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EDITORIAL

No one can deny that fact that religious life is in crisis especially in countries where it traditionally sprouted and grew and is showing symptoms of a breakdown even in our country. Vocations have been on a sharp decline, even as we console ourselves saying that we are not at a dead end. How do we respond to this situation? Perhaps, it is providential that on October 11, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI issued *Porta Fidei* (The Door of Faith), an Apostolic Letter proclaiming a Year of Faith to begin October 11, 2012. The date coincides with opening of the Synod of Bishops on “The New Evangelization,” and also with two significant anniversaries: the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the 20th of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Giving his reasons to proclaim a Year of Faith, Holy Father states that it would provide an “opportunity to usher the whole Church into a time of particular reflection and rediscovery of the faith.” He comments on the urgency of Church renewal in our society where, as he sees it, faith is now being subjected to a series of questions arising from a changed mentality. These questions have also their ramifications on religious life as live it in the heart of the Church and the world. Many are raising questions. Is religious life really meaningful? Is it truly relevant? What do we communicate to the world of today? Are we living the mission that we are called to be? These are questions confronting the religious today, and we cannot avoid reflecting on them, because as John Paul II says, consecrated life is an “integral part of the Church’s life and a much needed incentive towards ever greater fidelity to the Gospel” (VC. 3).

Entering through the *door of faith* demands that we re-think, re-vision and re-ground our identity, life and mission in response to the challenges facing us from within, wider Church and world. For a renewed vision, we need to rethink and reground religious values in dialogue with the pluralistic world that we live in. Simply re-arranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic* is not enough. Unfortunately, this is the kind of thing we end up doing even as we meet in all earnestness in our encounters, assemblies and chapters. Reverence for the theological traditions alone may simply not enough anymore. These traditions, too, had their interdisciplinary roots, and must be understood and criticized within their historical situation. Past behaviours and values are not ipso fact, holy. They were often based on erroneous assumptions derived from the philosophies and sciences of the time that are no longer applicable today. To be authentic, credible and relevant witnesses of the Kingdom, many of the religious values need to be rethought and regrounded.

Such a re-visioning calls for a certain death in our internal spheres of life which involves dying to some of the customs, ways of thinking, modes of behaviour, world

views, systems, and traditions. However, this is a death that no one can force on us; we must face it and undertake it voluntarily in the context of our spiritual journey in the presence of the One who has been calling and continues to call us. Facing this death calls for willing surrender in genuine freedom.

Responding to the call of Pope Benedict to enter through the door of faith, let us also move in a process of rediscovering our faith in and commitment to the Lord in this changing and questioning world. It is in view of helping us to rediscover our faith and commitment that the present issue of the Journal offers a series of articles that helps the readers to look at religious life from different horizons — eschatological, pneumatological, biblical and formational horizons.

In a world where faith in God and in the life hereafter are called into question, *Maria Anto, CMC*, presents consecrated life as a *sacrament of eschaton*. She begins by describing the universal human destiny to be men and women of the other world and goes on to examine theologically the role of the Christians in this pilgrimage to the “Paternal Home Land.” While explaining the eschatological mission of the consecrated, she presents consecrated people as “communicators of longing for eternal home,” and as “eloquent signs of the world “not yet,” especially for their co-pilgrims on earth in their journey towards heavenly Jerusalem. In presenting consecrated life in its symbolism as a sacrament of eschaton, her main proposition is that the Church witnesses her eschatological nature and her hope in the life after in and through the life of consecrated men and women. By becoming the visible and living signs of that invisible, “not yet” but ever living reality, consecrated life foretells the future Kingdom and makes people conscious of their divine orientation.

Exploring the pneumatological dimension of consecrated life, *Mathew Vadakkal, CMF* begins by looking at Jesus as a person filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and elucidates the all pervading action of the Spirit in the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was not only born of the Spirit, but also led by him and eventually became the giver and dispenser of the gifts of the Spirit to the Church. He establishes that the Spirit enabled Jesus to dream and vision for humanity and the religious are called to share in his vision for and friendship with humanity. The author goes on to discuss the varied actions of the Spirit of God in the life and mission of the Church and of the religious in particular. It is the Spirit that transforms, initiates new movements, calls for radical changes, brings out new forms of consecrated life and moves them in mission, manifesting to the people the heart of God, his plan for humanity and his profound and interior designs for them.

Alex Ansheles, CMF, through his article, calls us to rediscover the power and centrality of the word of God which has been the source and nourishment of all the movements throughout the history of salvation. As he exegetically explains the recreating, nourishing, empowering and transforming power of the word of God, we come across various heroes

and heroines in the scriptures who were called, consecrated and transformed by its power. He goes on to elaborate on the centrality of the word of God in the life of the chosen people and more so in the heart of consecrated men and women, and argues that their formation, living of the counsels, community life and mission must become schools of the word of God, drawing sustenance and strength from a lived familiarity with its transforming power.

Consecrated life stands at the crossroads today and is throwing up various forms of crisis. Taking a serious look at the contemporary crises and problems in religious life, *Xavier Manavath, CMF*, leads us to a much deeper and fundamental problem of *entrenchment* in religious living, especially as it is lived in the local churches. It is a situation where the religious gets so used to or conditioned by a particular, historical, regional, and social-cultural mould that domesticates, makes them lose touch with the fundamentals, restraints and blurs their proper mission in the Church and in the world. In order to help us work through this entrenched living, he invites us to listen to call of the Spirit, to “being born from above,” as he widens our horizons, while taking us through a critical and creative reading of the history of consecrated life. The conclusions that he draws from this process can certainly shift our horizons, challenge us to re-vision and equip us with the resources suited for more relevant living of religious life in this new millennium.

Through an exegetical study of Mercy (Lk 6:36) and Perfection (Mt 5:48), *Martin George, CMF* makes a laudable attempt to help the religious respond to a very basic question, pertaining to their life and mission: What should they strive at, mercy or perfection? He begins by placing the two maxims in their respective contexts, analyzing the different nuances of both the ideals and proceeds to a deeper analysis of the Lukan version. The author’s main contention is that Luke does not motivate the Christians to follow Jesus’ commandment of love by simply appealing to the eschatological reward. This command makes sense in the background of the doctrine of imitation of God who loves his enemies in his mercy and such an act of love should become the core disposition of the heart of a committed Christian. For this very reason, imitation of the mercy and compassion of the Father becomes inevitable in the life and mission of consecrated men and women. The author proposes to them a two-fold strategy of being in touch and being touched.

Following up on this theme, *Babu Thannickal, CMF*, taking a psychological approach, explores the unhealthy aspects of perfectionism that could manifest itself in many ways in religious life and formation. The striving for perfection, high ideals and standards of behavior, expected in religious life can provide the ideal ground for perfectionism to grow especially for those who predisposed to it. He discusses the various types of perfectionism and outlines in detail the damaging effects it exercises on the lives of the religious, while offering very good guidelines for community living with members who may be suffering from the perils of perfectionism so as to help them come to an increased self-acceptance.

Editorial

Lastly, the present issue of the Journal offers to its readers two book reviews, each prepared by *Rosmitha, MSJ* and *Juby Scaria, AASC*, two of the graduate students of Sanyasa: Institute of Consecrated Life.

May this season of Advent bringing us the love of God breaking into our human history as the *Son of God in a manger* awaken our slumbering spirits and lead us to a new year of hope and joy. Blessed Christmas and Happy New year to all our readers!

Xavier E. Manavath, CMF
(Chief Editor)



CONSECRATED LIFE: A SACRAMENT OF *ESCHATON*

Maria Anto, CMC

INTRODUCTION

We are at the door of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the II Vatican Council which, according to Blessed John Paul II, “the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century.” Pope Benedict XVI has issued on 11th October 2011, the *Motu Proprio, Porta Fidei* (The Door of Faith), for the indication of the *Year of Faith* that will commence on 11th October 2012 to commemorate this great event. Pope Benedict, thus, starts the Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*: “*The door of faith* (Acts 14: 27) is always open for us. . . . To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime. . . . It begins with baptism. . . and it ends with the passage through death to eternal life.”¹ This *pasch* or the passage through death to eternity recalls the ultimate goal of human life.

However, in the contemporary digital world, faith in God and faith in life after are constantly called into question. In other words, we live in a Godless, high-tech world where complex marketing is there for everything except for God and divine matters.² The gravitational pull of this worldliness is so strong that contemporary men and women easily lose their divine orientation. In such a situation, the reflection of eschatological life or life in the other world may come across as foolishness. Still one cannot set it aside since the summons of Jesus – “do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures eternal life” (Jn. 6: 27) – has the same force as then even today. The restlessness of human heart until it finds rest in God is a living proof for an everlasting life with God.³

The present article tries to underline three aspects: the human destiny to be men and women of the other world; the role of the Christians in this pilgrimage to Paternal ‘home land;’ and the mission of the consecrated to be a sacrament in the journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

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The negation of God and divine matters is the root cause of contemporary problems of the world. In such a world, the call of consecrated people to witness the eschatological nature of human/christian life or to be a sacrament of eschaton⁴ is a real challenge. However, at the very outset it, has to be kept in mind that this accent on the other world mission makes latent the earthly responsibilities of neither the consecrated nor the Christians. The sole intention here is to bring up to the main stream those aspects which are often kept back and to make people God-oriented by the life witness of the consecrated men and women.

1. TO BE MEN & WOMEN OF HEAVEN: THE HUMAN DESTINY

Revelation grants us glimpses of life in the world to come. The presence of the “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7: 9) brings to mind the fundamental orientation of the world towards God, “the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 21: 6). Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles emphatically highlights the heavenward movement of the whole creation. To the Romans he wrote: “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11: 36). The prepositions *from*, *through* and *to*, summon up the ‘divineness’ of the entire creation and signify that the created world is originated from the Triune God and through the mediation of God himself, it has set itself in motion towards God. Human beings are at the forefront in this movement towards eternal fulfillment. Their responsibility is not only to take the lead in this march, but also to ensure the eternal journey of the whole creation. That duty can be exercised above all by becoming people oriented to the other world. To be men and women of heaven is the divine destiny of all human beings irrespective of caste, creed and culture.⁵

This common divine destiny points to the fact that death is not the final word either for humanity or for the world. Personal existence survives despite biological death since the person is part of an “inexhaustible and indestructible mystery.”⁶ In other words, by biological death, human beings belong to the divine realm, like Christ whose risen humanity can no longer be confined to the earth and belongs henceforth only to the Father’s divine realm.⁷

Even though the divine destiny of all human beings is the participation in the eternal life, men and women are tempted to distance themselves freely from that destiny. Their daily decisions either make faster their upward journey towards God or deviate them from the same. Possibility for the divergence is strong as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “Left to its own natural powers humanity does not have access to the ‘Father’s house,’ to God’s life and happiness.”⁸ Here comes the mission of the Church to turn the hearts of men and women constantly towards the final destiny. The Church

carries out this *missio Dei* mainly through the God oriented life of her own children, the Christians in whatever states of life they are.

2. CHRISTIANS: A PEOPLE ON ‘MARCH’

The Church is *in* the world but not *of* the world. Strong with the faithfulness of her God and tested under the weight of hesitations and refusals, she goes forward on her pilgrimage towards the divine fulfilment of history; she is on her pilgrimage to the *patria*.⁹ Right from the beginning at baptism, Christian life continuously moves towards the heavenly Jerusalem which is the final goal of the earthly pilgrimage (cf. Heb. 12: 22). Therefore, Christians have no lasting city on earth, their common wealth is in heaven (cf. Phil. 3: 20); they are “strangers and exiles on the earth” (1Pet. 2: 11; cf. Heb. 11: 13) but they are not yet citizens of heaven. In short, they are not yet *in patria* but *in via*. Consequently, it can be said that Christians are a people on ‘march,’ between the ‘already’ but ‘not yet.’¹⁰ They are a people in exodus, moving towards a fulfilment at which they will arrive in glory when the time for the renewal of all things will come (cf. Acts. 3: 21). Edward Schillebeeckx explains in a masterly manner the Christian waiting for an encounter yet to come: “Christian life is an advent. We must be on the lookout, waiting for the encounter which has yet to come. Christianity is the religion of *Maranatha*: Come, Lord Jesus.”¹¹ “Come, O Lord Jesus” is their watchword in life.¹² In constant expectation of that final meeting of the divine and the human, they set on move their earthly pilgrimage. Like strangers in foreign land (cf. 1 Cor. 11: 26), this life in exile they live with hope and joy of setting journey to the paternal house (cf. Ps. 122: 1) for which the model is the incarnated Son of God and his God oriented earthly life.

2.1. Filial Life: the Norm to the ‘Fatherland’

The life of the incarnated Son provides the norm for the heaven oriented Christian life. *From* the Father, *of* the Father and *to* the Father was the programme of his life.¹³ Jesus was an itinerant Master. Starting from the bosom of the Father, till his final destiny with the Father, his life was in constant motion. He was not only the way (cf. Jn. 14: 6) but was on the way. He insisted always that he has come from the Father and he is of the Father and, at the Last Supper, he reminded his disciples that he would return to the Father (cf. Jn. 16: 28). Jesus was so firm not only of his origin but also of his return. “I did not say these things to you in the beginning because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me” (Jn. 16: 5). “I came from the Father and entered the world, now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (Jn. 16: 24). “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn. 20:17).¹⁴ So too Jesus was assuring the finality of the disciples. “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also” (Jn. 14: 3). It is in Christ, Christians “have tasted... the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6: 5) and their lives are swept up by

Christ into the heart of divine life.¹⁵ Thus, these filial words reveal the common destiny of both Jesus and the Christians.

Christians have pitched their tents on earth modelled after the one who “pitched his tent” (Jn. 1: 14). Tents are homes for those who are just passing through and do not put down permanent roots. Christians are tent-dwellers, as pilgrims on this earth (cf. 1 Pet. 2: 11). It is notable that in the Acts of the Apostles, the earliest self-designation for Christians was those who belonged to ‘the way’ (cf. Acts. 9: 2; 19: 9, 23; 22: 4; 24: 14, 22). Both phrases, ‘tent dwellers’ and ‘the way’ bring to mind the pilgrim nature of Christian life. After fulfilling the earthly mission from where the Son of man ascended, each Christian, after fulfilling his/her particular earthly mission is also ascending. Thus they come forth from the Triune God and go back to him. The disciples are given the indescribable privilege and honor of partaking of the glory of the Triune God both now and for eternity (cf. Jn. 17: 9-10, 22; Rom. 8: 17-18, 29-30; 2 Cor. 3: 18; Col. 3: 4; 2 Thes. 2: 14; 1 Pet. 4: 14; 5: 1, 4).¹⁶

2.2. Christian Life: Vigorous Foretaste of Eternal Joy

The apostle Paul writes: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 1: 19). In this contemporary age, so lacking in hope, the life of the disciples of Jesus is a vigorous foretaste of the joy of eternal life, victorious over suffering, evil and death, and promised in Christ’s return to the Father in the power of the Spirit. The source of this joy is the resurrection of Jesus the Son. The Christian hope is that just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives for ever, so after death the righteous will live forever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day (cf. Jn. 6: 39-40). Their resurrection, like his own, will be the work of the Triune God, Father, Son and the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8: 11; 1 Thess. 4: 14; 1 Cor. 6: 14; 2 Cor. 4: 14; Phil. 3: 10-11) and they will see him no longer dimly in a mirror, but face to face; they shall understand him fully (cf. 1 Cor. 13: 12). In Johannine terms, “seeing him as he is” (1 Jn. 3: 2) is the finality of Christian life. Thus the paschal mystery reminds them that the encounter with the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the ultimate aim of Christian life. More than an encounter, it is partaking in the divine life of relations.

However, this participation in the divine nature starts here on earth and culminates in the eternal dwelling in God (cf. 2 Pet. 1: 4). The purpose of the divine indwelling in human beings is not only to make them experience the divine presence within but also to enable them to participate in the eternal relations between the divine persons by giving a pre-taste of the same. Hans Urs von Balthasar states that these relations are precisely what these persons are wholly and entirely.¹⁷ It is above all the mission of the Church to help her children to experience this divine indwelling in their earthly life itself as a pre-taste of that life in heaven. To exercise that ecclesial mission, the Church never

fails to turn, above all, to the consecrated men and women whose very lives anticipate in a certain way the eschatological life towards which the whole Church is tending.¹⁸ In other words the challenge of consecrated life is to show forth, by their very life witness, the divine orientation of Christian life.

3. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MISSION OF THE CONSECRATED

As stated above, the proposition here is that it is especially in and through the consecrated, that the Church witnesses her eschatological nature and her hope in the life-after. Council Fathers wrote in *Lumen Gentium*: “The people of God have here no lasting city but look to that which is to come . . . the religious state . . . foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom . . . and shows forth in a special way the transcendence of the Kingdom of God over all earthly things and its sovereign demands.”¹⁹ Again in *Vita Consecrata* Pope John Paul II writes: “The consecrated life becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty.”²⁰

These remarkable words of both the Vatican Council II and the Apostolic Exhortation turn one’s attention altogether to the mission of the consecrated which extends beyond the earthly apostolate. To foretell the future kingdom and to attract the people to that Kingdom are inevitable aspects of the apostolate of the consecrated. In the pilgrim journey of Christians towards the ‘paternal homeland,’ the consecrated are not only at the forefront but also in the process as its constant reminders in the world. The crucial question now is how do they exercise this eschatological mission?

3.1. Consecrated People: Communicators of Longing for Eternal Home

In order to communicate to the co-pilgrims on earth the longing for an eternal home, consecrated men and women, first of all, have to fix their own eyes constantly on the eternal finality. Giving primacy to God and the divine matters enable them to keep up the desire for heaven in life. As the term ‘religious’ (*religare* means “to relate”) points out, their call is to be related always to God and the people. These twofold relationships are complementary in nature. To express this nature, Pope Benedict XVI writes: “Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, rather, truly become closer to them.”²¹ Their first responsibility, therefore, is to witness who and what they are – people in relation, especially as men and women of God. If they are really so, spontaneously they communicate the longing for that God, for the eternal home of that God. Contemporary world urgently is in need of such communicators. Karl Rahner has said that the more the consecrated are who they want and ought to be, the more chance, prospect and hope they have that their life will serve God, humanity and the Church.²²

Here life witness has prime importance. “People are not moved by logic, doctrine or authority, but by the power of witness and holiness.”²³ More than by lofty words and wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 2: 1), they can instill the thirst for the eternal home in human hearts by their own ardent yearning for the same. The personal God experience of the consecrated is decisive since experience speaks more efficaciously than proclamation. Speaking about evangelization, pope Paul VI declared that the world will receive evangelizers who speak to it of a God they know, as if they actually saw the invisible One (cf. Heb. 11: 27).²⁴ It is the same with the communication of the longing for heavenly kingdom. Therefore, God experience which engendered out of ardent longing for God is the first requisite that the consecrated is in need to exercise the heaven oriented apostolate. God establishes with that person the intimacy, the relationship which God intends to establish with the whole group to whom he/she is being sent. Thus their very being itself is apostolate which has eternal connotation. Theologically speaking, the very existence of the consecrated on earth is a missionary existence, the end of which is the eschatological existence in the Triune God with all those whom they served directly or indirectly.

3.2. Call of the Consecrated to be a ‘Sacrament’ of *Eschaton*

The special mission, to witness to the existence of another world, brings with it the task of transmitting the hope, “we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3: 2). The foundation of their hope is strong since it is based on the divine revelation that the history of humanity is moving towards “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21: 1), where the Lord “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21: 4). They convey this hope above all by being the ‘sacrament’ of eschaton, the visible living signs of that invisible ‘not yet’ but ever living reality. It is a demanding task. The possibility of bridging the difference between the present world and the promised new earth (cf. Rev. 21: 1) in a life that the world deems utopia is, in fact, for the world a genuine sign of promise. Like a sacrament, it ‘contains’ what it signifies.²⁵ Its very reason is nothing but their life constantly being given anew in the call to be disciples of Christ. In other words they can uphold this entrusted *missio Dei*, to be the sacrament of eschaton, through their commitment to daily *metanoia*. The adjective *daily* recalls that *metanoia*, conversion of heart, is not a one day programme but a lifelong commitment for the consecrated.

