For Hasdai Crescas, God’s love is the active cosmic principle, the impulse for creation, like Plato’s eros and the Hindu *sakti*.

(ii) Ex 34:6–7 could be the next Biblical passage, which enumerates thirteen qualities of God’s mercy visible in his dealings with his creatures: “The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex 34:6-7). This list shows that God is capable of inordinate generosity. Yahweh is wondrously generous and forgiving. How far is God generous and forgiving? The Bible provides us with two remarkable texts which depict God’s attitude towards our sins.

First, the psalmist declares in 103:10-12: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.” Judaism is biased in man’s favor: when the people of Israel appear for judgment, the angels say, “Fear not! The Judge is your townsman, your kinsman, your brother, your father!” (*Midrash Tehillim* on Psalms 118:10). Divine forgiveness is again presented in spatial terms. The separation means that the sinner is absolutely safe from sin’s consequences. If one starts walking in an easterly direction he will remain in an easterly direction even if he crosses over into the Western Hemisphere. There is no end to an easterly direction. That’s what God wants us to know: his separation of us from our sins is infinite. The separation is so great that it literally means he will forget our sins. In Psalm 103:10, the psalmist says God did not treat him and others living then as their sins deserved. Here the psalmist reveals again God was not inflicting upon them the terrible punishments they should have suffered because of their disobediences to the Law of Moses.
Second, according to Mic 7:18-19, the prophet makes an impressive enumeration of the various manifestations of God's mercy: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” Note the consoling words: “God will tread our iniquities under foot. He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” Just as the Lord hurled Pharaoh’s chariots and his army into the sea and they sank to the depths like a stone (Ex 15:4–5), so he will throw all “our” sins into the depths of the sea. This speaks of the complete forgiveness of sin and the removal of its guilt forever (see Jer 50:20). “God not only puts our sins out of sight (Isa 38:17); he also puts them out of reach (Mic 7:19; Ps 103:12), out of mind (Jer 31:34), and out of existence (Isa 43:25; 44:22; Ps 51:1, 9; Acts 3:19).”15 God forgives sins. His anger does not last forever (v.18, cf. Ps 30:5). He will get victory over our sins and bury them in the depths of the sea because he will always be true to his covenant promise which he made with Abraham.16

1.4. Yahweh, a God who Protects the Humans

The Hebrew Bible employs different striking images to say how God protects us carefully and enables us to live in this world without danger. One of such images is the phrase “apple of eye” that the writers of the Old Testament mention on three occasions.17

This image is first used by Moses in Deuteronomy: “He (God) sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions.”18 Later, in the Psalms, the psalmist writes, “Keep me as the apple of thy eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings” (Ps 17:8). Much later in the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah tells us, “For thus said the Lord of hosts: ‘after the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that touched you touched the apple of his eye’ ” (Zech 2:8). This idiom might speak of the nature of God’s love for Israel, who needs his protective and sovereign love. Since protecting the eye is a reflexive action, the pupil is an effective simile for an object of protective care.19 As is well known, the eye is one of the most complex and delicate organs in the human body. The pupil is the most tender, the most easily injured, and the most important to the eye. The loss of it is irreplaceable. Through it light comes to the retina of the eye for vision. What a fit symbol for Israel this is! The apple of the eye
is a beautiful, figurative expression of that which must be tenderly cherished as the choicest treasure.\textsuperscript{20} The description of the Lord’s solicitous care is in most tender terms. He shielded (\textit{sābab}, lit., “encompassed” or “surrounded”) Israel and cared for (\textit{poel} of \textit{bîn}; “attentively considered”) them. So central was Israel to the Lord’s concern that they were, as it were, the “apple of his eye” (v. 10b).\textsuperscript{21}

God encircled Israel protectingly. Rashbam sees this sense of the verb in Ps 34:8: “The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear Him and rescues them.” God guarded him from snakes, scorpions, and marauders like the Amalekites. Ps 139:5 can be read in the context of the above discussion: “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” The words “You hem me in” could mean “you besiege me with hostile intent,” but in context means “you keep close guard.” The statement “Lay your hand upon me” may indicate giving a blessing (Gen 48:14,17; Lev 9:22) or offering protection (cf. Ex 33:22). In face of “such knowledge,” the way in which the Lord knows him through and through, the psalmist can only respond with a sense of wonder which he cannot fathom. It is important to notice the intensely personal framework within which the psalmist speaks. It is characteristic of the whole psalm. A philosopher or theologian might wish to attach to these verses the label “the omniscience of God,” just as the following section might be headed “the omnipresence of God,” but the psalmist is not interested in that kind of intellectual discussion. He is simply saying, “The Lord knows me through and through, and that is breathtakingly wonderful.”\textsuperscript{22} Here the psalmist certainly celebrates as good news the marvelous and mysterious reality that his or her life is accessible to God in every way and at every moment.\textsuperscript{23}

1.5. \textit{Yahweh, a God who Comforts the Humans}

The Hebrew \textit{naham} has the dual meanings “repent” and “comfort” or “console.” The latter meaning is found about sixty times in a number of different contexts.\textsuperscript{24} In the sense of divine comfort, this verb appears mostly in the prophetic texts (Isa 12:1; 49:13; 51:12; 52:9; 66:13; Hos 11:8) and in the psalms (Ps 23:4; 71:21; 86:17; 119:82).

Thanks to the prophet Isaiah, particularly the Deutero-Isaiah who speaks profusely of the comforting God in his oracles.\textsuperscript{25} Isa 12:1 shows that God’s anger does not last forever. His anger has now been turned away; he even comes with comforts and new blessings.\textsuperscript{26} In Isa 49:13 heavens and earth and mountains are called to witness God comforting Israel, especially the returnees of the diaspora.\textsuperscript{27} In Isa 52:9, the prophet announces to the exiles in Babylon God’s comfort. They feel they are a waste; their lives seem to be a landscape of ruins. Their sin has left
them alienated from God and each other, bound by enemies both physical and spiritual, helpless in despair, guilt, and purposelessness. It is into this landscape that the prophet announces that God has comforted them and redeemed them (prophetic perfect verbs). The two verbs “comfort” and “redeem” are at the very center of the message of this part of the book. They speak of restoration to fellowship, deliverance from bondage, encouragement in despair, strength in weakness, forgiveness in guilt, purpose in uselessness, and more. The wastes of Jerusalem will be rebuilt, but much more to the point, the waste places of the people of Israel, and of the people of the world, will be rebuilt.

Deutero-Isaiah is so creative that in order to comfort and console the exiles in Babylon, he depicts Yahweh as goel of Israel (Isa 41:15). Deutero-Isaiah likes to call 14 times Yahweh the goel of Israel, ‘your Redeemer’ (v 15). This term is taken from Hebrew family law. The goel is the member of the family who has the responsibility of defending the cause of the family in various ways. He has to take over the property after his next of kin when it is in danger of passing out of the family, or to recover it when it has already been lost. By Levirate marriage he must maintain the name of a male relative who has died without leaving a son to succeed him. He ransoms a member of the family who has been killed. So the goel is the protector, the upholder, and the restorer of the family. When the prophet calls Yahweh the goel of Israel, this means that Yahweh is the protector of his own people, that he vindicates the right of his people, in particular by redeeming them from their oppressors. The image of Yahweh as goel includes two ideas: (a) a close bond with Israel, usually of blood (Lev 25:25); (b) an obligation to come to Israel’s assistance.

Thanks to the collection of psalms, the prayers of Israel which bears witness to the comforting God of Israel. In Ps 23:4, it is said Yahweh like a good Shepherd comforts his sheep with rod and staff, providing guidance, protection, rescue and even correction. In Ps 71:21, the psalmist trusts that God’s greatness is ultimately put at the service of human greatness. This in itself is a source of continual hope and “comfort.” Thus the psalm ends with a crescendo of praise directed at God’s faithfulness. In Ps 86:17, the psalmist recalls how God comforted him and helped him. In Ps 94, the psalmist declares that God’s consolations brought joy to him: “Then I thought, “My foot is slipping,” your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul” (Ps 94:18-19). In Ps 119:82, the psalmist looks to God for life and comfort.
1.6. Yahweh, a Motherly and Fatherly God

The Hebrew Bible uses motherly as well as fatherly pictures of God. Picturing God as a mother who gives birth and nurtures may seem strange to 21st century people, but it was not strange to the writers of Scripture.32

The poem, ‘The Song of Moses,’ that closes Deuteronomy begins picturing God as father: “Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” (Deut 32:6). In what follows in Deut 32:11–12, the text switches to the imagery of a mother eagle and its young ones. When the time comes for the eaglet to fly, its mother will stir up the nest, that is, she will agitate her offspring and thus prepare it for the next phase of its development. But she will do so protectingly and not prematurely. At the same time she is encouraging it to fly, she is hovering over it with comfort and assurance. Even when the eaglet ventures forth for its first flight, its parent is there to fly beneath and, if necessary, to catch the neophyte on its own outspread wings.33

In this manner the Lord had carefully and tenderly sheltered his own offspring, Israel; and even after Israel had begun to be mobile, he was there to protect and preserve. Again the text soon adds mother-image to the thought in Deut 32:18: You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. The first half speaks of begetting as the act of fathering; the second half recalls the motherly act of giving birth. Literally, the second half refers to “giving birth in labor pains.” Anyone who has been through childbirth, either as a participant or as an observer, can tell you that there is a big difference between conceiving a child and bringing one forth. Invoking a maternal image here, this graphic depiction of God “giving birth in labor pains” for us present an immediate and compelling picture of God’s love and sacrifice on our behalf.

Similarly, other passages that refer to God’s love for us do so in terms of female physiology. Prophet Jeremiah speaks of God’s compassion in 31:20: “Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my bowels have been moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.” Here there is a truly extraordinary anthropomorphism, with Yahweh’s “bowels” said to be in divine turmoil.34 The emotion of Yahweh over Ephraim is then profound and overwhelming: every time he speaks or even thinks of Ephraim he is overpowered by his affection, so that he cannot help showing compassion on him.35 The thought of this verse is strongly reminiscent of Hos 11:1–4, 8–9. The terms of endearment are different but the love is the same, my dear son, a child in whom I delight or “my darling child.” The Hebrew text in the last line reads literally “my bowels rumble for him.” The very vivid anthropomorphism depicts
God’s stomach being churned up with longing for his son. The “inward parts” may be the internal organs in general, but several times the word refers specifically to the generative organs of the male (Gen 15:4; 2 Sam 7:12) or female (Gen 25:23; Ruth 1:11; Ps 71:6; Isa 49:1). The verb raham (“have compassion”) comes from the same root as the noun rehem (“womb”). On the basis of these two allusions to the womb, and other evidence, Trible hears the voice of God speaking as mother in Jer 31:20.

Prophet Hosea is the next prophet who uses motherly as well as fatherly picture of God in chapter 11. The picture in the mind of the writer here might be of a mother or a father but no words are used that betray the gender of the parent. Despite this, most Bibles and commentaries still entitled the section in ways that named God as ‘father.’ Hosea used parental imagery here to describe the Lord’s exodus deliverance of his people. The actions described here - teaching a child to walk, leading him by cords, nursing the sick, and feeding the children - are all activities of women. It was as mother that God said: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11:1). Further, Hos 11:4 tells us that God loves us “like someone who lifts an infant close to his cheek” - certainly a very evocative and motherly image. Think of a time when you held an infant close to your cheek. What feelings does this memory invoke for you? Does it mean something to you to know that God feels this way about you?

Hosea goes on to evoke the motherly and fatherly picture of God in Hos 11:7-8: “My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” According to Deuteronomic law, both parents could condemn a stubborn, rebellious son before the elders of the city, whereupon he would be stoned to death (Deut 21:18-21). This legal background illuminates the theological intent of Hos 11:8, where God is about to hand over the son to be stoned. God cannot deal with the son in the same way God treated Admah and Zeboiim, two cities destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 10:19; 14:2-8; Deut 29:23). Yahweh’s abhorrence of the son’s death penalty gives way to a growing compassion; he has changed his mind because of his eternal desire: he wants his people coming back to himself. Ultimately, the mother/father God makes a decision: “I will not execute my fierce anger;/ I will not again destroy Ephraim” (Hos 11:9a). Although the parent has the legal right to have the son killed, compassion for and bonding with the child prevent God from doing so. God transcends human legal institutions, which enforce the death sentence for disobedient sons, proclaiming “for I am God and no mortal,/ the Holy One in your
Bringing God’s Embrace: Perspectives of the Hebrew Bible

midst,/ and I will not come in wrath” (Hos 11:9b). Yahweh now announces that he will restore Israel because his character includes grace. Yahweh is God and not human (Hos 11:9b); he is “holy” so he is set apart from human things so as to reflect Godlikeness.40

Motherly pictures are used several times, in very different ways, in Deutero-Isaiah. In the traumatic situation of exile, after the brutal destruction of Jerusalem, faced with the complaint: “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa 49:14). As a picture of God’s constant unchanging love the prophet replied: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15). Isaiah 42 depicts Yahweh as the gasping panting mother in labour: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant” (Isa 42:14). Again in Isa 66:13, the motherly picture is used to underline God’s comfort for Israel: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” It highlights that Yahweh is the ultimate source of “comfort.”41 This is one of the few places in the Bible where God is directly compared to a mother, and most commentators agree that the comparison has been used to reinforce the depth of God’s concern and care for his children. When he gives them courage, strength, hope, and will (comforts them), these are not merely arm’s-length transactions. They are an expression of the intimate, personal involvement of a loving, personal God with his people.42

“By calling God ‘Father,’ the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood (Isa 66:13; Ps 131:2), which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents...” (CCC 239).43

2. MISSION OF BRINGING GOD’S EMBRACE

The first part of the article explored the Hebrew Bible and discovered through six biblical images the Lord who comforts the people. The second part shall highlight from the Hebrew Bible how the Lord not only loved immensely Israel but also made use of the humans as agents of his comfort and compassion. The following Biblical personalities in the Hebrew Bible, particularly Abraham, Priests and Prophets are depicted as having carried out the mission of bringing God’s love to the people of their times.
2.1. Abraham’s Mission as Being a Blessing to Others

In Gen 12:1-3, we see the call of Abraham. God had called Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan and to set into place his plan to save the world. What was God asking Abram to do? He was asked to leave his home to travel to an unknown land. Did God call Abraham for nothing? In his call, God made it clear that Abraham would become a great nation. He would be blessed. His name would be great. He would be a blessing. Through him the whole world would be blessed. In this call, there are two imperatives in the Hebrew text: “The Lord says to Abram, ‘Go from your land…. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; and be a blessing.’” Looking at the text in context, it is evident that God intended to use Abraham in such a way that he would be a means of blessing to all the nations of the world. Clearly, he was to be the instrument of blessing to the world.

If being an agent of blessing to others is the mission of Abraham, why at all God was interested in such a mission? Such a question can be answered if only we take into account what goes before the call of Abraham. The first eleven chapters of Genesis show that the entire world is corrupted by human sin and is cursed by God. Flood itself resulted due to human sin. After the Flood, the world began to again deteriorate spiritually illustrating man’s inability to be righteous free of God’s intervention. At first, God exposed the pride of the people and scattered them to create a need for them to turn back to him. At the end of Gen 11, we feel that the world is in need of a solution to the curse that had been imparted as a result of the fall, and the curse imposed at the dispersion of the human race at the tower of Babel (Gen 11:7ff). God supplies solution to the problem of curse in the call of Abram. As we said above, in Gen 12:1-2, God declared that he would not only bless Abram, but that Abram would become a blessing. The next verse reveals the amazing magnitude of that blessing: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Abram is blessed to bless others. Why has God blessed Abraham? Is it simply for him to count his blessings? God has not simply poured out his blessing on him for him to stockpile them. God has called him out, set him apart to bless all the families of the earth. The promised blessing in Gen 12:1-3 is clearly intended as a contrast to the cursing that is mentioned five times in the primeval history (3:14,17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25). It is probably not coincidental that cursing occurs five times in Gen 1-11 and the Hebrew root conveying the idea of blessing appears five times in the “call of Abram” (Gen 12:1-3). Furthermore, Abraham’s calling by God presented in Gen 12:1-3 has a particular relationship to the contents of Gen 1-11, namely “all the families of the earth” (see “families” in Gen 10:5,20,31-32).
The call of Abraham helps to make clear that the God of biblical faith, in contrast to such a popular notion, is clearly bent toward blessing and mercy toward the human creature. Judgment takes place when the loving purposes of a compassionate God are thwarted or opposed. But the divine way and purpose are not any less loving or set for blessing. When Yahweh sent Abram out, it was to bring about blessing, not curse. That is the good report which the Bible transmits to each generation.47

But do we also see the nations blessed in the stories of Abraham’s family in Genesis? Of course, we see Abraham and his family sometimes becoming anything but a blessing to others. Abraham lies to his foreign hosts with drastic results (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Jacob’s sons wipe out the men of an entire Canaanite city (Gen 33:18-34:31). Despite these and other events, God did bring help to other nations through Abraham and his descendants. For example, Abraham came to the rescue of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 14), which had been taken captive by raiding armies that had seized “all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply” (Gen 14:11). Not long after this, Abram prayed that God would spare the entire city of Sodom. He argued his case before God, not just for Lot and his family, but for “the whole city” (Gen 19:28). Even though the city was destroyed, the point is that Abram initiated intercession to save the entire city. It is significant that near the end of Genesis, we see Abraham’s grandson Jacob pronouncing a blessing upon the Pharaoh himself: “Jacob blessed Pharaoh” (Gen 47:7,10).

2.2. Priestly Mission of Blessing the People

Among his chief duties, the priest is to bless Israel in the name of the Lord. This responsibility is given to the priests and the Levites as indicated in Num 6:22 and in Deut 10:8 and 21:5: “The Lord your God has chosen them (the priests) to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord.”48 However, the blessing issues solely from the Lord; the priests’ function is to channel it. This point is made emphatically clear by the threefold use of the divine Name in the blessing formula in Num 6:24–26. And if this were not enough, the authorization for the priests to pronounce the blessing concludes with the admonition (v. 27) that even though the priests utter the divine Name, it is not they but the Lord who alone can activate the blessing.49 This repeated emphasis on the divine source of the blessing is projected into even bolder relief when it is contrasted with the formula of welcome pronounced upon the worshiper by the priest as he entered the Temple: “We bless you from the House of the Lord” (Ps 118:26). Clearly our text has taken great pains to underscore that, although the priest is holy (Lev 8:30; 22:9), indeed, one of God’s intimates (Lev 10:3), he possesses no divine powers of his own. He is the invested technician of the cult, but whether his purpose is blessing or forgiveness.
The high regard in which that blessing was held is illustrated by the discovery in Jerusalem of two silver amulets from the biblical period on which copies of the priestly blessing were inscribed. These two amulets were rolled, as the *tefillim*, and could be worn on the neck. In the OT tradition, Yahweh’s blessing implies precise gifts as answer to concrete needs in relation with the multifold aspects of the human life: posterity (Gen 28:3), goods (24:35), a land (Gen 35:12). The divine blessing is manifested first by the protection it gives: it implies, help, assistance, defense (Num 6:24; Ps 121). The words of this blessing could also be read just after Lev 9:22a where Aaron blesses the people; his words are not said but only his gesture: “Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.”

The only place in the OT, where a priest blesses an individual is the story of the priest Eli in the first chapter of 1 Samuel. In v 14, begins a dialogue between Eli and Hannah. By mistaking Hannah as being drunken, he commands her to put aside her wine. Hannah replies to Eli’s irritated rebuke by explaining herself. She was a woman struggling in spirit. She was praying before the Lord.” She “pours out” words of agonizing petition. Eli consoled Hannah and blessed her (1 Sam 1). Eli extended to her the blessing of the God of Israel, the God whose people Hannah’s son Samuel would eventually lead. Eli wished for her prayers to be answered: “Go in peace! The God of Israel will grant your request which you have asked of him.”

Eli’s expression *Go in peace!* marks “a successful conclusion of negotiation or assurance that the request for a desired state of relationships has been granted.” It should be noted that this is the only place in the OT where a priest blesses an individual. 1 Samuel 1:19–20 speaks of the fulfillment of the priest’s peace oracle. Hannah conceives and bears a son and calls his name Samuel, saying “I have asked him of the Lord.” In this story, Eli proved quite capable of fulfilling his priestly role. Learning the true nature of Hannah’s actions, he validated her prayer with a wish and a blessing. Hannah’s departure from the sanctuary area was an example of faith triumphant. Though she had approached the Lord in the depths of despondency, she left the sanctuary elevated and transformed with the help of the Priest’s role of blessing. Hannah’s spiritual victory, won through the labor of tearful prayers, enabled her to eat the festival meal in peace and hope.

Therefore, the priests are to continue to pray for God’s blessing upon the people, which began as a blessing upon all humanity, but has been particularly known and experienced by this people by the way in which God has provided and cared
for them throughout the vicissitudes of their history, giving them fertility, land, possessions, and victory; protecting them from harm, dealing with them in mercy, and granting them security and peace.

2.3. Prophetic Mission of Comforting the People

While the priestly mission is to bless people, comforting the people is the main mission of the prophets. Prophet Isaiah and the Minor Prophets are known for comforting the people of Israel.

2.3.1. Prophet Isaiah

In the first verse itself, Deutero-Isaiah tells that he has been sent by God on mission: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1-2). V 1 calls for the word of comfort to go out. The historical context clearly belongs to the prolonged exile of the people in Babylon (587-538 BCE), with all the consequent humiliation and the sense of powerlessness to escape. Many of the prophet’s contemporaries were asking whether there was any source of comfort left for a people stripped of self-defense, vulnerable before their captors, bitter of soul as they mourned in a foreign land. God here announces in a concise manner his intention for the people and for the city, Jerusalem (vv. 1-2). This statement, issued within God’s own council, stands over the entire discourse that follows and stipulates the terms with which God is now prepared to treat a people once deaf and blind (6:10) and a city once a whore (1:21).

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” To whom is God speaking these words? To whom is this divine command being directed? These imperatives, “comfort, comfort” are in the plural—nahamu, nahamu—meaning that the prophet and even the whole faithful remnant are to announce comfort to the people in exile. Prophet’s task is to comfort, to strengthen, to encourage God’s people. The message is from your God. There is comfort for the oppressed, the power of the oppressor is set aside. God reigns, and God is about to act on Israel’s behalf. The expression ‘I, I, am the Lord’ found also in Isa 40:1-2; 43:25, expresses solemnly at the very beginning of II Isaiah’s writings, that it is time for Israel to receive pardon and comfort because she has suffered enough for all her sins. ‘I, I am He...’ expresses the theme of divine forgiveness; so the repetition was intentionally chosen to produce a solemn, dignified tone that would be especially suitable for communicating the theme of divine forgiveness.
Isa 61:1-3 again shows that God entrusts the mission of comforting Israel to a human being, the servant of Yahweh. One of the missions of Yahweh’s servant is “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa 61:2). The above prophetic texts show how God entrusted to the prophets the mission of comforting Israel.

2.3.2. Minor Prophets (Sir 49:10)

While summarizing the teachings of Minor Prophets, the sage Sirach declares: “May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope” (Sir 49:10).

First of all, it should be observed that Ben Sira lists “the Twelve Prophets” (49:10a) as a single book and places them after Ezekiel, as in the Hebrew canon. Secondly, it is curious that Ben Sira speaks of the Twelve Prophets giving “comfort to Jacob” and saving “him with steadfast hope” (49:10cd); he thus reflects a tradition that the message of these prophets was one of consolation and hope. Sir 49:10, though it does provide us with what is probably our first reference to the ‘Twelve Prophets’ discerned as a collection of writings, is primarily interested in the way in which the bones of those prophets provide new life. It is, however, noteworthy that their function was perceived as being to comfort the people and offer them hope. This appears to be a reading of the ‘Book of the Twelve’ taken as a unity; to what extent this theme of comfort and hope is envisaged as extending to all the prophets is less easy to determine.

When we read each of the Twelve Minor Prophets, we could understand how the Twelve Minor Prophets comforted the people. Being the first of the Minor Prophets, Hosea significantly contributes to the message of hope and comfort about which Sirach speaks. For that reason, it provides an excellent entrance into the Book of the Twelve, telling in unforgettable imagery of God’s love that will not let his people go. In Hosea 11, compassion overthrows wrath, the tension in God himself finds its resolution in forgiveness, becoming the motivation force in calling the apostate people back to a relation with God. Above all, the prophet conveyed God’s love for his people through his marriage with an unfaithful wife. He is traditionally called a prophet of love, because he remarries his unfaithful wife, by love, even after she had returned to her former lovers (Hos 1-3). By this he showed the patience and tenacious love of God (the husband) to Israel (unfaithful wife).

The prophet Nahum’s name itself bears the message of “comfort.” But how did he comfort Israel in his time, because he only announced the fall of Assyria? One
might even say that the book of Nahum is “a celebration of the fall of Assyria.” If so, what kind of comforting message can this book carry? The fall of Assyria is in fact a positive encouragement and “message of comfort” for Israel, Judah, and others, because they had experienced the “endless cruelty” (3:19) of the Assyrians. Furthermore, the Minor Prophets seem to have consoled the people of Israel by supporting them and by speaking for them during the time of crisis: Amos defended the cause of the poor during the time of social injustice and Joel organized a community prayer for the people during the time of locust plague.

CONCLUSION

As we come to the end of this article, we need to ask the question: why does the Pope Francis entrust to the consecrated men and women the mission of “bringing God’s embrace” to the people? It is because the Pope feels that love, compassion and joy are lacking or can be higher in the life of consecrated men and women and in their approach towards the poor and the afflicted. Some of the thoughts written down by him in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium give us insight into the present situation of the Church:

An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral (EG, n°10)…Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach (EG, n°32)…I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best (EG, n°44)…Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems (EG, n°47)…I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give
them something to eat (Mk 6:37)” (EG, n°49)…May the monastery not be a Purgatory, but a family (Letter, n°9)

In this context, what does our above study contribute for the consecrated people? (i) First and foremost, the above study of the Hebrew Bible invites us to “be mothers and fathers” in our relationships and in our mission. Our bowels must move, when we see the suffering of our people. This is what the pope writes: “Our journey together “matures towards pastoral fatherhood, towards pastoral motherhood, and when a priest is not a father to his community, when a sister is not a mother to all those with whom she works, he or she becomes sad. This is the problem. For this reason I say to you: the root of sadness in pastoral life is precisely in the absence of fatherhood or motherhood that comes from living this consecration unsatisfactorily, which on the contrary should lead us to fertility.” (ii) Secondly, the study of the Hebrew Bible invites us to focus on the mission of blessing. Like Abraham and like the priests of Israel, the consecrated people should be an agent of blessing and a blessing, as Abraham. It is one of the duties of the priests to pray and to ask for the blessings of God upon the people. (iii) Thirdly, like the prophets in Israel, the consecrated people must comfort the people and deliver them with confident hope from the dangers. Our inclination to be merciful should be 500 times more than passing judgment.

Endnotes

2 What does the Bible say about the image of “God’s embrace”? First of all the term “embrace” occurs twice in the book of Song of Songs in 2:6; 8:3: “His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me.” This in fact refers to the lovers actually touching each other. The lady still yearns for her beloved’s embrace, his left hand under her head, his right hand embracing her. However, the Hebrew grammarian Paul Joüon thought that the embrace signified Yahweh’s presence in the Temple. Here in the Song, the right-hand–left-hand dyad only implies affection and support. Secondly, the prophet Habbakkuk’s name could signify God’s embrace. In Hebrew the name of the prophet Habakkuk probably comes from the verb habaq meaning “to fold one’s hands” or “to embrace.” Perhaps the significance is that Habakkuk embraced God and his people. M.H. Pope, Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 384. D. Garrett, Song of Songs/Lamentations (WBC, Dallas: Word, 2004), 151.
3 It can be said that mercy is one of the common features of the religions of the Ancient Near East.
4 “Sound Christian doctrine has always resisted all new forms of Marcionism, which tend in different ways, to set the Old Testament in opposition the New” (Verbum Domini, n° 40).