To be the sacrament of eschaton basically signifies two things that are complementary in themselves. They are: consecrated life assimilates constantly the supreme values of the Kingdom; and it presents here and now those values without any hindrance. Consecrated men and women have to remember constantly that without the assimilation of the Gospel into their lives, they will be unable to witness the values of the Kingdom of God. However, human limitations should not discourage them. The grace of the

Master, who blessed them with the divine call that is intrinsically missionary, is sufficient for them.

To phrase it otherwise, despite their historical conditions, consecrated men and women are eschatological signs. They interpret the signs of the times and, at the same time, point beyond them. In pointing beyond the times, they are reminders that the history of humanity and the cosmos is finally a history of salvation and liberation that still awaits fulfilment. They can become that splendid sign to the extent that their lives foretell the eternal divine reality. As the Latin Code of Canon Law states, “They are a splendid sign in the Church as they foretell the heavenly glory.”²⁶ The evangelical counsels are relevant means which make such a mission a reality.

3.3. Consecrated Celibacy: Eloquent Sign of the World ‘Not Yet’

The evangelical counsels are gift from the Triune God, and the style of life that the consecrated follow by the profession of the counsels is Trinitarian, modelled after the life of love, willingness and the self-gift of the divine persons both within and outside of the Triune life. Evangelical counsels lead the consecrated into a state of life where there is no dualism or dichotomy since the call is to manifest the divine life style being within human limitations. With the acceptance of the evangelical counsels, the three vital human aspirations (affection, autonomy and possession) are not set aside as something negative but they are assimilated in a special way highlighting their divine dimensions. A positive value can be sacrificed only for the sake of a higher value. One aims at heavenly fecundity through renunciation of earthly fecundity, heavenly freedom in the bonds of earthly obedience and heavenly riches in the leaving of earthly richness. Thus the life of the counsels remains, until the end of the world, as the sign of the heavenly Jerusalem. In other words, the three evangelical counsels are sign boards of the world ‘not yet.’

Consecrated celibacy, however, has a special thrust. The vow recalls the other world orientation of Christian life. “There are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 19: 12). “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mk. 12: 25; cf. Mt. 22: 30; Lk. 20: 34-36). These words of the divine Master reveal this eschatological nature of the vow. Here on earth they witness in advance the world to come. *Perfectae Caritatis* reminds: “For all Christ’s faithful, religious recall that wonderful marriage made by God which will be made fully manifest in the age to come and in which the Church has Christ alone for her spouse”.²⁷ The force of consecrated celibacy, thus, is both to have a pre-taste of heavenly life and to proclaim aloud that state of life to which the entire people of God is in march. One of the main reasons for the Church to uphold consecrated celibacy is this witness of the world to come.

The special grace of consecrated celibacy is bestowed by the Lord for the sake of a greater fruitfulness. Being immersed in the things of the Lord (cf. 1Cor. 7: 32-34),

consecrated men and women replicate that “here we have no lasting city” (Heb. 13: 14) “for our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3: 20). “The one thing necessary is to seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness” with unceasing prayer for the Lord’s coming (Mt. 6: 33). Since they are vigilantly waiting for the fulfillment of the divine promises, more than anyone else, they can bring desire and hope to all especially to those who are often discouraged and pessimistic about the future.²⁸

To exercise that heaven oriented mission, consecrated men and women have to witness to genuine love which is always in movement towards the other; from the ‘I’ to the ‘thou’. The living fruitfulness, the supernatural fecundity that the celibate life brings forth, enables them to overcome the loneliness felt in life. The *senselessness* that the contemporary consumerist society observes in consecrated celibacy can be challenged only by such a self-less, self-giving love because everything is consumed itself before the mystery of the divine love which can be never fathomed. If consecrated celibacy does not enable one to love authentically, its essence itself is contradicted. Therefore, the risk of losing the sight of eternity is always there, since this treasure is given in clay jars (cf. 2Cor. 4: 7). This fragility requires to be wise as serpents (cf. Mt. 10: 16). It reminds them constantly that the extraordinary power to love and to be loved comes not from them but from above. Hence, the love has the inner form of dependence and submission. So too, it calls for practical commitment here and now. By their very life of consecrated celibacy, they witness that *ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*.

3.4. Consecrated People and their Relativizing Mission

By the power of being eschatological signs, consecrated men and women challenge constantly the Church, the Bride of Christ, to *relativize* herself in the world. That is, she is not an absolute, the end, but only a means, an instrument. Her very existence on earth is for the sake of the Master. Apart from him, there is no relevance, no self address for her. What the Bridegroom is doing in and through her is count worthy. The church is great and glorious, but not on account of her earthly strength and achievements. Christ’s redeeming grace always triumphs in her, in spite of human weakness. Schillebeeckx says that the weakness of the Church however is *felix culpa* for it makes us realize that our only boast is in the power of God.²⁹ This relative nature of the *Ecclesia* is revealed by the life of all her children. More than their words and actions, the consecrated people exercise this mission of reminding the Church, of her secondary position by their very life. They uphold the relative nature of their own existence in the world as a model for others.

As the reminder of the heavenly Jerusalem, the ‘not yet’ world, the consecrated edifies the pilgrim people to relativize the grandeur of this world. They exercise this mission, on the one hand, by reminding the transitory, earthly or carnal dimensions of the present world and, on the other hand, the never-ending nature of the other world.

In other words, they point out always the perishable or passing nature of the material world. Along with Paul and Peter, they too are proclaiming that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7: 31). “He has given a new birth...into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1: 3-4). The consecrated are thus “constant reminders that the primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives.”³⁰ They emphasize also that the world, for all its brokenness, is destined to move to the other shore.

3.5. Eternal Blessedness of the Consecrated: Active & Altruistic

The eschatological mission of the consecrated is an unending process. The death of a consecrated person is not simply a moment of his or her escape from history. It is rather the moment in which the individual’s contribution to history, and to the fulfilment of human destiny, begins to achieve its final form.³¹ The mission of the consecrated finds its earthly completion with their own entrance into the divine life in eternity where they see God as He is; the direct *visio Dei* and their total immersing in the Triune God. There they contemplate God without end, love him without surfeit, praise him without weariness. As Augustine exclaims, “Behold what will be in the end, without the end!”³² Thus the common call to be men and women of heaven which is the destiny of human life, gets actualized in the consecrated. They are incorporated into the divine life for eternity. The ‘happiness’ in which the consecrated find themselves is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the living God. This meeting with the ever living God is “the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.”³³

In the heavenly life, however, the earthly mission is not suspended but rather, brought to perfection. Balthasar writes: “Eternal blessedness can by no means consist of a mere *visio*, but must involve genuine, creative activity.”³⁴ What is meant here is that the eternal life in God is not passive but active and altruistic. Thus the finality of the life of the consecrated is to reach the paternal homeland along with all men and women of goodwill, where one sees the Triune God face to face which is not a passive but an active *visio*. Thus, in the heavenly glory, the blessed continues joyfully to fulfil God’s will in relation to others and to all creation. Therefore, it can be said that the consecrated continue their unending apostolate of being the sacrament of eschaton from the womb of the Triune God. This mission continues till God becomes *omnia in omnibus*, all in all and the entire world will be in the Paternal homeland (cf. 1Cor. 15:28).

CONCLUSION

The attempt here was to emphasize the heaven-oriented mission of the consecrated. One should not ignore the fact that the ‘not yet’ aspect of the Kingdom of God is an absolute mystery and no one can make any extravagant claim about the incomprehensible

mystery of God. There are hardly words and concepts to describe it. In Pauline words, “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2: 9). But, at the same time, we cannot rule out the Scriptural revelation that those who die in God’s grace and friendship live like God forever, for they see him as he is, face to face. “When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3: 2).

Consecrated people are always in the forefront of the heaven oriented human pilgrimage. Their life is called to be a ‘sacrament’ that makes visible the life of the invisible God, his great compassion which urges him to give final rest to the whole creation in the divine indwelling. As a sacrament, consecrated life must stand for what it contains. To phrase it otherwise, consecrated life is an eloquent sign of the world to come. If the sign boards are right, the people who decide to take that direction will never go astray. They will reach the destiny safe and sound. Whereas, the sign boards are wrong or vague, the pilgrim people will not reach at the sanctuary.

The web world of today extends hundreds of possibilities to make the sign boards formless ones. We cannot but agree that attracted by the colours of the world, the sacramental aspect is not always revealing its significance; signs are indistinguishable. As a result the consecrated people themselves and the entire humanity, for whom they stand, deviate from the goal. The eschatological nature of consecrated life is a real challenge for them to give always primacy to God and his matters at any cost. To the extent that they are faithful to this mission, they regain the credibility of their life in today’s world.

ENDNOTES

1. Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, Apostolic Letter (October, 2011), 1.
2. That is why in the presentation of *Youcat*, Benedict XVI exhorts the youth: “You need to be more deeply rooted in the faith than the generation of your parents so that you can engage the challenges and temptations of this time with strength and determination.”
3. Augustine, *The Confessions*, M. Boulding, trans., (New York: New City Press, 1996) 1:1.
4. The noun *eschaton* derives from Greek *eskhaton* – neuter of *eskhatos* (last). It denotes the final event in the divine plan, the end of the world. Traditionally, eschatology is the doctrine of the last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. But fundamentally it is about the human being, “a being who exists from out of his present ‘now’ towards his future.” Confer, Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, William V. Dych (trans.) (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1984), p. 431.

5. Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* (Bangalore: TPI, 1994), 1024. The heaven of faith is not a 'place' but a mode of being.
6. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 438. There is no proper knowing here, only hoping. Everything depends on that boundless trust in God which is called 'faith': Hans Küng, *Credo, The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today*, John Bowden, trans., (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 180.
7. CCC, 645, 646.
8. CCC, 661.
9. Bruno Forte, *The Church Icon of the Trinity: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Manila: Pauline Publication, 1990), p. 37.
10. Bruno Forte, *The Church Icon of the Trinity*, 23 &, 110.
11. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 41.
12. The Scripture invites them to keep up this vigilant expectation always: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Mt. 24: 42); "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Mt. 24: 44); "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (Mk. 13: 37); "Surely I am coming soon" (Rev. 22: 20).
13. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata (VC)*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World (March 25 1996), 18.
14. The theme of 'I am going away' is a recurring one in John's last discourse. For example see, Jn. 14: 2-3; 13: 33; 16: 16 etc.
15. CCC, 655.
16. Christopher R. Little, *Mission in the Way of Paul: Biblical Mission for the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 49.
17. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. V, *The Last Act*, Graham Harrison (trans.) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), p. 428.
18. VC, 14b.
19. LG, 44c.
20. VC, 20b.
21. Karl Rahner, *The Religious Life Today* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), p. 7.
22. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Contemporary World (December 1975), 41.

SANYASA, *Journal of Consecrated Life*

23. *EN*, 76.
24. *Deus Caritas Est*, 42.
25. von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), p. 160.
26. *CIC*, can. 573 § 1; cf. *CCEO*, can. 410.
27. *PC*, 12a.
28. *VC*, 26e.
29. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, p. 205.
30. *VC*, 27c.
31. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 444-446.
32. Augustine, *City of God*, B. Z. Demetrius and G. G. Walsh (trans.) (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), XXII, p. 30.
33. *CCC*, 1024.
34. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, p. 486.

THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Many of the Fathers of the Church, especially the Orientals, in order to explain the Christian revelation of God, the Holy Trinity, and the salvific Will of God towards all human beings use two distinct terms, such as; “theology”¹ and “economy.”² This salvific action of God in our human history is realized by the double mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus called this as “the two hands of the Father”. The mission of the Son is realized by his incarnation in the world which is visible, historic, geographical and universal. This saving mission of the Son is prolonged in the salvation history through his Church with her visible structures and institutions. The mission of the Spirit is non-incarnate, invisible and dynamic, and works as the inner force within the persons, groups and movements as life and love. Most of the times, the presence of the Spirit is expressed by impersonal symbols, such as: wind, water, fire, etc. Even though the mission of the Son and the Spirit is different, the mission is neither independent nor exclusive of the other, but is closely and intimately related.

The Church is a mystery that derives uniquely from the mystery of Christ, the incarnate Word of the Father. So the mystery of the Church depends on the mystery of the incarnation of Christ sent by the Father as the saviour and redeemer of the whole humankind. Today the Risen Lord is present and active in his Church through the power of the Holy Spirit who converts the Church as the Body of Christ and the community of the faithful.³ Therefore, the presence of Christ in his Church and the diverse forms of Christian life can be understood only through the mystery of the Pentecost, since it is the Spirit who makes Christ present and operative in the Church and in the life of each Christian.⁴ Consequently, the presence and the saving action of Christ are continued in his Church and in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit until his second coming.⁵

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Therefore, we can affirm that all the ecclesial actions and forms of life in the Church bear a Trinitarian character, because her actions are not proper to herself but derived from the mystery of the Holy Trinity. In the economy of salvation, the eternal Father sends His own Son, Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the human race. Christ, in turn through his Paschal mysteries, sends the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and the primitive Christian community and thus the Church today continues the work of Christ with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit through her evangelizing and pastoral mission, until the end of time.

1. JESUS, FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SENT BY THE FATHER

Jesus of Nazareth, our source, inspiration and model for religious life, evangelization, pastoral actions and ministry of unity among all people of God, was a person filled by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1: 35; Mt 1: 20-21), and the Holy Spirit descended on him at the moment of his baptism (Lk 3: 21-22). He was “led by the Spirit” to experience in the desert, the decisive combat and the supreme test before beginning his mission (Mt 4: 1). It is “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4: 14), that he had returned to Galilee and begins his evangelizing mission at Nazareth where he begins his public ministry by proclaiming; “The Spirit of the Lord is up on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” (Lk 4: 18-19). Generally speaking, from the Synoptic Gospels, one can affirm that Jesus’ overall ministry was born of the Spirit.⁶ The Spirit was the creative as well as the activating power, presence and person in the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Lk 1: 35; 3: 22; 4: 1-2; 4: 18-21), apostles and the early Christian communities. The Holy Spirit empowered and anointed each of them in their lives for a mission and task to fulfill as part of God’s divine and salvific plan for the whole of humanity (Acts 2: 1-4; 4: 31; 13: 2-4; 10: 19-20; 11: 12-15). In all this, it was the Holy Spirit who acted as “the initiator” and “the energizer” of the mission of Jesus and his disciples.

The authority of his teachings and actions in favour of the Kingdom of God was also derived from the Holy Spirit who inspired him and guided him (Mt 12: 28). He died by yielding up his Spirit (Mt 27: 50) and before sending out his disciples for the mission, the resurrected Lord, breathes on them the Spirit, saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20: 21-23). In the same way, the revelation of God, accomplished in the life and Paschal mysteries of Christ, is perpetuated in his Body, the Church, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in all generations and peoples of the world.

1.1. Jesus Born of the Holy Spirit

The four Gospels present Jesus to us as the man of the Spirit and we see a first indication of this in his origin (Lk 1: 35). The Gospels brings out with great clarity that Jesus was born in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Both Luke and Mathew in

their infancy narratives attribute Jesus' conception and birth to the coming of the Spirit on Mary, and as a result of the power of the Most High overshadowing her (Lk 1: 35; Mt 1: 20-21). Herman Gunkel states: "Both the infancy narratives of Luke and Mathew underline the idea that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, intending to describe Jesus as not identical and similar to other ordinary persons chosen by God to be prophets, and the Holy Spirit was not something added to his nature, a *donum superadditum*, but rather the agent who continually and totally filled his life, just it was the Spirit who began it."⁷

The divine and the creative Spirit, understood in the Old Testament as God's creative and active power, present to human beings, came upon Mary at the time of the annunciation, and the Spirit is associated with the conception and incarnation of Jesus on earth (Lk 1: 35-ff).⁸ It was the Spirit who made it possible for the Word to be incarnated, thus from the miraculous conception onwards, Jesus was under the influence of the Spirit of God who inaugurated the salvific and redemptive history in a renewed phrase.

Thus Jesus' whole existence transpires in the Holy Spirit: from the moment of his conception to his salvific death, culminating in the resurrection and the out pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Luke's sole concern in the infancy narrative is to assert that the birth of Jesus, who is God's Messiah, is the effect of his creative Spirit on Mary, and a pure gift from God to the humanity through the power of God's Spirit.⁹ It is the Spirit of God, who from the very beginning of Jesus, through the miraculous conception, consecrated him as holy and as the Son of God. The infancy narratives composed in the post-resurrection age are obviously aimed at enfolding the whole atmosphere, with supernatural elements to explain the divinity of Jesus.¹⁰

1.2. The Decent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at His Baptism

Another instance of the decent of the Holy Spirit to our earth occurred at the inauguration of the public ministry of Jesus with his baptism in the Jordan. The experience of Jesus at Jordan was a fresh, more personal and intimate experience of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who was active at the beginning of the human existence of Jesus, was again active when he is about to set out for his public ministry. It was the culmination of thirty years of his growth in wisdom and grace, of favor with human beings and with God (Lk 2: 52).

The baptism of Jesus, which describes the anointing by the Spirit of God, is narrated by all four evangelists (Mt 3: 13-17; Mk 1: 9-11; Lk 3: 21-22; Jn 1: 32-34). The synoptic gospels, in particular, focus on the fact that the ministry of Jesus was initiated and inaugurated with his baptism and anointing by the Spirit of God, which is also associated with a theophany (Mt 3: 17). The baptism of Jesus is considered as the

great turning point in the Biblical history when the Spirit descended upon Jesus and anointed him (Acts 10: 38). Yves Congar makes the following observation about the significance of the Baptism of Jesus in the Biblical history of salvation: “At his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus is marked out and dedicated as the one by whose words, sacrifice and activity, the Spirit enters the history of mankind as a Messianic gift and as an eschatological gift.”¹¹

The descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his Baptism is described as a prophetic anointing for a mission. James Dunn opinions the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at Jordan as follows: “We may legitimately speak of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at Jordan as a baptism in the Spirit; and certainly cannot deny that it was this anointing with the Spirit which equipped Jesus with power, authority and motivation for the mission to follow (Acts 10: 38).”¹²

According to Luke, the coming of the Spirit marks the dawn of the age of fulfillment. The gift of the Holy Spirit is understood as a prophetic inspiration and power in the ministry of Jesus as well as in the mission of his apostles, to work “signs and wonders.”¹³ Now Jesus is empowered and equipped with the divine power for the mission of the Messiah. Thus the baptism of Jesus opened a new chapter and a new mission for Jesus. The communication of the same was initiated in the event of baptism.¹⁴

1.3. Jesus Led by the Spirit

Jesus, who was anointed and endowed by the Holy Spirit at the event and the experience of baptism at Jordan, was constantly led by the Spirit, both in his life and mission. It enabled him to realize his kingly and prophetic mission as the Messiah. A close look at the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, starting with the temptation episode in the desert will give us a better picture on this aspect. The temptations of Jesus in the desert, are portrayed as an introduction to the entire course of Jesus’ public ministry. They are closely linked to the baptism scene in all the three synoptic gospels (Mt 4: 1-11; Mk 1: 12-13; Lk 4: 1-15). At the same time, the Spirit does not allow Jesus to bypass the conflicts inherent in the human condition. On the contrary the Spirit leads him to the wilderness to face anti-God forces, to encounter them and to overcome them. It is this conflict which finally led Jesus to pay its price with his own life. However, it is the anointing and the power Jesus received at his baptism which enabled Him to overcome the forces of evil and Satan and thus to commit himself for the mission of giving freedom and liberation, that are both personal and communitarian.¹⁵

1.4. Holy Spirit in the Overall Salvific Mission of Jesus Christ

Holy Spirit was present in the person of Jesus as stimulating and activating power. He was present all through Christ’s life, at his birth, baptism, mission, death and

resurrection. Special mention is found in the Gospels, elaborating the power and the presence of the Spirit in Jesus, in all the unique and important moments of his life and mission. One can say that the prime way in which the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus is proclaimed in the NT is in terms of Jesus' unique relationship to the Spirit of God.¹⁶ Referring to the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of Jesus, the Indian theologian, George Sores Prabu says: "The Holy Spirit plays a prominent part in the life of Jesus. Its role is particularly prominent in the two-volume work of Luke (Luke-Acts), where the Spirit controls the origins and directs the activities of Jesus (Lk 1: 35; 3: 22; 4: 1, 14, 18: 10: 21) and the early Church (Acts 1: 2-8; 2: 1-ff; 4: 31; 13: 1-4; 15: 28)."¹⁷

Possibly the finest name given to Jesus in his relation to the Spirit in the New Testament is: one "who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (Mt 3: 11), the one who offers us the basis and the core of Christian identity and distinctiveness. Jesus is preeminently the man of the Spirit, the giver of the Spirit, the dispenser of the gifts of the Spirit, and he is the one who makes it possible for us to share the Spirit of God through his life, death and resurrection. For Jesus himself had said that the Advocate would come only if he himself went to his death and rising. Lord Jesus by his living, dying and rising again makes it possible for the Spirit of God to be poured out upon us so that we may live the new life, the life in God.¹⁸ Luke 4: 18-19 explains the very sum and substance of the programmatic proclamation of Jesus' kingdom manifesto. It stresses that his proclamation and ministry in words and deeds are directly under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Referring to this text, G. W. H. Lampe writes: "Here Jesus declares himself to be the prophet announced in Isaiah 61: 1-2, a figure who would probably be identified both by himself and by his audience with the Servant of the Lord. He is ideally "the Spirit-possessed prophet" sent out with the anointing of the Spirit to proclaim good news (Lk 4: 18). This is the key to the Lucan picture of Jesus, and of the Church, which was to carry on the same mission after his death and Resurrection. The Spirit had made it possible with which he was anointed to be bestowed on his people in their turn."¹⁹

The rest of Jesus' ministry, stretching for three years, is merely an elaboration and explanation of the programmatic manifesto proclaimed in the synagogue of Nazareth. The Spirit-anointing which was both prophetic and messianic was manifested in the entire public life and ministry of Jesus. J. D. G. Dunn opinions that Jesus was certainly vividly aware of his anointing and empowering by God's Spirit, for within Judaism, "to possess the Spirit of God" was to be a prophet (Mk 6: 4; Lk 13: 33; Mt 23: 30-37).²⁰ Later Peter in his discourse in the house of Cornelius, alludes to Jesus as the one "anointed by the Spirit (Acts 10: 38), which reminds us of the investiture of Jesus with the "power" of the Spirit at his baptism. Jesus, who was constantly led by the Spirit, presents the gift of the Holy Spirit as the supreme donation that his followers would receive in prayer (Lk 11: 13).

1.5. Jesus: The Giver of the Holy Spirit

Jesus “the bearer” of the Spirit whom he received from the Father at the moment of his conception and fully endowed at the time of his baptism, became “the sharer” and “the giver” of the same Spirit to his followers after his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Jesus had promised to confer the Spirit on his followers (Jn 7: 37-39) but the evangelist comments that the “hour” had not yet come because Jesus was not yet glorified. The “hour” of Jesus, the supreme moment of salvation was characterized by the evangelist as the “bestowing of the Spirit” (Jn 19: 30). Since Jesus is already glorified on the cross (Jn 3: 14; 8: 28; 12: 32), the expression “gave up the Spirit” as seen in Jn 19: 30, must mean then the communication of the Spirit by Jesus to “his own” (Jn 13: 1).²¹ The very act of his redeeming death and resurrection became “the hour of the Spirit”. The giving of the Spirit, which the gospel had foretold and promised several times, is reserved to that “hour” when Jesus is exalted and raised up. Thus the hour of Jesus glory became “the hour of the Spirit.”²² The last breath of Jesus became the first moment of the outpouring of the Spirit.²³

The Spirit, the Councilor, is seen in the farewell discourse of John’s Gospel (chapters 14-16) as destined to be the defender of the cause of Christ, in the apostles and through them, in the world. When Christ is removed from the sight of the disciples through his death, they will be fortified and consoled by the presence of the Spirit among them. In this sense, the Spirit takes the place of the visible presence of Jesus.²⁴ The Holy Spirit is the promise of the Father (Lk 22: 41; Acts 1: 4) and without receiving the Spirit the disciples are unable to live their life and mission in the world. The promise of “the rivers of living water,” mentioned in Jn 7: 37-39, is fulfilled at the time of Jesus’ death. We read that “the side” of the savior is opened and from it “came out blood and water” (Jn 19: 34), “the streams of living water” (Rev 22: 1-2). But the decisive sending of the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-4). Jesus, therefore, asked his disciples to wait in Jerusalem that they might “be clothed with the power from on high” (Lk 24: 49), the promise of the Father, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit on his disciples after his resurrection empowered them for their mission of forgiveness and reconciliation. The fourth gospel ultimately identifies the Holy Spirit with the Paraclete (Jn 14: 16-17; 25-26; 16: 7-15) and it is because of the Paraclete-Spirit, the disciples are able to bear witness to Jesus and to continue his mission.

2. JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE SUPREME MODEL FOR US TODAY

The four Gospels present Jesus to us as the man of the Spirit. Jesus is God’s gift to humankind and his origin is in God’s free, saving, gracious will and plan. It is the Spirit that makes Jesus the divine-human and realizes the Word’s existence as Flesh. It is the same Spirit who reveals to us the humanity of God. The Spirit enabled Jesus to come

through temptations and struggles unharmed, matured in faith, love and hope and be ready for his Messianic task. From then on Jesus' life was entirely in the Spirit (Lk 4: 4; Lk 4: 17-18). As a result, there was power and graciousness in his words and actions, but there was also a note of judgment and challenge which at times gave rise to hostility (Lk 4: 23-30).

The wonders and the signs he performed were manifestations of the Spirit dwelling within him, but his greatest miracle was his friendship, his loving relationship with people. In the same way the sign that he has been among us will be our love for people, especially the small and the poor. The joy of a life lived in the Spirit enables us to rejoice not in having success but in being powerless and small, like the little ones; in being docile to the Spirit and to the Father; in being able to give thanks for the privilege of knowing the Father; and for the joy of sharing this knowledge with others as Jesus did. All this is made possible in and through Holy Spirit in whom Jesus was exulted (Acts 2: 33).

3. THE DREAMS AND VISIONS OF JESUS FOR HUMANITY

The Spirit inspired Jesus to dream and vision for humanity. We may draw out three priorities in the dreams and visions of Jesus for the humanity which will have tremendous implications for the mission of the Church. *First and foremost*, we see the primacy of people in the dreams and vision of Jesus for the humanity. Jesus considers people as God's sacrament and God's self revelation to others. This is the meaning of the true incarnation. He dreams of people who have the right kind of attitude and relation with God and one another (Mt 5: 23-24) a right kind of relationship of reverence, acceptance, truthfulness, tenderness and service to God's children, irrespective of colour, race and status. When the Church takes care of these factors in her ministry she will discover that people are not godless, and that God is willing to exist for us and to enable us to become worthy followers and worshipers.

Secondly, we can speak of what Jesus wants is mercy rather than sacrifice in our relationship to God and one another (Mt 9: 12-13). Jesus was not a fanatic; he had largeness of heart, rich in mercy. For him man came first; not things, not formulas, not authority nor law, but the human person, who is the image, the presence and the self-expression of God. This kind of thinking and acting on the part of Jesus was quite revolutionary in his time. But he could do that because he was a man of vision, a nonconformist, and a bold imitator of new things. Today the Church must struggle in the same way, to stand by Jesus, to be loyal to his newness, to the challenge of his Spirit, to the freshness and transforming power of his reality, to the primacy of love, mercy and service, to the primacy of human beings. In order to achieve these goals in her life, she needs to keep her heart free to respond to anyone, good or bad, just as God responds to all people, in love and reverence, as God's gift of the Spirit suggests and makes possible.

Thirdly, the fundamental basis of Jesus' life and teaching is founded on love of God and the neighbour (Mt 22: 37-39; 25: 40). Jesus wants us to cross natural boundaries of love, friendship and service and faith (Lk 10: 29-37). God gives the sun and rain not merely to the good, but to all people in need (Mt 5: 43-48). This is a new kind of love that is independent of human response, uncontrolled from outside and totally free. This is the type of love and service where enemy is loved and accepted. Jesus recommends this boldly to his Church and each one of his followers. This calls us to love everyone unconditionally, and to be prayed for, loved, served, helped, and accepted and never to reject anyone in our evangelizing and pastoral activities.

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS TODAY

With Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enters into the life of the Church as a spirit of understanding, of gathering, of unity in variety. He is the Spirit of communion, of mutual openness, of openness to the distant and the different (Acts 2: 1-ff). The Spirit is poured out on all so that young and old can dream dreams and see visions. Thus all of us are enabled to newness of creativity and openness which are the gifts of the Spirit. Moreover, the Spirit invites us to think out new styles of Christian living, new forms of religious life, and new kinds of Church structure that will be expressive of the presence of the Spirit in the community that he gathers and builds. Therefore, the Christians especially the religious have a vocation from God to think out new kinds of celebrations and new ways of human existence in the Church and in society.²⁵

4.1. As Renewing and Transforming Presence

In the New Testament, God's Spirit is always linked with the sending of God's envoys to bring the Good News to the poor and the downtrodden that they can experience freedom and liberation from their captivities and hope for a meaningful future. The Spirit helps us to defend people's dignity, freedom and future, especially of the dispossessed and the marginalized. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church enables and equips her in the action for liberation and human dignity. Therefore, one can intimately associate the Christian message and actions in favour of the oppressed and the poor as the function of the Holy Spirit who is not only *dove* and *peace*, but also *fire* and *wind*, and enables us to struggle for justice, equality, freedom and peace.

God's love for men and women are realized in two spheres today. *First and foremost*, it is realized through the outward preservation and transformation of the world through adequate structures. *Secondly*, through an inner renewal of sinful human persons through the Gospel values. Since both are God's activity, then both are proper spheres for the mission of the Church, which have to be reflected in the life and mission of the religious today. All of these must be present in the new way of religious life in every locality and

community, if indeed the mission of Jesus is to be authentic and effective for the modern societies.

4.2. As the Initiator of New Movements in the Church

In the Bible, Spirit is associated with all great beginnings: the creation, the new initiator of the movements at the time of crisis and need of the people of God. He is the initiator of fresh developments and the leader of new ideas and movements. He is alive at every turning point in the history of the people of God and the march of life on earth. He is the Creator Spirit. Through images and symbols, the Bible reminds us the presence of the Holy Spirit in all great beginnings (Gen 1: 2; 2, 7; Ezekiel 37: 5-6; Joel 2: 28-30; Acts 2: 1-4). From the very beginning of the world, the activity of the Spirit was apparent (Gen 1: 2). When God's Spirit brooded over the waters, chaos changed into cosmos. The Spirit similarly can effect this change in us and in our world today. But this process and the progress towards order, peace and beauty are a life-long task, as in the creation story. Likewise, the Spirit must hover over the contemporary Church, religious congregations and the world, renewing them from within and from outer surface, for the world tends always to return to chaos (Gen. 6). Therefore the only solution for us today is to live under the influence of the Spirit and to collaborate with the Spirit to renew the earth, to regenerate society, to create fresh thinking and to rebuild our value systems. For the Spirit is the initiator of fresh movements, the One who guides the course of history, sustains the life of the Church and warms the hearts of all peoples.

The work of the Church and of each Christian is ultimately the work of the Spirit, and mission begins in our hearts with the coming of the Spirit. The experience of Jesus at Jordan is to be renewed in the Church and in each one of us at every hour of crisis. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit we can overcome our spiritual sterility and barrenness; only through his power we shall be new and fecund and become capable of bringing redemption to each other and to the world. Thus God's Word will become flesh in us; Jesus will be born in us and of us and we will become fruitful instruments of the Spirit.

4.3. Calling for Radical Changes

Luke records at the end of his Gospel and at the beginning of the Acts that Jesus told his disciples not to leave the city until his promise had been fulfilled and the Spirit had been bestowed. "I send down upon you the promise of my Father. Remain here in the city until you are clothed with the power from on high" (Lk 24: 49; Acts 1: 4). The second chapter of the Acts then proceeds to record the fulfilment of the promise and the bestowal of the final special gift that Father had in store for the Apostles and for us.

In order to explain this ultimate special gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit, who came down on the Apostles, one can see the two powerful symbols of the Spirit in the Acts of

the Apostles: the wind and the fire. Often in the Bible wind is a symbol of the Spirit. The wind blows where it wills. One can hear the sound it makes but do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (Jn 3: 5-8). Therefore, the Church and all the ecclesial leadership must have the humility to be ready to be led by the Spirit, to be surprised by the Spirit, to be challenged by the Spirit to things undreamt of until now. We must be willing to be led into the unknown, as Abraham was. We must be ready to be led to the desert by the Spirit, like Jesus (Lk 4: 1-2). This readiness may mean fear and anxiety as our spirits may react from this unpredictable, surprising visit of the Spirit of God. But we should ask the Holy Spirit to bestow the readiness of heart that we may be led by him beyond all our calculation and plans. This does not mean that we should not calculate or plan. We should, but then we should hold our plans and projects in readiness to be broken and led by the Spirit of God and his great winds may effect a radical change in us, if he sees fit.

A second powerful symbol we can observe for the person and mission of the Holy Spirit in the Acts is “tongues as of fire” (Acts 2: 3-4) which signifies the mission of the Apostles and the proclamation of the Word of God. The Spirit is the communicator of the Word. Likewise he invites each Christian to relate to other or proclaim the Word in the modern world with the power of the Spirit which should be our self-expression that has to be genuine and truly authentic. For only genuine words that have the lasting substance tell the truth of God and of human beings, and only the authentic words of love can have the enduring and transforming power.

4.4. Dreaming and Visioning for a New Mode of Consecrated Life

One can see in the Bible that one of the results of the coming of the Spirit is the gift of the ability to dream dreams and see visions. On the day of the Pentecost Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, said that the outpouring of the Spirit on humanity would be marked by young and old dreaming dreams and seeing visions (Acts 2: 17). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explains his visions and dreams of a new humanity, based on the values of the Kingdom of God: Love, justice, mercy and peace (Mt 5: 1-7, 28). In the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-12) Jesus has the courage to think of a world of happiness, love and sharing, a world in which God reigns, a world in which the earth becomes humankind’s inheritance and relationships are fraternal and warm as the family of God. This world of the Beatitudes is what the Spirit brings to us (Gal 5: 22-23). Thus one can say that Jesus, the giver of the Holy Spirit, is also the source of our visions and dreams for a new humanity, based on the values of the Kingdom of God.

Our vocation in the modern world as Christians, religious and as people on a mission to the world is to go on dreaming these dreams and challenging our world and ourselves with the power of these visions, and fight against the tendency to give up our dreams and succumb to platitudes. In order to achieve these ends, the Spirit urges us through

the active involvement of the Church to challenge these structures that have handicapped, fettered and starved the vast majority of human beings. The Church through her mission of evangelization and pastoral actions can bring the contemporary world of wars and violence to humanity's interest of peace and collaboration. To work for this impossible dream, the Church will have to involve in the struggles of the people, especially the poor and the marginalized. It will mean from the part of the Church, especially of the religious, hungering and thirsting for justice; it will mean suffering, paying the price for our dreams as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth. This vision of Jesus calls us all to believe that a group of men and women in the midst of darkness of this contemporary world can disagree with the current style of living and be a light at midnight, and this requires great vision and the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

4.5. Calling us to Be in Mission in the Spirit

Jesus began his public ministry with the powerful presence and work of the Spirit in Him (Lk 4: 18-19; Is 61: 1-2). In reading this passage about the beginning of the mission of Jesus and the role of the Holy Spirit in this mission, one can propose three important points to be considered for a Spirit-filled religious life and mission in the contemporary Church.

First of all, the mission is specifically to the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, the hopeless and the powerless. *Secondly*, we should note that the content of the mission of Jesus is freedom. Therefore, the Church through her evangelizing and pastoral missions has to commit herself for the liberation of every human person: liberation from prison of oppression to the freedom to be human; freedom to see the world from the point of view of God; freedom to see things for ourselves; freedom to walk before God in dignity, freedom to take responsibility for one's life and one's dignity and to shape his/her life in partnership with God and neighbours. This mission is always in association with the Holy Spirit (Is 42: 1-7), who helps us to bring God's justice and truth to the ends of the earth.

The third point to be considered is the relationship between the goal of mission and its content. The good tidings that the Church brings to the people through her life and mission are tidings about the heart of God, what God thinks about the people, our history, our doings, and what is God's plan for our humanity, of his profound and interior designs for people. Yet it is the Spirit alone who can search and know the heart of God; the Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God (I Cor 2: 10-13). Therefore, without being endowed with the Spirit, without an experience of the Spirit, there can be no mission. Therefore, the contemporary Church must receive revelation from the Spirit, in order that she may know and sense the mystery of herself and history, the meaning of human existence, and her true condition in her brokenness as well as her possibility for wholeness.²⁶ What Church brings to the people is freedom and life which are the gifts

of the Spirit of God. She is alive and free in the measure in which the Spirit is communicated to her and she lives in him. For the mission and the Spirit go always together.

The Holy Spirit is given to the Apostles in view of their mission, to enlighten them and to strengthen them for the mission, for the Spirit is given every time by God for a particular task that God wants to entrust to His people. Basing on the biblical teachings, one can assert that to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1Cor 12: 1-7). So the various gifts of the Spirit are given to the people for the building up and service of the community. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are for everyone. So everyone has a mission to serve the community. Everybody is given a gift by the Spirit to energize him/her for the mission. So this Spirit is not an exclusive possession of some one. The gifts may be different, but all have some gifts, for the building up of the community and for its service.²⁷ The Church and each religious congregation as the new liberating community by the power of the Spirit should affirm life and freedom. It challenges both the oppressors and the oppressed to a new transformation that centers round the values of the Kingdom, like, freedom, love, equality and justice that really matter rather than pleasure, power and money. This new community inspired by the Spirit liberates everyone and in the process, liberates itself. It is not liberation from life or the world but it is a liberation from all that is wrong with the life and the world. It is liberation into a new heaven and a new earth where God will make all things new (Rev 21: 1-5).²⁸

CONCLUSION

Today we need to draw our visions and conclusions on evangelization, pastoral missions and the role of the religious in the modern Church, from the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth who was filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the One who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Through his life, death and resurrection, the Risen Lord became the giver of the Holy Spirit to his disciples and to all human beings all the way through the generations in the Church. The same Holy Spirit enables the modern Church to witness the presence and power of the Spirit through her life and mission to the people in our day.

Many Indian theologians like to utilize the symbols of “fire” and “wind” in order to signify the powerful presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our society. They view the Holy Spirit as the powerful force for change in the socio-economic and political field so that the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed may find freedom, life and justice through the powerful intervention of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. It is the Holy Spirit who inspired, directed and guided first Christian community in their evangelizing and pastoral missions and expansion.

Besides, the Spirit as comforter of the afflicted, makes the Church and each one of us strong and firm within, so that comforting becomes a part of the apostolate, a part of

the Christian existence today. Thus the weary and burdened people of today, who toil under hardships and anxieties of whatever kind, who experience the pains of social and political involvements, of oppression and humiliation, of responsibility for others will receive rest and comfort through the Holy Spirit.

In order to achieve these aims, we need to be present ourselves before the Spirit in openness and love. In order to see the true shape of things, the thrust of events, the meaning of life, the depths of reality, the Church needs the light of the Holy Spirit. Our love, life and relationships are always touched by egotism and coldness, in all that we are and all that we do, until we are transformed by the fire of the Holy Spirit. We need the healing touch of the Spirit of God who is the purity and the beauty of all light and life. We need the assistance of the Spirit to heal the bitterness in our hearts and spirits, to bring people together and bind the wounds through the pastoral actions of the Church that might otherwise leave humanity bruised and fractured. Moreover, the Holy Spirit helps us to be open to God, to the mystery of people, to varied possibilities and to future.