7L. Legrand, “Creation as Cosmic Victory of Yahweh,” in A. Aloysius, M. David Stanly Kumar 
eds.), The Word is Near You: Collect Papers of Lucien Legrand, Vol.1 (Bangalore: St. Peters’ Pontifical 

8“Thousands” might better be read “an innumerable descendancy,” as the emphasis is upon the 
progeny of faithfulness and Yahweh’s unending goodness to them all. J.I. Durham, Exodus (WBC, 

9God because he is a father, must judge sin and apostasy, but he does not find pleasure in judgment. 
He is not malicious. He mourns the sin of his people, he suffers with him. God’s motherly/fatherly 
love does not dissolve the demand for judgment, but becomes an expression of God’s heart in 
tension between inevitable judgment and compassionate love. A people which has learned to know 
God in this way, will also have the courage and the confidence to appeal to God’s compassion, which 
has its roots in God himself. G. Hoaas, “Passion and Compassion of God in the Old Testament. A 
Theological survey of Hos 11:8-9; Jer 31:20 and Isa 63:9, 15,” 159.

10N.M. Sarna, Exodus (The JPS Torah Commentary, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 
1991), 111.

11Sakenfeld, The Meaning of Hesed, 120 as quoted in Michael Knowles, The Unfolding Mystery of the 
Divine Name (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2012), 140.

12Hasdai ben Judah Crescas was a Spanish-Jewish philosopher and a renowned halakhist (teacher 
of Jewish law). S. Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (Schocken: 1961), 37-38, quoted in A. 


B. Eerdmans, 1989), 81. K. L. Barker, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah (NAC, Nashville: 


17In all OT occurrences, the phrase “apple of the eye,” is used to something precious and needing 
careful protection. In Deut 32:10; Zech 2:8; Ps 17:8, God’s love for Israel is described through this 
phrase, while in Prov 7:2 the image is applied to the preciousness of the law to a devote student. 
Literature (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 52.

18Ex 19:4 alludes to the same image. In the present context, Hebrew ya’ir may mean “protects.” Cf. 
Society, 1996), 304. Also in Hos 11:3 but here only for the movement of taking in the arms.

19Cf. Ps 17:8; Prov. 7:2. Heb. ʾishon is comparable to Arabic ʾinsan al-ʿayin, “the little man in the 
eye,” referring to one’s reflection in the pupil of another (Ibn Janaḥ, Sefer Ha-Shorashim; Radak, 
Sefer Ha-Shorashim; HALAT; Gaster, Myth, 320).
20. D. Dunlap, “God’s Love For Israel,” *Bible & Life: Bible Teaching Newsletter*, Vol. 20, n° 2 (March 1, 2013) 1-4. The original Hebrew for this idiom ‘ishon (Deut 32:10; Ps 17:8) can be literally translated as “little man of the eye.” This is a reference to the tiny reflection of ourself that we can see in other people’s pupils. Some believe the meaning of ‘ishon can also include dark and obscure, as a reference to the darkness of the pupil. In Zech 2:8, the Hebrew phrase used is *bavah*. The meaning of *bavah* is disputed. It may mean “apple”; and if so, the phrase used in Zechariah 2:8 literally refers to the “apple of the eye.” Many believe that our English word “eyeball” may be derived from the Hebrew idiom the “apple of the eye.”

21. The same simile occurs in Zech 2:8 (Heb 2:12), where, however, *bāḇâ* is used rather than *īṣōn*. This term, perhaps to be understood literally as “gate” (cf. Aram. *bāḇāʿ*, “gate,” in Tg. *Esth* 5:14), also refers to the opening of the eye, that is, to the pupil. Inasmuch as vision is dependent on an open and undamaged pupil, it is easy to see how precious that part of the eye is. C. L. Meyers and E. M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8* (AB, Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 166. See also S. A. B. Mercer, “‘The Little Man of His Eye’ (Deut. 26:5),” *ATR* 3 (1920–21): 151–52. Cf. BDB, 36, 93.


30. Thus *goel* becomes practically identical with *mosia* (helper, savior) [Isa 41:14; 43:14; 44:24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7,26; 54:5,8]. God established the *goel* relationship with Israel by the great redemptive acts of the Exodus and the Sinaitic covenant (Ex 6:6-8; 15:13); God now lives up to this obligation.


32. Jesus talks of the new life he brings as new birth. Being ‘born again’ has become a very popular image among Evangelical Christians. If we are born again who is our new mother? The early Aramaic-speaking Christians (Syriac Fathers) often took Nicodemus’ facetious question (from John 3:4) seriously and spoke of baptism as the ‘womb of the Spirit.’


43The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states: “In no way is God in man’s image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the differences between the sexes. But the respective “perfections” of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God: those of a mother (Isaiah 49:14-15; 66:13; Psalm 131:2-3) and those of a father (Job 31:18; Jer 3:4-20) and husband (Jer 3:6-19)” (CCC 370).


45The word “Ab[i]ram” that evokes the fatherhood of the God of the person is a sign. In Mesopotamia, it means that “the father loves” his faithful. H. Cazelles, *La Bible et son Dieu* (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 45. In the Bible blessing means primarily the active outgoing of the divine goodwill or grace which results in prosperity and happiness amongst men. All blessing comes from God.


The need providing content of this divine hesed receives some concreteness within this Mosaic covenant tradition in the Deuteronomic picture of divine blessings: in fulfillment of the ancestral promises Israel will become a numerous people living in safety in the land given them by God. By contrast, Jer 16:5b speaks of the withdrawal of God’s hesed in the face of Israel’s disobedience; the consequences are life without gladness, decimation of the people by death with no time for burials or mourning, and exile to an unknown land. (*Anchor Bible Dictionary, hesed, 379.*)


In Isa 40:1-2, the sovereign of the world draws the beings of heaven into the mission of comforting, pardoning, and redeeming the broken nation. In a world dreading the influences of various divine forces, some good, some evil, Israel receives the assurance that the heavenly beings constituting the divine council are participants in the redemptive drama of the one true God. As the divine hosts join in praise of God in Isaiah 6 and Psalm 148, so too those same hosts here receive God’s command to bring a word of comfort and release to Israel. P.D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 18. Some of modern interpreters have been inclined to see the comforters as Yahweh’s supernatural agents... It is difficult to say that Yahweh needs the help of someone: Yahweh stands and works alone... According to Watts, it is evident from the following chapters that these as a group may be called Jacob/Israel and that they are the exiles in Mesopotamia.

Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*.


The consecrated men and women must be “wombs of mercies” in mission. The symbol of the womb allows us to overcome conflict and to see the other with all the love of the eyes of a mother for her child. It is this image chosen by God to make us understand his embracing. It is the literal translation “clothe yourselves with wombs of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3:12).

The beginning of the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis, introducing the year of consecrated life, says that we follow Jesus by fully embracing the Gospel and serving the Church and the Spirit will assist us in this task by filling us with joy and turning us into witnesses of God’s love and mercy before the world. The introductory words of the Holy Father lay out a simple but sure programme that a religious should follow: accept the Gospel, the Euangelion, with immense joy and become models and promoters of God’s love and mercy. In other words, the task of a religious is to bring God’s embrace into the world; he/she does it by living the gospel and radiating /communicating the joy of the gospel. Responding to the exhortation of the Holy Father, Sanyasa, Institute of Consecrated Life, Bengaluru, has proposed the theme for its annual seminar as Bringing God’s Embrace: Living and Radiating the Joy of the Gospel.

Bringing God’s Embrace! An embrace is a sign of joy, of acceptance, of communication, of love. It is something positive. We have heard of devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi Devi who stand in long queues to receive her blessing which she imparts simply by embracing them. We are told that she has personally embraced more than 33 million people across the world. It is a sign of love. Of course, a sign can be abused. Think of Judas Iscariot. His act is more than an embrace; it is a kiss. When Judas approached to kiss him, Jesus said: “Is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?” (Lk 22:47-48). So, an embrace could be something wonderful--a sign of communication, relatedness or affection; or, it could also become a sign of betrayal. We do not join the prophets of doom but mebassers, prophets of Good News (Is 40,9-11; 52,7; 61,1-2). We want to look at the positive energy of embrace, of God’s embrace in the New Testament. God chose to communicate life and love, in a word, himself, in the act of creation. He
continued to love humans and call them back to himself each time they betrayed him or went away from him. Ours is a God who has chosen to be in continuous communion and in constant relatedness.

All founders of religious congregations, however varied their charisms may be, took the original inspiration from Jesus of the gospels. The gospel became the absolute rule of life for them because it treasures the life and words of Jesus. By extension, we may say that the whole of the New Testament, too, bears witness to God’s extraordinary communication with us in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters - Pauline and Catholic, we see how the early Christian community tries to be faithful to Jesus, to his word and mission, bringing more and more people to accept Jesus as God, making Jesus the concrete expression of divinity.

My task is to look at the New Testament which presents Jesus who brings God’s embrace to us. It will be a herculean task, even unnecessary, to analyse all the 27 documents of the New Testament to speak of how Jesus communicates God to us and with us. I would rather limit myself to some texts to remind ourselves that Jesus is God’s good news to us. In Jesus, God has embraced humanity in love and compassion. Therefore, we are a privileged people.

1. DISCOVERING (BECOMING AWARE OF) GOD’S EMBRACE

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2). In the past, God spoke through various persons, particularly, the prophets. The Old Testament bears witness to it. Now, we look at Jesus, the Son of God, who becomes the definitive way in which God reveals himself to us. Mark begins in a similar vein: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1). The good news is Jesus Christ himself. The fourth gospel emphasizes this when it says: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known (Jn 1:18). In Jesus, God manifests his goodness, love, mercy and tenderness. The prologue to the gospel according to John says: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14). This is a unique statement of the New Testament. The divine becomes human.

In Isaiah 40:6-8, the word and the flesh are contrasted. For the Semitics, the flesh stood for the human person, perhaps with an emphasis on the aspect of weakness (Jn 3:6; 6:63). So, in saying that the word became flesh, John is saying that Jesus who is God, is identifying himself fully with human condition/human
nature (cf. Gen 2:23; 37:27; Is 58:6-7). When we use the words *grace* and *truth*, we are looking at the very qualities of God himself; we are defining divinity. These are two qualities that are constantly used in the Old Testament to describe the covenantal God who freely but faithfully relates to the humankind (Ex 34:5-7; Num 14:18; Ps 89:14; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Grace stands for God’s favour, benevolence, mercy and permanence of kindness. Truth points to his trustworthiness, reliability, faithfulness, stability and unwaveringness. Thus the prologue of John presents Jesus as the *unique and total revelation* of such a God (Jn 1:18; also 14:8-9). The new gift of the Father is Jesus himself. In the person of Jesus, God does not just speak to us or give us commandments; he comes to be with us (*Emmanuel*). Jesus, the Word, fully reveals the Father and enables human beings to partake of the divine fullness. He is the perfect and ultimate expression of God’s embrace of humanity.

God embraces us and comforts us like a mother. His love for us is *gratuitous*. The first letter of John insists on this. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son” (1Jn 4:10). God loved us first. We come to know God’s immense love for us humans because he has sent us his son. This shows how much God intends to embrace us, to love us, to relate to us. God can act only in this way. That is why the same letter would say: God is love (1Jn 4:8; 4:16). A unique statement! We have many statements about God loving us. We also speak of God as light, shepherd, rock etc. But the writer of this letter makes a bold statement: God is love. That is his nature. So when God relates with us, the only thing that he can do is to love us. He cannot but love us. We may not be convinced of the depth of God’s love. But, his love goes far beyond we can ever imagine as the New Testaments makes it abundantly clear.

The highly Christological parable of the wicked tenants (Mk 12:1-12) is an example. After sending his slaves, the owner of the vineyard sends his own son: “He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them” (Mk 12:6). The fourth gospel expresses it beautifully: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). God is not giving a token gift but his own Son to share himself with us. In Jesus God saves us and makes us live in God’s eternity. Matthew puts it in another way. The Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). We do not need to struggle or behave in a particular way to win the gratuitous and abundant love of God. What we have to do is to open ourselves fully to God’s unconditional love and let it totally transform our life. This is what the New Testament invites us to believe in and to be convinced of. God embraces us continually and always. In Jesus, God has given us all that he could ever give us. Jesus is God’s *mebasser* par excellence.
2. LIVING HIS EMBRACE WITH JOY

The response to our awareness of God embracing us in the person of Jesus is to live our life with Jesus and for Jesus. The realization of God’s embrace should make us live our day to day life, savouring God’s love and enjoying it every moment. If we may say so, we should embrace Him in return. To put it differently, accepting his call and having said ‘yes’ to him, we ought to constantly look for him and remain with him in order to transform ourselves into him.

A very familiar text from John, of Jesus calling the first disciples (Jn 1:35-42), could illustrate this point. Unlike in the Synoptics, the first two disciples of Jesus in the fourth gospel come from the circle of John the Baptist. As always, the initiative comes from the master. Jesus asks them, “What are you looking for?” (Jn 1:38). They were not dumb. They pose a counter-question to him, “Where are you staying?” (Jn 1:38). The response of Jesus is interesting, “Come and see.” (Jn 1:39). The two disciples accept the invitation of Jesus and stay with him. The first privilege and obligation of a disciple is to seek the Lord and to experience the Lord’s goodness by being with him. Remaining in Christ expands our heart to his heart, to the measure of his heart. Only intimacy with Christ can result in abundance of fruits (Jn 15:1-8). A similar idea is seen also in the earlier gospel of Mark. Jesus calls the disciples and appoints the Twelve “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mk 3:13-14).

Our principal task in life is to keep looking for this God who wants to calls us and make us his own. A constant and committed search for God is what should characterize our life. This is our life and task. We may try the latest techniques and changes and renewals. Only one thing can sustain, nourish and justify religious life. “The religious must be the person who first and foremost, always and forever, in whatever circumstance, seeks God and God alone, sees God and God alone in all of this confusion, in all of this uncertainty and, whatever the situation, speaks God-- and God alone.” Vita Consecrata, absorbing the sentiments of St. Augustine would put it: “The primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives, because men and women are made for God, and their hearts are restless until they rest in him.” We are God-seekers and that alone can give the real meaning to our life. We have to learn to be with Jesus. Unless and until that happens, the many other seemingly important activities of life may be hollow. So, the invitation is to keep looking for the Lord who wants to make us his disciples and his missionaries. “For the person who cannot find God here [in religious life], staying here is a mistake. For the person who does not seek God here, leaving here is an imperative. For the person who can find God better someplace else, leaving here is grace.” Pope Francis too,
shares his conviction of this primary duty of a follower of the Lord. Without a constant union with the Lord, we cannot reach out to others. “Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ’s heart, full of mercy and love.”

The immediate consequence of our being with the Lord is joy, immense joy. At the scene of the transfiguration when Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus, Peter is so happy that he shouts out: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings” (Mk 9:5). The first disciples who stayed with Jesus, in the gospel of John, come out to say, “We have found the Messiah” (Jn 1:41). Meeting the Lord and listening to him, makes our hearts burn! (Lk 24:32). It is a joy that comes from a double realization, of the Lord’s immense goodness and of our unworthiness to receive his love. St. Paul says: “For to me, living is Christ” (Phil 1:21). In the same letter, he adds: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4); or, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). It is not our ability or the capacity for immense ministry that gives us joy but simply the awareness that God continues to embrace me despite my weak and sinful nature. Our hope is based on the one in whom we put our trust; nothing is impossible to Him (Lk 1:37). Paul, when he realizes and is discouraged that he is too weak to be a follower of the Lord, is told by the Lord: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:8). Paul is happy. He realizes that there is joy even in weakness. “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” (2 Cor 12:9).

The life of Paul tells us that being with the Lord and working for the Lord, certainly brings us a lot of happiness, but not without hardships. Experiencing the Lord and proclaiming his gospel involves sacrifice and suffering. It involves self-emptying, kenosis. This is the example of the Lord himself (Phil 2:6-11). “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). This is also what a disciple of Christ should expect. Paul would say, “Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains” (Gal 6:19-20). In speaking of the blessedness (happiness) of the Kingdom of God, Matthew would say the same thing. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad” (Mt 5:11-12).
So, being with Lord, seeking him and following him, does not mean that our life is going to be trouble-free, that we are insulated against all kinds of problems and perils. The present political and social situations, and, tensions in the country and in the world at large may, in fact, point to the contrary. But we need not be frightened and run away. Rather, we must pray for and gain the boldness to accept whatever comes on the way. Look at the early disciples. The apostles are arrested for preaching Jesus and they are flogged. They are ordered not to preach in his name. Did they listen to the Jewish council? We are told: “As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.” (Acts 5:40-42). They did not stop teaching and proclaiming Jesus. Peter and John, when ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, respond without hesitation: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:9-20). The disciples do not run away, frightened. They decide to preach Jesus and to pray for strength to do this. The scene in Acts continues with the disciples praying together with the community for boldness to preach the word. “And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:9-30). We could also recall that scene in John, after the discourse on the Bread of Life. Many left Jesus. Jesus frankly asks his close disciples, the Twelve: “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:67-68).

The fact that Jesus has come and made us his own and called us to himself gives us immense joy. When God embraces us in the person of Jesus, joy is a necessary by-product. But it is not a trouble-free joy! We have to face obstacles and oppositions. That is why in his farewell discourse, Jesus prays that the disciples may experience genuine joy--a joy that comes not from the absence of conflicts but from the assurance that the Lord is with us. The joy that we speak of is something that arises of a certainty that we are loved and saved.12 Real joy is the messianic gift par excellence (John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13).

Pope Francis refers often to the joy of the disciples. Joy is a necessary manifestation of the consecrated; there is no holiness in sadness.13 Where there are religious, there is joy! There is no joy without the cross. “When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly. We may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.”14 Remember, what the first Pope, Peter tried to do at Caesarea Philippi when he heard that Jesus must undergo suffering and be killed. “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Mt 16:22).
And finally, encountering and staying with the Lord, will demand significant changes from us. We will be forced to recognize our own unworthiness, our mistakes, and, our insufficiency. The Lukan narrative of Jesus encountering Zacchaeus is a good example (Lk 19:1-10). Zacchaeus was curious enough to desire to meet the Lord and yet he was not expecting a personal meeting. He is lucky! Jesus not only looks up at him when he is on the sycamore tree, but Jesus becomes his guest at his home. And does Zacchaeus stand there the whole time looking at Jesus? No! He is not seeing Jesus anymore. He sees himself, his wretchedness. He wants to change. “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” (Lk 19:8). It is no different in the case of Peter (Lk 5:1-11). Toiling the whole night, no fish is caught. Jesus comes along. Duc in altum! Peter obliges and casts the net, and gets a huge howl of fish. Does Peter keep staring at the fish in amazement? No! Is he admiring Jesus? No! Peter sees himself, his real, unworthy self. He knows he is not worthy to be with Jesus. “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8). If we honestly read the gospels and listen to Jesus, revisions and rescheduling will be the norm, and not the exception in our life. As the Holy Father suggests, we may have to streamline our life and structures, and, repurpose our houses and mission for the needs and possibilities of today.

3. BRINGING GOD’S EMBRACE TO OTHERS

Becoming aware of the powerful embrace of God in the person of Jesus, and, letting that embrace take hold of our personal life will make us want to share that embrace with others. We will want to be like Jesus bringing God’s loving embrace to others. This is radiating the joy of the gospel.

People who experienced love from Jesus eagerly shared that love with others. Let us go back to the scene in John, the call of the first disciples (Jn 1:35-42). The moment Andrew experienced Jesus, he came out! He came out to share the good news of encountering the living gospel, Jesus Christ. He runs to his brother Simon, speaks to him about Jesus and leads him to Jesus. A similar pattern follows in the next encounter. Philip who is called by Jesus, finds Nathanael, tells him about Jesus and then brings him to Jesus (Jn 1:43-51). Two chapters later the story is no different. The Samaritan woman who is met by the Lord, runs to her people to invite them to come and see the Lord! “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” (Jn 4:29). So also at the post-resurrectional scene Mary Magdalene who experiences the Risen Lord, announces to the disciples: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:8). Good news is always shared. It cannot be kept for oneself. It has to be
shared! It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction. It does not matter who we share with - a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim; what matters is what we share: the good news, Jesus Christ! My experience of the Lord! We are not forcing the other to accept our religion. Rather, we are enthusiastically sharing a good thing that we have personally experienced to let others know that as God’s children, we can live together in spite of our terrible differences and individuality. This is also true with regard to diversity within our own community. Embracing God’s love would mean embracing differences, living in unity while maintaining our diversity; we need to curb our naturally strong instinct to have uniformity.

We need to realize that it is more our joyful living together that will attract many entrants to religious life than well-organized vocation programs. The more committed we are in living the gospel, the more eloquent our life is, and the easier it becomes for many young people to choose this form of life. People may listen to our words but they will certainly be moved when they see reflected in our lives the mercy and tenderness of the Lord. So, it is with the joy of the gospel that we need to wake up the world. By our living proclamation of the gospel, we must continue to invite people to Jesus. We are not the center; Jesus is the center. We must take people to Jesus as did Andrew who took his brother Simon to Jesus (Jn 1:42), or, Philip who took Nathanael to Jesus (Jn 1:46-47) or, the Samaritan woman who brought her villagers to Jesus (Jn 4:29-30). When we are focused on Christ, we move out of ourselves to others because “when we put Christ at the center of our life, we ourselves don’t become the center! The more that you unite yourself to Christ and he becomes the center of your life, the more he leads you out of yourself, leads you from making yourself the center and opens you to others. We are not at the center; we are, so to speak, ‘relocated’. We are at the service of Christ and of the Church.”

There is something peculiar about the way Jesus shared God’s embrace, his love with others. He chose to go to the weak, to the poor, to the outcast, to the marginalized. He chose to break down barriers. An apt title for Jesus, according to John P. Meier, is “Marginal Jew.” Jesus was a Jew alright, but not a mainstream Jew following all the customs and traditions. He was a Jew on the periphery, a marginal Jew. And, he easily moved to those on the periphery of the society, those rejected by the society. So, bringing God’s embrace would mean that we have a different set of criteria from those normally practiced in the world. We do not look at efficiency or numbers, not even at our own problems or deficiencies; rather, we look at how God’s love can reach particularly the vulnerable, those on the margins or the periphery of the society. In loving those on the periphery, we recognize in
our own lives the true meaning of life and love.22 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:18-19). We are not called to be prophets of doom, to diagnose and dissect the evil around us but to proclaim the good news especially to those on the periphery of the society in one way or another. If at all we diagnose and dissect evil, it is to put it right, not to lament over it! This is our life. To achieve this we must be more than willing to take on any role as demanded by a situation or time. We are called to become all things to all for the sake of Christ. “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessings” (1Cor 9:22-23).

CONCLUSION

1. God has fully manifested his love to us in the person of Jesus Christ. In the book of Revelation, we have letters written to the seven churches. Writing to the church at Laodicea, the 7th in the list of seven churches, the Lord says: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father who is in heaven” (Rev 3:20-21). The Lord has embraced us. He has transferred his energy and love into us. But he can only knock at our life. He cannot force us! He can suggest to us many things to make our life joyful. Yet, he cannot disrespect the freedom of our will. It is up to each one of us to make a decision to open the door, to let the Lord come in, and, transform our life with his presence within us.

2. As persons consecrated to the Lord, we have been found, touched and transformed by the Lord Jesus. Let us willingly share the Lord Jesus with others. This is our task but also our joy. By our consecrated life, we are called to incarnate the Word. It is “a call to take up his way of life, to adopt his interior attitude, to allow oneself to be invaded by his Spirit, to absorb his surprising logic and his scale of values, to share in his risks and his hopes.”23

3. Finally, we live our consecration bringing God’s embrace especially to the needy. Jesus spent time with those who needed him most. Religious life is not cutting oneself off from the world or a renunciation of the world. Rather, it is a
deeper immersion into the world as disciples of Jesus who are moved by the spirit of the gospel to build communities of freedom, fellowship and justice.24

Endnotes

2This paper was presented at Sanyasa on February 06, 2015 as part of the seminar. I thank Rev. Dr. Xavier E Manavath, Director of Sanyasa, for inviting me to join the seminar.
3Cf. Pope Benedict XVI launching the year for priests, June 19, 2009.
5Remaining/staying with Jesus is an important part of Johannine call process and theology. See also John 1:32-33; 1:38-39; 2:12; 4:40; 5:38; 6:27.56; 8:31; 8:35; 12:24; 12:46; 14:10.17.25; 15:4-10; 21:22-23; etc.
7*Evangelica testificatio*, n.3.
11*Rejoice*, n.6.
12*Rejoice*, n.3.
13ibid.
14*Rejoice*, n.6.
19*Rejoice*, n.8.
20*Rejoice*, n.5.
23*Rejoice*, n.5.
As the Catholic Church has dedicated this year to Consecrated Life, the religious find themselves in the crossroads, facing many challenges, which some would even call a ‘crisis’: dwindling vocations to religious life, some scandals among the religious and the fast pace of secularisation and consumerism in every realm, including the Church and even religious life, to name a few. Yet, I can see a silver line in the horizon, when I come across numerous dedicated and selfless religious among my contemporaries, spending their precious lives at the service of others. Therefore, I would like to look at the religious vocation as a joyous response to God, who is Love personified. In this small paper, I present the case of a few selected religious men and women, based on a research study, undertaken by me in the recent past. The participants in the study have all unequivocally understood their religious vocation as a joyous response to God, whose unconditional love urges them to live their religious life joyfully at the service of others. After a bit of introduction to religious vocation itself and a brief review of available literature on the theme, I shall present the findings of my study, in the hope of encouraging those young men and women, embracing religious vocation.

1. MEANING OF VOCATION

The literal meaning of the word vocation is ‘call’. It derives from the Latin word vocātiō. In the non-religious context, it refers to an occupation to which a person is specially drawn or for which she/he is suited, trained, or qualified. But Christianity believes that vocation is more than an ordinary call from God; it is a special call from God. Most people might think that their vocation is an invitation to do something...
special for God in life. It is important to know that any vocation is a special call from God to be holy.

There is a marked difference between profession and vocation. A profession is something that you take up in order to support yourself, your family and to contribute to the society in large. You need not be a believer in God to choose a profession. And you can pick, choose and switch profession freely as per your preferences and circumstances. Therefore, a profession is based more on the horizontal dimension, whereas a vocation dwells on the vertical dimension; the latter has more to do with what God wants me to be, than what I want.

God’s call is a call to holiness that is rooted in our baptism. As St. Paul states, “He chose us, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him in love.” (Eph 1:4). Any vocation is a call to know, love and serve the Lord. It is a movement that draws us toward a deeper union with God. This deeper union with God enables us to love God and love our neighbour. When we do this, we come to realise that there is a meaning for our existence, especially in relation to our particular vocation.

1.1. Specific Vocations in the Church

Each one lives out the invitation to be holy differently, depending on which vocation he/she has chosen. A person can lead a single life, married life, consecrated life or carry out an ordained ministry in the Church. Each of these vocations is a unique call to follow Christ closely and joyfully.

Those who have chosen to lead single life may not have formally professed the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but still they make a personal commitment to serve others in work and prayer. Thus they follow the teachings of Christ in their daily lives.

In marriage, Christian couple follow Christ dearly and thus they surrender themselves to each other. They promise to always love each other faithfully and share their partner’s joys and sorrows in whatever situation life brings them. Through sexual union and shared life, they express their true love, which brings them together in close intimacy and opens them to the gift of new life.

Those who have chosen consecrated life, follow Christ through their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. They are invited to imitate Christ in their lives and live as he lived, and keep themselves free for prayer and the service of humanity.

Those in ordained ministry share in the priesthood of Christ in a unique way. Since their lives are transfigured, they represent Christ, the head of the Church.
Thus they stand in the midst of the people of God and minister to the faithful as Christ did.

Each vocation has a unique lifestyle and is a commitment to love in a certain way, even though the centre of each vocation is the love of God. As Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote, “Love makes us seek what is good; love makes us better persons. It is love that prompts men and women to marry and form a family, to have children. It is love that prompts others to embrace the consecrated life or become priests.” Thus, each of these vocations challenges the faithful to live their faith more sincerely and to follow Christ more closely.

1.2. Religious Vocation

Religious vocation is a form of consecrated life that can be conceptualized as a special grace from God to selected individuals. Saying ‘yes’ to God’s call is not just an affirmation that one has chosen a rare sacred life, but it is also an affirmation of God’s love, care and plan for one’s life. Thus it is a special call from God to selected individuals to love others more and thus become holy. The heart of religious vocation is a call to fall in love with the person of Jesus, who is present in every human person. This deep love towards Jesus helps the religious to share that love with others – with fellow members in the community and with every person in the world outside.