The Church, therefore, must be ready to change, to go forward, to yield and to bend to every indication of truth and love, which are the gifts of the Spirit in the modern world. We need the Spirit to straighten us out so that we may see the true shape of things and their significance. In the Spirit's ardent fire all can be purified, healed and made beautiful and whole. In this light we shall be able to see with our hearts and not merely with our brains. For, it is only the Spirit who can empower us to see, to sense and to judge with the innermost centrality of our beings. Through his light, we shall be enabled to have a new vision of the Church, of her evangelizing and pastoral mission, of all human beings, of ecclesial and human structures, of society and of the world in general.

Our Mother Church invites each one of us to be Spirit filled people, and urges us to pray for the Spirit's gifts, especially for knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Wisdom means having a sense of reality, a sense for what really matters in the Church and in the world, the sense to respond to the human needs wherever it may be required. Such wisdom is our greatest need today. We also should ask the Spirit to deepen our understanding that we may enter into the experience of one another, into the limitations of one another and into their sorrows, agonies and happiness. Finally, we should pray that the Spirit brings us to that blessed outcome where we are willing to be his partners in the struggle and toil of building up the world, in shaping our history and constructing a new humanity in accordance with the mind of Jesus.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “The expression “theology” means the contemplation of the mystery of God, the Holy Trinity, and the intimate relationship inside the Holy Trinity (*ad intra*) also known as “Immanent Trinity”. V. CODINA, *No Extingáis el Espíritu: Una iniciación a la Pneumatología* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2008), p. 229.
- 2 “The term economy is understood as God’s action in the world in favor of our salvation or God’s saving action towards the world (*ad extra*) also known as “Economic Trinity”. V. CODINA, *No Extingáis el Espíritu: Una iniciación a la Pneumatología* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2008), p. 229.
- 3 E. SCHILLEBEECKX, “Iglesia y humanidad”, in: *Concilium* (1965), pp. 65-94.
- 4 L. BOFF, *Eclesiogénesis* (Santander: Sal Térrea, 1979), pp. 38-39.
- 5 JULIO A. RAMOS, *Teología Pastoral* (Madrid: BAC) p.26.
- 6 V. M. KÄRKKÄINEN, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002), p. 30.
- 7 H. GUNKEL, *The Influence of the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 16.
- 8 J. A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (New York: Doubles day & Co, 1981), p. 350.
- 9 J. A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, p. 351.
- 10 L. M. BERMEJO, *Pneumatology* (Pune: JVD, 1978), p. 8.
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- 15 J. A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, p. 513.
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- 17 G. SORES-PRABU, “Jesus and the Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels”, in: *Bible Bhashyam*, Vol. II, No.2 (June 1976), p. 101.
- 18 S. RAYAN, *Breath of Fire: The Holy Spirit, Heart of the Christian Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), p. 32.
- 19 G. W. H. LAMPE, “Holy Spirit”, in: *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, G. A. BUTTRICK (ed.), (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 632.

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- 20 J. D. G. DUNN, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 82.
- 21 J. KURICHIANIL, "The Holy Spirit, the Main Agent in the Mission of the Church", in: *Indian Theological Studies*, Vol. 31, No.4 (December 1994), p. 353.
- 22 POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican: March 25, 1992), No. 24.
- 23 H. WANSBROUGH (ed.), in: *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Bombay: St. Paul's, 1998), p. 1787.
- 24 C. F. D. MOULE, *The Holy Spirit* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1979), p. 37.
- 25 S. RAYAN, *Breath of Fire: The Holy Spirit Heart of the Christian Gospel*, p.17.
- 26 S. RAYAN, *Breath of Fire*, p. 146.
- 27 M. AMALADOSS, *We Believe: Understanding the Roots of Our Faith* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2005), p. 151.
- 28 M. AMALADOSS, *We Believe: Understanding the Roots of Our Faith*, p. 178.



POWER AND CENTRALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIVES OF CHOSEN PEOPLE

Alex Ancheles, CMF

1. INTRODUCTION

We are witnesses to the rapid and often chaotic changes in all dimensions of human spheres: social, spiritual, moral, economical, political, cultural and technological. The changes invariably cause positive or negative developments that enhance or belittle human existence. Consecrated life, with all its burdens of the past and paradigms of the present, oscillates between decadence and renewal. It is in a crisis. There is no doubt that consecrated life has lost its sheen in the recent years. The decline in vocations and the outlook of the people towards consecrated life speak for themselves. Gone are the days when consecrated people were looked at as heroes and models for human and Christian life. Today, the kind hearted sees them as good social workers, educationists, organisers but seldom as role models or men/women of God. In a message to the Council of Major Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life gathered in Czestochowa, Poland, on June 4, 1997, Pope John Paul II said: “We live in times of chaos, of spiritual disorientation and confusion, in which we discern various liberal and secularizing tendencies; God is often openly banished from social life, attempts are made to limit faith to a purely private sphere, and in people’s moral conduct a harmful relativism creeps in, religious indifference spreads.”¹ Consecrated people are part and parcel of this problem and one thing that could help them to face this problem and make them authentic before God and people would be the word of God.

In his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*,² the Holy Father Benedict XVI invites all the people of God to rediscover the centrality of the word of God in all dimensions of life.³ Word of God has been the source and nourishment of all the ecclesiastical movements, including consecrated life in the Church. Retrospectively even the history of salvation gives us a picture of the word of God, gathering, guiding

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and leading the people of God towards their promised destiny. The heroes and heroines that we encounter in the Scripture were called, consecrated and transformed by the word of God. To understand the centrality of the word of God in consecrated life, it would be better, to look into the power of the word of God and the central role it played in the life of the chosen people.

2. THE POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD

St. Paul calls the word of God as “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). The word of God possesses the power of God himself. The multidimensional functions and the power of the word of God can be understood if one reflects through the many images and metaphors used to define the word of God, such as, “rain and snow” (Is 55:10), “two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17), “seed” (Lk 8:11; 1 Pet 1:23), “honey” (Ezek 3:3; Ps 119:103), “lamp” (Ps 119:105), “hammer” (Jer 23:29), “rock” (Mt 7:24-25), “fire” (Jer 5:14; 20:9; 22:29), “food” (Deut 8:3) and many others.

The Torah psalms beautifully express the vitality and efficacy of God’s word and summarises its functions and utilities.⁴ The author of Psalm 119 calls the Torah as “my delight” (119: 24, 77, 92, 143, 174); “my counsellors” (v. 24); “my hope” (v. 43); “my comfort in distress” (v. 50); “my songs” (v. 54); “my meditation” (v. 99); “honey to my mouth” (v. 103); “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 105) and “the truth” (vv. 142, 160). He believes that it would help him “to walk in the way of the Lord” (v. 3), “to be pure” (v. 9), “not to sin against the Lord” (v. 11), “to be prosperous”, “turn him from chasing vanities” (v. 37), “give him hope” (v. 49) “give him life” (v. 93), “brings delight” (v. 47) and “to live in liberty” (v. 45) etc. The author of Psalm 19:7-10 adds to this understanding. He sees that in every sense and dimension the Torah is good; it is “perfect,” “sure,” “upright,” “pure,” “radiant,” and “true.” He illustrates its role with respect to human beings as “reviving the life,” “making wise the simple,” “making the heart rejoice,” “enlightening the eyes,” “enduring forever,” and “righteous altogether.” We shall now look into some of the other functions of the word of God to have a better understanding of its power.

2.1. Word of God Creates

The creative power of the word of God is found at the beginning of everything. It communicates and creates reality. Yahweh said, “Let there be light!” and there was light” (Gen 1:3). The Psalmists describe the multidimensional functions of the creative word in lofty words: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Pss 33:6; 148:5); “He spoke and it came to be. He commanded and it stood firm” (Ps 33:9); “He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly” (Ps 147:15f). The creative power of the word of God is clearly defined in Is 55:10-11: “As the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not

return before having watered the earth, fertilizing it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” The entire cosmos, with all its animate and inanimate objects, is the manifestation of the creative power of the word of God.

2.2. Word of God Nourishes

Scripture teaches us the nutritive character of the word. The book of Deuteronomy declares that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). Jesus uses it as a sword to defeat Satan during his temptations in the desert (Mat 4:4). The Psalmist finds greater nourishment in the word of God. He says, “With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments” (Ps 119:131) and again “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:103). The prophets, the spokesmen of God, were constantly fed by the word of God. Jeremiah was eager to receive God’s word: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16). Prophet Ezekiel was told to make the word of God his food: “O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. . . He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey” (Ezek 3:1, 3). The book of Wisdom makes the word superior to any earthly food: “O Lord . . . it is not the production of crops that feeds humankind but that your word sustains those who trust in you” (Wis 16:26).

Lack of God’s words were considered as a divine punishment and often compared to famine. Yahweh withheld his words whenever he found wickedness among the leaders and the people. When Eli was priest at Silo, and Samuel as a boy was serving the Lord in the presence Eli, “the Word of the Lord was rare in those days” (1 Sam 3:1). It was because of the disobedience of Eli and his sons to the commandments of the Lord that the Lord spoke through the boy Samuel to condemn Eli and his family. Amos predicts starvation of God’s words as a punishment for the injustice and wickedness of the people. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it” (Amos 8:11-12). Starvation of the word of God is more severe for the people than the starvation of bread and water.

2.3. Word of God Empowers

The empowerment of the word of God is very much visible in the life and mission of the prophets. Moses who was called and commissioned by Yahweh to liberate the

people of Israel from slavery is an apt example. His reluctance to accept the call of Yahweh sprang from his inability to speak but the word of God made him the greatest spokesman of Yahweh and it is through whom Yahweh communicated his instructions to the people of Israel. Prophet Isaiah, who declared that “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Is 6:5) in the awesome presence of Yahweh, voluntarily comes forward to do the mission of Yahweh and says, “Here I am, send me” (Is 6:8). This transformation happens after the seraph touched his lips by live coal from the alter, i.e. transfer of the word of God to the prophet⁵. Jeremiah, when called by God, resisted saying, “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer 1:6). God touches his mouth and says: “Now I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer 1:9). Empowered by the word of God, Jeremiah goes to announce God’s message and, even in the midst of persecutions and trials, he did not give up speaking God’s words. Jeremiah enjoyed a deeper intimacy with the word of God all through his life and it is evident in the number of times the word of God comes to him. There are 29 instances in the book of Jeremiah where the word of God comes to him or is present to him.

The prophets also were emboldened to become signs and portents by the power of the word. Jeremiah remained unmarried for his entire life (Jer 16:2). Isaiah walked naked and on barefoot for three years (Is 20:3). Hosea was asked to marry a prostitute and beget children through her (Hos 1:2). They were able to do them because they were empowered by God’s word. The prophets also encountered many persecutions and sufferings and they were able to withstand and continue in their mission only by the power of the word. Hosea was dismissed as a fool or a madman (Hos 9:7). Amos was rejected as a prophet for hire (Amos 7:12). Jeremiah in the end is carried off to Egypt against his will (Jer 43:1-7). Isaiah’s call culminates in 6:9-10 with the message that the prophetic word will not be heeded. In spite of the rejections and persecutions they could not resist God’s word. Jeremiah says that “within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer 20:9). Peter and John answer the Council that was threatening them: “For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). The word of God empowered them to commit themselves to do the mission entrusted by God.

2.4. Word of God Transforms

The ideal example for this function of the word of God, from the scripture, will be St. Paul. The words addressed by the risen Lord, during his encounter with him on his way to Damascus and the consequent revelations he received, transformed him into a new creature, with new eyes (2 Cor 5:16). He attains a new goal, new outlooks, new orientation and new loyalty after this encounter. The disciples on the road to Emmaus, who left Jerusalem dejected and depressed after the crucifixion of Jesus, returned joyfully to Jerusalem because their hearts burned within them and transformed them while the risen Jesus was “opening the scriptures’ to them (Lk 24:32).

Many men and women who embraced consecrated life and became distinguished saints were people transformed by the word of God. St. Antony of the Desert was the son of a wealthy landowner and inherited his family estate when he was just 18 years old. Upon hearing the words of Christ to the rich young man, heard during liturgy, “go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mk 10:21; Mt 19:21), Antony felt himself admonished, as if the passage read had been particularly meant for him. He listened to God’s word and became the great father of the Desert.

St. Augustine struggling to free himself from the bondage of his passions and love for the world, heard a voice telling him, “Take up and read. Take up and read”. And he took the Bible and, upon opening it, read from the letter to the Romans: “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:13-14). The words he read transformed him. Augustine writes: “No further would I read nor was there cause why I should; for instantly with the end of this sentence, as by a clear and constant light infused into my heart, the darkness of all former doubts was driven away.”⁶ Listening to God speaking to him through these words was for him the beginning of a new life and this is what made him a great doctor of the Church. Many other great saints and founders of religious congregations like Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis Xavier and St. Francis of Assisi, St. Antony Mary Claret were urged and transformed by the word of God. They gave up everything, their dreams and ambitions, their privileges and professions and committed themselves to spread the word of God.

3. CENTRALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

3.1. Source of Origin and Identity

Israel is a creation of the word of God. What constituted the people of Israel as people of God is the covenant. The people were languishing as slaves in Egypt and the Lord, seeing their flight and hearing their cry, sent his words through Moses to gather them and bring them out of Egypt and to lead them to the Promised Land. Articulating this reality the Psalmist says: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them and delivered them from destruction” (Ps 107:19-20). At Mount Sinai God made a covenant with the liberated people that made them his people and Yahweh their God. The covenant was built on the foundation of the Torah, the instructions of the Lord and on the words God spoke to them through Moses.⁷

The preparation to the covenantal ceremony, at the foot of Mount Sinai, was marked by a summons to obey the commandments of the Lord: “If you obey my voice and

keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Ex 19:5). The people responded in one voice saying: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex 19:8). Later, during the covenantal ceremony, the people responded twice saying: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex 24:3, 7). Israel owes her existence as a people to the words God has spoken through Moses and the words they have spoken in response to God. They are a people of the word of God.

The word of God that gave birth to Israel as a people also gave them an identity and set them apart as a privileged people. The Psalmist joyfully announces that “he declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances” (Ps 147:19-20). Thus, Israel as people of God is the people of the Torah, people of the word of God. Israel has no other identity as a people. It is this identity that served as the basis for their relationship with God. Through his word God would reveal himself and his will to them and as long as they listen to God’s word and respond to him in faith they would remain as the privileged people of God.

3.2. Means for Success and Prosperity

Israel’s success, prosperity, long life and their stay in the Promised Land depended on their adherence to the word of God. After setting all the commandments of the Lord before the people, Moses says: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God . . . you will live and grow numerous, and Yahweh your God will bless you in the country which you are about to enter and make your own. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear . . . you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess” (Deut 30:15-18). He emphasizes this truth again and again: “Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess” (Deut 32:46-47).

The people and their leaders were reminded again and again of the importance of obedience to the word of God. When Moses handed over the leadership to Joshua, at the barren plain of Moab, he put the law in writing and entrusted it to the priests with a command to read the law in the hearing of all Israel so that they may take care to put into practice all these words (Deut 31:7-12). After the death of Moses, Yahweh spoke to Joshua: “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful” (Josh 1:8). After the distribution of the Promised Land, which the Israelites

conquered under the leadership of Joshua, he renewed the covenant at Shechem and reminded the people, once again to serve Yahweh and obey his commands (Josh 24:23-27). Obedience to the word of God is obedience to God and to doing his will.

3.3. Yardstick for the Rulers

At the advent of the monarchy in Israel, the emphasis on the King, who represented Yahweh to the people, was to remain faithful to the commands of the Lord. Saul, the first king of Israel, was rejected by Yahweh because of his disobedience. Samuel, who communicated the message of God to Saul, says: “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). And when Saul asks him to forgive him and return with him to worship Yahweh, Samuel says: “I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel” (1 Sam 15:26). Obedience to the word of God is supreme over all other things. King David remained a person closer to the heart of God because of his obedience to the commands of the Lord. All through the period of monarchy, the kings and the people were measured with the yardstick of their obedience to the commandments of the Lord. The fall of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were attributed to the failure to covenantal obligations, i.e. failure to follow the commandments of the Lord.

3.4. Source of Renewal and New Life

The people and their leaders recognized the centrality of the word of God when they were in exile. They lamented: “The Lord our God is in the right . . . we have sinned before the Lord. We have disobeyed him, and have not heeded the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in the statutes of the Lord that he set before us. From the time when the Lord brought our ancestors out of the land of Egypt until today, we have been disobedient to the Lord our God, and we have been negligent, in not heeding his voice” (Bar 1:15-19). “We did not listen to the voice of the Lord our God in all the words of the prophets whom he sent to us, but all of us followed the intent of our own wicked hearts by serving other gods and doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord our God” (Bar 1:21-22). This realization helped them to give importance to the word of God after their return from the exile. The reformation promulgated by the priest Ezra begins with the public reading of the book of Law, the commandments of the Lord. The priests and the Levites who stood among the people interpreted them to the people so that they may understand them and build their lives upon them. (Neh 8:1-12).

3.5. Word of God and the Servants of God

Not only the community of Israel but also the individuals, the servants of God, and the prophets, who were called, consecrated, assigned to guide and warn the people

were nourished and led by the word of God. The response of boy Samuel to the call of God, “speak Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10), could be applied to all the genuine leaders and prophets of God. They were open to the word of God. It is their openness to listen and to obey the word of God that transformed their lives. They had always access to the word of God. The word of God came to them or they could see the word of God. Through his word, God became someone real, living and present in their lives. The word of God shed light in their lives, helped them to cultivate a deep intimacy and communion with God and made them his friends and servants. They were aware of the consequences of disobedience too. The example of Moses would suffice. It was a small failure of fulfilling the command of Yahweh that denied Moses entry into the Promised Land (Num 20:2-13).

4. WORD OF GOD AND CONSECRATED LIFE

The Church documents and the popes have been constantly speaking about the importance of the word of God in the life and mission of the consecrated people. They want them to “have the Sacred Scripture at hand daily, so that they might learn the ‘surpassing worth of knowing Jesus’ (Phil 3:8) by reading and meditating on the divine Scriptures.”⁸ Addressing the religious in his message for the 34th world day of prayer for vocations on April 20, 1997, Pope John Paul II said: “Let yourselves be continually challenged by the word of God, shared in community and lived with generosity in the service of others, especially young people. In a climate of love and fraternity, enlightened by the word of God, it is easier to answer ‘yes’ to the call.”⁹ This call is renewed by the present Holy Father through his post synodal apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*.

The Holy Father reminds us that consecrated life “is born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life.” He invites us to multiply efforts to read and meditate on the sacred scriptures. He exhorts “both old and new expressions of special consecration to be genuine schools of the spiritual life, where the Scriptures can be read according to the Holy Spirit in the Church, for the benefit of the entire people of God.”¹⁰ He recommends that “communities of consecrated life always make provision for solid instruction in the faith filled reading of the Bible.”¹¹ No further reminders are necessary to understand the centrality of the word of God in consecrated life but how can we make it happen in reality? The communities and the missions should become schools of the word of God where one is formed and transformed into the living image of Christ. The basic structures of consecrated life like formation, evangelical counsels, community life and mission must find sustenance and strength from the word of God.

4.1. Word of God and Formation

The fundamental identity of a consecrated person consists in discipleship to Jesus. It is faith in Jesus that makes a person his disciple. “Faith comes from what is heard and

what is heard comes from the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The apostles listened to the words of Jesus and believed in him. The evangelists describe the call of the disciples as a response to his words. Jesus said: “Follow me,” and they left everything and followed him. Jesus, according to John, categorically says to those who believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32). Peter realised this truth and confessed: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). Hearing his words and doing it establishes an intimate relationship with him. Jesus makes it crystal clear to his disciples: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). He also confers blessedness to the ones who hear the word and obey it. In his response to the woman who said, “blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you,” Jesus responds: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Lk 11:27-28). Thus, discipleship originates in faith, nourished and led into fulfilment in obedience to the word of God. Therefore the primary objective of the formation of consecrated persons must be the formation of the candidates into disciples of Jesus.

The disciple is to become like the master. Therefore the formation is not “to inform” something but to help the candidate “to transform” him/herself so that he or she may acquire the form of Christ. It means helping the candidates to internalize the values of Christ to the point of being able to say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The entire personality of the candidate, his/her way of thinking, feeling, loving, acting, reacting, and relating to others must be transformed and every aspect of his/her character should be identified with Christ¹² so that the candidates grow “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This would be possible only with an enduring acquaintance and continuous dialogue with the word of God. Every vocation to consecrated life must be born, nurtured, matured and fructified in the dynamics of the word of God. The formation programmes of consecrated people must have more space and time to read, meditate and interiorize the word of God. The word of God as the power of God, when it is heard and meditated, can establish a deeper and intimate relationship with God, take hold of our lives, reshape it, bring us to a fuller life, transforming and enabling us to fulfil the mission entrusted to us.

4.2. Word of God and Evangelical Counsels

The evangelical counsels are signs of consecration. They must be expressed in being and in witnessing. The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI illustrates the practice of the evangelical counsels as a living exegesis of God’s word.¹³ What does it mean to be a living exegesis of God’s word in concrete circumstances? It is presenting Jesus to humanity in our person and in our action; it is retelling the story of Jesus, his incarnation, his proclamation of the good news through words and deeds, his passion, death and

resurrection, in our stories of life; it is becoming messengers of hope and life to those who are languishing as slaves of hopelessness and death. In other words, the practice of the evangelical counsels must be an interpretation of the 'Word became flesh' and 'his living among us' so that God is experienced by everyone as Immanuel. Jesus, sent by the father, is the exegesis of the Father and in him one could see and experience the Father. (Jn 14:10). The consecrated people called, consecrated and sent by Jesus, must be the exegesis of Jesus and, in them, the world should see and experience Jesus.

The teachings of the Church, from the time of Vatican II, considers "consecration as more fundamental than mission."¹⁴ It means our being is more important than doing. What we are is more important than what we have done or what we do or what we will do. Our being has more witnessing value than our doing. For this to happen we need to treasure the word of God in our hearts and ponder over them as Mary did (Lk 2:19, 51). When the people of Israel failed to keep the commandments of God, written on the stone tablets, Yahweh made a new covenant, and said: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33). After reciting the commandments of the Lord Moses told the people: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart (Deut 6:6).

The heart, in Hebrew understanding, is the central seat of reason, the seat of human personality, and the deep font of human life in all its aspects, spiritual, intellectual, moral, and emotional. Heart is the place where the word of God must be received and kept; it is there the word does its work, as it was experienced by the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).¹⁵ The prophet Jeremiah had the same experience. He says: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'" (Jer 20:9).

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). God's word kept in the heart cannot fail. Like a "sharp sword" or a "polished arrow" (Is 49:2) it never fails to pierce through and through. There is no blunt side to it; it always cuts with one side or another, either saving or judging. It penetrates to the innermost depth of the human being. It scrutinizes and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart. In the innermost center of personality where everyday choices as well as radical decisions are made the believer is regenerated by "the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).¹⁶ When this happens, our lives become exegesis of the word of God.

4.3. Word of God and Community Life

Community life is an essential component of consecrated life. Consecrated communities are signs that the Christian faith can create communities in which, peace, justice, love, true sisterhood and brotherhood are not just simple words, but lived realities and the visible tangible anticipation of the final community which God intends for the whole creation. The community of Jesus and later of the apostles that the consecrated people take as model was nourished and empowered by the word of God. Jesus, sent by the Father, was nourished by the words of the Father. He says: “I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me” (Jn 8:28; Jn 12:50; 14:10). The disciples were nourished by the life giving words of Jesus. They had the privilege of listening to him and seeing his deeds. Jesus called them friends because he has made known to them everything that he has heard from his Father and laid down his life for them. The disciples can remain in his friendship if they do what he commands them (cf. Jn 15:13-15). Thus it was the word of God spoken and listened in faith that united them and prepared the disciples to remain with him and to be sent to proclaim God’s Kingdom.

Consecrated communities should find their motivation, nourishment and empowerment from the word of God. The Holy Father recommends that “communities of consecrated life always make provision for solid instruction in the faith-filled reading of the Bible”. He proposes ‘lectio divina,’ a form of reading and meditation of the scripture practiced in the monastic tradition, to be practiced in the specific spirituality of the congregations.¹⁷For this the communities should become the schools of the word of God where the word is proclaimed and heard; it is meditated and welcomed; it is deepened and applied.¹⁸The different dimensions of community living, fraternal fellowship, prayer life, commitment to the specific mission etc. are to be expressions of our response in faith to the invitations of the word of God, proclaimed, meditated and deepened in the community. No one can remain indifferent to the invitation of the word. It must be accepted or rejected. He who accepts it is thrust into action.

4.4. Word of God and Mission

The call of God always comes with a mission. In the parable of the vine and branches, Jesus clearly articulates the importance of remaining with him, and the objective of remaining with him is to bear fruit. The branches that do not bear fruit will be cut off and thrown into the fire (Jn 15:1-8). The parable of the barren fig tree (Mk 11:12-14; Mt 21:18-22) also conveys the same idea. The two metaphors, salt and light that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 5:13-16), further illustrates this idea very clearly. In these metaphors there is an allusion to the Servant of Yahweh (Is 42: 6; 49: 6) in which Yahweh has ordained him as a “covenant to the people, a light to the nations.”

This was a call to Israel, through their covenant faithfulness, to draw all peoples and nations into a bonded relationship with their God. When Jesus told the disciples, “you are the salt of the earth,” he meant that through their faithfulness to his words, they should draw others into a living relationship with God.¹⁹ The other saying, “You are the light of the world” also carries the same message. The disciples are to give witness to all the peoples and nations. The purpose of this witness is to give glory to the heavenly Father (Mt 5:16).

As in everything, Jesus is the model for our mission. Jesus was the missionary of the Father, sent into the world by the Father, to fulfil his plan. He loved his Father and was fascinated by His Kingdom. Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a man to fulfil his Father’s plan. He humbled himself and was obedient, even to die on the cross (Phil 2:6-7). He said to the disciples: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (Jn 4: 34). His commitment was a commitment to the Father, manifested in his commitment to the people. In his proclamation of the Kingdom, he was proximate to the sinners, the poor and the marginalized of the society. He fulfilled the mission entrusted to him by the Father through his being and doing. We, the consecrated people, called and sent, should always keep in mind that our commitment is a commitment to God and our mission is God’s mission. Whatever may be the specific mission of each community, they all come from God and we do them to witness Jesus and to glorify the Father.

When Jesus commissioned the apostles to make disciples of all nations, he promised to be with them (Mt 28:20). His continuous presence sustains and bolsters the mission. What is essential, from our part, is transparency to the word of God, the authenticity of witness and adherence to God’s plan. The word of God that we listen to should determine the mission and we as individuals and as communities give witness to it. The salt and the light metaphors illustrate the individual and communitarian dimensions of witnessing. The communities by their very nature must reflect God’s light to all and the individual as a lamp “gives light to all in the house” (Mt 5:15). Witnessing is the best and irreplaceable form of mission and all other forms of missions must flow from it.

5. CONCLUSION

The word of God is at the center of the life and mission of the people of God. It is the source of their origin as a people in the Old Covenant, the mark of their identity, the goal post for their life, the nourishment for their journey, and a faithful companion in all their undertakings. The word of God gathered, consecrated and guided the chosen people and their leaders towards their common destiny. They flourished when they were faithful to the word of God and floundered when they failed to keep them. In the New Covenant, the incarnated Word, Jesus Christ, nourished the people with his word

and called everyone to build their lives on the rock that is the word of God (Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:47-49). In both the dispensations, the success and failure of the people were measured by their obedience or disobedience to the word of God.

The consecrated people are those who must “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Lk 8:15). For this they should make the word of God the center and animating principle of their lives. Consecrated life born of the word of God can find its nourishment and strength from it. Therefore, making the communities as the schools of the word of God, the consecrated people should allow all the charismatic dimensions of their life and mission, find their meaning, purpose, nourishment and strength from the word of God. God’s word is an invitation that must be accepted or rejected. Jesus proclaims that “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). Anyone who accepts this invitation and lives by his words, not only will find life but also bear abundant fruits and glorify the Father in heaven. But for those who reject his words, the words spoken on the last day, will serve as judge (Jn 12:48).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope John Paul II, *John Paul II Speaks to Religious*, Book X (1997-1998), compiled by Jean Beyer (London: Little Sisters of the Poor, 1998), p.108.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2010). Hereafter it will be referred as *Verbum Domini*.
- 3 In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI uses the phrase “Word of God” analogically, referring “to a symphony of the word, to a single word expressed in multiple ways.” According to him the Word of God refers to the Word spoken by God at creation and in the salvation history, to Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father made man, to the word preached by the Apostles in obedience to the missionary mandate of the risen Jesus, i.e. the word handed down in the Church’s living tradition and to the divinely inspired sacred scriptures (VD 8-18).
- 4 Psalms 19 and 119 are called as torah psalms by scholars.
- 5 Generally the action of the seraph is understood as purification to alleviate the fear of Isaiah who declared that he was impure and he lived among impure people. But comparing this action of the seraph with the call narratives of Jeremiah, where the Lord reached out his hand and touched the mouth of Jeremiah, saying, “now I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer 1: 9) and Ezekiel who was fed by the word of God when called (Ezek 3: 1-3), we can say that it means the transfer of the word of God to the prophet.
- 6 As quoted in Zacharias Mattam, *Opening the Bible*, (Bangalore: KJC Publications, 1988), p. 4

- 7 Torah is usually translated as 'Law' but it really means 'instruction' or 'teaching'. They were instructions of God to the Israelites given through Moses. In this paper the term Torah or Law should be understood in the sense of instructions of God or Word of God.
- 8 *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, no. 82. References to this document are from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988).
- 9 Pope John Paul II, *John Paul II speaks to Religious*, p. 69.
- 10 *Verbum Domini*, 83
- 11 *Verbum Domini*, 83.
- 12 Marciel Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests* (New York: Alpha House, 1998), p. 36
- 13 *Verbum Domini*, 83.
- 14 Elizabeth McDonough, "Come Follow Me: Reflections on Some Current Theories of Religious Life," *Review for Religious*, Vol. 54, No. 2, (March – April 1995), pp 166-169
- 15 Armando J. Levoratti, "The Power of the Word of God," in *The International Bible Commentary* (Bangalore: TPI, 1998), p.1
- 16 Armando J. Levoratti, "The Power of the Word of God," p.1
- 17 *Verbum Domini*, 83
- 18 Jones Ma Canals cmf, in *NUNC* 479 (July 2011), p.1.
- 19 Adrian Leske, "Mathew" in *The International Bible Commentary* (Bangalore: TPI, 1998), p.1338.

WORKING THROUGH THE ENTRENCHMENT IN RELIGIOUS LIVING

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During these past years, the religious men and women have been in the news for wrong reasons! Various episodes of conflicts, problems and tensions among themselves and in relation to the wider church and the world have been reported in the media. My concern is not to go into any of these particular issues. Neither is to take any one side of the debate that follows. There have been many arguments defending some against the others. The purpose, in this article, is to invite us to go deeper into a fundamental problem that we, the religious, are faced with. In a globalized world, news travel fast and intrude into our domains. We cannot stand back as neutral observers as they touch upon our lives as consecrated men and women. Reflecting over all these episodes and the current ambience that prevails in the religious living, there has been one problem that was coming to my mind and heart persistently. Let me describe the scenario:

1. QUESTION AND THE CONTEXT

Looking at religious life¹ today as it is lived in the local churches, I end up asking the question: Why are we (as religious) in the Church and in the world? What is our mission in relation to these realities?² I raise this question also in the context of the other vocations in the Church. The role of religious life today in the Church and the society is in great confusion. I have heard many religious themselves asking the question: What is so unique about our vocation? If I am doing things (teaching, nursing, administration, social work etc), which I can do even as a lay person why should I be a religious? In fact, they often do better than us. If so, what is so specific about my vocation? Is this life really meaningful today? What is its relevance in our times?

The laity also asks reverse questions and is confused about the institutions, positions and possessions of the religious. Most of the times, the wider society looks at priests and religious as one category and is not aware of the differences between vocation to

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priesthood and to religious life. Even when it does, it looks at the religious as those who are called to renounce everything but come across as those who end up having everything. It considers religious life as an enterprise on education, health, social services or as a nongovernmental organization. The only difference ordinary people may see is that the religious seem to spend more time in prayer, live in community, do not marry, and some of them also wear habits. This is where the popular perception of the religious, most of the time, ends up! Moreover, the particular environment that we live in also creates certain conventional and acceptable moulds for the religious and expects them to conform to those stereotypes and fit in. Any divergence from those moulds can be provoking and sometimes, controversial. This in turn, forces the religious also to remain within the acceptable and conforming models of presence and action, whether or not they are in tune with what they have been called to be and to do.

At times, ordained ministers also do not know what to do with this form of life called, “religious.” They do not know how to handle the situation, how to respond to its needs, or how to integrate it in their diocesan or parochial systems. There are also cases of mutual lording over and dominating each other between the religious and the hierarchy; mutual resentments and conflicts develop.

What has happened or what is happening to us? Perhaps we have mistaken the essentials for the accidentals or what we thought as important in the past is proving to be no longer important and so we are in despair. Deep down, some of us feel that we have reached somewhere where we are not meant to be. Now what else to do at this stage, other than just pull on. Some of us suffer from serious doubts about the uniqueness of this vocation to consecrated life, others about its specificity, and still others, about its authenticity or relevance in the world of today.

All these could bring us to crisis of all sorts: crisis of meaning, relevance, direction, orientation, and purpose. Confronted with these moments, we often, resort to react through fight, flight, fusion or opportunism. The result is: our life gets all the more disoriented. Thus we end up blaming this or that, pulling or pushing one against the other, escaping real issues, running after partial truths, or even displacing the essentials with the accidentals. Many of the contemporary problems affecting religious life must be seen in the light of these basic disorientations that have been happening to us, sometimes, even without our awareness. Where have we gone wrong? What is the alternative? Is there an alternative at all? This is the dilemma we are in.

2. THE PROBLEM OF ENTRENCHMENT AND ITS PREDICAMENT

This scenario that has been described is one that arises from a deeper problem: the problem of *entrenchment*. It is a situation where we all get so used to or conditioned by a particular, historical, regional, and socio-cultural mould that restricts and blurs our

vision. It is a vision of life, though grounded in the present, stifles, blurs and suffocates our way of seeing things around, making it a “tunnel vision.” This happens to all of us, laity, priests and religious. We see only what is in front of our eyes. Philosophers call it, the problem of *restrictive consciousness*. It is a vision that remains closed to the Spirit of God who continuously opens up and widens our horizons. Various are the problems that result from such an *entrenched* living: institutionalism, routinism, ritualism, doctrinalism, legalism, regionalism, fanaticism etc. This situation affects Church in general, all religious congregations and especially, the local churches and the indigenous congregations whose members come mostly from those local churches. Their strength is their insertion and rootedness in the local churches and their cultures but the weakness can be that they become too conditioned by the regional and cultural mould. We must have our roots and it is equally important also to have developed wings. Otherwise, we will fall into the traps of all sorts of exclusivism including regionalism and cultural imperialism.

2.1. Religious in a Domesticated Mould

It is no wonder then, that religious life as it is lived today suffers from a domestication in a mould made up by the conventional society and a conventional Church. We are more tamed by the powers of the world around rather than by the power of the Gospel. We seem to be entrenched in a mould so difficult to break for various reasons. Whenever religious life becomes overly identified with the law, structures, institutions and spirituality of the institutional church, it begins to die. “Where religious life is routine, life is dead. Where religious life is bent on being socially safe and legally proper, the life is dead. When Religious life is more an ember than a fire, the life is dead.”³

The dominant face of religious life today is the apostolic form with its original intent to offer corporate service and presence to the Church and the world in educational, medical and social apostolate. It is no wonder that many religious end up clinging on to the security, power and comfort of their institutions and their corporate presence rather than offering a personal Christ-like presence to the people and especially to those who are on the frontiers and margins of the society, although, these were the people that Jesus served; the unknown, the unwanted, the anonymous.

Added to this, there is a nostalgic preference to remain within one’s own institutions and the reluctance to enter into mission in collaboration and partnership with other religious and lay people in shared mission. Many of us excuse ourselves by saying that we need to work in “our own,” but in fact, it covers up our insecurity to encountering the real world that offers varied incarnational and evangelizing possibilities. Living in “our own,” our personal presence is often choked and stifled by archaic legalism, uninspiring spiritualism and bureaucratic red-tapism. Often times, too much of work is

extracted from those who work in their own institutions, pushing them to excessive activism that erodes the foundations of a vibrant spiritual life.⁴ The question is: what is our position in relation to the power structures and its colossal illusions? What are we saying to the world of today? Have we become a “people without prophecy?”⁵

Those of us, who belong to active orders, seem to be losing our ability to be on the frontiers to offer alternative perceptions based on the demands of the Gospel. We have moved too far into the middle ground, adapted and tamed by the world and its illusions and alienating compulsions which we are supposed to renounce with all the strength of our being.⁶ It seems that our “frontier mission” has been subverted and is now reappearing in strange and unexpected places.

We also have been trimmed and tamed by the hierarchical Church, more so when we exist in churches, traditionally grounded. In spite of the autonomy of the religious in the Church, we subject ourselves to undue hierarchical control. Added to this, due to the clericalization of religious life, the mission of religious life has been subjected to the demands and at times to the emergencies of the pastoral work of the local church. In this way, religious life has been overly conditioned by dioceses and parishes. Post-conciliar ecclesiology has emphasized the importance of the local church. All apostolic services must fit into the common pastoral work under the direction and guidance of the local hierarchy. It is good to ask. Are we prepared to live the healthy tension that should exist between our fidelity to the Kingdom and loyalty to the hierarchy of the Church?

2.2. Loss of Touch with the Fundamentals

We know that consecration, communion and mission are the three essential aspects of consecrated life.⁷ Sadly, these are all objective concepts too familiar to us and that precisely is the problem. We think that we know them. In an entrenched living, people take what is passed onto them without a critical and spirit-filled enquiry as it happens in much of our religious formation. We can run into the danger of living out of touch with the fundamental meaning of the above aspects of our vocation. The story of the painting, called *Night Watch* by Rembrandt is particularly significant in this context. *Night Watch* was a painting well known for its contrast between light and darkness. After the death of Rembrandt, his admirers, in an attempt to keep the painting fresh, added a layer of varnish over the original painting and every succeeding generation also did the same. Finally the painting became very different from the original. One day, a chemist decided to remove the layers of varnish and retraced the original. Surprisingly, however, when the original was discovered, many expressed shock at the original saying, “this is not Rembrandt.” They knew only the painting with layers of varnish over it so much so that the original, when discovered, was strange to some and scandalous to others.

Something similar has happened to Religious life today. I have a feeling we are losing touch with the fundamentals as we are caught up in a conventional religiosity. We seem to have buried ourselves in our routines and conventional religiosity and securely insulated ourselves against any form of spiritual shock.

2.3. Blurring of the Mission Proper to the Religious

Even though, fidelity to one's own foundational charism was pointed out by the Council as a criterion for the renewal of religious life, religious communities have become specialized apostolic bodies at the service of the local church or "cheap labor" in pastoral work and teaching, renouncing the function unique to it and proper to congregational charism. This may have resolved pressing pastoral problems, but it has negatively affected the identity of religious life. On the one hand, the local Church is deprived of the specific support of the congregational charism. On the other, religious life is faced with a sort of permanent schizophrenia. Respective charisms are left behind in order that religious life may adjust itself to the pastoral system of the entire diocese or to its institutional demands, stifling our prophetic and creative imagination for creative fidelity to original charismatic vision.