God’s invitation to consecrated life is a pure mystery, known only to God. It is through prayer that a religious comes to realize how great God’s love for him/her is; and then, he/she wants to respond with a generous heart to this love. A religious freely chooses to answer Jesus’ invitation to follow Him in a consecrated life of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Having given one’s heart to God, the religious wants to be free of material possessions. His/her only aim will be seeking to do His will in all things.

St. Bernard offers a beautiful description of religious vocation. According to him, the consecrated persons live more purely, fall more rarely, rise more easily, live more peacefully, are more plentifully endowed with grace, die more securely, and are more abundantly rewarded. While a religious vocation is a glorious grace from God, it is only the beginning of a long chain of graces that they must cooperate with, by serving Him with love and fervour.¹

2. RESPOnDInG TO THE GOD OF LOVE

Religious vocation is a sign of God’s unconditional love for human beings and it’s a perfect gift from God. The source of this gift is God, who is Love – Deus caritas...
1 Jn 4:16 says, “Whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” This original bond is based on God’s love, which precedes creation itself. God has chosen us and loved us unconditionally even before we come into existence. Out of his unconditional love, he has created us from nothing (cf. 2 Macc 7:28), in order to bring us into full communion with Him.²

Looking at the creation of God, in wonder and excitement, the Psalmist exclaims: “When I see the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you arranged, what is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:3-4). The truth of our very existence is confined in this amazing mystery: each and every human person is the fruit of God’s thought and act of His love which is ceaseless, faithful and everlasting (cf. Jer 31:3). This limitless love precedes us, sustains us and calls us along the path of life. This love is a free gift of God. Thus, every specific vocation is born of the initiative of God. He is the one who takes the first step because his love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5).

2.1. Religious Life as a Joyous Response

When God took initiative and first called us to religious life, each of us have felt the burning joy within us. We feel joy within us in being loved by God and there is a greater joy in following Him wholeheartedly. Pope Francis says, “At the centre of your vocation, is the firm conviction of being loved by God.”³ As long as we mirror this God of Love, we will draw men and women to Christ. To nurture this joy, the Pope recommends us to pray, meditate on the word of God, and celebrate the sacraments and life in community. If these are lacking, the joy of religious life will be diminished.

The Pope also insists that each of the three evangelical counsels, obedience, chastity, and poverty are essential aspects of a joyful religious life. Obedience requires one to cling on to Christ, who himself was the role model of obedience. “Mature and generous obedience,” he said, “requires that you cling in prayer to Christ who, taking the form of a servant, learned obedience through what he suffered (cf. Perfectae Caritatis, 14).”⁴ Purity and chastity are stirred by God’s mercy for the religious and they express the single-minded commitment to the love of God. Finally, through poverty, a religious is able to recognize God’s mercy not only as a source of strength but also as a source of treasure. Therefore, one must approach consecrated life as a precious gift to the Church and to the world.

Thus, religious vocation is a happy union of the special call from the God of love and the individual’s joyful response to it. All cannot be religious men and
women; it has to come from God. The expectations of each vocation are unique and challenging. It is love that pulls religious men and women to embrace consecrated life and ordained ministry.

2.2. Review of Literature on the Theme

There is a dearth of studies on the theme, ‘religious vocation as a joyous response to the God of love’. However, some of the related studies are highlighted below, since they enhance the present study.

2.2.1. Correlation between Attachment to GOD and Psychological Wellbeing

In his study, ‘Attachment to God: Its Impact on the Psychological Wellbeing of Persons with Religious Vocation,’ Okozi (2010) studied how attachment to God could be associated with psychological wellbeing. He examined 47 male students in Roman Catholic seminaries, who were training to become priests or religious. The results showed a strong correlation between attachment to God and psychological wellbeing. Okozi discovered that the ‘secure attachment style’ was the best predictor of attachment to God.5

2.2.2. Special Personality Features of Religious

Another study by Galea, ‘Identifying Personality Features Related to Religious Vocation: A Comparison between Seminarians and their Peers Using the NEO Personality Inventory (Revised)’ found that seminarians tend to exhibit a psychological structure that differs from that of their peers. Various personality factors such as agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience distinguished seminarians from their peers, and perhaps predisposed them to choose this religious vocation.6

2.2.3. Reasons for Staying in a Religious Community

Previous research shows that reasons for staying in a religious community are varied. A study by Cooney (1992) found the reasons to be ‘call to mission, call to community life and life in the Church’. Religious perceive themselves as a ‘doers’ and ‘risk-takers’. The values, operative among the religious as reasons for staying in a community, were facilitated by the congruence between their personal beliefs and the organizational model of their religious Congregation. The guiding values identified were: a commitment to modelling collaborative governance, a preference for direct services to the poor, and the desire to challenge unjust structures, policies and beliefs, wherever these are found, and the desire to take risks for one’s beliefs.7
2.2.4. **Impact of Religious Affiliation on Attitudes in Life**

Reed (1991) examined the impact of the strength of religious affiliation on attitudes toward life satisfaction and found that religious persons are happier, more satisfied, and more fulfilled than the non-religious.⁸

2.2.5. **Motivations to Religious Vocation**

Wolf (1990) conducted a study on thirty elderly women religious, using a phenomenological interview technique to discuss women’s ‘call to vocation’ - the remembered life events that influenced their decisions to enter the convent as young girls. These women talked about romantic and pragmatic motivations as well as spiritual direction.⁹

Thus, different studies and life experiences of the religious show that most of those who accepted a religious vocation enjoy life to the fullest and derive internal satisfaction. It is evident that those religious perceive it as a call from God and therefore, they respond to it joyfully. Though the available literature shows that religious vocation results in internal satisfaction, how they experience joy in religious life and make meaning out of their life experiences is not explored adequately. The present study attempts to explore this aspect in religious life.

### 3. A STUDY ON THE LIFE OF SELECTED RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN

Responding to the dearth of studies that explore the perception of religious, regarding how they make meaning out of their experiences, I have undertaken a study of the different elements involved in religious vocation. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the importance of religious life. It can motivate and enlighten the young novices among religious men and women.

#### 3.1. Methodology of the Study

Before going into the findings of the study, let me clarify the methodology followed in this research: the questions, the paradigm, the participants and the methods used for data collection and analysis.

#### 3.1.1. Research Questions

The following are the basic questions explored in this study:

a) How do religious men and women perceive the religious vocation?
b) What are the determinants of choice of consecrated life?
c) What are the benefits of consecrated life?

3.1.2. Research Paradigm

This study used qualitative research design. Qualitative research has been considered particularly appropriate here for the reason that the field of interest is characterized by complexity, ambiguity and lack of prior theory and research. Qualitative research is used to gain insight into the attitudes, behaviours, practices, beliefs, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture and lifestyles of religious men and women. Here, we are interested to know how the religious vocation is found to be meaningful and as a sign of God’s love. The study attempted to explore different dimensions of consecrated life by understanding the experiences of religious men and women; this is best achieved by qualitative method because of its ability to capture the profundity of insight and the meaning people attach to their experiences. Therefore, the guiding research paradigm chosen for this study is phenomenology.

3.1.3. Participants

The participants selected for the study were ten religious (5 male and 5 female), whose age ranged between 30 and 60; they belong to different religious Congregations. The participants had at least 10 years of experience of religious life after their final vows.

3.1.4. Data Collection

In-depth interviews were used to collect data. This interview method is considered flexible in that the interviewer can modify the order and details of how topics are covered; it is aimed to provide rich data. This guarantees some control to the respondent over how the interview goes, but, because respondents are asked more or less the same questions, this makes possible comparisons across interviews. In depth interview was selected because the area of interest is complex and involved the experiences of the religious.

The development and validation of interview schedule followed these steps: The interview protocol and guide was developed after conducting a thorough review of literature on ‘religious life as a joyous response to God’s call’. An informal interview with three members of the target population was conducted. Based on the data collected from the informal interview, some relevant modifications were made in the interview guide. Then a provisional interview schedule was prepared. The interview schedule, thus prepared, was given to three experts - a senior member of the target
population and two subject experts. The final interview schedule was finalized by incorporating the suggestions and feedback given by the experts.

The interview schedule included questions regarding the participants’ religious life experiences, childhood experiences, family support system, life incidents, strengths, challenges, coping strategies and other aspects. The focus was on subjective interpretation and the meanings they make of their vowed lives. The participants were contacted through telephone, seeking their willingness to participate in the study. Those who gave consent for the study were further contacted to fix appointment for the interview. The interviews were conducted at venues convenient to the participants. Participants were given a written description of the study and were asked to sign the consent form before the interview. Biographical information was collected. Interviews lasted for nearly 45 minutes to 1 hour. The entire interview was audio-taped and transcribed.

3.1.5. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes in data. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to organize and describe the data set in detail. It is constructive in interpreting various aspects of the research statement. The thematic analysis expounded by Ritchie, Spencer and O’Connor was followed during the analysis.

The procedure consisted of many steps: initially I tried to gain an overview of the data coverage and familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcript. Based on the objectives of the study, a thematic framework was developed initially. The raw data was indexed using thematic framework to show the theme or concept in the data. After indexing, materials with similar content or properties were sorted, which facilitated easy access to specific themes. A thematic chart was developed, in which each main theme and its associated sub-topics were plotted. Themes and categories in the initial thematic framework were refined, while it was transferred to thematic chart. Similarities and differences between various emerging themes were established and a coherent logical structure was displayed using the conceptual map. Basic themes were matched using set of linkages to form organizing theme and groups of organizing themes were classified under a global theme. Explanations were structured, based on available theoretical framework on wellbeing and coping, similar empirical studies and common sense.
3.1.6. Ethical Consideration

Informed consent form was given to the interviewees for participation in the study. This necessitated that the participant agreed for examining interview transcripts subsequently as research material. The participants were given the freedom to leave the study, if they felt uncomfortable or wished to skip any questions. Confidentiality of the responses and names of the interviewees was strictly maintained. It was made clear to each participant that the personal communication would be used in the write-up for the journal article. However, all other identifiable information about the participants (such as names and places) would be removed from the transcripts and write-up.

3.2. Findings of the Study

I shall summarise the findings of this study under three titles, based on the three research questions mentioned above (3.1.1.) and the three corresponding thematic frameworks.

3.2.1. Perception of Religious Vocation

Table 1: Thematic framework on ‘perception of religious vocation’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Themes</th>
<th>Organising Themes</th>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Meaning of religious life</td>
<td>1.11. Service to all humanity</td>
<td>It helps to serve society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.12. Answering the call of God</td>
<td>Finding joy in giving oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.13. Being happy and content</td>
<td>Listening to God and do what he asks one to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.14. Finding meaning in life</td>
<td>Being regular and faithful to religious activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Qualities of a religious</td>
<td>1.21. Self-sacrificing nature</td>
<td>Being happy with what one has and not craving for others’ things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inner desire to give life for God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness to sacrifice something in life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in the table, the two global themes that emerged from the data indicating the first objective, ‘perception of religious vocation’ are categorized into ‘meaning of religious life’ and ‘qualities of religious men and women’.

**a) Meaning of Religious Life:** Religious vocation is generally considered as a pure and sacred service to humanity; and people who are chosen to embrace it find themselves worthy of accepting God’s call to fulfil His mission in this pursuit of service. Participants perceive that religious life helps them to serve the society better. They find greater joy in doing so. They also felt that serving humanity is a way of listening to God’s word and they felt fully contented about joyously engaging in such activities of service. Many opined that religious vocation is ultimately helping them to find meaning in life, which otherwise they wouldn’t have fully realized. According to them, the way one engages in religious activities has to be special and unique; also, being regular and faithful to what one does results in the successful completion of tasks assigned.

“If I answer the call of God, that is how my life becomes meaningful. I find joy in giving myself. To me, religious vocation means understanding and answering the call from God and discerning His will in life.” (P2, personal communication, 30 November, 2014).

**b) Qualities of Religious Men and Women:** The second global theme under the first objective is ‘qualities of a religious’. People who choose religious life are assumed to be possessing unique characteristics and strengths. Participants in the study too agreed with this popular notion. Many of them said that following the principle of aparigraha is essential in terms of feeling completely satisfied and happy with what one owns and not getting stressed and worried about what one desires to possess. Universal brotherhood has emerged as an organising theme, because the participants believe that the ability to look beyond oneself and to unconditionally accept others as brothers and sisters are virtues that each religious should possess. Other qualities of a religious, perceived by the participants, are the ability to be focused in life and the clear knowledge about various aspects of religious life.
“First and foremost one should have the desire to sacrifice life for Christ. Religious should not crave for worldly things. If one cannot be happy with what God wants him to have, he cannot be focused in his mission” (P5, personal communication, 27 December, 2014).

3.2.2. **Determinants of the Choice of Consecrated Life**

Table 2: Thematic framework on ‘determinants of the choice of consecrated life’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Themes</th>
<th>Organising Themes</th>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Motivation to religious life</td>
<td>2.11. Family and societal influences</td>
<td>Studying in the school run by the nuns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.12. Observational learning</td>
<td>Observing the life of priests and nuns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Childhood experiences</td>
<td>2.21. Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Born in a God-fearing family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Had a great desire from childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Love for the God and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.22. Simple lifestyle</td>
<td>Dressing up simply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement in church activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second objective was to explore the determinants of the choice of consecrated life and two global themes emerged: ‘motivation to religious life’ and ‘childhood experiences’.

**a) Motivation to Religious Life:** Participants revealed that their family and upbringing played an important role in their choice of religious life. Many of them are brought up by God fearing parents, who tried to inculcate religious ideals and values in their children. The education provided also helped them to value the importance of being selfless and caring for others, as there were ample opportunities to get influenced by the religious teachings and lives of nuns and priests. So, the participants agreed that observational learning made them more mature in their way of understanding religious life and contributed a great deal in their decision to choose a unique and sacred vocation.

“Parents encouraged and supported a lot. I was the seventh child in the family. When I expressed my desire to join a convent, my dad said that it is a very good thing. But I was a bit confused and I approached the religious nuns in my parish. They came and spoke
about the charism of the Congregation that is, living together in community - Trinitarian Communion. All these influenced me quite a lot.” (P1, personal communication, 28 November, 2014).

b) Childhood Experiences: It is important to note that the childhood experiences of these participants laid the foundation for the development of a positive attitude towards religious life. They all were intrinsically motivated to pursue the religious vocation and were governed by an inner drive to be simple in their life. They opined that their parents and teachers guided and motivated them to participate in religious activities, which led them to maintain and enhance their interest in following the sacred path of religious life. Some participants also said that though external agents influenced their choice of religious life, they wouldn’t have become religious, if there had been no burning inner desire.

“The desire was so compelling in me that I was convinced that I would not marry and I would move away from home. I was very sure of it. I told my dad that I want to love God and serve all people.” (P4, personal communication, 27 December, 2014).

3.2.3. Benefits of Religious Life

Table 3: Thematic framework on the ‘benefits of religious life’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Themes</th>
<th>Organising Themes</th>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Sense of wellbeing</td>
<td>3.11. Happiness within self</td>
<td>Discovered own true self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helped to come out of myself, liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.12. Enhanced wellbeing to a greater extent</td>
<td>Enjoying the day to day life and activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.13. Sound health</td>
<td>Having good health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Maintaining positive relationships</td>
<td>3.21. Good and cordial relationship with people around</td>
<td>Seeing God in everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.22. Unconditional positive regard</td>
<td>Loving everyone even if they hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loving everyone with all their strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.23. Forgiveness
 Forgiving the one who has hurt me

### 3.3. Selfless service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.31. Empathic understanding</th>
<th>Having a heart that can feel for others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.32. Reaching out to others</td>
<td>House visits to both rich and poor, especially when the family is in sorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.33. Available in need</td>
<td>My training in the convent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.34. Praying for the needy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.4. Dealing with adversities in life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.41. Religious formation</th>
<th>The spirit of the congregation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.42. Spiritual activities</td>
<td>Attending seminars and retreats regularly gives me strength.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.43. Benefiting from other’s experiences</td>
<td>Seeing the life challenges others have faced and overcome successfully</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.5. Becoming a better human being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.51. Ability to be allocentric</th>
<th>Life experiences to think beyond oneself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.52. Principle of <em>aparigraha</em></td>
<td>Trained to be simple,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust and faith in self and others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third objective of the study was to see the benefits of religious life. From the data, five global themes emerged: sense of well-being, maintaining positive relationships, selfless service, dealing with adversities in life and becoming a better human being. Let us briefly analyse the findings under each theme.

**a) Sense of Well-being:** Participants were of the opinion that religious life had contributed to a great extent in enhancing their personal growth, which in turn enabled them to give better service to humanity. The obvious outcome of engaging in religious activities is reflected in their enhanced happiness, well-being and sound health. Many of them said that religious life had given them the opportunity to introspect and reflect in order to become better religious. Their enhanced well-being helped them to look at oneself from a different perspective, to give different meaning and thereby enjoy the present moment mindfully.
“Religious life has helped me in discovering my true self. I am able to improve upon different areas of life, and am helped to come out of myself. I feel liberated. I can find happiness within myself and a deep sense of belonging. I would not have achieved this sense of well-being, if I were not a religious.” (P7, personal communication, 29 December, 2014).

b) Maintaining Positive Relationships: The second notable benefit, which the participants spoke about, refers to their enhanced ability to build and maintain positive relationships. They said that their relationship with people around, especially those in the community, is very rich and satisfying; they are very thankful for these relationships and keep the relationships very cordial and fresh. Many participants agreed that their ability to unconditionally accept people and forgive them for their mistakes resulted from the training and the exposure they received in the religious community. It has become easier for them to see God in others and look at the positive side of people, regardless of what they bring with them or what they are engaged in.

“Living wholeheartedly the community life and relating to other sisters have helped me to contribute to people outside. I have been taking classes and sharing my life with others in the college; I visit the houses of both the rich and the poor, especially when the family is in sorrow.” (P1, personal communication, 28 November, 2014).

c) Selfless Service emerged as another organizing theme. Participants were very joyous to reveal that they have become very empathetic, genuine and caring in their dealings with others. Religious life has optimized their skill in reaching out to others who are in need, thus providing support and a peaceful environment, which in turn helped people to become positive in their thinking. They said that they learned to handle and regulate their emotions in a mature way, without getting emotionally involved, when they had to support others in their sorrows and hardships.

d) Dealing with Adversities in Life: The global theme, ‘dealing with adversities in life’ shows the positive impact of religious life on a person’s coping skills and abilities. Almost all participants agreed that this enhanced ability to deal with hardships and stresses in life emanated from their religious training and their experiences within the community. They shared the fact that not only their training and exposure but the observational learning also has helped them to become resilient and more powerful and courageous in dealing with adversities of life. Regular prayer, Eucharistic celebration and periodic retreats, all put together, seem to have developed their strength and will-power to withstand pressures.
“Attending religious seminars and monthly retreats has given me strength to face challenges in religious life. The daily prayer and Eucharistic celebration has made me strong as a person.” (P8, personal communication, December 30, 2014).

e) Becoming a Better Human Being is the final global theme that emerged from the interviews. It indicates that religious vocation and life had helped the participants in their personal growth. Many of them feel that they learn to look at things from others’ perspective, giving more thoughts to it than being self-centred. It helps them to engage in selfless service. Following a simple life-style and being contended with what they have, is a result of sacred life. They have profited from witnessing the suffering and hardships of others and learned to adopt a simpler lifestyle.

“Religious life has helped me to think beyond myself. It taught me not to look for personal comforts in life. It made me an ‘other-centred person’.” (P9, personal communication, 30 December, 2014).

CONCLUSION

As we see from the discussion above, religious men and women who participated in the study find much meaning in consecrated life. It helps them to serve every person they come across in life and are happy and contented with it. The findings of this study have several implications for religious men and women, both young and old. All religious should cherish their religious life as a way of answering to God’s love. At the same time, every religious should possess certain qualities such as self-sacrifice, love for all humanity, love for community life and be focused and informed. Religious life helps one to find happiness and maintain positive relationships. It also helps them to face and overcome the challenges of modern life and thus become better human persons. These findings should encourage and motivate those wanting to join this way of life, as the religious vocation results in a joyful life in the community and helps them to serve humanity freely. The findings also will help the policy makers in the Church to come up with policies that will enable more men and women to adopt this way of life. The study shows that the childhood influences in family and society work as a motivational force. Therefore Christian families have an important role in the promotion and sustenance of religious life.

Endnotes


“We are on the edge of a new era, and we don’t know how to be reborn . . .
The entire understanding of what it means to be human must be enlarged”
(Sam Keen).

Holy Father, Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Letter addressed to all consecrated
people on November 21, exhorted us to “live the present with passion,” and radiate
the joy of the Gospel. He tells us to manifest “the joy of having answered the Lord’s
call, of having responded to his choice of love and of bearing witness to his Gospel
in service to the Church. And Joy, true joy, is contagious; it is infectious . . . it
impels one forward.”1 According to him, “Church must be attractive” and invites
us: “Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of acting, of living! It is
possible to live differently in this world . . . It is this witness I expect from you.”2

It seems to me that Pope Francis is initiating something new, or rather helps us
rediscover and live something that belongs authentically to our Christian heritage
that we have ignored. Drawing on the teachings of Pope Francis, the Cardinal
Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of
Apostolic Life, states: “In this historical process, through choices and ways of living,
Pope Francis is building up a living hermeneutic of the dialogue between God and
the world. We are introduced to a style of wisdom rooted in the Gospel and in
human eschatology, which interprets pluralism, searches for equilibrium, invites
us to facilitate the capacity of being responsible for change so that the truth of the
Gospel might be better communicated.”3

To accept his teaching means to “renew our existence in accordance with the
Gospel, not in a radical way understood as a model of perfection and often of

Xavier E. Manavath is a Claretian Missionary who has long experience of service in formation and on-going formation.
He has a doctorate from Van Kaam’s Institute of Formative Spirituality, Duquesne University, USA and has been the
founding director of Sanyasa: Institute of Consecrated Life. After having served as Provincial Superior of the Claretians
of Bangalore and the President of KCR, he is currently the Director of Sanyasa and serves also as the Episcopal Vicar
for the Religious in the Archdiocese of Bangalore.
separation, but by adhering wholeheartedly to the saving encounter that transforms our life.” What does this really mean? How do we do that? For this, I firmly believe that, first of all, we need to shift from a spirituality that is negative into one that is more positive and life-affirming as expounded in the Gospel. Every form of consecrated life has been born of the Spirit’s call to follow Jesus as the Gospel teaches. For all the founders and foundresses, the Gospel was the absolute rule, whereas every other rule was meant merely to be a nuanced and concrete expression of the Gospel and a means of living the Gospel to the full. A concrete implication of this is that the evangelical counsels or vows are intended as a concrete expression of this passionate love that means to transform and “wake up the world.” All interpretations of consecrated life that do not lead to this passionate love for God and humanity are simply wrong and incompatible with the Christian message.

1. **A PAST BURDENED WITH A NEGATIVE SPIRITUALITY**

As religious, however, we are burdened with a Christian tradition which has records of many epic tales of heroic asceticism of men and women who in pursuit of holiness has challenged the very limits of human endurance. Some of our best known records come from early Christian times. Spiritual life was identified with asceticism, and was labelled with a negative, anti-world and anti-human tag. No wonder there were reactions, triggered by the emerging human –psychological sciences and shared also by the contemporary world– a response that is widely held, rarely committed to writing, but one that tends to dismiss ascetical behaviour rather than attempt to assess it, positively or negatively. The following quotation is accurate and truthful but totally misses the essential message. The author, a historian, judges by the externals and misses the core. He writes of the original epoch of Christian asceticism: “There is perhaps, no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, sordid and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato.”

No wonder Pope Francis himself said: “The ghost to fight against is the image of religious life understood as an escape and consolation in face of an ‘external’ difficult and complex world.” The Pope urges us to “leave the nest,” and to live the life of the men and women of our times, to hand ourselves over to God and to our neighbor.
Surprisingly, these ascetic trends are common to all religions; its features include: forsaking the secular world, fasting, penance, mortification, celibacy, solitude and prayer, confrontation with the demonic powers. There are tales told with awe and admiration, recording outstanding feats of accomplishment.

We must admit that it is part of the human condition to exaggerate and even glorify anything that stretches our capacity to endure. There is always a fascination with the human ability to endure, to conquer the enemy within or any achievement that demands discipline and endurance so as to overcome the oppressive forces without. Stories are formed out of such fascination with an intent to form others also in the same spirit. These form of traditional stories should be considered as a “repository of the human spirit forever pushing the ultimate perfection.” Those who have explored the forming power of the stories tell us that we humans live continuously out of a narrative infrastructure made up of these form traditional stories. These stories do not have to be true but they must be interesting and capture the imagination and strike chords of resonance in the depth of our inner being.

2. ASCETICISM AS A FORMATIONAL STORY

Asceticism is essentially a “formational story”, not a set of facts or achievements. It is a gripping story, deep rooted in the human psyche, transcending every culture, race and religion. It seeks to convey deep feelings, fears and aspirations that transcend time and culture, values which seem to be eminently appropriate for the holistic vision of life that, in all probability, will characterize the 21st century. Contrary to public opinion, it is a narrative about life in its fullness, in its wholeness and not the denial of life as we are often led to believe. Two observations must be kept in mind as we approach the ascetic story.

1. In all religious traditions, separation of the ascetic from the main stream (withdrawal from the world) should be understood as a “liminal, primordial period of maturation so that the person can return to the main stream society and contribute more effectively to the development of life and culture.” The Monk does not leave the world in order to abandon it, but to return better equipped to confront the forces of evil that undermine a holistic, human and earthly existence. So the separation symbolizes the contemplative spacing needed to attain liminality and also the process required for its attainment. It was an attempt to remove the blinders that cloud our vision of true reality. It is Jesus who said: “How can the blind lead the blind.”
2. St. Anthony became famous because of his biography written by St. Athansius, Bishop of Alexandira, a prominent figure of the church of the early period. It depicts a man of valour and endurance, engaged continuously in a war with evil forces which he tries to overcome with his unceasing prayer, fasting and penance. We get the impression of a world invested with the demonic forces against which only the heroic can be victorious.

However, when we read the letters of St. Athony, his own original writings, we get a different picture. Interestingly, there are virtually no references to war with evil forces. Neither do we find any extremes in asceticism or self-denial. We are able to see a man deeply filled with God’s love so much so that his heart constantly moves out to others in compassion and concern. (SHOW a THEOLOGY CARD) This is true not only when he returns to the world after twenty years of solitude, but also when he was living as a recluse in the desert. Louis Bouyer writes: “The picture that is given us of Anthony, as he emerged from his solitude is in no way of an ascetic emaciated by asceticism that is its own end: it is that of a man calmed, brought into equilibrium, in whom everything human has become, as it were, transparent to the Spirit, docile to his influence.”

Why are these opposing renditions in the story? What certainty is there to conclude that one is true and the other false. In fact, both are true at a deeper level where the dualistic category of truth and falsity breakdown. There is the truth of the story and the truth of the fact. How do we reconcile the two?

3. FORMATIONAL STORY, CLOTHED WITHIN A CULTURE

Hagiography is made up of the form traditional stories that are coloured by the culture of its time. One of the assumptions of that period was that every saintly person attained that holiness as a result of successfully conquering evil forces within and without, through extreme penance and incessant prayer. Consequently every person who gained holiness was looked upon with certain qualities and experiences irrespective of the fact whether he or she truly experienced it or not. In our contemporary period of hagiography, a writer is much more “scientific” or “objective,” and will only record verifiable facts. Those who wrote about them, mostly wrote from the level of a consciousness, conditioned by that period. “They told a story in a way that generated meaning, of a quality that seemed appropriate for the world of that time but one which clearly needed to be translated if it is to continue to bear meaning for the contemporary world.”
4. THE CHALLENGE OF ELUCIDATING THE FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS

Our challenge, therefore, is to get behind the stories, the popular stories of heroic asceticism, discern, and elucidate the deeper or the “foundational” message of holiness and transformation, leaving behind the “accretions,” the world views, assumptions and perceptions of that time that are partial, one-sided and worn out.16 This will help us to understand more clearly ‘the liminality and the liminal values’ that these ascetics wanted to symbolize, express and proclaim. These values will empower us, an evangelizing community, to get, in the words of Pope Francis, “involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives, bridging distances, showing willingness to abase itself when necessary and embracing human lives, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”17 We always need to remember what Pope Benedict XVI has said: “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction.”18 Unfortunately we know the ascetic stories, either idolize them or dismiss them as irrelevant for today, and remain out of touch with the fundamental formational dynamics, the values and the transformation inherent in the process of attaining those values.

We will soon realize that it is the fundamental spiritual discipline of “aestheticism rather than asceticism” that the great ascetics in all the spiritual traditions wanted to live and proclaim. Defining this concept, Omurchu writes:

The word aesthetic which means appreciating beauty, order and harmony, is derived from the Greek verb aisthanomai meaning to perceive, to understand holistically, to comprehend in depth and totality. The person of the aesthetic disposition goes beyond the externals to the deeper harmony, purpose and meaning. The aesthetic outlook is essentially mystical and contemplative: everything is precious and sacred within the cosmic ambience of life. Consequently, the development of the aesthetic consciousness is a requirement of that spiritual transformation to which all people aspire and on whose behalf it is articulated by liminal persons and groups.19

To recapture the beauty and riches of Christ who is the “eternal Gospel,” (Rev 14:6), we need to develop the aesthetic in its above sense. John of the Cross says that “the thicket of God’s wisdom and knowledge is so deep and so broad that the soul, however much it has come to know of it, can always penetrate deeper within it.”20 Hence the Church never fails to be amazed at “the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom 11:33). Even as she passes through periods of ‘dark nights’ and often make attempts to domesticate Jesus and stereotype him, according to Pope Francis,
Jesus can always break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘new.21

5. RECASTING THE ASCETIC IDEALS

Today, especially after the Second Vatican Council, we, as agents of this new evangelization, seem to have rejected the asceticism of the past, partly due to the permissive and liberal culture and partly also due to a gross misreading of the ascetical stories of the past. Instead of uncovering the hidden treasures in these stories, we have thrown away the baby along with the dirty water and have not worked out an aestheticism of the future—a major challenge for the contemporary religious. We must be reminded of what Saint Irenaeus wrote: “By his coming, Christ brought with him all newness.”22 With this newness, he can always renew us and our communities. Even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness, ecclesial weakness and persecution, it will never grow old.

This will call for a re-articulation or a re-visioning of the myth of traditional asceticism. The ascetic ideals of the great ascetics of the past remain valid even today as they touch upon the primordial aspirations of the humankind. We must begin on some of them as starting point for the aesthetic exploration.

5.1. Desert

Anyone who is acquainted with the spiritual heritage of the Church or that of all religions, is familiar with the term, “desert,” “wilderness,” or “forest.” We know that it is not merely a place; neither is it simply a body of ascetical practices and ideals. The dominant motivation, as often understood, is not social isolation or personal mortification. We must admit that there have been several cultural and mythological strands enmeshed with sincere and genuine spiritual earnings. Christians have inherited from Judaism, the tendency to glorify the desert and set in opposition to the world. Added to this may have been the eschatological motive—the myth of the messianic age commencing in the desert resulting in a certain ideological opposition between the desert and the city, tendency to do no work, and even a trend to part company with the sacramental life of the Church. Besides, there may have been also the love of and admiration for martyrdom practiced in the Pre-Constantine era, and re-expressed in the white martyrdom. Many ascetics
also thought that the Church had succumbed to the forces of evil in the world and since the desert, as per the mind-set of the popular mythology, was perceived to be the homestead of evil spirits, the ascetics went into the deserts to battle with these destructive influences and to defeat the enemy in its own territory.

Leaving aside these cultural accretions, desert, in its primary meaning, is an “experience” of wandering in search of one’s true home (identity) and the end result is perceived to be the discovery of the one true God. Desert involves a formational process of purification of the heart from all the idols in our inner sanctuary.

Throughout the Old and New testaments, the double themes of “pilgrimage in search of truth and discovery of truth” (True God, God’s will) persist. The desert experience is essentially a withdrawal from the normal stream of life to discover in quiet reflection and prayer, the deeper meaning of existence. The underlying assumption is that the lone wanderer returns to the mainstream and brings renewed reality to bear upon daily life. We can certainly identify the outlines some of the deepest aspirations of desert spirituality. They are: (1) the desire to get to the heart of the matter; to encounter authentically and experience as fully as possible “God,” the source and depth of our being; (2) Humans are pilgrims by nature and the desire to express and articulate our restless search is liminally expressed in the love of the desert; (3) The desire for purity as “remoteness from anger, friendliness towards the enemies, peacefulness of disposition and sincere love of God and man” is expressed in several forms. The desired purification is a preparation for re-insertion into the society as a more transparent vehicle of divine goodness; (4) The primordial desire to do battle with evil forces arises from a profound desire to rid of the world of destructive tendencies so that earthly and human life can be more wholesome and integrated; (5) The firm biblical conviction that all evil ultimately proceeds from the human heart and the importance of the personal decision and instrumentality in the transmission of evil into the world in its social, political and communal and transcendent forms inhibiting the transformation willed by God; (6) The “desert within” is a symbol of the interior desire to grow and to be wise, to learn and to love, which is a universally shared experience. Louis Bouyer comments on this “desert within.” “Solitude allows man to discover, and so to face, all the obscure forces that he hears within himself . . . Seen in this light, the strange devilries described by ancient monasticism should neither disconcert us nor deceive us. They are simply translations made by the popular imagination of a truth of faith, which is certainly one of the most profound truth of the Gospel.” In authentic solitude, purging out the idols of our inner sanctuary, we learn the art of communion which will helps us become “servants of communion and of the culture of encounter;” (7) The desert
is also a symbol of the chaotic experience that we all go through at least some time in our life. There are times when, everything we had known, confidence in, believe in collapsed around us. Faced with the onslaught of this chaos, we are tempted to despair, for we find that the faith we had was weak or built on shallow foundations to sustain so a great a demoniac upsurge. Jesus himself said: “Wise are those build on rock” (Mt 7: 24).

Yet in our distress, we know that some gift is given to us. A contemplative reading of our life will reveal to us that something new is being born in us. The Church needs men and women who know their way around in the desert, those who can understand what is going on there, can interpret it and manage with it. “To be a monk in this time, then, is really to be the man of the hour. No man in the Church is more necessary, more useful. The desert is the monk’s world and today the world is a desert.”26 To attain spiritual and vocational maturity, everyone has to go through ‘desert” which involves a process of purification of the heart from the idols of our inner sanctuary. Hence desert is at once a “deeply personal search and pilgrimage, but also an archetypal global aspiration for wholeness, integration, depth, solitude, purification and unity. It is very much all embracing, generic concept, not with the traditional connotation of separation from the world but the very opposite: insertion at the heart of the world in a way best suited to bring about transformation.”27 Insertion, if it has to be authentic, cannot be immersion. We need to insert in to the world as qualitatively different people, formed through a contemplative spacing from the world. We withdraw only to re-insert ourselves in a different way.

The desert wilderness is the place where our very existence is threatened, and yet it is also the arena especially chosen by God as the focus of his revelation. Speaking of this way of desert spirituality, Alan John writes:

The desert of which I speak is the desert of the spirit: a place of silence, waiting and temptation. It is also a place of revelation, conversion and transformation. A true revelation is a very disturbing event because it demands a response; and to respond to it means some kind of inner revolution. It involves being “made over”, being made new, being “born again”. The desert, then, is a place of revelation and revolution. In the desert, we wait, we weep, we learn to live. The austere and refreshing desert way of belief has a peculiar array of devotees. They have two basic characteristics: a heart and mind willing to pursue truth wherever it may lead (and the ability to acknowledge that they may be wrong): and the kind of sensibility (which is the joining of mind and heart) to that which is captive to wonder, mystery and awe.28
In the desert we must distinguish between means and end: Means: withdrawal, desolation, solitude, seeking and searching, suffering. Goal is personal and global integration. In the ultimate realization, aesthetic values of beauty, harmony, peace and wholeness far out reach the traditionally associated ascetic qualities of personal immolation and global disassociation. The true ascetic is the aesthetic who learns to treat all of life with the gentleness and justice of the beatitudes. The world is not a place to be abandoned, but an arena of revelation where we as participants are working to bring about the transformation of the Kingdom.

5.2. Unceasing Prayer

Let us now move into the theme of “unceasing prayer.” What is it? Unceasing prayer is stressed in ascetic monastic traditions of Christianity and even of other religious traditions. The focus on personal salvation or enlightenment is inescapable but nonetheless misses the essential point. Unceasing prayer is not to be seen as the pursuit of a selfish, introspective search for personal perfection, nor is it a “sitting down” in continual prayer without any activity.

It points to an unbroken communication with the divine. However, what does this really mean? How can this be possible? It is essentially a fascination with the mystery of God that graces us not with the ascetical power to escape the world of sin, but with the aesthetical potential to enhance the transformation of creation by striving to tune into the divine creative energy which animates and permeates the source of all being. It is this fundamental and continual awareness of his presence and that primordial listening to him. We know that true prayer can begin only by listening to Him. God has spoken first; for the moment we can be only hearers. And we are created with a capacity to be hearers of His Word. If so, where does He speak? He speaks, first of all, in the heart of our life, in the midst of our ordinary and extra-ordinary moments of our life. Our life is the locus of God’s speaking and our listening.

The problem is when we try to listen, we hear too many voices, especially in the present context of a world, profoundly shaped and even fabricated by the global media. We hear too many voices and noises, all mixed up and confused in their varied forms and with innumerable contents. In our contemporary world, we are bombarded with so many words, coming from all different directions, both consonant and dissonant words. So God’s word is often subsumed under so many other noises and voices. His directives co-exist with many other directives. Hence, it is not enough that we listen, but we listen to God’s own word, spoken through his own Son, Jesus Christ, the fullness of God’s revelation. We need a listening that
is disciplined, refined and attenuated and above all discerning. To pray, therefore, is to allow ourselves to be addressed personally by Christ and to allow ourselves to be evoked by that word. It is to let the Christ event fall on our lives and light up all our other listening, engagements, interactions, relationships, pursuits, projects and goals with the criteria that emerge from the Christ event. Unceasing prayer is this art of making all our other listening along with their contents subservient to God’s word and to allow the criteria of the Kingdom to bear on them. Whenever and wherever we allow this to happen, we are in prayer, and because of its utmost importance, we are called to be in continual prayer. The stories of those in continual prayer, therefore, serve as a liminal reminder of what all of us should be striving to do, because it is inherent in our nature to act in that way; we are called to be hearers of God’s word. Speaking of this formative process involved, O Murchu writes:

The true goal of unceasing prayer is one of self-realization as a creature whose true destiny is one of self-transcendence. It involves a letting go of all the material and cultural props, in order to realize that in God alone we find our true selves. It is a stripping of the false ego in order to discover the true self. . . . Unceasing prayer is not intended to lead away from the world, but to see everything anew in the divine, creative plan and to discern ones’ role within that plan. Today we use the term ‘discernment’ rather than ‘unceasing prayer’ to denote that process of divine intuitive sensitivity that leads to individuation (finding my true self amid the diverse reality of creation) rather than perfected individualism (escapism in to personal salvation).29

What is involved in unceasing prayer is the genuine effort to bring God’s healing, love, compassion and hope to the brokenness, alienation, fragmentation and injustices in modern life. It seeks to discern God’s will for his pilgrim people in the world of today and to strive to empower people to transcend powerlessness, pain and confusion which often befall people in their struggle to live and survive.

It is important for us to remember that unceasing prayer is not for the distant, barren deserts of the bygone days, but for the desert experiences of the contemporary world. Specific times of prayer and selected prayer styles will remain important but most urgently needed is a new approach whereby we encounter God in the heart of the world. The greatest achievement is not what the ascetics accomplish in the desert but the transforming power they brought to bear upon the world of their times. Their fame is not on the ascetic achievement but on the aesthetical transformation—personal and cultural. Let us strive to emulate their aesthetical testimony to growth and wholeness.
5.3. Fasting

Abstinence from food whether total or partial is seen as prevalent in all religious traditions. Primitive people believed that demonic powers entered the body with the reception of food. Such a perception is also shared by Greek thinkers of pre-Christian times, and is expressed in the ritual purity and find echoes in the Christian practice.

It is quite significant to note that Jesus left no guidelines for fasting. Though he accepted it as a religious practice, there is no exhortation to do fasting. In fact, people had complained to Jesus saying, “Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink” (Luke 5:33). But Jesus replied that as long as he is with them his disciples should not fast, but after he is taken away then “they will fast in those days” (Luke 5:35). His only instruction is not to make a public display of one’s fasting. “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. . . . But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret” (Mt 6: 16-18).

Fasting became mostly widespread during the emergence of Christian monasticism. It is interesting to note that very early church rarely mentions about fasting. But to make up for this absence, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory Nazianzen, Eusebius of Caesarea make abundant references to the necessity of fasting. Despite the popularity, no official approval was given from the Church. In fact the teaching of fasting given by Gnostics and Encratites was condemned by the Council of Ancyra in 314 AD (Canon 14). And the following words from the Shepherd of Hermas reflect the mind of the Church regarding fasting.

Here is the fast, you must keep for God: Do not commit any wicked deed in your life and serve the Lord with a pure heart: keep his commandments by walking according to his directives and do not let any evil desire enter your heart; have faith in God. If you do this, and fear him and refrain from every evil act, you will live to God. And by doing this, you will perform a fast that is great and acceptable to God.31

History of monasticism records many instances of excessive fasting. But the popular perception rarely does justice to the historical facts. Excesses did occur but they were exception rather than the norm. Beginning with St. Basil up to the present time, monasticism has retained this balance and moderation. The underlying principle to be followed is not just about moderation and balance to
be pursued for one’s personal sanctity or for personal well-being. Neither is it a mere detachment from certain types of food prescribed by law. Externally fasting may mean abstinence from food. But inherently it entails a process of detachment, restraint and moderation in the use of the earthly goods, respect for life in its God-given giftedness, and for nature and its life giving nourishment (so vegetarianism), inner purification by modest consumption of food, and a desire not to exploit nature solely for one’s own end. Ecological, aesthetic and ascetical considerations are intertwined in the archetypal value called fasting.

Fasting is also a symbol of solidarity with the starving people of the earth also a public protest against the consumerism and exploitation. It reminds us of the importance of restraint in the exploitation of the ecological resources, and alerts us to the injustices caused by consumerism and the greed resulting from the human urge to master and control. It facilitates the responsible stewardship of the earth and its giftedness. It protects us from the abusiveness in the ways that we use our senses and its enjoyments. Such a fasting must be personally discerned and undertaken, not imposed upon by law.

Many illnesses are diet related shown by the contemporary world and so the need for discipline, awareness of food quality, potential damage of the preservatives, additives and inappropriate ways of cooking. In recent years, at a purely secular level, fasting has become more appealing and fashionable, thus breaking down the distinctions between secular and sacred. Aesthetic intuition is replacing the ascetical obligation.

Food as a form of energy connects us with the creative energies of the cosmos. Our attitudes to it can affect not only our bodily and mental health, but also our spiritual consciousness as well. The waste and abuse of food has reached disgusting proportions. The gross imbalance that we often see, some with no food and others with overabundance is an ungodly imbalance. The political consciousness must be rekindled and that is the task of the liminal groups. “We, religious, must once again, re-invoke the fasting archetypal value system and articulate its meaning anew for ‘starving’ peoples of the earth. Personal ascetical acts of fasting aimed at individual spiritual growth are an insult to our creative God, as long as his incarnate Son continues to be gluttoned or starved in the people of our world.”

5.4. Sexual Continence

It is legitimate to suggest that all the major religions consider sexual continence to be the most conducive state for contemplative intimacy with the divine. Present
to all religious traditions is the singular quest to seek the fullest, the most perfect of living one’s faith, to seek God alone, to attain the infinite, to be simple and single. In this quest, we share a common vision and the same unifying archetypal aspirations that are prevalent in all religious traditions. There is need to recapture this central positive motive, a fascination with the mystery of God, if you want to call it, as the central force beneath our sexual continence. The primary concern of our sexual continence, therefore, is neither ascetical, sacrificial self-discipline nor preparation for Lord’s second coming. We also need to affirm it against the onslaught of all negative motivations that look at sexuality as something unclean and ungodly and, therefore, something to be renounced (Manicheans, Montanists and Encratites).

This aesthetical fascination with the divine rather than ascetical immolation should be the one that dominates our choice of celibate chastity. In fact, celibacy is not a choice; it is the consequence of something that has already happened, namely aesthetical fascination with the divine. This was so in the life of Jesus. We do not carry our celibate, virginal chastity as a burden, something that we are saddled with, something to be nervous and embarrassed about, to be endured or as something to be abided with an external force of law. Aphraates, a Syrian ascetic, has this to say: “For those who obtain this portion, there awaits a great reward, because it is in our freedom that we bring it into fulfilment, and not in slavery or under the compulsion of any commandment; for we are not forced thereto under law. Its model and type we find in the Scripture. And we can see in the triumphant the likeness of angles; on earth it is acquired as a gift . . . Love my beloved this charism which is unique in the whole world.”34

As we can see the context of sexual continence is a great deal more mystical and holistic. Sexual energies are channelized not into procreative human relationship but into an incarnational encounter (what the virgins called “Spiritual marriage”) which is life giving, not just for ourselves but also for spiritual and pastoral nurturing of everyone that we encounter. We must radiate joy and freedom and not sadness and seclusion; openness rather than avoidance. Somehow, in the lives of many religious, celibate chastity appears more like a cross than grace. Celibacy as a life-giving, creative and positive option is not easily communicated. The manner, the style and the mode in which we live our celibate chastity is a counter witness to its deeper, liminal and archetypal meaning. Evangelical celibate chastity is to be re-visioned in the manner and style that Jesus lived it, as a call to love freely, generously, respectfully, unconditionally and non-exclusively. We need to rediscover, re appropriate and re-express the intimate rather than the ascetical dimension. If our celibacy does not bind us to deeper love of God and for people, then it fails in its primary archetypal
function to challenge people into a deeper, more respectful, restrained and self-giving love. How urgent and relevant is this vision for our times!

5.5. Conflict with Demons

Early Christians had an acute awareness of the satanic powers. Perhaps the oppressive nature of life and the hardships at that time led to a conviction that the forces of evil were responsible for political unrest and religious persecution. Wilderness, barren deserts and abandoned tombs were considered to be the residing places of these forces of evil. The hermits, who left everything and went to the desert had no intention of betraying or deserting the world. They desired to liberate their hearts and their world from the clutches of these evil forces. They truly believed what Jesus said: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man” (Mt. 15: 19). Secondly, in order to lead others in the right path, one who leads must first of all remove his own blinders. “A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit? (Lk 6: 39). The mission of these ascetics was to improve the quality of life by enduring the combat with evil forces within and around and thus, to some extent, to control and prevent the world from destruction. Stories of conflict with demons could be the dramatized, external portrayal of the internal warfare that was going on in their hearts. St. Paul writes about this “war” within himself: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate . . . For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom 7: 15-23).

There can be a question. How real are these stories of ‘war with demons’? These may not have been literal and factual description of what has happened but we cannot reduce them as stories of pure imagination. In the intensity of the personal struggle, the ascetic records his or her experiences in terms of the images provided by the local surroundings. Derwas J. Chitty, in his introduction to the Letters of St. Anthony the Great, writes: “Did the forms of the animal gods along the walls of the tombs, occupied by the hermits suggest the shape of the attackers.”

We need to rediscover and live a simple but profound truth hidden in these past stories of conflict with demons. And that is: we cannot hope for peace and contentment until we first confront the “evil demons” both real and imaginary. Thomas Merton has this to say:
He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centred ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.\textsuperscript{36}

We know very well that the demonic lust for power, pleasure, and property, manifested personally, communally and structurally contribute to massive injustices that divide our world, pollute the earth, exploit our God-given resources and alienate people from creation and from one another. Our vowed life, lived authentically will bring us into conflict with these forces of evil. We need to confront these demonic trends that undermine human dignity and erode the human meaning. We need to denounce and announce; offer alternatives to an oppressive status quo and engage ourselves in critical and energizing action. Our vowed life, therefore, is not about ascetic heroism, but about discovering the aesthetical that God seeks to activate in our world through all those committed to His Kingdom and its unfolding values.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

It is Thomas Merton who wrote once: “All life tends to grow . . . in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centred, in its very heart, on divine mercy. . . We do not respect the living and fruitful contradictions and paradoxes of which true life is full. We destroy them, or try to destroy them with our obsessive and absurd systematizations. Whether we do this in the name of the matter or in the name of the spirit, makes little difference in the end.”\textsuperscript{37} The effort to grapple with this incomprehensible mystery, in the sense that Merton described, finds its expression in all religious traditions. Thus every mystical/ascetical system, including Christian tradition, speaks of a contrast, which if by passed, will fall into unhealthy dualism.\textsuperscript{38} Such a dualistic dichotomy does not belong to the foundational truths of Christian asceticism.\textsuperscript{39}

The attempt in this paper was to recast the underlying wisdom of traditional Christian asceticism into “new wineskins.” We have done it in such a way that we do not dismiss or explain away the real essence of Christian asceticism, but to re-discover in it the aesthetic aspirations and values that transcend traditional categories, offer fresh possibilities, and are more appropriate for a holistic vision of life. The temptation in the world of today and even in religious circles is to dismiss the ascetical practices as irrelevant and out-dated. Forms of ascetical practices may change over time, and, therefore, our fidelity must always be to the aesthetical aspirations and values that are contained in them; we must discern, carry them
over and seek after appropriate forms to express them personally and communally. Insertion in the world does not mean immersion. We need to insert in to the world as qualitatively different people, formed through a contemplative spacing from the world. We withdraw only to re-insert ourselves in a different way. It is unhealthy and unspiritual to cling to certain forms but lose the substance.

All asceticism must be in view of aestheticism so that we re-discover, live and radiate the joy of the gospel.

Endnotes


5*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.


14Hagiography is the branch of spiritual writing that records events and times of holy and saintly people.


17*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 (abbreviated hereafter as EG).
Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass for the Opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (13 May 2007), Aparecida, Brazil; EG. 15.

O’Murchu, The Prophetic Horizon, 211.


EG, 11.

Adversus Haereses, IV, c. 34, n. 1: PG 7, pars prior, 1083: “Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens”.

O’Murchu, The Prophetic Horizon, 212-16


Omurchu, 215.


O’Murchu, Prophetic Horizon of Religious Life, 216-17. Fascination with the mystery of God, which is also the mystery of life, has been a recurring theme in all streams of the religious and monastic life. We must admit however that there has been a strong tendency in mystical and spiritual literature to project it as a highly sophisticated, individualistic pursuit for the specialists endowed with the grace of perfection. Thus, slowly emerged, in all religious traditions a tendency to differentiate and elevate the perfected from the sinners; the latter look to the former to earn merit on their behalf, manifested often in all popular devotions. These elevations, though deviations, serve as liminal reminders of what all are called to be.

Hindus and Jains fast on pilgrimages and also as preparation for certain festivals. Taosim advocates fasting of the heart (purity of intentions, outlook and attitude). Confucians fasted as preparation for worship of the ancestral spirits. Orthodox Buddhists fast from noon till the following morning while liberal ones fast and confess sins four times per month. Islam follows rigorous fasting in the ninth month, Ramadan between dawn and sunset. Sufis recommend fasting as a preparation of communing with the divine. There was also a pre-christian belief that fasting prepared people for the reception of the divine power.


Read the following account: “Some of the hermits dwelling at a distance from the main body were served with a ration of bread sufficient for six months. According to Cassian, the daily allowance of the normal monk was two loaves, each weighing half a pound. On fast days, this was cut by fifty percent. The use of wine was interdicted, although many thought and said that it was ill adapted to the digestive apparatus of monks; two cupfuls, but never three,” was the motto of Sisoes . . . Some lived entirely on fruits and vegetables; in fact Theodotus had a theory that abstinence from bread reduced and quietened one’s physical vibrations. Honey was a great favourite. Mostly they cooked their food. . . . The cook at Tabenna had no sinecure. Into the daily salad, he poured forty flasks of oil. At Notiria, the bread making kept seven bakes hard at it all the time. There were doctors here as
well, also confectioners and wine merchants. . . In Anthony’s monasteries seven monks were detailed for the daily duty of scaring the birds from the date palms.” Cf. Aloysius Roche, *First Monks and Nuns* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1945), 70.

33 O’Murchu, The Prophetic Horizon of Religious Life, 222.


38 Christian Gospel is unique in its description of this paradox: “We live in the world, but not of it” (Jn 17: 14-19). “The last will be the first, and the first last” (Mt 19: 30); “He loses his life will find it” (Mt 10: 39); “Unless a seed falls on the ground and dies, it cannot bring another life”

39 However it is true that Eastern religions seem to be able to express this mysterious paradox with greater subtlety than Christian writers in the West have yet succeeded in doing.
What kind of consecrated life do we expect today? This was the first question asked to the Holy Father Francis during his meeting with all the Superior Generals during their 82nd Assembly. “One which offers a special witness” was his answer. “You must truly be witnesses of a different way of doing and being. You must embody the values of the Kingdom.”

The question that followed immediately was about the situation of vocations and formation. The Pope insisted upon the importance of formation for religious life which he presented as being founded upon four fundamental pillars: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. He said that it was “indispensable to avoid every form of hypocrisy and clericalism by means of a frank and open dialogue on all aspects of life.” He commented: “Formation is an artisanal craft, not a form of policing . . . . Its aim is to form religious persons with a tender heart, not bitter like vinegar.” Time allotted to training varies according to one’s gifts and culture. Otherwise we will produce “little monsters”. We mustn’t forget that “young people use a different language and categories. It is not a question of geographical differences but of a cultural change which is in answer to an epochal transformation.” We need to train young people so that they may be witnesses of the Resurrection, of the Gospel values, so that they may lead and train the people of God. This is the goal of training for religious life; it is for the faithful people of God that we enter such life. This is truly the voice of the chief shepherd with real concern.

Whenever we speak about religious life, we cannot but speak about formation, because the formation of the members is the prime concern of every religious
Institute. Without constant inflow of new vocations and a process of effective formation, the vitality of religious institutes may face serious crisis. Formation of religious has been a constant concern of the Church.¹ We are called to celebrate the year of consecrated life after fifty years of the starting of the renewal process. Five decades are considerably long period of time especially in the context of rapid changes that the humanity is facing globally. Every global problem influences the Church at large and the consecrated life in particular. As consecrated men and women how do we make an impact on the world today? How do we bear effective witness to the society today? Therefore there is a need to reflect and share about the new concerns of religious formation in today’s context.

In doing that, we need to follow four steps. (a) The first step is to situate ourselves to understand the religious formation in the present context with its entire new ambience. (b) The second step is to arrive at a conviction that God who calls human persons forms them according to his design. (c) In the third step we shall highlight that the individual candidate is the prime responsible agent to experience the joy and passion in being formed as the witness of the Gospel. (d) In the fourth step we shall explain how the formators also can become effective channels to create an atmosphere of joy and passion in religious formation.

1. UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS FORMATION IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT

We cannot speak about religious formation in abstract terms. Even though we speak about religious life in generic terms, it is good to remember that the religious life is present in and through different institutes which are founded by different persons in various times and realities and concretely approved by the Church. Consecrated life does not remain as an abstract concept. Consecrated life is lived by individuals in local communities belonging to different religious institutes which have different names, identity, charism, spirituality, life style and traditions. One does not enter religious life in general but in a particular congregation. Those Christians who are inspired and gifted to follow Christ in a special way gather together in different institutes according to their experiences of encounter. Congregations or institutes have been founded by different men and women, in different space and time and in different cultures. Such congregations during their expansion sow the seeds of their charism in new lands and in new cultures. Therefore there is a constant dialogue of life between the charisms of the congregations and various human cultures. All those who discern their vocation are in need of animation and accompaniment in this process of welcoming “this gift of God which the Church has received from
her Lord and which by his grace she always safeguards.”\(^2\) Formation as a process of transformation will bear fruit only if it is animated by a profound spiritual renewal which brings joy and enthusiasm. The formation of candidates which has, as its immediate end, that of introducing them to religious life and making them aware of its specific character within the Church, will primarily aim at assisting men and women religious realize their unity of life in Christ through the Spirit, by means of a harmonious fusion of its spiritual, apostolic, doctrinal, and practical elements.\(^3\)

The golden words of the Holy Father Francis should draw our attention. “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.”\(^4\) If the consecrated are called to become such prophetic witnesses to the joy of the Gospel, then their formation should lead them to encounter their real Master Jesus and experience the joy of it. This encounter should transform them into enlightened witnesses of new life and empower them to communicate this joy. Originally this has been the experience of the beloved disciple of Jesus that he could authentically proclaim: “The life made it known, we have seen eternal life and we bear witness, and we are telling you of it. It was with the Father and made himself known to us. So we tell you what we have seen and heard that you may be in fellowship with us, and us with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we write this that you may have perfect joy” (1 Jn 1:3-4).

Today the consecrated life faces different challenges because of serious influences of the cultural changes. In this background, it is appropriate to raise certain questions of relevance to situate our reflections on the theme of religious formation based on present experiences. They are: (a) Is there a sufficient passionate search in the candidates to discover their true identity? (b) Do the candidates willingly commit them in authentic dialogue with God to clarify the mystical dimension of their vocation? (c) Do the candidates enjoy sufficient inner freedom to involve in authentic process of discernment till they arrive at a final decision of a permanent commitment? (d) Do the religious formation centres have the atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm to lead the candidates into the deeper spiritual experiences of transformation? (e) Do the formators have sufficient personal experiences, due preparation and energy to accompany the candidates in this process of discovering their true Master of life?

Honestly we should admit that there are defects in vocation facilitation as well as in formative process. There are entries of candidates either without proper motivation, or mixed motivation or even without any serious motivation. Their doctrinal and ethical frames of reference tend to be relative and feeble. Young
people hesitate to say who they are and what they are called to become. The views of the present generations on the values and virtues are different. There is frequently a gap between the level of their secular knowledge, which can be highly specialized at times, and that of their psychological growth and their Christian life. Not all have had a happy experience within their family. So their human formation has suffered to a great extent. They learn much through images, and the present system of education encourages this at times, but they read less. All the present exposures of the social realities such as the modern technologies, explosion of social media and communications make a greater impact on the lives of the candidates. The process of entering into solitude and discovering the treasure in the internal silence turns to be a hard task. The vocation ministry is at a crossroad, ranging between facilitating only genuine authentic vocations and bringing more numbers to fulfil the needs of the institutionalized congregations.

These are some indications of the problems that flow from the variety and complexity of the human background, and they directly challenge vocation promotion and also formation. It is the discernment of genuine vocations that is in danger. Some candidates present themselves for religious life because of a more or less conscious search for social gain and future security; others look upon religious life as an ideal place for an ideological struggle for justice. There are also others of a more conservative nature who look upon the religious life as if it were a place for saving their faith in a world which they regard as being hostile and corrupt. These motives need to be corrected and purified. There is, above all, a need of promoting a human and spiritual balance based on renunciation, lasting fidelity, calm and enduring generosity, authentic joy and love. This calls for a very difficult and demanding task for those religious who are entrusted with vocation promotion and formation.

1.1. Religious Formation and Culture

Even when God became human, it happened within a particular culture. It is true Christ is beyond all cultures. The Gospel is universal and the salvation is for the whole universe, but in incarnation, he received a Jewish name as Jesus and he lived as a Jew. He received his human formation in a Jewish culture. When God calls human persons to become consecrated, He chooses them from human families belonging to different cultures. We cannot think of forming persons for religious life without taking into account their own culture and world views. One cannot lose one’s own cultural and personal identity during the period of formation.
Bringing Passion and Joy into Religious Formation

Religious formation, therefore, should integrate the cultural elements in its integral approach. The following guidelines that come from the congregation for consecrated life in this regard are relevant: (a) To be attentive to the level of the general culture of the candidates without forgetting that one’s culture is not limited to the intellectual dimension of a man or woman; (b) To see how religious succeed in inculturating their own faith within the culture of their origins and to assist them to do so. This should not aim at transforming a house of formation for religious life into a kind of laboratory of inculturation. Nevertheless, those responsible for formation cannot neglect being concerned with this in their guidance of those who have been entrusted to them. Since it is a question of personal education in their faith and its taking root in the life of the whole person, they cannot forget that the Gospel frees the ultimate truth of the values contained in a culture, and that the culture itself expresses the Gospel in an original manner and reveals new aspects of it; (c) To initiate religious who are living and working in a culture that is foreign to their own native culture into a knowledge and esteem for this culture, in keeping with the recommendations of the conciliar decree, Ad gentes.5

1.2. Joy as the Beauty of Consecration

“Are you happy?” This is the gut level question that the Mother Church is asking all those who are in consecrated life and specially those who are in formation. As a good mother she wishes all her children and specially the consecrated to be joyful in their respective vocation. An unhappy religious is a paradox and it is an indicator that an unhappy candidate in formation is not meant for this form of life, unless one works out one’s difficulties and return to the “natural joy” of consecrated life.

Absence of joy in everyday life or presence of pervading sadness in a religious speaks loudly about one’s lack of vocational integrity. Consecrated life is a free response to the loving call of the Lord heard in the interior of a person. Often one may find it difficult to hear the call amidst so many of the sounds or furies trumpeting within and one may find the inner self pulled and pushed by the many attractions. The exhortation of Pope Francis on the joy of the Gospel offers us a compass to navigate in a noisy world:

Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others … An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that ‘delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow’… And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive
the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ.6

Both in the formation process and the missionary commitment, joyfulfulness is an unmistakable proof of authenticity and integrity of Consecrated life. The image of a consecrated person should give us a picture of an enlightened and empowered person who experiences flames of love and vibrates the joy of discipleship. It is possible that candidates may get lured by the prestige and possibilities open to a cleric or religious in their social milieu and seek religious life. Absence of joy will be more evident in such cases. The heart will not be settled where it does not belong in spite of good efforts and apparent academic success. Sadly people who are in a religious house without inner conviction and religious motive turn out to be like salt without saltiness (Mt 5.13) and become a listless presence in a community or mission. A person in such a situation may try to find happiness “out of route” in positions of honour or gratifying relationships, but remain “joyless” as a religious. Joy is the right thermometer to check the spiritual health of a missionary.

Difficulties and crisis in life do not take away joy from life. On the contrary joy prepares that terrain in life which lets one to learn from difficulties and grow through crisis moments. Joy helps one to embrace the necessary trials and pain of life. For a sad person trials and tribulations can become only scandal of the cross as meaningless and worthless burden!

1.2.1. Joy: An Authentic Experience of Finding the Master

As love and fear cannot go together, holiness and sadness cannot travel together. Transformation into holiness starts with the finding of the Master who communicates the joy of transformation. The vocational story of John, the beloved disciple is a beautiful example of this. John the evangelist is one of the first two disciples to follow Jesus according to Johanine presentation of the gospel. In this story John, the ‘Son of Zebedee’ is transformed into the ‘beloved disciple’ by staying with Jesus. John the Baptist was the first one to discover Jesus as the true Master of life. That is why, as Jesus walked by, John looked at him and said, “There is the Lamb of God.” On hearing this witness of the vocation facilitator, the two disciples followed Jesus. “What are you looking for?” These are the first words addressed by the Master to the disciples. John, the beloved disciple, would not have forgotten these first words of the Master during the rest of his life. The first disciples answered, “Rabbi (which means Master) where are you staying? Jesus said “come and see”. These two disciples began to live with Jesus. Their kairos begins then as they discover
that he is the teacher; the Messiah; the Son of God. He is the one they were looking for! Especially John, the beloved disciple, was constantly with Jesus to discover and experience him even at the foot of the cross with Mother Mary. He also ran to the empty tomb, entered and believed that the Master is alive and he is with him. This is very relevant in the consecrated life. This is the question to those who aspire to enter into consecrated life. What are they looking for in following consecrated life? In this walk of life the inner dispositions are very important. If the Master is the central point of the search the persons who search may experience joy and peace which cannot be removed. If he is not the focus of the search one may miss to discover him and may gain nothing.

1.2.2. Joy: An Authentic Sign of Transforming Witness

Joy is also an authentic sign of transforming witness. The apostles and the early Church were experiencing this joy when they were experiencing the presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of them and animating them to be transformed witnesses. Jesus came and stood in their midst. He said to them: “Peace be with you. Then he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples kept looking at the Lord and were full of joy (Jn 20: 19-20). Concretely, this is revealed in the experience in Mary of Magdala. Her sadness is removed and she is transformed to become a joyful witness of the Master’s resurrection.

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she bent down to look inside…she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize him. Jesus said to her, “woman why are you weeping? Who are you looking for? ...Jesus said to her, “Mary” She turned and said to him, ‘Rabboni’ which means Master. So Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord, and this is what he said to me’ (Jn 20:11-18).

The above said examples denote that joy is the sign of the authenticity of vocation. This joy is above all the part of the experience of discovering the Master of Life who calls to follow him. Joy also becomes the spontaneous expression of becoming a transformed witness to the Master’s resurrection. The formative process in religious training should enable and empower the candidates to experience this authentic joy of finding the Master and being transformed as his witnesses.

1.3. Passion: Vibrancy of Life

When we speak of consecrated life, we tend to focus on consecration, not highlighting sufficiently the aspect of life. Life is essentially life. In response to God’s call, our life is consecrated. The Lord Jesus is its life. He came to give life
abundantly (Jn.10:10). We who choose to follow Christ in a special manner should search for excellence, fullness, richness and quality of life. A life, vivacious with vital environment stimulates the interest, fascination and attractiveness of the call. It also generates fruitfulness, authenticity and a total response. Life generates life. Religious formation is a preparation for the channels of life. All those who are in this process of transformation should experience a flow of life giving energy and living enthusiasm in them. They are to grow in their enthusiastic love towards Christ who calls them towards the suffering humanity in which they identify the Master who suffers.

1.3.1. Passion for Christ

“Consecration is not a contract. It is a life in Christ. The crisis of consecration is, above all the crisis of the depth and quality of our love for Christ. Fidelity is only possible where there is an ardent passion – a passion for Christ, a passion for humanity.” Consecrated life is a call to incarnate the Good News. That is the meaning of following Christ, crucified, died and raised to life. In concrete terms, it implies to take on Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brothers and sisters. Practically it is a call to take up his way of life, to adopt his interior attitude, to allow oneself to be invaded by his Spirit, to absorb his surprising logic and his scale of values, to share in his risks and his hopes. Remaining in Christ allows us to grasp the presence of the Mystery which lives in us and expands our hearts to the measure of the heart of the Master. Those who remain in his love, like the branch attached to the vine (cf. Jn 15:1-8) enter into intimacy with Christ and bear fruit. Remaining in Jesus means constantly to be attached to him, in him, with him and talking to him.

Christ is the seal on our foreheads; he is the seal on our hearts: on the forehead because we always profess him; on the heart because we always love him; he is the seal on our arms because we are always working for him . . . Jesus’ whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, all this is precious and relate to our personal lives.

It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience of encountering him every day. Pope Francis recommends for us ‘restless searching’ just like that of Augustine of Hippo,

which brought him to a personal encounter with Christ, brought him to understand that the remote God he was seeking was the God who is close to every human being, the God close to our heart, who was more inward than our innermost self . . .
Augustine did not stop, he did not give up, and he did not withdraw into himself like those who have already arrived, but continued his search. The restlessness of seeking the truth, of seeking God, became restlessness to know him ever better and to come out of him to make others know him. It was precisely the restlessness of love.”

The religious formation is, above all, an experience of initiating a passionate search for this enlightenment.

### 1.3.2. Passion for Humanity

Joyful passion for Christ finds an authentic expression in and through passionate service to the brethren, especially the poorest ones. Pope Francis often invites the consecrated men and women to go to the peripheries of the world. We have to look at things from the periphery. We have to go there in order to really know the life of the people. Otherwise we tend to embrace stern, fundamentalist positions, based on a centralised vision. This is not healthy. Today God asks us to leave our nest. Even those who choose the cloister receive the mandate to pray for the spreading of the Good News. This is the most concrete way of imitating the Lord: to go out! Meeting the Lord gets us moving, urges us to leave aside self-absorption. A relationship with the Lord is not static, nor is it focussed on self. “Because when we put Christ at the centre of our life, we ourselves don’t become the centre! The more that we unite our self to Christ and he becomes the centre of our life, the more he leads us out of our self, leads us from making our self the centre and opens us to others. We are not at the centre. We are at the service of Christ and of the Church.”

### 2. GOD THE SUPREME FORMATOR WHO BRINGS PASSION AND JOY

God is the true formator who can bring passion and joy in the process of transformation. We all can collaborate in this process of receiving a new form. It is God himself who calls one to a consecrated life within the Church. It is God who, all through the course of religious life, keeps the initiative. St. Paul bears witness: “God who said, let the light shine out of darkness, and has also made the light shine in our hearts radiate and to make known the Glory of God, as it shines in the face of Christ” (2. Cor 4:6). “He who has called you is faithful, and he will do it.”(1 Thes 5:24). Only God can satisfy the human hearts, only God can bring passion and joy in our life. The primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives. So when we think of religious vocation, the first step is to turn one’s heart and will towards God and to accept God as the primary agent of one’s transformation.
2.1. God Who Formed His Own People in Passion and Joy

The Lord says: “I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the Lord will be made known to his servants” (Is 66:10-14).

The above said prophesy is an indication that joy is the fruit produced by the presence of God in the history of Israel. In the Psalms, there are numerous effective expressions to indicate that joy is above all the fruit of the benevolent presence of God. In some references, joy also sounds as the jubilant echo that it proclaims how God fulfils his promises. God wants to make a new light shine out, a trust that will immediately heal infidelity and cruelty. The curse due to their disregard for the Covenant will disappear because God is about to make “Jerusalem a delight and its people a joy” (cf. Is. 65:18). When the relationship of fidelity and love with God had failed Israel had ended in sadness and sterility. Now the power and holiness of God restores meaning and fullness of life and happiness, expressed in terms that belong to the affective roots of every human being, arousing unique feelings of tenderness and security.

It is a gentle but true profile of a God who radiates maternal vibrations and deep, contagious emotions. A heartfelt joy (cf. Is 66:14) that comes from God – with maternal face and supportive arm – and radiates through a people who have been crippled, whose bones have become brittle through a thousand humiliations. It is a freely-given transformation that spreads out joyfully to the “new heavens and the new earth” (cf. Is 66:22), so that all the people might come to know the glory of the Lord, the faithful redeemer. So, joy is the beauty of consecration! And joy is the expression of transformation! This is authentic and permanent joy that flows from being belonging to God in faithfulness. This joy flows in the mission of bringing God’s consolation to all. In the world there is often a lack of joy. We are called to give witness to the joy that arises from the certainty of knowing we are loved, from the confidence that we are saved. Our short memories and flimsy experiences often prevent us from searching for the ‘lands of joy’ where we can relish God’s reflection. We have a thousand reasons for remaining in joy. Its roots are nourished by listening with faith and perseverance to the Word of God.
2.2. Christ Who Formed His Disciples in Joy and Passion

Jesus called his disciples, allowed them to stay with him and to share his life. He formed them through his teaching and more than that, he allowed them to experience his exemplary life and to participate in every moment of his life. He invited them: “Learn from me, I am gentle and humble in my heart” (Mt.11:28-30). He shared every aspect of life through his personal accompaniment and communicated joyfully his vision of life into them: “I have told you all this, that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). The call is always the Master’s choice. He confirmed it by saying: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). His approach to formation was personal and gentle. He looked at the young man, loved him and told: “One thing you lack, Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mk 10:21).

Jesus invites the new disciples to stay with him and to share his life, choices, the obedience of faith, the happiness of poverty and the radicality of love. According to Pope Francis this is the entry point of entering into the zone of joy and passion. “I invite all Christians at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ today, at least to openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.”11 “Letting Christ make us his own always means straining forward to what lies ahead, to the goal of Christ” (Phil 3:14). This is an invitation to rebirth. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

2.3. Holy Spirit Who Forms the Church

Holy Spirit is the one who anoints his people with joy and enthusiasm. The Apostles who were in fear, sadness, guilt and loneliness in the absence of the Master were filled with joy and enthusiasm of life as the Spirit descended on them (Acts 2:1-12). Consolation is a gift of the Spirit, the Paraclete. Holy Spirit, the Consoler comforts us in our trials and awakes a hope that does not disappoint. Thus Christian consolation becomes comfort, encouragement, hope. It is the fruit infused by the active presence of the Spirit (cf. Jn 14:16-17). The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22).

In a world of distrust, discouragement and depression, in a culture in which men and women are enveloped by fragility and weakness, individualism and self-interest, we are asked to introduce belief in the possibility of true happiness, in the feasibility of hope that does not depend solely on talent, superiority or knowledge, but on
God. All are given the possibility of encountering him, if only they seek him with a sincere heart.

The Spirit whose action is of another order than the findings of psychology or visible history, but works through them, also acts with great secrecy in the heart of each one of us so as later to be made manifest in fruits that are clearly visible: The Spirit is the Truth who “teaches,” “reminds,” and “guides.” He is the Anointing giving desire, appreciation, judgment, choice. The Spirit is the consoling advocate who comes to assist us in our weakness, sustains us, and gives us a filial spirit. This discreet but decisive presence of the Spirit of God demands two fundamental attitudes: humility, which makes one resign oneself to the wisdom of God; and the knowledge and practice of spiritual discernment. It is, in fact, important to be able to recognize the presence of the Spirit in all the aspects of life and of history, and through human mediation. Among these must also be included openness to a spiritual guide; this openness is prompted by the desire of having a clear knowledge of oneself and by a readiness to let oneself be advised and directed with the intent of correctly discerning the will of God. This love, which orders and vivifies the very practice of the evangelical counsels, is poured out in hearts through the Spirit of God which is a Spirit of unity, of harmony, and of reconciliation, not only among persons, but also within the interior of each person. This is why the Church wisely identifies the origins of the consecrated life in the mystery of Christ and of the Trinity.12

3. THE CANDIDATES TO DISCOVER PASSION AND JOY WITHIN

True freedom empowers a person with certain capacities; to make choice, to decide, to renounce and to assume responsibility. So it is the individual religious who holds the first responsibility for saying “yes” to the call. Personally, the individual assumes responsibility to accept all the consequences of this response. A religious who enjoys a matured freedom that assumes responsibility does not blame others or the outside realities for the consequences of following this way of life. Religious commitment does not remain in the order of the intellect, but it is a loving offering of the whole of life. God’s love, his redeeming act and his call are not finished realities of the past. God loves…loves…ever loves. God out of his love calls…calls and ever calls. One who receives this loving call is also invited to give constantly a new, joyful response of love in freedom. This indicates the extent to which the formation of a religious should be personalized. It will, therefore, be a question of strongly appealing to the conscience and personal responsibility of each religious, so that each one interiorizes the values of religious life. On the contrary, when a religious does not personalize
and grow in the capacity of making a free response, all the prime values of religious life such as chastity, poverty, obedience, common living, prayer and mission can become bitter burdens of life. Consequently, a religious may feel the vocation as a binding yoke with heavy burdens, loosing consolation and joy.

Formation should have a profound effect on individuals so that their every attitude and action, at important moments as well as in the ordinary sense of life, will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God. Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving, this must be also the principal objective of formation. That is why the formation should involve the whole person, because it aims at the transformation of the whole person.  

Vocation begins with an inspiration of the Spirit which brings in certain desire. The human person who receives it begins the search, overcoming certain stagnancies of inner life. As the candidates in search enter the religious training with an approach of internal search, religious formation enables them to travel from superficiality towards authenticity. When the formative journey is personalized, each individual is strengthened and guided by the Spirit in authentic journey without being struck with mere superficial practice of religiosity. Instead, the formative journey with true spirituality, encourages them to travel from self-centeredness to self-transcendence. In this committed interior journey, one needs to enter into solitude to listen to the true voice of God. This is why religious traditions promote cultivation of inner silence and practice of meditation and *Lectio Divina* as important ways to recognize the voice of the Lord and recover the joy of life. It will be the duty of each one to verify the way in which their activities in their own lives are derived from intimate union with God and, at the same time, confirm and strengthen this union. This is the process of learning to say ‘Amen’ with personal freedom and conviction. This obedience is only explained by a resolve to follow Christ more closely, which is itself enlivened and stimulated by a personal love of Christ, the interior principle of unity of all consecrated life. The proof of a unity of life will be opportunely made in terms of the four great fidelities: fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, fidelity to the Church and to its mission in the world, fidelity to religious life and to the charism of one’s own institute, and fidelity to humanity and to our times.

4. **SPIRIT FILLED FORMATORS WHO SET THE ATMOSPHERE OF PASSION AND JOY**

The Church acknowledges that God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the Supreme Formator of those who consecrate themselves to him. But in this noble service, God makes use of human instruments. “Formation
is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women.” So, ‘bringing God’s embrace’ is the first responsibility of the formators. The young candidates are welcomed in the name of God and the Church. The formation is geared to transform them as consistent witnesses of God’s unconditional love. So the formators are to create an atmosphere of growing in consistency. The effective way of creating this atmosphere demands from the formators, above all, to become exemplary witnesses of consistency and authenticity.

If consecrated are called to awaken the world, the process of awakening should begin with the consecrated themselves. The spirit-filled formators who are awakened will be effective instruments in accompanying the young ones who are in training to experience this awakening in them. Creating a climate of awakening involves leading them into experiences of living faith and warmth of love. Formation can take place only in settings that are loving and happy. If they are fear-filled or marked by suspicion and distance, young people learn to hide and protect themselves, rather than be themselves. Naturally, wise discernment and decision making cannot be facilitated in such unhealthy setting.

Those who are in formation are certainly in need of listening to loving encouraging words. All the more, the present generation needs and longs for tangible loving experiences in terms of tender nearness. Formators who are available with tender understanding hearts can make a positive climate of trust and confidence. This positive atmosphere in formative process helps the young ones to discover God who comforts His people in tender love. As much as they experience this redeeming love, all the more they are empowered to give such God experience to others who are in need. In today’s loveless world, the urgent mission is to make available the tender and compassionate love of God to all.

The spirit of the risen Jesus is made present and active by means of a complex of ecclesial mediations. The whole of the religious tradition of the Church attests to the decisive character of the role of teachers for the success of the work of formation. Their role is to discern the authenticity of the call to the religious life in the initial phase of formation and to assist the religious toward a successful personal dialogue with God while they are discovering the ways in which God seems to wish them to advance. They should also accompany religious along the paths of the Lord by means of direct and regular dialogue, always respecting the proper role of the confessor and spiritual director in the strict sense of the word.
Formators should also offer religious solid nourishment, both doctrinal and practical, in keeping with each one’s stage of formation. Finally, they should progressively examine and evaluate the progress that is being made by those in their charge, in the light of the fruits of the Spirit. They must decide whether the individual called, has the capacities which are required at this time by the Church and the institute.

4.1. The Formators as Models of Passion and Joy

The formators should be spirit-filled whose lives are inspiring. In present context, the young ones are looking up to visually effective models in their formators. Enlightened formators who are passionately responding to the call of life and love, can become a sign post to others. Instead, a formator who struggles to find meaning in life and who is struggling with unsettled problems cannot effectively accompany the young religious. Consequently, this office requires inner serenity, availability, patience, understanding, and a true affection for those who are entrusted to their guidance. Those who involve in the ministry of formation need to have certain strengths and aptitudes such as; a sound knowledge of catholic faith and morals; the human qualities of insight and responsiveness; a certain experiential knowledge of God and of prayer; wisdom resulting from attentive and prolonged listening to the Word of God; love of the liturgy and understanding of its role in spiritual and ecclesial formation; necessary cultural competence; sufficient time and good will to attend to the candidates individually etc.15

4.2. The Formators who transmit Passion and Joy

Tenderness is one of the basic qualities of God, the divine potter. He is so gentle and tender with His children as the clay that he handles with. In this regard, the formators have to assume this tenderness to handle the persons to whom they offer the service of accompaniment. All those who are present in the formative community, especially the formators, are called to wear God’s smile. Formators are to take extra effort to see that the formative community has the atmosphere of gospel encounter. Community is the first and most believable gospel that we can preach. Joy is confirmed in the experience of community where each one is responsible for their fidelity to the Gospel and for the growth of all. When a community is centred on the eucharistic experience of being fed by the same body and blood of Jesus, consciously it gathers around the Son of God, to share the journey of faith, guided by the Word. It becomes one with him, together in communion, experiencing the gift of love and festive celebration in freedom and joy. Any joyless community is one that is dying out. If a formative community is without an atmosphere of joy and tender love, in
no way it would inspire the growth of the candidates. Every formative community is a school of the gospel. The candidates enter into the community to specialize in the art of gospel loving. Thus a community rich in joy becomes a genuine gift from God where the candidates have the possibility of learning the lessons of understanding, acceptance, collaboration, sacrifice and mutual up-building.\(^{16}\)

The formator who has the experience of joy through his personal encounter with Jesus, can become a channel to spread this joy into the future generation. This is how the formators can exercise the spiritual fatherhood or motherhood effectively. Experiencing in formators such witnesses of joy, serenity, fruitfulness, tenderness, and humble charity, inspires the candidates in the process of assuming the values of the Gospel. Entrusting to us the task of waking up the world, the Pope urges us to approach the stories of the men and women of today in the light of two pastoral categories that have their roots in the newness of the Gospel: closeness and encounter, two ways through which God himself is revealed in history, culminating in the incarnation. The best example for this experience is the story of the disciples of Emmaus. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus gave the experience of closeness and encounter to his disciples, leading them into warmth of companionship. His words were encouraging. His gestures were enlightening. Following this example, the formators are to render the accompaniment, giving the candidates the ‘warmth of heart’ especially with tenderly care for the tired and the weak. Thus, the formators are called to exercise the pastoral fatherhood and motherhood in order to help the candidates to experience the new birth in the religious community.

**CONCLUSION**

Consecrated life is a wonderful gift of God to the Church and the humanity. This gift is given through the Holy Spirit, the giver of all gifts. This is founded on the greatest permanent gift of love. This gift is deeply rooted in the personal example and teaching of Jesus, the consecrated lover. The continuation of consecrated life is fundamentally depends on the mystical experiences of individuals receiving special call from God. God who calls different individuals forms them through different congregations, using human instruments. The individuals who receive their vocation necessarily undergo the process of transformation by experiencing a formative process. In this process, they discover their true Master in the person of Jesus and enter into a joyful, intimate loving relationship with him. Constantly being with him, they become joyful witnesses of new life which flows from his resurrection.

God, as the formator, leads the individuals into this experience of transformation. The human formators collaborate with God in this great task of shaping and
forming God’s witnesses. The individuals who are formed, are the primary agents who experience the joy and enthusiasm which flow from God. The formators who experience the discovery of true joy in their own personal life can accompany effectively the candidates in the process of transformation. The Church today invites the consecrated to take this aspect of joy seriously in the discernment and growth of missionary vocation. The formators are invited to look for signs of joy in the candidates when they accompany them in their discernment and vocational growth. Thus our formation processes should become a true catechesis for living the joy of the Gospel. The formation should bring forth consecrated disciples who share that joy to all men and women through genuine acts of missionary charity. The call for consecrated life is the call to love in joy like Jesus and to grow in this experience of attaining fullness of joy in perfection of love.

Endnotes

1Even before the Second Vatican Council, the Church was concerned about the formation of religious. The Council gave doctrinal principles and general norms in Chapter VI of the dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium and in the decree Perfectae Caritatis. The New Code of Canon Law gives in more precise norms the exigencies required for a suitable renewal of formation. After the council which showed the path of renewal, invariably all the Popes have updated their contributions towards religious formation.

2LG. 43

3Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes (February, 1990) 1.

4EG.1

5GS. 53-62

6EG. 10

7Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, Vocational Fidelity and Abandonment in Today’s Consecrated Life, 12

8Rejoice-The reflection shared by the congregation for the consecrated life, no 26, 27

9Ibid., 32

10Pope Francis in his answer to the Superior Generals in their 82nd General Assembly, held in Rome.