Moreover, the activism of the active religious orders also has contributed to the blurring of the mission of the religious. The system of bureaucracy has entered into religious life. The hierarchical structure become imposing, widening the gap between those who govern and those who are governed. Often such a situation is legitimized by self-serving interpretation of the counsel of obedience that substantiates such an unjust structure. Offices and responsibilities are multiplied, giving rise to conflicts of competency, interferences and blockades. This predominance of doing has led to a certain uncontrolled activism, a blind faith in temporal commitments and an almost idolatrous worship of effectiveness.

Most importantly, this situation of entrenched living prevents us from being what we are called to be: that critical and therapeutic function proper to the essence of our religious vocation. We seem to have been bought by the world and are no longer able to exercise that critical and therapeutic function. There are also false compromises, or "pact with the world" made, for fear of loss of safety and security and sometimes, to promote our own vested interests. We may have come to accept a world where "normality" can be, at times, neurosis.

We seem to have forgotten answers to the two basic questions: Who are we in the Church? Why are we in the Church? Is our function merely to become a "labour force" within the Church, to become locked up in institutions or to convert people of other faiths? Is the mission "*ad gentes*" to be understood only in terms of converting people of other faiths to our own? Why do we live in community and what is its essence? What is the evangelical meaning of corporate mission?

What are the real values that we want to express and mediate to the world through the evangelical counsels? Have our vows enabled us to grow in spiritual freedom? Does the style of living vowed life hearten, encourage, and attract others to God? Have we been able to understand and practice the vows appreciatively and positively? What is dominant, negation or positive affirmation?⁸

The crisis is not merely one of vocation, but of exercising the mission and the function proper to consecrated life: We need to search for it and discover it. Because of this entrenchment in a particular, historical and cultural mould, there exists a real need of re-visioning of religious life so that we can exercise the mission proper to us.

3. BEING BORN FROM ABOVE: WIDENING OUR HORIZONS

To discover our mission, we must begin, first of all, by opening our horizons. Such an opening is closely associated with the reality of the Kingdom whose stewards we are. Jesus says to Nicodemus: “No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again from above” (Jn 3: 3). The most redeeming thing in a period of entrenchment is our willingness to be open to the Spirit of God who “hovers over the face of the earth,” leading us to an experience of being “born again from above.” Jesus says again: “You must be born again from above. The wind blows where it pleases and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). We must allow the Spirit to hover over us because it is the Spirit that challenges us to go beyond our entrenched, fixated, rigidified and routinized living, our partial perceptions, decisions and actions. It is the Spirit who is the Great Founder of consecrated life, who inspires the founders and “sustains consecrated life into existence and gives it the varying shapes it has assumed throughout history.”⁹ The Spirit calls us to seek, search and incarnate ourselves in new, and creative ways so that we can further the growth of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus has also called us to “ask, seek and knock” (Mt 7: 7-8; Lk 11:9-12), an essential disposition for discipleship. He tells us: “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and God’s righteousness” (Mt 6:33), and if we do, essentially everything else will fall into its proper place and priority in our lives. The problem is that there are many who follow but few are those who seek. It is in this challenge of opening ourselves and seeking beyond the familiar that we hear the call to creative and innovative fidelity to God’s will. Such an opening can be an opportunity to rediscover very essential and vital aspects that may have been neglected or glossed over or even forgotten in our journey through life.

4. NEED FOR A RE-VISIONING

Perhaps, the time has come for a re-visioning of consecrated life with all its values, structures and traditions. There is the need for an “honest rethinking and re-grounding”

of all that we profess and live.¹⁰ Some of our structures and traditions may be too ill for meaningful and relevant existence today. We are unable to let them go because of fear, fidelity as blind conformity to certain forms or due to ignorance of the other ways that we could be and act. Many of our renewal attempts are about re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Re-visioning would call for dying of customs, of ways of thinking, modes of behaviour, of world views, systems and traditions in genuine freedom. Reverence for the past traditions alone may not be enough anymore. These traditions, too, as Barbara Fiand says, “had their interdisciplinary roots, and must be understood and criticized within their historical situation. Past behaviours and values are not *ipso facto*, holy. They were often based on erroneous assumptions derived from the philosophies and sciences of the time that are no longer applicable today.”¹¹

We must know that authentic values can be lived in a variety of forms and styles more in tune with the needs of the Church and world. For a re-visioning, what is most important is the willingness to question the “why” of things without fear of rejection or worry about giving scandal. Such a questioning does not imply a negative attitude or the desire to do away with what has been valued so long. But it provides an opportunity for an honest self-examination of our motives in an attempt to arrive at a more authentic meaning and proclamation of what we have been called forth by the Spirit of God who will certainly assist us in this open search.

5. LEARNING FROM THE HISTORY

No reality is more essential to self-awareness than history. An important aspect of working through our entrenchment is to learn from our own history as religious in the Church. As we widen our horizons, let us first of all begin taking a brief overview of our history: origin, growth and development of consecrated life.

5.1. Glancing through the History

A simple glance through the history of religious life will reveal that it has expressed itself in a variety of forms all through the history: Hermits, monastics, mendicants, apostolic institutes, missionary orders with mission *ad gentes* and secular institutes. This great variety is one of the glories of the Church and one that permits a large number of men and women to find a form of consecrated life adapted to their needs and dispositions and multiplies the services which consecrated people render to the christian society and mankind in general.

A deeper reason for the variety could be the rocking of religious life, its renewals and crises, initiated by the Holy Spirit who continuously reminds the whole church of what discipleship of Jesus consists of in every period. In fact, throughout the history, the different forms emerged successively as a spirit-filled response, both to the corruption inherent in the previous form and also to the emerging new needs of the Church and the

world. Various forms emerged as a critical response to the ills of the society and of the Church. In the beginning, persecution and later, compromised christian living and the growing worldliness of the clergy and the faithful during Post Constantine era, necessitated the desert as the first form of consecrated life. Though the goal of the eremitical form was mostly directed towards personal sanctification, deep down their attempt was to remove everything from their hearts that prevent love of God and neighbor. The hermits of the desert wanted to remove their own blinders first in order to see the world through the eyes of God and respond to it in the way God wanted. They knew what their Master told them: “Take first, the plank from your own eye, then you will see clear enough to take the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:5). “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” (Lk 6:39; Mt 15:14). The hermits took these words of Jesus seriously.

Monasticism came as an organized Christian response to the faltering and the chaotic social organization of Europe and to give it order, discipline and stability. It resisted a pattern of decline in the social fabric by forming an integrated way of life that involved an alternative way of working, praying and being together. Monasticism also embodied a resistance to the clerical patterns that had developed after the Constantine alliance of church and state. At the frontiers of the declining Roman empire, early monastics lived a prophetic way of life, denouncing its evils and announcing the possibility of an alternative future for the culture and for the Church. Monasteries have been and still strive to be, in the heart of the Church and world, in the words of Pope John Paul II, “eloquent signs of communion, welcoming abodes for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of study, dialogue and culture for the building up of the life of the Church and of the earthly city itself, in the expectation of the heavenly city.”¹²

Mendicants with their itinerant poverty countered the nascent bourgeois ideal of profit over all and the wealth of the Church and her institutions; the Carmelite reform responded to the power-drunk Spain and a divided Church; Apostolic orders came to reform the corrupted clergy, to lead the counter reformation and to build up christian nations. Congregations devoted to the marginalized responded to the bad effects of industrial capitalism. Secular Institutes emerged to deal with the bad effects of clericalization of religious life, enclosures of the cloistered living and to shed the light of the Gospel on secular realities. Missionary congregations were founded to share the faith to the newly discovered gentile nations with *mission ad gentes*. Various forms of religious life and its most representative institutions have always come into existence as a counterpoise to some of the main temptations into which christians seem to be falling and as projects aimed at remedying some of the crying needs in the Church and of the world.¹³

5.2. Shifting of Horizons and the New Learning

There are some important conclusions that we can draw from this brief historic overview. These insightful conclusions go a long way in helping us to situate and understand ourselves from wider horizons which can open up our entrenched living. They are:

1. Consecrated life stands in a three-fold relationship: relationship to God (*consecration*), relationship to the Church (*communion*) and relationship to the world (*mission*). Hence we speak of the three-fold aspect of CL as *consecration, communion and mission*. Consecrated Life unfolds in this triangular relationship. Precisely because of this reason, they are mutually inter-forming relationships. Changes in the perceptions of one reality (God, Church or world) in a certain period can affect the way the religious men and women of that period see and relate to other realities. For example, changes in the perception of God can have its repercussions in the way we see and live communion and do the mission and vice versa.

2. In consecrated life, there are various forms such as, hermits, monastics, mendicants, apostolic institutes, missionary orders with mission *ad gentes* and secular institutes. We, as religious, belong to this wider family of men and women. We need to come out of our narrow enclaves, discover, affirm, support and work with one another collaboratively, knowing also the mission proper to each.

3. We find in the evolution of forms the successive emphasis on total consecration to God, communitarian experience, preaching and evangelical poverty and apostolic commitments and missionary movements.

4. The foundation of every new form is characterised by a re-reading of the Gospel and new appreciation of the message of Jesus that leads to innovative insight on how the condition of the Church or society could be dramatically improved or how a totally new kind of future could be launched. A new thrust to live the religious life in all the totality of its demands is felt, and a new vision emerges that is at once a critique of the present, an appropriation of the past, a compelling image of the future and a basis for novel strategies.

5. There has also been a rising and falling of forms, a cycle of birth, growth, decline and rebirth in a new form.¹⁴ Each new form successfully interpreted the signs of the times and responded wisely and creatively to new needs of the Church and of the world. Growth of every form eventually leads to a certain corruption and so decline, though not a complete death. In the stage of decline, the Spirit points to new possibilities for the future. At every stage of decline, we can identify factors that lead to decline and decay, and therefore, also the possibilities for revitalization.¹⁵ No matter how entrenched religious life becomes in any one historical, cultural or spiritual mould, the Spirit will call forth prophetic leadership to pioneer new possibilities in response to the new needs.

6. However, every new form seems to follow a cycle of five different phases:¹⁶ They are: foundation, expansion, stabilization, breakdown and transition phases. At the transition phase, any of the following is possible: total extinction, low level of minimum survival or survival with revitalization. Survival with revitalization depends on the following factors: transforming response to the signs of the time, re-appropriation of the founding charism, profound renewal of the life of prayer, faith, centeredness in Christ and a deep personal transformation coupled with insight and vision.

7. There is no need to count as failures those which disappeared. The history of the work of the Spirit is neither a linear evolutionary history nor is it the history of apparent winners. That a movement is paralyzed and dies, dissolved and overcome or falls forgotten, does not mean that its origin was not an action of the Spirit. On the contrary, to be charismatically consumed and worn out, is a guarantee of evangelical life. Charismatic death is the end of an accomplished mission, not the end of a failed cycle.

8. The emergence of a new form may not replace the previous form, though individual institutes, apostolates and institutions cannot claim permanence.¹⁷ The particular form within which such things came to be, however, loses its dominance, paving the way for a new form.

9. New forms emerged when the Church was flourishing as well as when she was disoriented and unsure of herself. This pattern points to a consistent reforming influence that the consecrated life seems to exercise in relation to the Church.

10. We find in the evolution of forms a successive, though not exclusive, emphasis with regard to the internal life. Each form emphasizes one or the other important aspect of consecrated Life: eremitism, the contemplative experience; monasticism, the communitarian experience; mendicants, preaching and evangelical poverty; apostolic congregations, the apostolic commitments; missionary congregations, the missionary aspect. Correspondingly, the understanding of the vows also changes: hermits (individual asceticism), cenobitics (individual poverty but made it compatible with community wealth), mendicants (favored real poverty for both individuals and communities and directed them to itinerant mission); apostolic orders (essentially in terms of service to the poor, marginalized and acquisition of the knowledge and skills needed to build up faith communities and nations); missionary orders (as radical availability and generosity for the needs of the mission).

11. There exists an exaggerated persistence, in the heart of religious life, to be at the bordering zone, at different boundaries of the world (the limits: poetic, artistic, symbolic, the sociological, religious) in order to place themselves in front of the mystery which gives them foundation to mirror back the truths, the world may have been ignoring.

12. Essential to consecrated life are two complementary movements: a *going up* and *coming down*, a process that sums up the two commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. This is the journey of growing in conformity with Christ and returning to the world to love and serve in a Christ-like manner. Consecrated life involves both going up and coming down—a call to live intensely this twofold aspect of the one commandment of Jesus. If this principal commandment as interpreted by Jesus is the supreme norm of life, obviously we have to see religious life, in its constitutive elements, as a life according to the commandment of love. The only vow that characterizes christian life is the *vow of love*; it is the goal of all christian life. “This single vow is configured in the religious life with liminal and frontier traits.”¹⁸ Contemplative orders emphasize more the up-movement and the active orders emphasize the return movement. Contemplation and action are the two wings of consecrated life and they are complementary. One cannot exist without the other even though one or the other can become a primary mode of presence on behalf of God.

13. Though consecrated life originated in the desert with a radical break from the world, the successive forms were more a return to the world. Even in the desert form, the holy men and women knew that they had a mission to the world. At the same time, to be in the world in a Christ-like manner one must constantly contemplate on the One whom he or she is called to represent and mediate.

14. We must marvel at two things: the unchanging continuity in consecrated life from the early church to the modern times and the development, the progress, the adaptation to the times, the adjustments, the decline of certain forms and the emergence of new forms. The main goal of this brief overview of history is to help us see that consecrated life, though remains the same in essentials, has manifested itself in various forms. To know just one would be unbalanced. To know just the other without the first would be a tragedy. Most of our problems in religious life occur because we look at things partially and one-sidedly. Correspondingly, we hold on to things that need adjustment. Or more seriously and tragically, we are adapting to everything in the world and in the process, losing that substance without which, you may have adaptation all right, but no longer religious life in its true sense.

15. We must also remember that the primitive radicality expressed in a life of total consecration, cannot be limited to a single vow or even to the three vows. Involved in consecration is a striving to unite all the counsels scattered throughout the Gospels, possibly, a *religion of the counsels*. Perfect realization of those counsels is impossible to man; the opportunity of practising them all does not present itself in every man’s life and one would quickly be worn out if he attempted to keep them all continually in view. In fact, the breakdown of each forms and the emergence of a new form must be understood in the context of the innovativeness of the Spirit of God, bringing forth new

demands from the totality of the demands of the Gospels. Those counsels that ensure the freedom from whatever hinders the love of God and neighbour—this is the distinguishing mark of consecration.

16. Because of the above reason, in spite of the rising and falling of its forms, consecrated life will continue to flourish as it has happened in the past, expressing itself in new forms that we may least expect, depending on the new historical, cultural, ecclesial context in which it finds itself. However, this will happen only with a “huge divesting of the accretions of time and culture. The wealth we have accumulated, the status and privilege we have amassed, the fame we have accrued, will have to be shed . . . the false securities, we will also have to dispense with.”¹⁹ There is no way that consecrated life can flourish without the living through the paradox of Calvary and resurrection. This could be the hardest cross to bear but it is also our greatest hope for the future.

CONCLUSION

In short, through the contemporary problems and crises, we are all experiencing what John Shea describes as *disenchantment*. According to him, disenchantment is a “traditional and well-established path to the awareness of the Mystery.”²⁰ Disenchantment is the beginning of a mature religious consciousness. At first, it appears as negative. It is resented and seen as destructive of personal convictions and purposes of our entrenched religious living. More central to this experience is the pain of being deceived. Life in its most important dimension—the relationship with God—had been guided by an understanding of Church, religious life, community life, others etc., that claimed too much. However painful may be the path of disenchantment, in the last analysis, it is a positive and mature experience. It is more an experience of discovery than loss. It is the retrieval of the true relationship between God and our finite and conditioned human reality.

In fact, disenchantment is the way that God reasserts himself into our lives, opening our horizons. Shea writes: “When people mistakenly equate Mystery with finite reality, they create idol. An idol is not a symbol of the Mystery but the pretension to be Mystery itself.”²¹ There could be too many of those idols in our entrenched living. The process of disenchantment, therefore, is a process of disengagement, a double freeing. Mystery is freed from the idol’s exclusive hold, and the idol is freed from its false identity. Mystery is restored to its status as genuine Mystery and the finite reality, previously perceived idolatrous, now has the possibility of being appropriated as a symbol. Let nothing in our life be an usurper of the sacred but one of its mediators. If we have to sense the transcendent call hidden within this experience of disenchantment, we must look at this from the perspective of faith.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The terms, “Religious life” and “Consecrated life” are used interchangeably throughout this article.
- 2 This article is the first part of a reflection paper, written by the author, titled, “Why Religious Life in the Church?” in an attempt to search for the mission proper to consecrated life in the Church and world. The next issue in July will carry the second part of the same.
- 3 Joan Chittister, “Religious Life is still alive, but far from the promised land,” in *The National Catholic Reporter*, 30/16 (February 18, 1994), p. 18. Read also, Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Between the Times: Religious Life and the Post-Modern Experience of God,” in *Review for Religious*, 53/1 (January-February 1994), p.15.
- 4 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World (Rome, 1996), hereafter abbreviated as (VC), 63.
- 5 VC. 51, 57-58.
- 6 VC. 38.
- 7 These three aspects of Consecrated life are dealt extensively in *Vita Consecrata*. The document has only three chapters each of which focuses on the themes of consecration, communion and mission successively.
- 8 VC. 87.
- 9 Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes , *Theology of Religious Life: Covenant and Mission*, (Claretian Publications, Manila: 2006), p. 209.
- 10 Barbara Fiand, *Wrestling with God: Religious Life in Search of its Soul*, (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 29.
- 11 Barbara Fiand, *Wrestling with God: Religious Life in Search of its Soul*, p. 29.
- 12 VC.6.
- 13 Readers would remember that this is a very brief over view of the history of religious life. For a detailed reading, kindly use: Cada, L & Alia. *Shaping the Coming of Age of Religious Life*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); Chitty, Derwas J. *The Desert, a City*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966); Merton, Thomas. *Wisdom of the Desert*. (New York: New Directions, 1960); Hostie, Raymond. *Vie et Mort des Religieux*, (Desclee de Brower, 1972); English Edition is available from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Washington D.C.); Knowles, David. *From Pachomius to Ignatius*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); Lozano, John M. *Religious Life as Parable*. (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 1986); Puthiyadam, Ignatius. *A Short History of Religious Life*. (Asian Trading Coporation: Bangalore, 2000). It is to be specially noted that the history of religious life is inseparably linked to the history of

the Church. For a reading of the history of the Church, please refer, Bokenkotter, Thomas. *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) and MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Viking Penguin, New York: 2009).

- 14 This analysis is based on the thesis of Raymond Hostie, a Jesuit Scholar. The kernel of his theory is as follows: “Religious institutes have a hardy life. They need a period of gestation from ten to twenty years. To consolidate, they need almost double that time. Their full development, if not postponed by a period of incubation, takes almost one hundred years. They remain stabilized during an almost equal period of time. Then suddenly they begin a downward curve, which in its turn can last from fifty to one hundred years, after which, according to circumstances, extinction is duly registered . . . The complete life-cycle of groupings of Religious Life stretches out over a period varying between 250 and 300 years” (Raymond Hostie, *Vie et Mort des Religieux*, (Desclee de Brower, 1972), p. 312. (English Edition available from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Washington D.C.).
- 15 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *The Prophetic Horizon of Religious Life*, (London: Excalibur Press, 1989), 63-92. Some of these factors could be manifested in the following tendencies: activism begins to dominate; work satisfaction displaces the centrality in Christ; going along with the herd mentality; a feeling of overall well being rules out the necessity for change; a hidden type of rigidity sets in; wealth begins to accumulate; poverty becomes problematic, prayer life recedes into the background.
- 16 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1991), p. 64. Total extinction happened to 76% of all groups of male religious, founded before 1500 and to 64% of all founded before 1800. Historically this would imply that most groups of the religious in the Church today will eventually become extinct. Low level of minimal survival can last for several centuries. Of all male groups only 5% of those founded before 1800 have a current membership larger than 2000.
- 17 VC. 63.
- 18 J.C.R. Garcia Paredes, *Theology of Religious Life: Covenant and Mission*, p. 28.
- 19 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigms*, (Claretian Publications: Manila, 2005), viii.
- 20 John Shea, *Stories of God*, (Alen, Texas: Thomas More Publishing Company, 1978), p. 31
- 21 John Shea, *Stories of God*, p. 32.