11EG. 3

12Cf. VC 14-27

13VC. 65

14VC. 66

15Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes, 31.

16VC. 67
Pope John Paul II was once asked: “Are you not worried that so many religious are leaving and not many vocations coming in?” Popes answer was: “I am not worried about lack of vocations but about the quality of religious life.” We live in a fast changing world and our society is in constant evolution. The kind of culture that is fast developing and candidly and often subtly promoted by our modern society—the craze for materialism, rampant corruption, very individualistic approach to life, selfishness that has no thought for the other, polarization of people and unhealthy competitive spirit etc.—is progressively disintegrating our life. The advancement of science and technology has unfortunately alienated us from our neighbors. In the cities, people are afraid and so shut themselves up in their own houses, frightened of ‘intruders.’ Life has become almost monotonous and mechanic. Everyone is apparently very busy with managing life that there is hardly any time for real solidarity or relationship building, be it within the family or in the neighborhood. Consecrated men and women, who have renounced the world but who nevertheless live in the world, are also subject to the influence of these new trends we see around us. In this situation, is it really possible for us, men and women, who come from different countries, states, places, languages, caste, culture and status, live and work together as a community? Living and sharing life together as a community is definitely not a walk in the park. It involves many challenges, but it is a marvelous and rewarding adventure that we embark on as religious.

1. COMMUNITY LIVING CENTRAL TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

Living as a community is a basic idea in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God makes a covenant with a group of people and those who lived according to this
covenant were brought together, and a community was built around the God of the covenant. God said to this people: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is your God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5). This text is very basic to their relationship with their God that they copied it and ritually affixed it to the hand, to the forehead, and to the door post at the entrance of the home. There was a radical social sense among these people. They formed one people, though they belonged to different tribes. Their worship, way of life, and sense of unity--one God, one Temple, one People--kept them together and gave them an identity of their own among the nations.

Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus, calling to himself apostles and disciples, men and women, formed a fraternity around him and established the beginning of the new people of God. He animated them to become one, so that they might be able to respond to the love of the Father, loving him with all their hearts, with all their soul, with all their might and loving their neighbor “as themselves” (Mt 22:39). He expressed his relationship with this community in the symbolism of the union of the vine and the branches, and the body with its different members. He entrusted to them the new commandment of mutual love: “Love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one-another” (Jn 13:34), and he commissioned this chosen group to announce the good news to the whole world. Love for God, selfless mutual love for one another and unity modelled on the Trinitarian love – “that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us” (Jn 17:21),--are to be the central values of this new community.

A religious community is a true family gathered together in the Lord’s name and enjoys his presence.1 It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and it manifests the profound communion in the Holy Trinity, the eternal, unceasing communion of the Father, the Son and the Spirit; there is oneness of the total being, of heart and mind, feeling and thinking, giving and receiving that goes on uninterrupted. The unity of the Trinity is considered as the basis of the communion in the religious community. Founded and rooted in the heart of the sanctifying Trinity, and reflecting the same spirit, the members of a religious community live in mutual giving and receiving, receiving and giving, in love and service, to one another and to the world. In other words, religious communities are living signs of the primacy of the love of God and for one’s brothers and sisters as manifested and practiced by Jesus Christ. The call of a religious community is to the pursuit of perfect charity through the practice of evangelical counsels.2
Fraternal life in common is a constitutive element of religious life. Bound by a common calling from God who calls them together in a covenant of love and mutual caring (Heb 8:10), the members of a religious community strive for the building up of true communion in their midst. A successful community living is the result of breaking down barriers to welcome differences. It is made up of people, very different from one another, who love each other and who are all reaching towards the same hope and celebrating the same love. They verbalize their mutual belonging, announce their goals and live the same spirit that unites them and make them realize that they are responsible for one another. “In a religious community which experiences communion of hearts, the members have a common goal and this common goal becomes important. Personal preferences are overlooked. In such a community, love and service to one another become a fundamental choice, not optional. There is mutual understanding and prayerful support, sharing of responsibility, sharing one another’s joys and sorrows.”

They work to support themselves and share with each other whatever they possess. There is the mission to grow together in faith and move together in trust and hope. So, to live in a community means to be open to others, to be flexible enough to live with others as they are and to remain vulnerable and humble. If the community is a living and dynamic community, then each member of the community finds living space in it, moves forward to his or her goal and an atmosphere of joy and welcome characterizes a true community.

1.1 Community Dimension of the Evangelical Counsels

According to St Augustine, the main purpose of the coming together is to live together in harmony, intent upon God in unity of mind and heart. The public profession of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, expresses self-surrender and a total gift of oneself to God in the Church. The document Fraternal Life in Community (FLC) states that the religious are not called to an individual personal vocation. While there is this individual personal call and the responsibility to live his or her self-gift, rests on each one personally, our following of Christ “obedient, poor and chaste”, is lived in the community of a religious family with whom we are bound to share our life. In this sense our call is also a “con-vocation” i.e., we are called together with others. We can say that the effectiveness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life with one another in the community. This communal dimension of the vows must be continuously fostered and deepened.

Jesus teaches us that the fundamental attitude of religious poverty is a turning away from material wealth and a turning towards heavenly things. It is to find our
true wealth in him who has captured us. God desires our hearts so completely and expect us to wait on him with trust. This in practice means we have to let go of our preoccupation with ourselves and our increasing wants and, at times, even our legitimate needs. The temptation to adopt a purely functional and worldly mentality which leads to placing our hope in human means alone, destroys the witness of poverty which our Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught us. The sharing of goods, even spiritual goods, has been from the beginning the basis of fraternal communion and this bears witness to the spiritual union among them. Besides, poverty makes one accept the same treatment received by the other members of the community. Holy Father Francis, noting that poverty in consecrated life is both a “wall” of protection and a “mother” that guides along the right path, cautions us against distractions and scandals in the practice of it. “The hypocrisy of those consecrated men and women who profess vows of poverty, yet live like the rich, wounds the souls of the faithful and harms the Church,” he said.6

The vow of celibate chastity is the heart of religious life; it expresses our single-minded dedication to the love of God who is the strength and joy of our hearts. According to the Decree Perfectae Caritatis, consecrated virginity is the manifestation of the spousal union between Christ and the Church.7 In our very make up, physical and psychological, we are essentially made for one another, man for woman and woman for man. Consecrated chastity, which implies great purity of mind, heart and body, expresses our total availability that frees us to love and serve our brothers and sisters with motherly, sisterly and brotherly affection, making present the love of Christ. By our humble trust in God, vigilance, persistence and with ascetical practices, our natural inclinations to seek human love in interpersonal relationships is sublimated.

One of the strongest means to mature chastity is a happy and well-adjusted life in community which provides us with the affection and recognition so necessary for the integration of our personality. Fraternal love that binds religious to one another in community life is a safeguard to chastity.8 The atmosphere of cordiality, understanding and sisterly/brotherly love in the community sustain and encourage us to remain firm in our resolve to observe celibacy and total continence.

The vow of Obedience sums up the whole of religious life; the following of Christ is marked by obedience in its various expressions. It is the unconditional submission of one’s free will, one’s very self, to the will of God. In imitation of Christ in his self-offering to his heavenly Father and who in a total dependence on his Father’s will was obedient unto death (Phil. 2:8), the religious in taking this vow expresses his or her desire to please God, the object of their love, by doing only his will in their life.
In practice, this is repeatedly saying “no” to self-will and to submit one’s will to his or her lawful superiors. I make my Superior’s will my will, no matter how ignorant, how young and inexperienced she/he may be. In obeying her/him, I am obeying God whom she/he represents in the community. Therefore, religious obedience is always an act of faith.

Obedience is a unitive factor in a community. There is a common vision and a specific mission to be accomplished that unites all in one single fraternal community. In a healthy community, an open and trustful dialogue promotes oneness of intentions and binds together the various wills, leading them to discover the will of God and the best means to translate it into practice.

1.2 Community Living: Means For Personal Sanctification

St Francis de Sales says: “Religious Congregations are not formed for the purpose of gathering together perfect people, but those who have the courage to aim at perfection.” Our religious consecration and all our good works amounts to nothing if one does not set one’s own holiness of life as his or her first and most important preoccupation of life. Pope St. John Paul II addressing the religious wrote: “Remember always that your first field of apostolate is your personal lives. It is here, before all else, that the message of the gospel must be preached and lived. Your first apostolic duty is your own sanctification. No change in religious life is of any importance if at the same time there is no conversion of oneself to Christ. No activity of religious life has any value if at the same time there is no activity in our interior, in the deep “centre” of our lives where Christ is living. What matters most is not what you do, but what you are as brothers and sisters consecrated to the Lord”. As consecrated men and women, our first responsibility is our own sanctification.

Vows, however, do not automatically make us spiritual human being. The first condition is that we become persons of prayer. Community life should spur us on to search for God. Apart from common liturgy, common prayer, common life, we must set aside ample time for personal prayer and contemplation. This way we affirm the supremacy of God. The second way is by being available for selfless service. The third way is ascetical practices. Our religious community, where we live in harmony and devotion to God is, for that matter, the privileged place for our search for God experience and personal holiness of life.
2. JOYFUL COMMUNITY LIVING: A CHALLENGE

The important challenge that we need to negotiate is the task of making our community living a joyful one. There are different dimensions to this challenge. Let us look at some of them.

2.1. Building Oneness with Severalness

God seems pleased to call together in religious communities people who are very different. Ability to uphold oneness in severalness or unity in diversity is very important for a joyful community living. Oneness and severalness are two opposing characteristics. Living and working together with people from different backgrounds, languages, interests, and outlooks can be a frustrating experience. It is a question of loving those whom God has set beside us today. We might have chosen different people, people who were more cheerful and intelligent but our community members are the ones God has given us, the ones he has chosen for us. It is with them that we are called to create unity and live a covenant. This means that each person must accept and love the others with all their differences and work with them for the community, setting aside all their differences and often sacrificing one’s personal tastes and preferences for the sake of the community. Our motives for accepting others must be deeply evangelical, that is, the understanding that all people are worthwhile because of their relationship to God and that God loves each person and Christ died for everyone (Rom 5:8). Those who are in community should be specially esteemed and accepted because they are given to us by God as people for whom we are directly responsible.

If we consider this diversity in our community as a block or an obstacle and tend to stick to like-minded ones, then we keep building walls of separation instead of building bridges that unite us. In fact, this unity and diversity in our community is a sign of God’s generosity and creativity. Most beautiful communities are created from just this diversity of people and temperaments. The presence of communities where people of different ages, language, and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, and which remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and difficulties inherent in common life, is in itself a sign that bears witness to a higher reality and points to higher aspiration. Living and sharing life together can enormously enrich us and provide us with many opportunities for personal growth.

2.2. Embracing Stability and Change

A fruitful community living demands that we learn to integrate stability and change into our community living. While stability demands us to remain rooted in
our past, creativity calls for change, to recapture our vision once again in a new way, to meet the reality from a different perspective, to articulate a new following of Jesus and so on. Both stability and change are necessary for growth; if there is too much stability, we will fossilize; change is absolutely necessary. The world is changing daily and we need to embrace change and move with the time. In other words, we are not to be mere imitators of our Founders and Foundress but very creative people who find new and relevant ways of following Jesus, of living our charism anew in the present socio-political-religious scenario of our society. Imbued with the Holy Spirit as our guiding principle, we, then, search for new and creative ways of being Christ-like in our world today. This keeps us from being outdated, old fashioned and irrelevant community and, instead, makes us one that is well-informed about and abreast with the changing milieu.

2.3. Being Comfortable with Openness and Conflict

Supposing we were to ask a member of the community what would make his or her community life a joyful one, he or she would probably express it this way: (1) Tell me that you love me and appreciate me through your talks, actions and gestures. Don’t assume that I know it and when I know it I may show signs of embarrassment but do it any way. (2) Complement me for the jobs well done. Don’t take me for granted. (3) Let me know when you are hurt because I can’t always weigh your feelings or be sure of controlling mine. (4) Listen to me with an open mind, without prejudice and judgmental attitude.

St Benedict says: “He who loves community, destroys community; he who loves brethren, builds community.” Community is for persons and for their growth. A community comes about when people are no longer hiding from one another and no longer pretending to prove their worth to another. It ought to be a privileged place in which the members can live in constant and lively exchange, self-experience and knowledge; a place of confidence, a holy space in which people can grow in loving relationship to one another and to God. We should have a language to express our feelings, our experiences, our faith, and our life. Certainly, we would all like to have the family atmosphere in our community. In order to create family atmosphere, we need to be good listeners. In a home people listen to each other; listen to others life-experiences, their stories, their discoveries and to their apostolic experiences. It is not just ear-listening but heart-listening and this implies love. Only if we love, we will really listen to the other with the heart. When we listen to the other with the heart, we discover the dimensions of the other’s personality.
Our Holy Father, Pope Francis notes: “From experience I know that community life is not always easy, but it is a providential training ground for the heart. It is unrealistic not to expect conflicts; misunderstandings will arise and they must be faced. … But despite these challenges, it is in community life that we are called to grow in mercy, forbearance and perfect charity.” It is good for us to bear in mind that God does not love us because we are good but that we are good because he loves us. It is not first of all good qualities of others that should make us love them, but that we love them in order to implant and nourish good qualities in them. What we are for one-another is inexpressibly more precious than what we do for each other. Each one has to help the other grow. We are all together on our way. Loving appreciation of one another is a key to genuine community life.

When people live closely together as religious do, there is always a tendency to judge one-another harshly. When a judgmental attitude predominates, then fear is usually the motive force for most human action, and fear makes the growth of the true community impossible. Openness and fear cannot exist together. An atmosphere of openness is very important for community wholeness. Many communities become lifeless because they are incapable of expressing themselves. A community in which feelings cannot be shown and the atmosphere prohibits the manifestation of one’s weakness does not help to build up a real community. We do not find love and friendship in such communities. There the individuals have no initiative; they are not free, they cannot think or decide anything for themselves, there is no spontaneity, no new ideas and no creativity.

We know that we have our limits, our dark sides, our shadows and we have to grow beyond them. In each community there are many negative feelings, dynamics and energies. If we are not open to corrections, it can ruin the community; the spiritual level of the community sinks and the community becomes a sort of hostel or boarding house. Fraternal love really means that we want to become better and better and help others become better by correcting their faults. Common life requires that we have the courage and charity to gently and with sisterly/brotherly concern, point out to one-another what is disagreeable in their behavior. Positively taken fraternal correction can help to build up the confidence and trust in the community. Reconciliation takes place, the hidden anger dissolves and a certain hearty feeling comes into the community.

In any community there can be conflicts between the young and old, between different cultural and linguistic groups, but we need to be mature enough to openly discuss the conflicts without becoming emotional or one-sided about it. Conflicts have the potential to inspire us and take us forward and they should be welcomed as
necessary building stones for human growth. Similarly, there can be brotherly and sisterly criticism, but such criticism has potential for growth, for self-knowledge, and for creative planning. We must bear in mind that for the sake of well-being of the community and the individual concerned, such criticism should be exercised with great respect and compassion.

3. COMMUNITY LIVING AS SIGN AND WITNESS

We live in a community not because we like each other, rather we are called together by God and our mission is to bear witness to him by our life and activities. In its structure, motivations and distinguishing values, a religious community makes publically visible and continually perceptible the gift of fraternal communion in the Church. We work to support ourselves and share with each other all we possess. Indeed, our life in common is our message, not just to the Church but to the entire world, of fraternal love, sharing, co-responsibility, mutual help, attentiveness to one-another, and of abiding fidelity to God.

Whatever builds persons, builds community and whatever builds community, builds persons. Community life ought to be marked by love, acceptance, appreciation, esteem and mutual assistance of one-another. When the members of a community are living in communion, the community becomes a sign of the presence of God and, from this communion of hearts and minds, flows serenity and fruitfulness of consecrated life. To a world focused on efficiency, productivity and progress, the religious community is a sign of God. The testimony of us together--of one heart, one soul, one spirit--is a witness of our authentic calling and we become bearers of the love and compassion of God to humankind.

Addressing the religious communities of Korea, Pope Francis urged the religious to focus on community life in transmitting the joy of the Gospel to the world. He called them to reflect on the central role that joy must play in their lives and pointed out that our life must be for others a tangible sign of the presence of God’s Kingdom, a foretaste of the eternal joys of heaven. In a sense, our real identity is the witness of generosity, self-denial and humility, we bear with our life. The firm conviction of being loved by God is at the center of our vocation and the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience that we make is to become joyful witnesses to God’s love and an anticipation of God’s reign among us, as well a sign of things to come. Through our vowed life, we publically underline the priority of God and of the values of the gospel in all our relationships and undertakings. Besides, our rootedness in God, our intense fraternal communion with one-another and our life in common are stimulus for all the baptized and it has great significance for apostolic activity and for the work of evangelization.
Calling the religious to an awareness of their role in shaping future vocations, Pope Francis urged the women religious of Korea to do all that they can to show that consecrated life is a precious gift to the Church and to the world. If community life is healthy, working as a team is a joyful and helpful example to motivate the young ones to choose our way of life. The Holy Father cautions us: “Only if our witness is joyful will we attract men and women to Christ, …and this joy is a gift which is nourished by a life of prayer, meditation on the word of God, the celebration of the sacraments and life in community. … When these are lacking, weaknesses and difficulties will emerge to dampen the joy we knew so well at the beginning of our journey.”

He explains further: “The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programmes, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as men and women who are happy.”

Similarly, the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of your lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full.”

This is to say that, as consecrated men and women, our community life is just as important as our apostolic life. In fact, fraternal communion is both the beginning and the end of the apostolate.

CONCLUSION

In his “Wake up the World” message, our Holy Father tells the religious that he is counting on us “to wake up the world” by being “prophetic witnesses” by being truly human, truly Christian and truly religious. Our vocation as religious is, above all, a call to love, love in the purest form. Consequently, a religious community has to be a living sign of this love for God and for one’s brothers and sisters, as manifested and practiced by Jesus Christ--selfless, other centered, understanding, forgiving, sacrificial and universal love. St. Paul also points out that love is indispensable for a joyful community living (1 Cor 13:1-8) and this entails a life “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another” (Eph 4:2-3). Many of us are probably doing wonderful service as far as the outside world is concerned, but it is even more important to build up a happy, healthy and life-enhancing togetherness in community and, in fact, this ought to be our first mission as religious.

Endnotes

1 Perfectae Caritatis, 15.
2 Perfectae Caritatis, 1.
3 Perfectae Caritatis, 15.

Fraternal Life in Community, 44.

Pope Francis, Korea, August 16, 2014.

*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1

*Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

*Vita Consecrata*, 45.

Pope Francis, Korea, August 16, 2014.

Pope Francis, Korea, August 16, 2014.

Pope Francis, Korea, August 16, 2014.


Within a short span of time, Pope Francis, the Pope from the “ends of the earth,” has conquered the hearts of people, not only of Catholics, but of all. With his simplicity, preferential option for the poor, mercy, compassion, bold steps taken for radical changes in the Church, and above all with his joy, he has attracted a number of people. He repeatedly says that Christian life is a call to joy – a call to experience the joy of the Gospel and to share and spread that joy.

In this paper, we shall have an overview of his message of joy, mainly based on his various writings and homilies. We shall also depend on Rejoice! A letter to consecrated men and women. A message from the teachings of Pope Francis from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. This letter prepares us enter into the Year of Consecrated Life and presents the Pope’s message of joy, especially for the consecrated persons. Though we focus on Pope’s invitation to the consecrated persons to experience the joy of the Gospel and to spread that joy, we shall remember that all the disciples of Christ are invited to experience and share the joy that God offers. This paper attempts mainly to present the reflections of Pope Francis on consecrated life, and the importance of living this vocation to joy.

1. **Joy: The Basic Vocation of a Christian**

“The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.” It is to be remembered that, “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord” (EG, 3). Evangelization is nothing but radiating and sharing this joy, inviting everyone to experience this joy that God offers. Joy is the basic attitude that a Christian should have: “Being
Christian means the joy of belonging completely to Christ, ‘the one spouse of the Church,’ encountering him is like going to a wedding. Therefore, joy and the understanding of Christ’s centrality are the two attitudes that Christians should cultivate in their daily lives.” The Pope also says that joy was the basic characteristic of Jesus: “While we are accustomed to think of Jesus preaching, healing, walking through the streets speaking to people, or even being raised upon the Cross, ‘we are not accustomed to think of Jesus smiling, or joyful.’ However . . . ‘Jesus was full of joy.’”

This call to joy is all the more relevant regarding consecrated life. Addressing the religious, the Pope says: “I want to say one word to you and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always joy!” Joy is the most important attitude proposed by the Pope in his opening address for the year of Consecrated Life: By being joyful, “show everyone that you follow Christ and put his Gospel into practice, filling your heart with happiness. Infect those who are near you with this joy; and then many people will ask you for the reason and feel the desire to share with you your splendid and enthralling Gospel adventure.” This message of joy is even more strongly expressed in his Apostolic Letter as the first expectation that he has for the year of consecrated life: “Where there are religious, there is joy.’ We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church, to families and young people, to the elderly and the poor, brings us life-long personal fulfilment. None of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for ‘a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom.’”

The biblical concept of Joy is elaborated, especially referring to the Psalms and the Prophet Elijah (Is 9:2; 35:1; 44:23; 49:13; 35:9 f.; 51:11). In the New Testament, joy is the Messianic gift par excellence; it is the sign of the presence and growth of the Kingdom of God (Jn 15:11; 16:24; 17:13; Lk 1:14.44.47; 2:10; cf. Mt 2:10; Lk 10:17; 24:41.52; Lk15:7.10.32; Acts 8:39; 11:23; 15:3; 16:34; cf. Rom 15:10-13; etc.).

However, this joy is not mechanical or automatic. Although it is granted freely with one’s vocation to be a Christian, it faces a number of challenges. At the very outset of Evangelii Gaudium, the Pope indicates a few possible threats to this joy: consumerism, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, a blunted conscience, and a self-centredness that gives no room for others, no place for the poor. “In the world there is often a lack of joy. We are not called to accomplish epic feats or to proclaim
Radiating the Joy of the Gospel: the Spirit of Pope Francis

high-sounding words, but to give witness to the joy that arises from the certainty of knowing we are loved, from the confidence that we are saved.”¹⁰ This means that joy is something to be kept alive, being aware of the threats, challenges and of our weaknesses that may extinguish that joy. Similarly, like everyone else, religious also have their own troubles, dark nights of the soul, disappointments, infirmities, and the experience of slowing down as we grow older. “But in all these things we should be able to discover perfect joy.”¹¹ It is a joy to be experienced and achieved in every situation and moment of life. In Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis says:

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress: ‘My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is… But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness… It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord’ (Lam 3:17, 21-23, 26).¹²

There is no doubt that Christian life is a call to follow Jesus, ‘bearing the cross’ (Lk 14:27). Jesus’ ‘advertisement’ about himself was that those who would follow him would have to suffer. Christian life demands a lot of renunciation and suffering. This is all the more true about consecrated life. However, we cannot forget that the call to follow Jesus is a call to experience his joy (Jn 17:13). This paradox of cross and joy is at the core of the Christian message. The renunciation along with the suffering involved, is not an end in itself; it is not an escape from this world or a call to consider everything of this world as evil and think about the joy in the life in heaven. Perfect joy is eschatological. However, a Christian is called to experience the joy here on this earth – the joy of being called and loved by Jesus, the joy of his constant presence. It seems that often we forget this message of joy, that we live more in the mystery of the ‘Good Friday’ than that of the ‘Easter’. Cross is central to Christian faith, but it is not the end. Easter – the resurrection – the joy of the Risen Lord is the most important mystery of Christian faith. That is why we are called to live in joy even in the midst of sufferings and cross, experiencing the joyful presence of the Risen Lord. Perhaps we need to evaluate whether, in our day to day life and in our devotional practices, we are able to transmit this joy of the Risen Lord, or only the gloom of the cross.
2. JOY OF BEING CALLED

First and foremost, for a consecrated person, the source of joy is her/his calling, because it is the sign and assurance of God’s love, that she/he is important for God. “In calling you, God says to you: ‘You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you’. Jesus says this to each one of us! Joy is born from that! The joy of the moment in which Jesus looked at me. Understanding and hearing this is the secret of our joy. Feeling loved by God, feeling that for him we are not numbers but people; and we know that it is he who is calling us.”

Jesus makes clear: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). The initiative comes from God, we are only responding to his initiative. That is why the Pope says that in the act of vocation, “God is indeed the mysterious subject of an act of calling.” This vocation is a free gift of God, inviting free response. This means continuously “making an ‘exodus’ from yourselves in order to centre your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans.”

Consecrated life of a person begins with an encounter with Jesus, and this call is to be nourished at each moment through the encounter with him. Only then, the joy of the call can be experienced. That is, prayer, meditation, reflection, etc. are necessary to experience and keep alive the joy of the consecrated life. Discovering and rediscovering the joy of consecrated life imply experiencing the fervour of the original experience of the call of God, enkindling that original desire in our heart, and searching with a restless heart what God’s call demands from us at present:

“Look into the depths of your heart, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has your heart maintained a restlessness searching or have you let it be suffocated by things that will finally harden it?”

The Pope invites us to remember “the joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me” and thus to recall the underlying meaning of our vocation. He invites us to “contemplate the beginnings of a journey or rather, of an event initiated by Christ, when the nets were left on the lake shore, the tax collector’s desk by the side of the road, the ambitions of the zealot among discarded plans. All are inappropriate means for staying with him.” Reflecting on the original experience of the Lord’s gaze on us is important, because, “this makes us aware of the gratuity of the gift of a vocation and helps us to explain the reasons for our initial choice and for our perseverance.” At the same time, “letting Christ make us his own always means straining forward to what lies ahead, to the goal of Christ (cf. Phil 3:14).” This means that the memory of the original meaning does not mean that we have to live only in the past. In fact, there is an interplay of the past, present and future; or, we are living the past and future.
in the present. It is living at the present moment the mystery of the past and the
mystery of the present simultaneously and also being open to the mystery of the
future. “Faith contains our own memory of God’s history with us, the memory
of our encounter with God who always takes the first step, who creates, saves and
transforms us. Faith is remembrance of his word that warms our heart, and of his
saving work which gives life, purifies us, cares for and nourishes us . . . . The one who
is mindful of God, who is guided by the memory of God in his or her entire life is
able to awaken that memory in the hearts of others.”20 It is the memory of being
called here and now.

3. **JOY IN FIDELITY**

Joy is an outcome of the faithful following of Jesus: “Anyone who has met the
Lord and follows him faithfully is a messenger of the joy of the Spirit.” Thanks to
the fidelity to the Lord, to this encounter and renewed encounter with the Lord,
“we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.”22

Fidelity is sometimes described only in negative terms. For example, marital
fidelity is described as avoiding adulterous relations. There is no doubt, avoidance
of adulterous relations, not only physical, but also emotional, is essential to marital
fidelity. At the same time, fidelity is not merely avoidance of something, that
is, it is not a negative virtue. It is a creative virtue. Fidelity in marital life refers
to keeping alive the love between the couple, an ongoing and active interest in
the partner, finding and actualising in day to day life new and renewed ways of
giving and experiencing love. It is not a utopian idea, but finding the joy of love
of the partner even in little things. Otherwise, fidelity may be lived as a negative or
burdensome virtue that limits the joy and freedom of a person. The same may be
said about fidelity in the consecrated life. “Consecrated life is a continuous call to
follow Christ.”23 It is an ongoing and ever-living invitation to experience the love
of Christ, to love him, and to follow him, in everyday life, and in everything that
we do. It requires avoidance of many things, as expressed in the vows taken. But,
fundamentally, the consecrated life is not a life of avoidance; it is a call to live, to
actualize the love of Christ. Pope Francis writes:

Consecrated life is a call to incarnate the Good News, to *follow Christ*, the crucified
and risen one . . . . In practical terms, it is a call to take up his way of life, to adopt
his interior attitude, to allow oneself to be invaded by his Spirit, to absorb his
surprising logic and his scale of values, to share in his risks and his hopes. ‘Be
guided by the humble yet joyful certainty of those who have been *found, touched
and transformed by the Truth* who is Christ, ever to be proclaimed.”24
This following and the fidelity that is expressed in the day to day life, is not a burden, but a joyous experience of an intimate personal love and relationship. The vows that the consecrated persons profess are expressions of this creative fidelity: “To stay with Christ requires us to share our lives, our choices, the obedience of faith, the happiness of poverty, the radicality of love.”25 The vows demand renunciation, but they are not invitations to a negative life. Renunciation is in view of the greater joy that it offers; obedience is not to negate one’s freedom, but to find the true meaning of one’s freedom in the “obedience of faith.” Poverty is not the denial of possessions and wealth, but to experience God as one’s true possession, and to understand that the real value of material wealth is not in possessing, but in sharing. Virginity is not a denial of love, but a life of radical love, loving everyone as a brother or sister in Jesus, and finding the meaning of one’s life in this life of love, without possessing anyone, but sharing oneself for others.

It is often true that we are more acutely aware of what we are renouncing than what we are gaining. This may affect or destroy the joy that we can experience. Instead of living obedience as the freedom to fulfill the will of God in faith, it may be lived as a loss of independence. Instead of the “happiness of poverty,” we may feel more acutely the deprivation of personal property and the security and power that it brings. More than the radicality of love and its joy, we may feel the absence of an intimate partner and the sexual enjoyment. Focusing on what we are renouncing, and feeling the pain of what we are losing, instead of enjoying what we have gained is a human tendency. Only through creative fidelity in day to day life, we can overcome this pain and experience the joy of what we are gaining.

That the consecrated life is a life of joy does not mean that every moment there is merry making, or that there are no difficulties or challenges. Like every other status of life, in the consecrated life too there can be difficulties, challenges, tensions, pain, disappointments, and failures. We may feel that we have made a wrong choice; that we are unable to fulfill the demands of commitment that we willingly made once; that the call is too demanding; that we are not strong enough to shoulder the burdens of the call; we may feel totally tired to go forward; our weaknesses may frighten us; our failures may disappoint us; we may feel that we have completely lost our original love which cannot be regained; our life and ministry may appear meaningless and fruitless. Francis writes: “This daily journey, both personal and communal, marked by discontent and a bitterness that encloses us in remorse, and almost in a permanent longing for unexplored paths and unfulfilled dreams, becomes a lonely road. Our call to live in relationship, in the fulfilment of love, can be transformed into an uninhabited wilderness.”26
These are challenges that anyone who has been called and who has responded to the call should face. There we realise the burden of fidelity, but also the value of fidelity. We find it in the life of the prophets and great leaders of Israel. We come across Jonah who wanted to flee from his call. Or, sometimes, like Jeremiah we may lament all the time about the vocation received. Jeremiah could not reconcile completely with his call to remain unmarried symbolising the barrenness with which Israel would be punished for her infidelity. Still he persisted and persevered.27 Jesus himself felt the burden of the call. Being faithful to the call is not easy. Cross is the cost of fidelity: “When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly. We may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.”28 But, only this fidelity which is willing to carry the cross brings the joy of the call:

To persevere all the way to Golgotha, to experience the lacerations of doubts and denial, to rejoice in the marvel and wonder of the Paschal event, up to the manifestation of Pentecost and the evangelization of the peoples, these are milestones of joyful fidelity because they are about self-emptying, experienced throughout life, even in the sign of martyrdom, and also sharing in the life of the risen Christ. ‘And it is from the Cross, the supreme act of mercy and love, that we are reborn as a new creation’ (Gal 6:15).29

The Pope’s invitation to be faithful to the call and to experience the joy in the faithfulness has to be understood in this background. He says: “It is about being reborn through vocation. I invite all Christians […] at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ today, at least to an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.”30 One of the benefits of re-reading our own personal story and scrutinising it in the light of God’s loving gaze31 is that it instils in us the strength to be faithful. It is an ongoing process.

Life in the spirit is never completed, but is always open to mystery, as we discern in order to know the Lord and to perceive reality beginning with him. When God calls us he lets us enter into his rest and invites us to repose in him, in a continuous process of loving understanding. We hear the Word you are worried and upset about many things (Lk 10:41). On the path of love we go forward through rebirth: the old creation is born anew. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).32

Understood in this way, fidelity to Christ is the means to grasp the mystery of the call and to grow in the intimacy with him. “Remaining in Christ allows us to
grasp the presence of the Mystery which lives in us and expands our hearts to the measure of his Son’s heart. Those who remain in his love, like the branch attached to the vine (cf. Jn 15:1-8), enter into intimacy with Christ and bear fruit. ‘Remain in Jesus! This means remaining attached to him, in him, with him, talking to him.’”

This implies that the consecrated life is a continuous call to follow Christ, and to be made like him: “Jesus’ whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, all this is precious and relates to our personal lives.”

This means that faithfulness to the call is not static, but it invites the person to be always active, to be always in movement: “Christian life is defined by verbs of movement. Even when it is lived in the context of a monastery or contemplative cloister, it is a life of continual searching.”

Addressing the General Chapter of the Order of St Augustine, Pope Francis presented St Augustine as an example of this continuous, restless search. Due to the “restlessness in his heart which brought him to a personal encounter with Christ . . . Augustine did not stop, he did not give up, he did not withdraw into himself like those who have already arrived, but continued his search. The restlessness of seeking the truth, of seeking God, became restlessness to know him ever better and to come out of himself to make others know him. It was precisely the restlessness of love.”

Fidelity is demanding: “We are experiencing a crisis of fidelity, understood as a conscious adherence to a call that is a pathway, a journey from its mysterious beginnings to its mysterious end.”

This concept of fidelity presented by the Pope is the key to understand the meaning and burden of fidelity. We may never understand fully the meaning of our call. From the beginning till the end of our life, it may remain a mystery. In fact, every mystery is like that, we live them, but we may never understand it fully. Accepting it as it is and living it though we may not understand it fully, is one of the burdens of fidelity. Though we may not understand the meaning and mystery of the call, we decide to be faithful to his call, to live it with joy trusting in his ways and abandoning ourselves completely in his love and care.

Fidelity, even in the midst of suffering and cross, helps us understand the meaning of love and the joy that this love brings. This is always the same and ever new. Referring to Benedict XVI, Pope Francis says: “Love is never finished and complete; throughout life it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself.”

This, in fact, is the experience that we all have in true and faithful friendship. We understand that our friend is the same, but always new; we realize that the friendship deepens though we are the same persons; there may be moments
of difficulties, misunderstandings, confusions, but if we persist, all these contribute to the deepening and strengthening of friendship. And, we believe that our friendship can grow further, mature into greater intimacy and meaning, giving us more profound joy.

The Pope underscores the importance of prayer in appreciating the depths of our call and in keeping fidelity: “The first thing for a disciple is to be with the Master, to listen to him and learn from him. This is always true, and it is true at every moment of our lives. If the warmth of God, of his love, of his tenderness is not in our own hearts, then how can we, who are poor sinners, warm the heart of others.” In his address to the Seminarians and Novices, the Pope specially points out the need of cultivating a habit of prayer: “Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ’s heart, full of mercy and love.” A consecrated person is always a contemplative; rather, only a contemplative can be a consecrated person, whether he/she lives in cloister or engaged in an active ministry.

Fidelity, is nourished by prayer and deepens the call and the joy in the call: “The Pope invites us to renew our vocation and to fill it with joy and passion, so that the increase in loving activity is a continuous process – ‘it matures, matures, matures’ – in a permanent development in which the ‘yes’ of our will to God’s will unites will, intellect and feeling.”

The Pope also assures us that we should not deny ourselves of the joy that the Lord offers us, worrying about our failures and lack of fidelity: “And he asks fidelity of us. Jesus asks us to be totally his; though we sometimes have bad habits or do things that don’t lead us to being totally his, ‘they mean little: let us repent, let us ask forgiveness and go forward,’ without growing tired of asking for the grace of joy.”

4. JOY IN THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY

The joy that the consecrated persons experience and radiate is integrally linked to their prophetic ministry. Rather, it is the prophetic ministry that makes consecrated life meaningful and joyful. This is the second programmatic attitude that the Pope proposes for religious in his opening message for the year of the Consecrated: “By being brave! Those who feel loved by the Lord know how to place full trust in Him, as your Founders and Foundresses did, opening new ways of service to the Kingdom of God. With the power of the Holy Spirit that accompanies you, go out into the streets of the world and show the innovative power of the Gospel which,
when put into practice, works wonders today too and can answer to all the questions of mankind.” In his Apostolic letter, *To All Consecrated People*, referring to his address to the Superiors General (29 November 2013), the Pope says: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.’ This is the priority that is needed right now: ‘to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth… a religious must never abandon prophecy.’

The Pope explains the qualities of the prophets: They receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events; they know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters; they are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice; since they are free, they are obliged to no one but God; they have no interest other than God; they are on the side of the poor and the powerless. Prophetic ministry for the religious means, creating “alternate spaces,” where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive. All the activities of the religious are in fact the expressions and actualization of their charisms, the fruit of the prophetic ministry. This creative response should continue reading the signs of the times. Only then the ministry of the consecrated persons becomes relevant and the source of real joy. This prophetic ministry is at times too demanding or may appear fruitless, and hence there can be the temptation to abandon it. But, the consecrated persons are called to rely upon the power and assurance that God offers to overcome such temptations.

The Pope is aware of the difficulties in prophetic ministry, and the temptations to abandon it: “At times, like Elijah and Jonah, you may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the task of being a prophet because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless. But prophets know that they are never alone. As he did with Jeremiah, so God encourages us: ‘Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you’” (*Jer* 1:8). Pope Francis underlines the importance of contemplation in cultivating the prophetic aptitude: “The prophet is one whose eye is opened, and who hears and speaks the words of God; … a person of three times: the promise of the past, the contemplation of the present, the courage to point out the path toward the future.”

Religious congregations, often, begin as movements. In fact Christianity itself started as a movement. But, gradually institutions are started and the congregations become institutionalized. Institutions can be a helpful means for serving people, but institutionalization distances us from people. Instead of serving people, institutionalization becomes an obstacle to serve others. Being settled in the comforts
of institutions is a temptation that religious face. The more institutionalised we are, the less prophetic we become; the less challenging our ministry becomes. We become rather defenders and protectors of institutions. If we look at the history of religious life, we discover that religious life was often seen as an escape from institutionalization, to escape from the security that institutions and settled life offer, into the security that the Lord gives—in the insecurity of the desert, of the wilderness, and in the mendicant life; to experience the freedom to take up prophetic ministries to serve others, to challenge unjust systems and structures, to find new pathways to establish the Kingdom of God. It may be good to reflect on how the prophetic ministry is exercised by the religious in the Indian context. Often, the religious are seen as owners of big institutions. Surely, they help us serve the people. At the same time, it may be good to evaluate whether at least sometimes they distance us from people, whether they distract us from the prophetic ministry and drive us to the comforts of the ‘settled life’. There are religious who take up the risk of prophetic ministry – fighting for justice, protecting the poor and the defenceless, working for women emancipation, sharing the compassionate love of God with the street children, beggars, the addicted and so on. However, especially in the context of the rise of religious intolerance in the country, often we see educational institutions as the only secure areas of ministry, the means of exerting influence on the society and safer way of living. Even congregations which originally took up prophetic and challenging ministries gradually fall into the temptation of big institutions which bring power, money, influence and security. The higher we are, the more insecure we become; the more powerful we are, the more anxious we become, endangering the joy of the prophetic life and mission that the Lord wants us to carry forward.

Prophetic dimension of consecrated life requires respecting ample freedom for personal initiatives. It is clear that the charism of the community is to be kept. At the same time, in a certain sense, we can say that each member is a new interpretation of the charism of the community, and through each personal charism, the original charism of the founder/congregation is enriched. Sometimes, we conveniently forget that religious congregations began as ‘protest movements’ against the structures and systems that tended to choke the ‘wind’ of the Spirit and that the charisms were often creative responses to allow the free movement of the Spirit. This does not mean that anyone can do anything according to his/her whims and fancies. Evidently, actualization of the prophetic ministry should take place through sincere dialogue between the person and the community. Pope Francis’ words should touch our conscience:

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos
I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).\(^5\)

5. SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

The “spirituality of communion” is foundational to the joy that the consecrated persons experience and radiate. The Pope calls the religious to be “experts in communion” and asks them to make the Church “the home and the school of communion.”\(^5\) In his various addresses and exhortations, the Pope delineates multiple levels of this communion: “Firmly rooted in personal communion with God, whom you have chosen as the *porro unum* [good portion] (cf. Lk 10:42) of your existence, be tireless builders of fraternity, above all practicing among yourselves the Gospel law of mutual love, and then with all, especially the poorest. Demonstrate that universal fraternity is not a utopia but Jesus’ very dream for the whole of humanity.”\(^5\)

5.1. Communion within the Respective Communities of each Institute

The Pope asks the consecrated persons to avoid “criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility as ways of acting which have no place in our houses.” Instead, “the path of charity that entails mutual acceptance and concern, practicing a communion of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction and respect for those who are weak” should become the norm of community living. Here the Pope underscores the importance of extending the communion especially to persons from different cultures, as communities are becoming increasingly international.\(^5\)

In the context of individualistic culture that develops today, the communitarian dimension in religious communities faces serious challenges. Often, individuals live under the same roof without much communication or sharing. Modern technologies further encourage us to live in isolation from others in the community.
The ministries that we have taken up perhaps do not allow us to be present at all the community activities. However, it is good to evaluate whether we are in communion with other members of our community, or whether we are living as islands under the same roof.

Joy of the consecrated life can be experienced only in a community that lives in harmony, sharing, mutual encouragement and appreciation. This also means that every member has a role in the community, and that the contribution of everyone is important for the community; everyone also should contribute to the well-being and harmony of the community.

5.2. Communion between the Members of Different Institutes

The Pope invites the consecrated persons “to step out more courageously from the confines of” the respective Institutes and “to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action” as “communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope.”

Perhaps this is an area where we need to work more. Although there are forums to bring together various religious institutes, unhealthy competitions, jealousy, rivalry, etc. still prevail among different religious communities. Often, these lead to scandals as well, not only destroying the joy of Christian life, but also giving counter witness. Charisms are unique; they are complementary. Hence, they should not lead us to rivalry and competition. Instead, they should help us to collaborate with each other, appreciating the unique charisms of each other. Behind rivalry and competition, there is often the hidden tendency to dominate and to exert and enjoy power, which are in fact contrary to the ideal of consecrated life itself. Unhealthy competitions raise the question whether we are seeking ‘His Kingdom’ or our own kingdoms.

5.3. Communion with all other Vocations in the Church

The Pope exhorts the consecrated persons to live in communion with priests and the lay faithful. Unfortunately, this is an area where immediate attention is required. In many parts of our country, as well as in many countries, conflicts between religious and diocesans are going beyond limits, sometimes ending up in public protests and clashes and even physical violence. The quest for power and control knows no limits, it seems. Instead of communion, it is not rare that we become agents of disharmony and discord. A culture of appreciation for each other’s ministry and charism has to evolve and develop.
Similarly, religious and religious communities need to find newer ways of collaborating with the laity, the married, the youth and so on. This will be an enriching experience for each other. By appreciating the vocation of the consecrated life, we become able to appreciate more the meaning and mystery of the vocation of the married; by appreciating the vocation of marriage, we understand more the unique mystery of religious life.

All of us need to realise that we belong to the same Church, that we are in the same mission of spreading the good news of the love of God and the joy that he offers us all. We all work together for the Kingdom of God, where God is the Father of all and all are brothers and sisters, where all belong to the same family. The consecrated persons are called to witness to this communion of all, and to bring about this communion.

5.4. Communion with all People, especially the Poor and the Needy

Pope Francis calls the consecrated to experience communion with all people, especially the poor, the needy, going forth to the existential peripheries: “A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine.” This going out and communion is the source of joy: “Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love.” Here, the Pope underlines the need of welcoming the refugees, and drawing near to the poor, and the need of apostolates adjusted to new needs.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis eloquently speaks against an economy of exclusion, against an idolatry of money, against the “globalization of indifference.” He clearly states that the Church can never neglect the poor: “Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members.” He repeats the importance of taking care of the poor: “Any Church community, if it thinks it can comfortably go its own way without creative concern and effective cooperation in helping the poor to live with dignity and reaching out to everyone, will also risk breaking down, however much it may talk about social issues or criticize governments. It will easily drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.” I hope that these words are self-explanatory; still it may be good to ask ourselves: “How much importance do
we give to the poor in our ministry?” If they are not taken care of, if a preferential option for the poor is not given, that is the beginning of the disintegration of religious communities; and we deprive ourselves of the gift of joy that the Lord graciously gives us. Pope Francis underscores the importance of taking care of the vulnerable in the society:

Jesus, the evangelizer par excellence and the Gospel in person, identifies especially with the little ones (cf. Mt 25:40). This reminds us Christians that we are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth. But the current model, with its emphasis on success and self-reliance, does not appear to favour an investment in efforts to help the slow, the weak or the less talented to find opportunities in life. It is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all.59

Taking care of the vulnerable was always considered as the special ministry of the consecrated. It is an obligation; at the same time, it is the means of finding joy in the consecrated life.

In Evangelii Gaudium, the Pope speaks about the need of dialogue with other Churches and other religions, with the scientific community in the world, and thus bringing about greater communion in the world. Here too, we can say that the religious have a special role in bringing about communion in the world through various initiatives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to Pope Francis, Christian life is a call to joy, to experience the joy that God gives gratuitously and to share it. In a particular way, the consecrated persons are invited to experience this joy and to radiate this joy. This demands a personal relationship with Jesus, a renewed experience of the call that we have received, and the willingness to be faithful to him even at the cost of the cross. Religious are invited to experience and share this joy in the prophetic ministry, and by being experts in communion. Pope Francis himself is a model of this joy and communion. He invites everyone to the joy of the Gospel, to the experience of the compassionate love of God. In his ministry as the head of the Church, his attempt is to bring everyone into the loving embrace of the Church. Hence, not only his message, but also his life and example radiate the joy of the Gospel.
Endnotes


5 Rejoice!, 5.


8 It is pointed out that there are thirteen different verbs and nouns found in the Bible to describe the joy of God, of people and also of creation itself, in the dialogue of salvation. In the Old Testament, these recurrences are most numerous in the Psalms and in the prophet Isaiah. With creative and original linguistic variations, there are many invitations to joy. The joy of the nearness of God is proclaimed, the delight in what God has created and made. Hundreds of times in the Psalms there are effective expressions to indicate that joy is both the fruit of the benevolent presence of God and the jubilant echo that it gives rise to, as well as a declaration of the great promise that lies in the future for the people. As for the prophet, it is the second and third parts of the book of Isaiah that pulse with this frequent call to joy. In the New Testament joy usually implies total exultation embracing the past and the future together. Joy is the messianic gift par excellence, as Jesus himself promised. Joy is a typical sign of the presence and the spread of the Kingdom (cf. *Lk* 15:7.10.32; *Acts* 8:39; 11:23; 15:3; 16:34; cf. *Rom* 15:10-13; etc.). According to Paul, joy is a fruit of the Spirit (cf. *Gal* 5:22) and a typical, constant feature of the Kingdom (cf. *Rm* 14:17) that is strengthened by trials and tribulations (cf. *1Titus* 1:6). The source of joy must be found in prayer, charity and unceasing thanksgiving (cf. *1Titus* 5:16; *Phil* 3:1; *Col* 1:11 f.). Rejoice!, 15-19.

9 EG, 2.

10 Rejoice!, 3.

11 To All Consecrated People, II, 1.

12 EG, 6.
Radiating the Joy of the Gospel: the Spirit of Pope Francis

13 Rejoice!, 4.
14 Rejoice!, 4.
15 Rejoice!, 4.
17 Francis, Meeting with Seminarians and Novices, Rome, 6 July 2013.
18 Rejoice!, 4.
19 Rejoice!, 4.
21 Rejoice!, 5.
22 EG, n. 8.
23 Rejoice!, 4.
25 Rejoice!, 4.
26 Rejoice!, 6.
29 Francis, Homily for Holy Mass with Seminarians and Novices, Rome, 7 July 2013.
30 EG, n. 3.
32 Rejoice!, 5.
33 Francis, Address to the Participants at the International Congress on Catechesis, Rome, 27 September 2013.
34 EG, n. 265.
35 Rejoice!, 5.
37 Rejoice!, 6.
39 Francis, Address to the Participants at the International Congress on Catechesis, Rome, 27 September 2013.

JULY – DECEMBER 2015


Rejoice!, 6.


Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life.”

To All Consecrated People, II, 2.

To All Consecrated People, II, 2.

To All Consecrated People, II, 2.

To All Consecrated People, II, 1.


For example, the moving force behind the Egyptian Desert Fathers was the desire to move away from the settled land and to seek God in the wilderness of the desert. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213-240.

EG, 49.


Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life.”

To All Consecrated People, II, 3.

To All Consecrated People, II, 3.

To All Consecrated People, II, 4.

EG, 186.

EG, 207.

Hospitality (φιλόξενος) is the combination of two concepts. The first concept is ‘philao’ (φιλό) which means love in Greek. It is particularly understood as brotherly love or to love like a brother. For example, Philadelphia means the city of brotherly love. The second concept is xenos (ξενος) which means stranger or immigrant. It also includes enemy. We cannot simply interpret the word, hospitality as ‘entertaining the guests.’ The word has got a deeper meaning as ‘one who loves strangers / immigrants /enemy’ like you would love your own brother.

God’s desire that we show others hospitality is a common theme in scripture; in the Old Testament, showing hospitality was a cultural norm. The New Testament frequently expresses its central importance as well. And the central story of the Bible? God extending hospitality to the most alienated people of all—the Israelites—and, through them, to the whole human race. The Old Testament identifies the Israelites as alienated people who are dependent on God’s hospitality (Psalm 39:12; see also Heb 11:13). Biblical hospitality is far more beautiful and radical than we had ever imagined. That is blessing instead of cursing, love instead of hate. Thus it is beautiful and radical. This is the real hospitality. God extends his hospitality to all people, regardless of whether they deserve it or not. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:45, God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Here we find the proper space for the prisoners. God is always a gracious host. He gives good things to all of his guests, even the ones that behave badly. We really need to understand this: this present life is not a life of rewards and punishments.” In this life, what we receive is God’s gracious hospitality, regardless of whether we deserve it or not.

Sebastian Vadakumpadan is the Asian Delegate and National Coordinator of Prison Ministry in India and the secretary to C.B.C.I for Prison Ministry. He is a priest of Ernakulum- Angamally Archdiocese. After his ordination in 1996, he worked as an assistant parish priest, and later served as the catechism director and parish priest in Mumbai in the diocese of Kalyan. He has also practiced as an advocate in the High court of Kerala and also as the director of Kerala Labour movement of the diocese of Ernakulum. He is available at: pmi2005@rediffmail.com.
Lucian Richard explores hospitality in the narrative of the Christian scriptures embodied in the life of Jesus Christ. Richard specifically highlights the nature of hospitality in: 1) Matthew 25:31-46 to welcome the stranger as Christ himself, for such a welcome bears on eternal destiny; 2) the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-25) as the reversal of the role of stranger and guest in the breaking of the bread; 3) the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) as the man who was a neighbor to the injured man offering him his own possessions; 4) the writings of Paul in connecting hospitality as the common virtue that unites the church as “family” or “household of God” in its early mission and expansion; and 5) in 1 Peter connecting hospitality with how those formerly outcasted are now welcomed as the elect and privileged people of God. These scriptures and narratives continue to shape the people of God as the body of Christ—a people both characterized and transformed by hospitality to the stranger, the social outcast, the neighbor, and the enemy. Here we find the proper space for the prisoners.

In a world that seeks to enclose the evil, we know that violence can never be overcome with violence, but only by the grace and gift of life, as Jesus Christ has revealed. Therefore, we affirm that prisons belong to the old order of this world, which still uses violence and revenge to maintain itself.

1. THE PEOPLE THAT GO TO PRISON

“A reality that hits all sectors of the population, but especially the poorest is violence, product of injustice and other evils, which for years has been planted in the communities. This leads to more crime and hence, many people have to serve sentences in inhumane prisons characterized by the arms trade, drugs, overcrowding, torture, lack of rehabilitation programs, and organized crime, which hinder the process of rehabilitation and integration into productive life in society. Today prisons are often unfortunately, schools to learn to crime.”

While addressing the chaplains of prison ministry Pope Francis said that he prays for the chaplains and for the ministry which is not easy; He says that it is a very demanding and very important ministry, because it expresses one of the works of mercy, renders the Lord’s presence visible in prisons and in the cell. The Pope reiterates that our ministry is a sign of Christ’s closeness to these brothers who are in need of hope, of open doors and of new horizons. This is not utopia, it can be done. It is not easy because our weaknesses are everywhere. The Pope wishes that the lord and His mother of all, the mother of all even those in prison will be with them.

The presence of a person in prison is much more than a moral issue; it is time to denounce an unjust society that excludes people. We are sinners too, just that our
sins are not typified under the criminal laws of our countries. St. Paul in his closing words to the Galatians (6:1-6) focuses on our responsibility towards each other within the context of Christian fellowship. “If anyone is caught doing something wrong, you my friends who live by the Spirit must gently set him right. Look to yourself, each one of you; you also may be tempted”.

“The prison pastoral care is a Church pastoral ministry in favour of those who are directly or indirectly affected by the reality of prison, which is why it seeks to encounter people deprived of their relatives, the prison officers and even members of the justice administration (Judicial System), based on the fact that they all form what we call an enclosed world /system.”

Prison Pastoral Care is about showing the love of God, the love that changes the hearts of many in the prisons, giving them a chance to transform their lives and impact the world of crimes with the world of love. It is the same love that transforms enemies into friends, love that turns fear into trust.

2. THE WORLD OF PRISONS IN THE UNIVERSE

More than 10.2 million people are held in penal institutions throughout the world according to the latest edition of the World Prison Population List (WPPL), researched and compiled by Roy Walmsley and published on Friday 22 November 2013 by the International Centre for Prison Studies. If those reported to be held in ‘detention centres’ in China and prison camps in North Korea were included in the total list it would be more than 11 million. Dr Peter Bennett, Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies commented; ‘It is of grave concern that there are now over 10.2 million men, women and children held in penal institutions throughout the world. What is of graver concern is that the world prison population continues to rise, despite the fact that imprisonment is a highly expensive option for governments, as well as being inappropriate and ineffective for the majority of prisoners who come from minority and marginalized groups, or who are mentally ill or who are alcohol and drug abusers’.

The International Centre for Prison Studies calls on those governments with high or rising rates of imprisonment to reduce their prison populations and to seek alternatives to custody in the interests of good economy, effectiveness in sentencing and the achievement of internationally agreed standards.

2.1. The Total Continental Prison Population

The report showed that the rise in prison populations is evident in every continent. In the 15 years since the first edition of the World Prison Population
List, the estimated world prison population has increased by some 25-30%. However, at the same time the world population has risen by over 20%. The world prison population rate has risen by about 6% from 136 per 100,000 of the world population to the current rate of 144. The list shows that rates vary considerably between different regions of the world, and between different parts of the same continent.  

2.2. Women Prisoners

More than 625,000 women and girls are held in penal institutions throughout the world, either as pre-trial detainees (remand prisoners) or having been convicted and sentenced.

Nearly a third of these are in the United States of America (201,200). The next three countries in terms of numbers are China (with 84,600 plus women and girls in pre-trial detention or ‘administrative detention’), the Russian Federation (59,200), Brazil (35,596) and Thailand (29,175). The only other countries with more than 7,000 female prisoners are India (15,406), Vietnam (12,591 plus women and girls in pre-trial detention), Mexico (10,072), Ukraine (9,697) and Philippines (7,726).

2.3. Under Trial Prisoners

Two and a half million people are in pre-trial detention and other forms of remand imprisonment. In addition it is believed that there are about 250,000 such prisoners in China and, taking account of those in the countries on which official information is unavailable and of those pre-trial detainees in police facilities who are omitted from national totals, there will be close to three million held in pre-trial detention and other forms of remand imprisonment throughout the world.

3. THE SITUATION OF PRISONERS IN THE WORLD

3.1. The Large Number of Under Trial Prisoners

In many countries, a large proportion, sometimes even a majority of people in prisons or jails, have not yet been convicted. They may be under investigation: The slowness of the judicial system and the resultant large numbers of under trial prisoners are major factors in prison overcrowding in many prisons in the world.