MERCY (LK 6:36) AND PERFECTION (MT 5:48): SEARCHING FOR THE IDEAL IN CONSECRATED LIFE

Martin George, CMF

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I would like to make a brief study of Jesus' command to be merciful, which Luke includes in his Sermon on the Plain, and compare it with its slightly different Matthean parallel. Lk 6:36 reads: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Its Matthean counterpart has instead "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). As evident, the focus is different in the two verses: 'mercy' in Luke and 'perfection' in Matthew. Which of these must the Christians seek more? Which of these should become the identifying marks of all Christians? As this journal focuses on themes related to consecrated life, a pertinent question addressed specifically to the consecrated people would be: What do we aim at in our various apostolates - mercy or perfection?

In the following pages, we shall attempt a study of the two maxims in their respective contexts, analysing the different nuances of both the ideals - mercy and perfection. Then we shall focus on the Lukan version a bit more, proposing some possible reasons for his choice of 'mercy'. At the end is a short exposition of the message of mercy and its implications in consecrated life.

1. THE TWO TEXTS IN THEIR CONTEXTS

In order to place the two maxims in their context, we need to study them in the background of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount and the Lukan Sermon on the Plain. For obvious reasons, we cannot take the whole sermons into account; let us look only at the relevant sections of the Lukan and Matthean sermons:

Luke 6:27-36 ²⁷ "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Matthew 5:38-48 ³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes

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²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even **sinners** love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even **sinners** do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even **sinners** lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ **Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the **tax collectors** do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the **Gentiles** do the same? ⁴⁸ **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

As may be observed, the two passages have only some things in common (The parallels are underlined and the differences are given in bold letters). Some other parallel texts are scattered in other parts of the Gospels; we cannot go into those details here. Let us now briefly analyze the two texts quoted above, in order to understand the context of our subject of discussion.

2. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND THE MATTHEAN MAXIM

The Sermon on the Mount, spread over three chapters, is too big and extensive to be considered here. We are presently interested in the concluding section of chapter 5, given above, which carries the maxim.

2.1. The Place of the Maxim

The argument in this section shows that the inadequate interpretation of Lev 19:18 as set forth in v. 43b-c (‘love your neighbour and hate your enemy’) shows no ethical value and thus cannot be the meaning of the Torah as intended by God. Mere conformity to popular morality and convention (‘loving those who love you’ and ‘greeting only

brothers and sisters’) does not suffice; going beyond or against popular morality and convention may be required to do justice to the will of God. The correct interpretation of Lev 19:18 is proposed in v. 44 (‘Love your enemies’) and v. 45a presents the eschatological consequences for those who follow the correct interpretation (‘attaining the status of the children of your father in heaven’); v. 45b adduces the mythology containing the reasons why the imperatives in 44bc are theologically well founded. Yet the fundamental theological doctrine, underlying the whole argument of vv. 43-48, needs to be stated positively; this is the purpose of the concluding maxim of v. 48.

2.2. The Maxim “Be Perfect...” (Mt 5:48)

With the argument of vv. 46-47 concluded, v. 48 presents a final maxim summing up the doctrine underlying the entire set of antitheses in 5:21-47. The *oun* (then, therefore) serves as both a transitional and an inferential conjunction, denoting that the sentence to follow is a consequence of the preceding argument. The maxim has first a verb in the future tense, and the second part states the reason justifying it. This form of composition is common among maxims, but it is not clear whether *esesthe* is merely an imperative (“Be perfect”) or a prediction (“you will be perfect”) or an eschatological promise (“you may be perfect”). Grammatically as well as contextually one could justify each of the options.¹ Probably the ambiguity is intended precisely to combine the various aspects, none of which can be isolated without losing grasp of the theology of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. Basic to it all is the divine promise of salvation for those who are obedient to the will of God.

The term *teleios* (perfect) occurs only here in the Sermon on the Mount and here it is first attributed to man and then to God. The terminology of perfection is widely attested in ancient literature and encompasses a correspondingly wide range of meanings. Establishing what the term means in a particular instance requires the examination of the context of that passage as well as close literary parallels. The adjective *teleios* (perfect) derives from the verb *teleo* (finish, complete) or the noun *telos* (end, goal, conclusion). The basic meaning, therefore, is ‘having attained the end or purpose’, ‘complete’, ‘perfect’. Depending on the context, it can refer to various fields like cult, education or ethics. A close parallel in Mt 19:21 (the story of the rich young man: “if you wish to be perfect...”) offers a similar meaning as in our text. *Didache* concludes in 1:4 and 6:2, “and you shall be perfect.” The Epistle of James has a fully developed perfection theology (cf. Js 1:4, 25; 3:2).

According to Luz, the Matthean *teleios* must be interpreted not on the basis of the Greek doctrine of virtues, but on the basis of its Jewish background.² In Jewish texts, individual pious persons (like Noah or Abraham) can be described as perfect, because of their piety and their obedience. The Hebrew equivalent *thamim* appears with special frequency in the Qumran texts; it is a self designation of this group that goes ‘the perfect

way' by keeping the more rigorously interpreted Torah. The young man in Mt 19:21 lacking perfection in spite of keeping all the commandments refers to the importance of the qualitative element. Probably when Matthew used the word *teleios* here, he has in mind the love of enemies, which does not fall into the category of an ordinary obedience to the commandments. It demands extra-ordinary attention to attain perfection.

In what way is God perfect? He bestows the benefits of his creation continuously on the bad and the good and on the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 45bc). He does so, not on the expectation that his enemies would see his goodness and be converted, but because it is his nature to be just, generous and therefore, perfect.³ Humans also can become perfect by imitation of this perfection of God. One must not misunderstand the love of enemy as a pedagogical device for the conversion of the enemy or for a general improvement of morality; instead it is an attempt to partake in the perfect nature of God.

3. THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN AND THE LUKAN MAXIM

The Lukan version of the sermon clearly reflects the trends in Lukan theology, visible in the rest of his Gospel. According to Fitzmyer, "the sermon on the Plain is a sample of the preaching of the Lukan Jesus. Its peculiar emphasis and theological import can only be judged from its place within the Lukan Gospel."⁴ Presented as an instruction to the disciples (6:20), the sermon is intended to shape their conduct. But it has also to be related to the mission of Jesus as presented thus far in Luke's Gospel; he has come to preach to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the downtrodden of his day (4:18). His introduction of 'now' (6:21a,c; 6:25a,c) reveals his concern for Christian life here and now, a call to the life of discipleship.⁵

The whole sermon may be divided into the following four parts:

- a) The beatitudes and woes (vv. 20-26) serve as a starting point for the heart of his message, the love.
- b) Love (vv. 27-36) must dominate the life of the Christian disciple. It is a love of one's neighbour, and even of one's enemy - of those who may hate, curse, mistreat, beat, rob and deprive Christians of what is rightfully theirs. The motivation proposed for such love is the love or mercy of God himself, the father of Christian existence, which is to be imitated.⁶
- c) In vv. 37-45, the teaching on love takes on a wider scope: the verses deal with the demands of Christian community living; the prohibition of judging (or criticising) is but another application of the counsel of love. Judgement and condemnation must yield to forgiveness, bounteous generosity and upright conduct.
- d) Finally in vv. 46-49, Jesus calls for realistic, effective action, based not only on such love, but on the word that he preaches.

3.1. Structure of the Section 6:27-38

To throw more light on the meaning of the Lukan maxim, let us take up an extended section - instead of stopping at v. 36, we shall take two more verses for our analysis, thus going up to v. 38. The section may be divided into a larger section on love of enemies (vv. 27-36) and a briefer section on being non-judgemental (vv. 37-38).

- a) Love of enemies
 - 27–28 - opening statement of the principle
 - 29 - concrete illustrations of its implementation
 - 30 - a generalization that broadens out the principle
 - 31 - the golden rule gives the widest scope in the definition of love
 - 32–34 - love of enemies is contrasted with a ‘reciprocity ethic’ by means of three rhetorical questions with appended explanatory comments
 - 35a - a restatement of the principle (in a form now coloured by the questions in vv. 32-34)
 - 35b - a promise of reward which supports it
 - 35c, d - the example of God, whose nobility one should imitate and thus behave like his sons
 - 36 - The last point is reiterated in a call to imitate the mercy of God.
- b) Being Non-judgemental
 - 37-38a - Fourfold parallelism enjoining a generosity of spirit toward others as necessary for those who wish God to deal in a generous spirit of mercy toward them.
 - 38b - The last of the parallel statements is expanded to make the point that God is yet more generous than anything he calls us to.
 - 38c - Statement of the principle that mercy and generosity to others (or their lack) is our declaration that we expect God to treat us the same way.⁷

3.2. The Lukan Focus in the Section (as different from Matthew)

Placing side by side the Lukan and Matthean parallel sections, in spite of the several similarities, the difference in Luke’s focus in the sermon stands out. The closely related themes of love (*agapan* - vv. 27, 28, 35), doing good (*agathopoiein* - vv. 31-33) and lending (*daneizein* - vv. 34-38) support Jesus’ exhortation to give away or lend without expecting any recompense. This is to be specially noted because Matthew doesn’t mention this point at all in his Gospel.⁸ The sermon concludes repeating the theme of

giving. The reward is to be expected in heaven, in keeping with v. 35b. It means that the Christian disciple is supposed to give and share generously his wealth with others in need, not with a business outlook, but with 'mercy' (v. 36). Probably, the contemporary situation of Luke's community in urban circumstances was highly influenced by Greco-Roman culture and promoted more business relationship (based on '*gegenseitigkeit*' - reciprocity or mutual benefit) than love relationship.⁹ Having this in mind, we can better understand the Lukan choice of the ideal of 'mercy', as different from the Matthean ideal of 'perfection' (Mt 5:48). Thus Jesus' exhortation is in perfect harmony with his care for the poor and needy, and at the same time, in head-on collision with the ethic of reciprocity, which in Luke's eyes, has in reality no love and mercy. In other words, Luke holds that this ethic is not the right attitude and should be abolished at least among Christians.

3.3. The Maxim "Be Merciful ..." (Lk 6:36)

This maxim is the conclusion to the section vv. 32-36. "Be merciful..." (v. 36) reformulates the last clause of v. 35 ("he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked"). The Lukan maxim sharpens the saying, by giving it the form of a command. The motivation for the command in the imperative¹⁰ is found in the second clause of the maxim ("just as your father is merciful"). Here the concept of imitation of God is introduced. What is the difference between vv. 35 and 36? What is the significance of the conclusion in v.36, in comparison with the argument in vv. 32-35? In v. 36 we have the statement of the positive ethical command for which the apologetic argument of vv. 32-35 has prepared us. It is noteworthy that v. 36 does not motivate the Christian to follow Jesus' love command by simply appealing to the eschatological reward (v. 35b-d). That doctrine, though not repudiated, is superseded by the motivation in v. 36: not heavenly reward, but imitation of God is the higher and more important doctrine motivating Christian ethics. Jesus' love command (27b) also makes sense in the background of the doctrine of imitation of God: God loves his enemies in his mercy, and such an act of love constitutes proper behaviour for the religiously sensitive Christian as well.

Though v. 36 reformulates what precedes, it is also transitional to what follows, since the question of judging is a further example of the imitation of God's mercy. Naturally, some link this verse with what follows and others with what precedes. According to Nolland, the latter is to be preferred for the following reasons: (i) being like God is the theme of both vv 35 and 36; (ii) the interest of v. 36 in the imitation of God does not mesh well with the theme in vv 37-38 of being treated by God as one treats other people; (iii) the equivalent material in Matthew (5:48) is oriented to what comes before; (iv) the universal compassion of God (cf. Sir 18:13; Ps 145:8-9) models well the kindness not based on reciprocity to which the disciple is called.¹¹

The adjective *oiktirmon* (merciful/compassionate) used in our maxim derives from the noun *oiktirmos* and the verb *oiktiro*. In the LXX this group of words (*oiktirmein*, *oiktirmon*, *oiktirmos*) are used to render the Hebrew words from the *raham* or *hannun*; family. The stem *oikt-* is thus used predominantly for derivatives of the stem *rhm* or for formations of *hnn*. The meaning is always ‘sympathy’ or ‘pity’. There is no palpable distinction between *oiktirmein* and *eleein* or *oiktirmos* and *eleos* (mercy/compassion). *Rhm* and *hnn* are rendered by both *oiktirmein* and *eleein* and in the LXX, *oiktirmein* and *eleein* are combined or used as parallels like the Hebrew *rhm* and *hnn*. *Oiktirmein* may denote human compassion, but in most cases, the reference is to divine compassion. Under the influence of the Psalms, invocation of God’s compassion became a characteristic feature of Jewish prayer.

In the NT, the verb *oiktiro* occurs only in Rom 9:15 in a quotation from Ex 33:19. As in the original, it stands parallel to *eleein*, which is the common word used by post-Apostolic fathers, Apologists and Justin. Also in the use of the noun *oiktirmos* in the NT, the OT concept of God’s *rahamim* (tender mercy) is adopted. Thus in Rom 12:1, Paul admonishes the congregation ‘by the mercies of God’ and in 2 Cor 1:3, he calls God ‘the father of mercies’. The latter designation is a common one in Judaism. God is the father from whom all compassion comes and it is imparted to us. The adjective *oiktirmon* is used of God in James 5:11 as a variation on the description of God in Ps 102:8 and 110:4.¹²

4. THE MATTHEAN ‘PERFECTION’ AND THE LUKAN ‘MERCY’

In either form the saying is a takeoff from Lev 19:2 (“Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy”). Being part of the sayings of Jesus, scholars trace the source of both the maxims to Q.¹³ Fitzmyer is of opinion that it is hard to say which would have been the more original ‘Q’ form, ‘perfect’ or ‘merciful’.¹⁴ However, since Matthew uses *teleios* (perfect) elsewhere (19:21), it is possible that he has redacted the Q saying. Moreover, God in the OT is never said to be perfect (*teleios*) or blameless (*amomos*), but he is said to be merciful (*oiktirmon* - Exod 34:6; Deut 4:31; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). It is also to be noted that Luke never uses this adjective *oiktirmon* (merciful) elsewhere; it is found only here. So chances are less that it is a Lukan invention. Dupont has argued convincingly that the Lukan form is more original than the Matthean and reflects Jesus’ own characteristic starting point in the action and character of God. In the OT *oiktirmon*, (merciful, compassionate), and behind that, the Hebrew *raham* are used dominantly as a divine attribute.¹⁵ Luz holds that “the Lukan version is faithful to the original Q source and Matthew has completely reworded it. The original Q is one of the earliest formulations on Palestinian soil of the Jewish ‘*Imitation Dei*’ (imitation of God) principle based on Lev 19:2.”¹⁶

In that case, why did Matthew change the Q tradition at all, if he too was concerned about mercy (e.g. Parable of the unforgiving servant - Mt 18:23-35 and other passages like 5:7 & 9:27)? Nobody can say for sure. However, with 'perfect', he probably emphasizes the fundamental significance of the love of enemies. "It is not one demand among others but the centre and apex of all the commandments that lead to perfection. Thus perfection is not a special status of a few 'exceptional' Christians."¹⁷ The need for a righteousness that is greater than that of the Pharisees and scribes (5:20) reiterates the idea that the goal of all Christians is the same perfection, which will necessarily include love of enemies.

While comparing two parallel texts from different gospels, we need to clarify a few points for the sake of those readers who do not have the background of any scientific biblical studies. During the composition of the gospels, Matthew and Luke may not have known each other's work and more importantly, did not consult each other. Therefore it is not that Matthew rejected the Lukan wordings and found his own vocabulary; neither did Luke find the Matthean version unacceptable and chose another word. Both had access to a common Q source (probably slightly different versions of Q) and they independently adopted their vocabulary. When we interpret for present-day Christian living the texts available to us, we cannot reject one version and accept the other, because both are 'Word of God'. What we are doing is trying to understand the text in its context and avoid possible wrong interpretations and misunderstandings. In this sense, here is a word of caution: though the Matthean insistence on perfection is understandable in the context of the teaching on love of enemies, when the maxim is taken out of its context, it can be misleading because of the various nuances associated with 'perfection' in the common man's language. At the same time, the Lukan 'mercy' is more convincing and commendable for Christian life; there are no chances of being misled or misunderstood. So, let us explore a bit deeper the Lukan concept of mercy.

5. POSSIBLE LUKAN MOTIVES FOR CHOOSING 'MERCIFUL'

In Lev 19:2 the determining quality of God is holiness. But in the LXX, the word *oiktirmon* is used thirteen times for God and only three or four times for human beings. Of the two main attributes of God, his holiness and his compassion, according to Luke, Jesus chooses compassion as the fount of Christian behaviour. What could be the reasons that motivated Luke for thinking so? Here are some assumptions:

a) The Mercy and Compassion Motif in Luke's Gospel: Luke's Gospel is full of references to the divine attributes of mercy and compassion. Jesus is the embodiment of these attributes. Parables and other narratives instruct the Christians to imitate these attributes. So, different from other evangelists, it is a tendency of Luke, visible in his composition of the Gospel, to cling on to God's acts of mercy. Numerous examples

include the *Magnificat* (1:46-55), the *Benedictus* (1: 68-79), raising the widow's son at Nain (7:11-15), anointing by the sinful woman (7:36-50), parable of the good Samaritan (10:30-37), parables of the lost sheep and prodigal son (15:4-7; 11-32), parable of the unjust steward (16:1-8), parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), parable of the persistent widow and the judge (18:1-8), Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the several miracle stories. An example for the Lukan shift of emphasis may be found in chapter 15: his redaction of the parable of the lost sheep (15:4-7) expresses Jesus' loving initiative toward sinners (15:1-3), and beyond that, God's accommodation toward human beings with the goal of rehabilitating them as children; in Matthew, however, the same parable is meant parenetically for the leaders of the congregation (Mt 18:12-14).¹⁸ Another striking example is in the Lukan twist to the anointing story (7:36-50) which is quite different from its parallels in the other three gospels. The act of anointing is depicted in Matthew, Mark and John as a preparation for Jesus' funeral while Luke uses the episode to teach a lesson of forgiveness and mercy. Hence we can reasonably understand the Lukan choice of 'mercy'.

b) The Theology of a Merciful God: The imperative "Be merciful" is based on the premise that the Father is merciful. This theological doctrine is presupposed as well known and acceptable. Luke has several passages pointing to the same idea (examples include Lk 1:50, 54, 58, 78; 10:37; 17:13; 18:38-39). In this verse (Lk 6:36) God's grace and mercy towards ungrateful receivers is emphasized, differently from Mt 5:45 which stresses God's equal rule over the wicked and the good. Mercy stands out when it is shown to those who, in human categories, do not 'deserve' it. In the background of the principle of loving one's enemies, the ideal is God's kindness even to the wicked.

c) Imitation of the Merciful God: The Lukan form proposes an imitation of God, and precisely of a quality that the OT predicates of him.¹⁹ The OT does not give any direct call to imitate God's compassion (but cf. passages like Deut 10:17-19). However the idea is well rooted in Jewish tradition and there are invitations to show mercy to fellow-human beings in need and not to show mercy to criminals.²⁰ For example, Deut 15:7-8 reads: "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be."