3.2. Delay in the Cases

“Quality of justice suffers not only when an innocent person is punished or a person is exonerated, but when there is enormous delay in deciding the criminal
Radiating God’s Hospitality: A Perspective from the Prison Ministry

3.3. The Increase of Punishment

The more the punishment, less the crime is the prevalent theory in different countries. The countries are trying to increase the punishment for crime thinking that they can decrease the crime rate by increasing the punishment.

3.4. Prisoners are Deprived of Rights

It was perceived that a person under detention and imprisonment didn’t have any rights except those, which are granted to him by the detaining authority.

A change in this attitude got reflected in the form of Article 10 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In paragraph 1 of the article 10 provides that all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect inherent for the dignity of the human person. There is no denial of the fact that the prisoners being human beings are to be entitled to all constitutional and legal rights except those are to be necessarily denied to them because of the conditions of imprisonment.

Human rights are neither privileges nor gifts given at the whims of the ruler or a government neither can be taken away with arbitrary power. These cannot be denied nor can they be forfeited because an individual committed an offence or broken any law. Prisoner’s rights have become an important item in the agenda for prison reforms in the country. This is done essentially to the recognition of two important principles.

Firstly, the prisoner “is no longer regarded as an object, ward or a slave of the state; who the law would leave at the prison entrance and who would be condemned to ‘civil death’.” Secondly, “the convicted person goes to prison as punishment, not for the punishment.”

The primary object of the detention of an accused is to secure his/ her appearance at the time of trial and is to make the person available. If his/ her presence at the trial could be reasonably ensured other than by his/her arrest and detention it would be unjust and unfair to deprive the accused of his/her liberty during the pendency of the criminal proceedings.
3.5. Overcrowding of the Prisons

Overcrowding of the prison makes things worse for all including the prison staff, prison managers and for the prisoners. Prisons have the responsibility to receive as many people the courts commit to them, to hold the prisoners securely and to release them to the community on the due date. Prisons also have the tasks of providing for their resettlement and reduce the likelihood of further involvement in crime.

Many studies have found that the majority of the prison population was from the rural and agricultural background and the first offenders were involved in “technical or minor violation of law” accounted for a large number of prisoners. Many inmates are imprisoned for nonpayment of fine or inability to afford good legal representation. The National Police Commission17 of India in its report says, that “the under trial consists of a large variety of persons; hundreds of them are dumb, simple persons caught in the web of the law, unable to comprehend what has happened, what the charge against them or why they have been sent to jail. These are the people without a calendar or clock, only a date in a court dairy, extending from hearing to hearing. There are some of them, charged with ticketless travelling or some minor infraction of the law….”

It is stated that the number of judges per million population in India and other Asian countries was 10.5 which was the lowest in the world.18 As in 2009, the strength of the judges in India was 14 per million population.19 India has one of the poorest judges’ population ratios when compared to countries such as Australia (47 per million), UK (50 per million) Canada (75 per million) and USA (107 per million).20

The speedy trial of offences is one of the basic objectives of the criminal justice delivery system. From the part of the accused a speedy trial is important because (a) pre-conviction incarceration is minimized, (b) the worry, anxiety, expenses, disruption of vocation and peace are minimized and (c) undue delay may result in impairment of the ability of the accused to defend himself whether on account of death or disability of the witnesses.

The right to speedy trial is recognized as a common law right, flowing from the Magna Carta in UK, USA, Canada and New Zealand. Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 is also speaking about the significance of speedy trial.21

Many are denied bail in the pettiest of the cases. Even when bail is granted in many cases, it is only an illusionary relief since the accused being poor cannot
afford to arrange a surety. It is pertinent to note that the court never grant them bail without surety or order their release on their own bond. As a consequence such people are made to languish in prisons for months together in cases, which do not deserve detention of the accused even for days.

4. **PROBLEMS IN PRISONS**

4.1. **Corruption**

The prison and prison department are not free from corruption. Since the prison is away from the notice of the general public, we can say that the most corrupt place is the prison. Money takes care of everything for you in the prison. Money can give a five star hotel atmosphere in the prison. Intoxicants, though strictly prohibited, are available if enough money changes hands.

4.2. **Prison Violence**

Prisons are often dangerous places to some extent to those they hold. Group violence is also endemic and riots are common. Meek and first time offenders are tortured and made to do all the menial tasks.

4.3. **Criminalizing Effect of Prison**

With hardened criminals being around and in the absence of scientific classification methods to separate them from others, contamination of first time, circumstantial and young offenders into full-fledged criminals occurs very frequently. It is an often given quote that ‘prisons are universities of crime where people go in as undergraduates and come out with Ph.Ds. in crime.’

4.4. **Homosexual Abuse**

Prisons are institutions that lodge people of the same sex. Being removed from their natural partners, the prisoners look for alternative ways to satisfy their sexual urge. This often finds vent in homosexual abuses where the young and feeble are targeted. Resistance from the side of prisoners leads to aggravated violence on them. At times, prisoners are subjected to massive homosexual gang-rapes. Apart from causing severe physical injuries like the rupture of anus and spreading sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, it also induces severe trauma in prisoners forcing some of them to commit suicide. Recently the Human Rights Watch, America has come out with a report titled ‘No escape: Male rape in U.S. prisons’ that documents the prevalence and the traumatic effect of this menace on its victims in the prisons of the United States of America.
4.5. Lack of religious freedom and assistance in prisons

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Prisoners may manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance, as well as the freedom to change his religion or belief. States are obliged, under the Covenant, to guarantee religious rights and to provide all necessary means that detainees have the opportunity to practice these rights.

4.6. Health Problems

Most of the prisons face problems of overcrowding and shortage of adequate space to lodge prisoners in safe and healthy conditions. Most of the prisoners found in prisons come from socio-economically disadvantaged sections of the society where disease, malnutrition and absence of medical services are prevalent.

4.7. Mentally Ill Prisoners and Terminally Ill Persons

Mentally ill prisoners constitute another percentage of population, which is largely ignored and forgotten by both the outside world and those inside. Even for a normal person, prolonged incarceration might lead to a mental breakdown, the atmosphere being such. Many, on the verge of such collapse, do attempt suicide. Sir Alexander Patterson while giving evidence before the Select Committee in 1930 (quoted at page 229 of the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment (1949 – 53) stated: “I gravely doubted whether an average man can serve more than ten continuous years in prison without deterioration.”

4.8. Drug Abuse

After murder, attempt to murder and other serious anti-personal offences, people booked under anti-drug laws constitute a substantial percentage of the prison population. Being in prison and cut off from the free world, they show desperation to get the banned substances to satisfy their addiction to drugs.

5. MISSION OF CHURCH

Radiating God’s hospitality in the world of prisons is, in the first place, the mission of the Church and is based on the concept of pastoral as overall and as organic as a project of the diocese and the parish. “Ours is not a lab faith, but a journey in faith, a historical faith where God has revealed himself as history, not as a compendium of abstract truths. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.”
Faith gives a good opportunity to intensify charity. Faith without charity bears no fruit. Faith and love need each other. Faith helps us to intensify our charity. Every diocese and every parish may take initiatives to help the prisoners. Every prison is in a diocese and also in a parish. Every prisoner is a parishioner who is in need of mercy and compassion for a better future. As Pope Francis did the act of love and mercy on Maundy Thursday, 28 March, 2013, in the prison for minors in Rome, going beyond all limits, from the limit of Basilica to the prison, from the limit of men to women, from the limit of Christians to non Christians: Our personal charity, parish charity and diocesan charity may have a place in visiting the prisoners who are in need of counseling, education, medicines, skilled training programs, visiting the family of prisoners and education of the children of prisoners and victims.

God’s glory is that man lives; nobody is disposable, or less worthy than any other. Our mission is to fight with all our strength for a dignified life for all, which has its roots in the new life that Jesus gives us. Like the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10, 25-37), we want to spend our lives in favor of our imprisoned sisters and brothers, and all who, in one way or another, are suffering because of the reality of prison.

The Pastoral agent feeling deeply loved from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in the community in the Word and in the Eucharist is called to proclaim the Gospel of mercy, reconciliation and hope among the imprisoned whom Jesus himself loves with preferential love because they are the most vulnerable. Jesus identifies with them: “I was in jail ... and you came to see me ” (Matthew 25, 11-36).

Encouraged by the Holy Spirit and conscious of our own sin, we move towards our brother who suffers, so that with him, we can generate a deep experience of fellowship. In the dynamics of Emmaus, the Master teaches us the pedagogy of accompaniment: to make ourselves present, walking together and illuminating life through His Word which gives freedom and sharing the bread that nourishes and gives eternal life. It is to recognize the suffering face of Jesus in our brothers and sisters to be the hand that blesses, heals wounds, and quenches the driving thirst, the hand that holds and turns sorrow into joy, just as the Good Samaritan.

5.1. Our Mission Seeks to be:

5.1.1. Incarnate

We are not going “to give” as if we were rich or knew beforehand what to offer in each case. We do not approach our brother and sister as “father and teacher,” but
as embodied faith, as the Son of God became flesh, and dwelt among us, setting his tent among men (Jn 1, 14). Our place is to be in line with Ex 2-4 and the Benedictus (Luke 1, 68) which says that God has visited (and redeemed) his people. This is not a polite passing-by visit, but a visit of incarnation. Incarnate means to dwell in and to enter into the lives of others, not to impose or force, not to snoop or give lessons, but to accompany the needy, to share life and walk together, each one giving to the other the best that each one has.

5.1.2. Prophetic, Bold and Passionate about Life

Aparecida 552 strongly invites us to recover apostolic courage and boldness. The conclusion of the V Conference says bluntly: “With firmness and determination, we will continue to exercise our prophetic task to discern where the path of truth and life goes, raising our voice in the social spaces of our towns and cities and especially in favor of those excluded from society.” The imprisoned world needs prophets who will report any injustice, who are witnesses of Jesus, even to the point of giving their own lives. Prison is not of God, therefore pastoral agents cannot expect to carry out their mission without difficulties and inconvenient situations, because the project ‘Gospel of Jesus’ is completely different from the prevailing system that every day offers more prisons, more closure, more injustice, and more poverty. This is what we mean when we state that our mission should be to question globalization without solidarity and the prevailing system, which both generate exclusion, as told in Aparecida.

As an ecclesial pastoral mission, we are encouraged by the prophetic Spirit that is transmitted to us through the prayerful reading of the Bible, celebration of the liturgy, and the loving encounter with our brothers and sisters in prison. These moments strengthen us in the mission of serving the project of the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Luke 4: 16-20, Isaiah 42: 1-4. 6-7, Is 61: 1-2, Mt 25:31-46; Heb 1:.3; Mt 5: 1-12, Luke. 6:20-26).

5.1.3. Reconciler

We live in a system of exclusion, that considers many brothers and sisters as disposable and worthless, especially prisoners. We are concerned with increasing violence and insecurity. It feeds the desire for revenge and death (capital punishment) for the perpetrators of certain crimes, with the wrong belief that this will resolve something.

Against this scene, the challenge of reconciliation, of building bridges, of believing that love is stronger, and that peace and justice walk together with a sincere pardon,
that does not forget but gives another chance to one who repents with his whole heart. Here we need to go back to the central image of a merciful God who deeply loves us and is always willing to meet us; (Lk 15: 1-32). It removes the burden from the shoulders of many in the prisons and gives colour and hope to the faded dream.

Do not neglect to show hospitality and generous hearts towards strangers and outcasts, by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Gen 18: 1-15). Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them: those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured (Heb 13: 2-3).

6. OUR CHALLENGES

In a world of imprisonment, this is our challenge; to fight against everything that threatens the dignity of the human person, realizing that the kingdom of justice is full life for all.

We live in a system of exclusion that considers many brothers and sisters as disposable and worthless, especially prisoners, as well as many people who would kill them or lock them up forever. We are concerned with the increase of violence and insecurity. It feeds the desire for revenge and death for the perpetrators of certain crimes, with the wrong belief that this will resolve something. Prisons, refugee camps, and slums are not the answer.

Prisoners are disabled before, during, and after imprisonment; they are disabled by lack of parental care, by lack of education, by drugs, by gangs, by being born into below-level economic situations, or by being subjected to various other personality disturbances. The increasing number of prisoners and the building of jails in our countries are not isolated facts, they are related to this social model that excludes and considers so many people disposable, many who are “hidden, kept, stored, isolated” in penitentiaries which are nothing else but schools of crime.

They are also deposits of human beings whom the State has not helped since childhood, and as stated in the final declaration of the VI Meeting of Prison Pastoral Care in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is fundamental and urgent that our governments prioritize and invest in quality public education, especially for the poorest and marginalized.

Another major challenge is the call for new pastoral workers in line with the spirit of the letter for the year of consecrated life and of the document of Aparecida (156). We should be disciples and missionaries in the world of prisons. This reality requires serious and intensive training, and also is important for seminarians,
future pastors of God’s people. In addition, universities should be encouraged to
train professionals with a social vocation, consolidating university prison pastoral
care with the challenge to take education to the jail and to take the prison reality
into the university.\(^{32}\) In connection with the national, states and civil society, it is
fundamental that public policies in health, education, housing, security, human
rights, etc. be influenced; and that States be required to implement measures and
plans for post-prison, insisting too on alternatives to prison.

The challenge of reconciliation, of building bridges, of believing that love is
stronger, and peace and justice walk together gives another chance to the one who
repents with his whole heart. Let us not forget the words of Pope Francis that God
is never tired of forgiving though we may be tired of asking forgiveness. In the
parable of prodigal son, it is easy to understand the anger of the hard working son
who remained by his father’s side. For his brother, who had deserted and disgraced
the family, he had nothing but contempt. This parable contains a strong challenge
to any community too ready to judge and condemn. The father’s unconditional
love for his remorseful son calls us to recognize that reconciliation and acceptance is
more important for us than any feelings of vengeance.

As we gather to worship and celebrate the Eucharist in our churches, let us
consider how we can provide a place at the table of the lord for prisoners deprived of
their liberty. As the father told his elder son in that famous parable; you are always
with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because
this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found
(Lk. 15:32). Jesus Christ shows us the unconditional love of God our father for
people whom others are too ready to condemn. He did not give up on the person
before him; no matter how challenging their behavior or demanding their need.
He always found an opportunity for the sinners’ repentance and conversion and
reestablished the person into life of the community. At the same time, he challenged
the community to be accepting and hospitable to those returning to the society
rather than building more walls. Let us build more bridges not walls.

6.1. The Voice of the Pope

While addressing the national congress of Chaplains of Italian Prisons, Pope
Francis said that he prays for them, keeps them in his heart, prays to the Lord
and Our Lady that they would be able to surmount positively this difficult period
of their life. They should not be discouraged or close themselves. He advised the
chaplains to tell them that the Lord is close to them and say it with gesture, with
words, with the heart that the Lord does not stay outside of their cell; he does not
stay outside of prisons, but inside. The Lord is inside with them; he too is a prisoner again today, prisoner of our egoisms, of our system of so many injustices, because it is easy to punish the weakest, but the big fish swim freely in the waters. No cell is so isolated as to exclude the Lord. He is there; he weeps with them, works with them, and waits with them. His paternal and maternal love reaches everywhere. The Pope himself felt after many occasions of communicating with the prisoners earlier, why is he there and not himself who has so many more reasons to be there? It does him good to think this; because the weaknesses we have are the same, why did he fall and I did not? This is a mystery for the Pope which makes him pray and come close to prisoners. Let us follow the voice of our Pope in our dealings with prisoners.

6.2. Faith of Christians

The faith of Christians implies recognizing the signs of God in the everyday events of life. Faith leaves us to God who always surprises us. The spirituality of prison ministry in radiating God’s hospitality is based on this faith. Such a faith is linked with listening to God who calls and speaks. We need to grow in the listening to the brother who suffers and God also speaks there.

6.2.1. Faith Helps us to Cross the Borders

Faith helps and motivates us to cross the border of prisons and makes God’s presence visible to the people behind the bars and to make the place of silence of loneliness to the place of God’s sound. The presence of Jesus at the house of Zachaeus makes the sinner to realize his sins. There is no much advice but the presence of Jesus made him a renewed person. The greatest gift that you can give to prisoners is not your money, nor your training, your skills nor your letters, but your presence.

6.2.3. Faith Illumines us and Help us to See the Reality as God Sees

The dignity of the prisoner is always greater than his guilt. The world cannot understand this truth unless they have faith. No humane privation takes away the dignity of a prisoner whatever may be the gravity of his crime.

6.2.3. Faith Helps us to Be Merciful and Socially Responsible

Faith demands mercy. No one is beyond God’s mercy. The distance between the sinner and a saint is question of the seconds. Faith also does not depart us from the world but make us socially responsible on what is believed. It makes the whole church aware of the social dimension of charity.
6.3. Victims and their Family

The victims and their families are completely forgotten by the government and judiciary. They have to be taken care of and supported by the society. The Church has also decided to take a wider step to look into the welfare of victims and their families. Those imprisoned are unable to look after their families. In the absence of the main bread-winner, the family is many a time forced into destitution with children going astray. This combined with the social stigmatization and ostracization that they face, leads to circumstances propelling children towards delinquency and exploitation by others. It is an inexorable circle. The problems become acute when they belong to the socio-economically marginalized and exploited sections of the society. The dominant class does not fail and loose time in taking advantage of this situation to exploit the remaining family members to the fullest possible extent. This can take the form of rape or forced prostitution of the prisoner’s wife and/or his daughters. We need to rehabilitate the members of the prisoners’ family today and save a potential criminal from tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

St. Maximillian Kolbe being the patron of prison ministry volunteers is the best example for all of us. He was ready to take up the place of another prisoner who cried for his return to his family. Thus our patron gave back a father to the family and a husband to the wife. The Church is engaged in the same ministry of giving back a son to the family, a father to the children, a mother to the children and, further, a good member to the society. In irradiating God’s hospitality in the world of prisons, we are not alone in this mission, not alone in our struggles, not alone in our prayers and not alone in our joy.

Endnotes

2La Pastoral Penitenciaria del Cono Sur, Una mirada hacia adentro para la Misión Continental, noviembre 2008 (PPC of the South Cone. A gaze inside the Continental Mission)
3Document of Aparecida (DA) 427.
4Pope’s address to participants of the National Congress of Chaplains, Vatican city, October, 23, 2013. Zenit.org.
5Fundamentos Doctrinales, VI Encuentro de PP de América Latina y el Caribe, noviembre de 2008.
7Cf. World Prison Population List (WPPL) researched and compiled by Roy Walmsley and published on Friday 22 November 2013 by the International Centre for Prison Studies. www.prisonstudies.org
Radiating God's Hospitality: A Perspective from the Prison Ministry

8As per the statistics, Prisoners in Africa: 2675905; Prisoners in America: 3683329; Prisoners Asia: 3610464; Prisoners Europe: 1714373; Prisoners Oceania: 46083. Almost half of the world’s prisoners are in the United States (2.24 million), China (1.64 million sentenced prisoners), and Russia (0.68 million). The United States’ prison total constitutes a rate of 716 per 100,000 Americans of the national population, making it pro rata by far the biggest user of prison in the world. More than half of the countries and territories (54%) have rates below 150 per 100,000. The overall world prison population rate (based on 10.2 million prisoners and a world population of 7.1 billion) is 144 per 100,000.

9For example: Africa: the median rate for western African countries is 46 per 100,000 whereas for southern African countries it is 205. The Americas: the median rate for South American countries is 202 whereas for Caribbean countries it is 376. Asia: the median rate for south central Asian countries (mainly the Indian sub-continent) is 62 whereas for central Asian countries it is 159.5. Europe: the median rate for western European countries is 98 whereas for the countries spanning Europe and Asia (e.g. Russia and Turkey) it is 225. Oceania (including Australia and New Zealand): the median rate is 151.

10The World Female Imprisonment List, the second edition of which was published in 2012 provides information about a specific section of the prison population; both of them complement the World Prison Population List and the information which the ICPS publishes and updates monthly in the World Prison Brief section of its website (www.prisonstudies.org).

11The total includes some 480,000 in the United States, 255,000 in India, 195,000 in Brazil, 116,000 in Russia, 107,000 in Mexico, 70,000 in the Philippines, 66,000 in Thailand, 55,000 in Iran, 50,000 in both Indonesia and Pakistan, 48,000 in Turkey, 47,000 in Bangladesh, 44,000 in South Africa, 40,000 in Colombia, 37,000 in both Nigeria and Peru, 35,000 in Venezuela, 32,000 in Morocco and 31,000 in Argentina. Please see www.prisonstudies.org.


13Media reports stated that Shankar Dayalat, an undertrial prisoner has spent 44 years in jail (including 43 years in asylum) and his family believed him to be dead. Cf. www.nhrc.nic.in

14Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration, 1978, 4 SCC 494

15The Supreme Court of India has made it very clear in many judgments that except for the fact, the compulsions to live in a prison entails by its own force, the deprivation of certain rights, like the right to move freely or to practice a profession of one’s choice, a prisoner is otherwise entitled to the basic freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

16Prison sentence has to be carried out as per court’s order and no additional punishment can be inflicted by the prison authority without sanction.


18See 120th report of Law commission of India on man power planning: A blue print at p. 317 http://twocircles.net/databank/judgepopulationratio.retrieved on March 12, 2012


20http://ebc-india.com/lawer/article2005
21. Article 14(3) (c) of the International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 says the accused to be tried without undue delay.

22. Quoted in Preface of Report of the All India Committee on Jail Reforms Vol. I [1980-83], Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India at page vi. This reported shall hereafter be referred to as the Mulla Committee report after the name of its Chairperson, Mr. Justice A.N. Mulla.

23. In the year 2010, 35% of convicts and under trials constituted that segment of the prison population that was under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. Source: Distribution of Convicts and Undertrials under various Crime heads in Prison Statistics 2010.

24. DA, 169, 198, 371, 401


27. DA, 33, 65

28. DA 243, 247, 251, 256, 257

29. DA 65


31. See: “Preferential Option for the Poor” DA 128, 397-399, 491; Documento de Puebla: “Preferential Option for the Poor” 382, 707, 733, 769, 1134, 1217, 1134

Encyclical Letter

LAUDATO SI’

of the Holy Father FRANCIS

ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME

(Claretian Publications, Bangalore, India, Pages 184, Rs 70.00)

Ecosophy has not only political, economic and scientific dimensions. It has an ethical dimension as well. Eco-crisis reflects our moral paucity and its solution involves moral choices. Technology cannot replace moral choices. The first ever Encyclical on the environment has rightly brought in what has been lacking in environment debate. If the earth begins to look like an “immense pile of filth,” it is a reflection of filth inside of us. Here is a timely analysis of the problem and the possibilities for the future.

A seamless mélange of politics and economics, science and religion, the Encyclical makes compelling reading. It begins with the perception of the fact that we live move and have our being on this planet earth and makes a fervent appeal for a new dialogue to reshape the future of our planet. The book takes us along the current problem leading through universal communion and integral ecology to finally arrive at an escape route from the spiral of self-destruction. What is envisaged here is a new life style of ecological conversion.

The idea of progress is the modern shibboleth. The policy of development at any cost has already wreaked havoc. Here the Pope calls for a redefining of the notion of progress. Visions of a consumerist paradise lead to overexploitation of resources mounting pollution and global inequality. Also at stake is intergenerational justice. Exponential growth is a recipe for disaster. Unlimited growth is impossible in a limited environment. Human desires are unlimited but the environment is limited. Hence the need for “containing growth by setting some reasonable limits” and
“accepting decreased growth in some parts of the world” so that resources are available for others for a healthy growth.

The way forward is a new paradigm of development: sustainable and integral. Development versus environment debate is a spurious one. Environment is development. Development will come to a halt in an increasingly degraded environment. That which does not create “a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.”

The primordial duty of human is to till the earth and take care of it (Gen.2.15). Care for our common home “is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience.” Eco-spirituality is the spirit of the present. It is holistic as it respects God’s will and His creation in its totality. Hopefully the Papal initiative will encourage some real action at UN climate negotiations as well as ecological conversion of the individual and community.

Dr Joseph Perumaparambil

For copies: Claretian Publications, PB 5577, Malleswaram West Post, Bangalore – 55, E-mail: info@claretianpublications.org, Tel: 080-23002277
SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE
A biannual published by Sanyasa Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore

Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life is a biannual publication of scholarly reflections committed to the Re-visioning and Renewal of Consecrated Life.

It welcomes the contributors with openness to express their views freely and responsibly.

Views expressed by the contributors are their own and do not necessarily manifest the view of the Editor and the Editorial Board.

The editors are indeed grateful to all the Priests and Religious for your encouragement and support and above all looking forward to your patronage.

Manuscripts for publication and books for review should be addressed to: Executive Editor, and business communications (correspondence, subscription, change of address) to: Circulation Manager

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE
Sanyasa
Carmelaram Post
Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India
Tel: 080 – 28439259; 28439944
E-mail: sjbancmf@gmail.com / sanyasac@gmail.com
Web: www.sanyasa.com

Dear Subscribers:

Kindly note the change in the rate of subscription of the Sanyasa: Journal of Consecrated Life. Since the beginning of the publication of this Journal in January 2006, we have been keeping the same rate. Now due to the escalation of the costs involved, we have decided to increase the rate of subscription minimally. We hope that our subscribers will understand this change and support this only Journal on Consecrated Life, published in India.

The new rates of subscription are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>INDIA</th>
<th>SRI LANKA</th>
<th>OTHER COUNTRIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One year</td>
<td>₹ 120</td>
<td>₹ 285</td>
<td>US$ 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years</td>
<td>₹ 220</td>
<td>₹ 520</td>
<td>US$ 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years</td>
<td>₹ 320</td>
<td>₹ 755</td>
<td>US$ 70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes! I wish to subscribe to

SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

I am enclosing DD / Cheque no.............................dated..........................drawn on (specify bank).................................favoring SANYASA for ₹ ...........................(add ₹ 15/- for non Bangalore cheques).

Name:........................................................................................................................................................................

Address: ...........................................................................................................................................................................

............................................................................................................................................................................Pin:..........................................................

Tel:..........................................................................................................................................................................

Fax:............................................................................................................................................................................

E-mail:..........................................................................................................................................................................

INDIA
SRI LANKA
OTHER COUNTRIES
SANYASA
Institute of Consecrated Life, Bangalore
INCORPORATED TO PONTIFICAL LATERAN UNIVERSITY, ROME
AND CHRIST UNIVERSITY, BANGALORE

Annual Programs:
1. LICENTIATE IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
   (June 17, 2016 - March 20, 2018: Offered by Lateran University, Rome)

2. M.A. IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
   (June 17, 2016 - March 20, 2018: Offered by Christ University, Bangalore)

3. ONE YEAR DIPLOMA IN THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE
   (June 17, 2016 - March 20, 2017)

Summer Programs:
1. ART AND DISCIPLINE OF FORMATIVE SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE:
   (2 Weeks in April, 2016)

2. ONE MONTH INTENSIVE COURSE ON CONSECRATED LIFE:
   (April - May, 2016)

Features:
- Possibility for both Ecclesiastical and Civil Degrees.
- A collaborative effort with the Claretian Institutes of Consecrated Life
  in Rome, Madrid and Manila.
- Open to all consecrated persons and those interested
  in consecrated life.
- Open also to Foreign Students.
- Option: Residential and non-residential.
- Subsidized Fees in order to promote studies and research
  in consecrated life.

Requirements:
- B.Th. for the Licentiate and Bachelor’s degree for the Masters
- Adequate knowledge of English
- Personal Interview (if called for)

For further details and for application forms:
Website: www.sanyasa.com
Address: The Secretary, Sanyasa Institute
Carmelaram P.O., Bangalore - 560 035, Tel: 080 - 2843 9259, 2843 9944
   Mobile: 00-91-996 416 1332
   E-mail: sanyasac@gmail.com or sanyasa.in@gmail.com

SANYASA
Journal of Consecrated Life
Sanyasa, Carmelaram Post, Bangalore - 560 035, Karnataka, India
Tel: 91-80-28439259, 28439944
   Mobile: 00-91-996 416 1332
   E-mail: sanyasac@gmail.com; sanyasa.in@gmail.com; Web: www.sanyasa.com