Other references include Ex 22:25-27; 23:10ff; Lev 19:13; 25:5-6; 25:37; Deut 14:28; 24:14; 26: 12-13; show mercy to the poor and need (Prov 3:27-29); not to show mercy to a criminal (Deut 13:8; 19:13, 21). In v. 35, to be a son of God is a goal for one's actions, whereas in v. 36 having God as Father is the starting point from which imitation proceeds. Children need to imitate the heavenly father in whatever way possible. Luke sees an excellent possibility in 'showing mercy'; he would even consider it a necessary quality to be a good Christian.

d) Jesus' Mercy and Compassion in the Synoptic Tradition: The doctrine must have been prominent in the circles where the Sermon originated, because the Christology of Jesus' compassion and mercy has some synoptic roots. Matthew has it in the beatitudes ("Blessed are the merciful..." - 5:7). The parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35) has the doctrine in the narrative form. It is also used to justify Jesus' miracles (Mk 1:41 par.; 6:34 par.; Mt 9:36 etc.). And the Matthean narrative of the last Judgement (25:31-46) gives charity as the only criterion to inherit eternal life; that charity (food, drink, clothes, house & visits) is an expression of the mercy and compassion to those in need. Thus the Lukan ideal of mercy is well attested in the synoptic tradition.

e) In Other NT Books: One should also note the close parallels in Js 5:11, in the letters of Paul and other letters. For example, see Rom 12:1; 9:15, 16, 18; 11:30-32; 12:8; 1 Cor 7:25; 2 Cor 1:3; 4:1; Phil 2:27; 1 Tim 1:13, 16; 1 Pet 2:10 and Jude 22. It points to the fact that being merciful was considered a respectable quality in the early Christian communities, from where the gospels (including Luke) emerged.

f) Hellenistic Influence: The language of the Sermon on the Plain is Greek religious language while that of the Sermon on the Mount is Jewish. The mercifulness of the deity was also a generally recognized element of Hellenistic religiosity.²¹ So Luke's readers, who had a Hellenistic background, would easily grasp the idea of mercy.

g) The Focus in the Sermon on the Plain: Finally, as we have seen at the beginning of the paper, the overall theme and focus in the Lukan version of the sermon is oriented more towards mercy and compassion, than perfection. It is obvious that 'perfection' is not expected of the disciples of the Sermon on the Plain, but they are rather invited to be merciful. As discussed above (3.2.), this would have been an apt response to the reciprocity ethics which Luke wanted to fight out from his community. Loving even the enemies, doing good to them and lending (giving) without expecting back were works of mercy, which the Lukan merciful Jesus wanted his disciples to practise.

6. THE MESSAGE OF MERCY

There is absolutely no reason to doubt if Jesus indeed preached the message of mercy. All the evangelists witness to the acts of mercy carried out by Jesus and to his presentation of God as a merciful father. Apart from the Lukan and other synoptic texts already mentioned in the paper, even the Johannine Gospel, which has less (compared to the Synoptics) stories, parables and miracles, the merciful image of Jesus is maintained; for example, the miracle at Cana (Jn 2:1-11), healing at Beth-zatha (Jn 5:2-9), feeding of the five thousand (Jn 6:5-13), the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11), the good shepherd image (Jn 10:11-17), washing of feet (Jn 13:4-15) etc. If his acts were merciful, his teaching would not be different.

In the study of Lukan communities, scholars have identified the presence of some rich members, who practised the Greco-Roman ‘reciprocity ethics’ (referred to in 3.2. above). For example, Karris writes: “The evidence is considerable that almsgiving was not known among the Greco-Romans, whereas it is a cultural expectation for those from an Egyptian/Jewish (oriental) background. The Greco-Romans would not come to the aid of a non-citizen; they would help a friend in need, but only to collect IOU’s (I Owe You) against future contingencies.”²²

Luke fought against this principle with his numerous passages on ‘giving away wealth’, concern for the poor and marginalised etc. For such people in his community, who think more of business (reciprocity) than mercy, the imperative command as well as the image of God as a merciful father form a real call to conversion and discipleship. And for the gentile Christians whom Luke addressed, in their new-found faith, it was mercy not reciprocity that would keep the mixed community of the poor and the rich united as Christians. As we have seen above, other Lukan passages would strengthen this idea and help them in their imitation of the ‘merciful Jesus’ and his ‘merciful father’.

In fact, even the Matthean ideal of perfection is not contrary to the Lukan ideal of mercy. Considering the nature of the life and mission of Jesus, which Matthew and others narrate, the idea of perfection would necessarily include mercy. We have already noted that Matthew has included in his beatitudes: “Blessed are the merciful...” (Mt 5:7).

That this message of mercy was imbibed by the disciples is corroborated by the accounts in Acts, especially in the mention of the disciples’ concern for the widows (6:1-6), Peter’s healing of a lame man (3:1-7) and similar texts. We have already seen (5.d & e) that mercy occupied a prominent place in the early communities (witnessed by the letters of Paul and James) and in the sources of the Gospel tradition. The perpetuation of the image of a merciful father and attempts to imitate his mercy continued in the Church throughout history. Probably there are no fathers of the Church, monastic fathers, founders of religious Congregations or pious associations who did not emphasize the need for works of mercy in Christian life. We know that hospitals were at first attached to Cathedrals or monasteries. This fact is also evident from other innumerable charitable activities going on in the Church through centuries.

We have seen that Luke used the maxim on mercy as an antidote to the reciprocity ethics prevailing in his community. In modern terminology, it is similar to the ‘business culture’ that is spreading its wings around the world with multi-national companies, open markets and liberalised economies. As a result, today we see the world getting more and more secularised and the culture of consumerism growing, wherein values like mercy and compassion are struggling to find a place; hence the message of mercy is ever relevant, as was the case in the Lukan community. In the eagerness for a successful

career and in the preoccupation with only profit and comfort, one usually tends to be very selfish which in turn hurts the others in the race. When business wounds and divides the society, it is mercy that can soothe and heal. While asserting our rights and individual freedom, we often infringe upon others' freedom and rights. There the message of mercy and compassion comes as a reminder of the original Christian message: "Be merciful just as your father is merciful."

7. MERCY IN CONSECRATED LIFE

For consecrated men and women who have dedicated their entire lives for a closer following of Jesus, imitation of the father's mercy becomes inevitable. However, when we look around, many consecrated persons seem to be misled by a preference for the ideal of perfection than of mercy. Hence, we have among them efficient administrators, managers and other heads of institutions, who orchestrate commendable achievements in their areas of work, for example, in the field of education. Their achievements are lauded, publicised and promoted by the society. On the other hand, there are numerous others, whose silent service in mercy and compassion to humanity go largely unnoticed and unappreciated. So the natural inclination for consecrated people is to opt for perfection, ignoring mercy. This perfection, as explained in the beginning of the paper, has little in common with the Matthean concept of perfection because the latter would certainly include mercy. What we are witnessing is a race for this 'worldly' perfection that is devoid of mercy. For example, heads of prestigious institutions will insist on strict measures to achieve perfection - high grades and ratings, ranks, championships etc. - in the competitive world. In this race, as stated above, there is practically no scope for mercy and compassion. And when consecrated people are the main players in this race, that will be an irony and a contradiction, because their lives are supposedly a close following of Jesus who is the embodiment of mercy and compassion.

However, more than any other state of Christian life, consecrated life offers a golden opportunity to spread the message of mercy. Others are more prone to be influenced by the 'business culture' and consumerism, mentioned above. But we, the consecrated people, with the help of our vows, have a possibility to transcend the craving for profit, money, fame, positions and things that impede the practice of mercy. And we have the training and circumstances for prioritising our values. So if we don't spread this message, who will? In order that we may not become mere seekers of the above mentioned perfection, but will radiate the mercy and compassion of our creator, I propose a twofold strategy: *Being in touch and Being touched*.

7.1. Being in Touch

When God decided to take human form, he decided to be really in touch with humans, especially, the neglected and suffering lots who deserved his mercy. Hence,

Jesus was born in a manger to experience the pain of the homeless; he grew up working as a carpenter, knowing the struggles of the working class; he continued to live homeless as a wandering preacher during his public ministry, doing good to all and wiping the tears of many; he died for others' sins, hanging outside the city walls and was buried in somebody else's tomb. That is the methodology applied by the omnipotent and omniscient God in his incarnation. If so, there is undoubtedly no better method available to us humans.

Without incarnating, we cannot imitate God's mercy. The first step for incarnation is being in touch with the reality where we want to incarnate. One of the things that impair the consecrated people in this process is a growing tendency to adapt a somewhat posh lifestyle - dress, food, buildings, travelling habits, associating mostly with the elite etc. Our 'compound walls', our secure and cosy houses and our growing number of elite institutions take us to a progressive alienation from the people. For example, the one who lives in a well-furnished house and travels habitually in luxury coaches has little chances of knowing what it means to be poor or homeless; the one, who eats sumptuously as many times a day as he/she wants, cannot know the feelings of a hungry person, leave alone respecting those feelings.²³ This is why most of our political leaders who lead a comfortable lifestyle, fail to deliver any good for the poor and needy. Observing the trend, one can easily assess that a good number of consecrated people are already suffering from this same syndrome and many more will, within the short span of a few years. To avoid this tragedy, staying in touch is essential.

7.2. Being Touched

It is not enough that we see and experience the reality, but must be touched or moved by it. In other words, our knowledge of the reality must prompt us to action. Being touched does not refer to any transitory sentiments; they will vanish in no time. For example, we may be 'touched' by talks, films, retreats or scenes from real life or by seeing the miseries of the people; however that sentiment of sympathy or compassion will often disappear when we are removed from that situation. Is it because we do not know that 925 million people in the world are chronically hungry, that we complain about our food or waste food? When we decide to buy one more set of clothes for us, do we think of the innumerable people around us whose only clothes are what they are wearing?

What really touches us will change our attitudes and approaches and will result in concrete actions. A recent example of a famous consecrated person, who had gone through this process, is that of Mother Teresa. What she saw around her touched her deeply and her course of life took a radical turn around. She could no more remain the same; her experience dragged her into the streets of Calcutta and there emerged a glittering model for all consecrated people. We have also several others, though not

famous like the Mother, who underwent this process and spent their lives in showing mercy and compassion to humanity.

Let us go back once again to what the master did! A perfect example, among the many, from the life of Jesus is the raising of a widow's son at Nain (Lk 7:11-15). Knowing the miserable plight of a widow in Israel, especially when her only son is dead,²⁴ Jesus is touched by the sight of the funeral procession at Nain. Nobody asks him to intervene; he is moved to action. The Gospel says: *When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep"* (7:13). This is exactly what he meant when he said: "Be merciful just as your father is merciful." He wanted his disciples to live the same way. So the command is handed down to all the disciples and in a special way to the consecrated men and women.

CONCLUSION

We were trying to understand the concept of mercy in the Lukan maxim in 6:36. Through our comparison of the Lukan verse with its Matthean counterpart, we have realized that the apparent contrast between the verses is, in fact, only a difference of emphasis by the two evangelists. Both Matthew and Luke have included Jesus' teaching on mercy. Luke formed the maxim with 'mercy' because it was most opportune to his addressees; in the same way it is even more opportune in the modern society, because the business culture is only spreading farther and wider. Consecrated people cannot overlook this command of Jesus, because it is fundamental to discipleship. Any attempt to be merciful must be accompanied by a lifestyle and attitudes conducive to it. That will bring us in touch with the people who deserve mercy and leave us open to be touched by them. Then we may be able to radiate the mercy of the father, as Jesus envisioned.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The imperative meaning of *esesthe* proceeds from the other commandments in vv. 43b, c; 44b, c; also 5:17, 21b, 24, 25, 27b, 29, 30b, 34a, 37, 39a&c, 40b, 41b, 42a&b. Those who take *esesthe* as a prophetic prediction can point to the beatitudes (5:3-12), while the eschatological promise follows from that interpretation of the Torah which leads to the greater righteousness required in the last judgement (5:20; 7:13-14, 21-23)- cf. Betz, Hans, Dieter, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia, ed., Adela Yarbro Collins) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1995, p. 321
- 2 Luz, Ulrich, *Matthew 1-7* (Hermeneia, ed., Helmut Koester; trans., James E. Crouch) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 2007, p. 289
- 3 Betz, p. 321
- 4 Fitzmyer, Joseph A., *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 1983, p. 629

- 5 Schweizer says, “The Sermon on the Plain is not a theologically conceived attempt to summarise the Christian message in its entirety. It is a call to the life of discipleship - originally interpreted through the total ministry of Jesus, interpreted by Luke through the rest of his Gospel (Schweizer Eduard, *The Good News according to Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox), 1984, p. 118)
- 6 Fitzmyer, p. 630
- 7 Nolland, John, *Luke* (WBC - 35A, vol.1, NT ed., Ralph P. Martin) (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher), 1993, p. 241
- 8 The Lukan addition of *panti* to v. 30 and the change from Matthew’s aorist *dos* to the present *didou* appear to generalize and sharpen the saying - cf. Schmidt, Thomas E., *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 1987 p. 142
- 9 Kim, Kyoung-Jin, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 1998, p. 172
- 10 The imperative (*ginesthe*) here is formulated as a periphrastic construction of *ginomai* with the present participle, denoting the beginning of a state or condition - Betz, p. 612
- 11 Nolland, p. 300
- 12 Bultmann, Rudolf, “*oiktiro, oiktirmos, oiktirmon*” in TDNT, vol. 5, pp. 159-161, pp. 160-161
- 13 Q is the abbreviation for the German word *Quelle* (source) referring to the source for material shared by Matthew and Luke, but absent from Mark. This hypothetical collection consists mostly of sayings and parables of Jesus and very little narrative content.
- 14 Cf. Fitzmyer, 640
- 15 Examples include: Dt 4:31; Ex 34:6; 103:8; 2 Ch 30:9; Neh 9:17; 9:31; Jo 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Ps 78:38; 86:15; 111:4 145:8 etc.
- 16 Cf. Luz, p. 289
- 17 Ibid., p. 290
- 18 Bovon, François, *Luke 1* (Hermeneia, ed., Helmut Koester; trans., Christine M. Thomas) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 2002, p. 241
- 19 Though the Lukan Gospel was primarily meant for the gentiles, it is well attested that Luke had a thorough knowledge of the OT and he used it extensively in his Gospel. Mercy is attributed to God, protecting and rescuing Israel, in numerous OT passages including: Exod 33:19; 2 Sam 24:14; 2 Kgs 13:23; 1 Chr 21:13; Ps 25:6; 40:11; 51:1; 69:16; 103:4; 119:77,156; Is 30:18; 54:10; 63:7; Jer 30:18; 31:20; 33:26; 42:12; Ez 39:25; Hos 1:7; 2:25; Habakkuk 3:2 etc.

20 Nolland, p. 300

- 21 One of the most interesting works illustrating the importance of mercy in the Greco-Roman world is Seneca's essay *On Mercy (De Clementia)*. It is a truly Roman work, attributing the virtue of mercy to the good ruler (thus it is a testimony to the Roman ruler cult). The basic ideas and arguments have much in common with the Sermon on the Plain. In being merciful, the ruler imitates the gods; mercy is understood as a divine power that can turn firm enemies into loyal friends; none needs to be handled with greater skill than man, and to none should more mercy be shown - Betz, p. 613
- 22 Karris, Robert J. OFM, "Poor and Rich: The Lukan *Sitz im Leben*" in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, Talbert, Charles H. (ed.), (Danville: Association of Baptist Professors of Religion), 1978, p.117.
- 23 If some of us do practise (ritual) fasting, in many cases, it is only an exception and we are sure that the next meal is waiting. The difference with the chronically hungry millions is that they have no food to look forward; most of them are unsure about the next meal. Statistics show that there are about 925 million chronically hungry people in the world (GHI - Global Hunger Index, October 2011)
- 24 In the OT, widows, orphans and strangers were the three most vulnerable groups of the poor. Like in other Patriarchal societies, they faced several problems that made their life miserable, especially if her in-laws were not benevolent. Widows could be divested of their properties if they did not have grown up sons. Therefore, that the dead man was the widow's only son adds to the tragedy. She is left alone like an orphan.

PERFECTIONISM IN RELIGIOUS LIVING: SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Babu Thannickal CMF

“The human story does not always unfold like a mathematical calculation on the principle that two and two make four. Sometimes in life they make five or minus three; and sometimes the blackboard topples down in the middle of the sum and leaves the class in disorder and the pedagogue with a black eye.” - Winston Churchill

There is a stark realism within these wise words of Winston Churchill quoted above. The quality of striving for excellence is a very desirable attribute that is often recommended by all for all. While this may well be so, when the chief preoccupation of one’s desires, acts and thoughts becomes perfection, one easily slips into the not-so-comfortable category of being considered a perfectionist. It is very different from the quality of striving for excellence that should be present in a consecrated person who seeks to do good for the people of God in the best manner using all of one’s talents. The joke of life’s unpredictability and imperfection is quite hard on the perfectionists who make vain efforts to avoid mistakes at all costs and do things in the best possible manner alone. What follows is an attempt to highlight some of the salient features of perfectionism (an undesirable attribute) as it presents itself in consecrated life from a psychological point of view.

I. MANIFESTATIONS OF PERFECTIONISM IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Perfectionism can be described as a person’s tendency “to value and pursue excellence, to set and adhere rigidly to extremely high standards, and to examine outcomes in a highly judgmental and critical fashion.”¹ It could also be understood as the desire for perfection, accompanied by a paralysing fear of imperfection, the equating of error to personal defectiveness, and the emotional conviction that perfection is the route to personal acceptability.² Obsession with perfection is not uncommon among the

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consecrated men and women. In consecrated life, perfectionism manifests itself in different ways.

1.1. Perfectionist's Relation with God

The high ideals and standards of behaviour that priesthood and religious life offer can become a big temptation for perfectionist people to choose such a way of life. Their desire for perfection, even in virtues or religious living, often suffers from an excessive orientation and focus on oneself that they do not in reality do it for God's glory but for personal feeling of considering themselves better than the rest. One is here reminded of the prayer of the Pharisee in the synagogue who feels self-righteous about his perfect religious observances and despise for the publican. Dr. Len Sperry³ observes that such persons can have a wrong relationship with God. They typically have an image of God as a taskmaster, police officer or judge who needs to be pleased by avoiding sinful behaviour. Being very scrupulous, their prayer tends to focus more on their failings and need for forgiveness. In the end they are left with very little genuine love for God. The perfectionist religious' striving after perfection serves often a narcissistic and utilitarian end and much less an evangelical one. Their behaviour aims at defending and buttressing a weak and vulnerable self from shame deriving from exposure to imperfections and personal limitations.

1.2. Perfectionism in Formation

Formators who are themselves perfectionists may insist the candidates to constantly aspire for perfection and do things in the best possible manner while punishing them for their failures without the necessary empathic understanding. This may not do as much damage to those candidates without a perfectionist orientation as it does to those who already have a disposition to perfectionism due to their early experiences. Perfectionist formators can prevent the healing that candidates with a perfectionist orientation could have undergone, had the formators been more empathic in understanding their difficulty. The candidates with a perfectionist orientation would try to please the formator by compliant behaviour doing things perfectly to the last detail but with very little consideration for the value orientation of their behaviour. In the process, the very purpose of formation, i.e. adoption of Christ-like attitudes and the internalisation of Kingdom values, is derailed. A formation programme that ignores adequate integration of affective dimension of candidates also facilitates the consolidation of perfectionism in individuals who are already disposed to it. The reason is that perfectionist individuals tend to avoid feelings and sentiments as they make them feel vulnerable. In the end they turn out to be battered individuals who are efficient machines but less warm or humane in their attitude.⁴

1.3. The Myth of Invulnerability

Perfectionist religious, like the obsessives, work hard to reduce their felt anxiety following the myth of invulnerability and total control over situations and persons including

themselves. Any perception of limitation or vulnerability provokes anxiety in them and, therefore, the immediate defensive response is to attempt to have total control of the situation. The sense of security of the perfectionist rests on the shaky ground which is the need for complete protection against exposure to vulnerability in the form of criticism, mistakes, failure, rejection and humiliation.⁵ This leads them to become control freaks who want to completely have the situation under their control to ensure nothing goes wrong. In the words of Allan Mallinger, the perfectionist's mythical belief in invulnerability may be verbalised as follows: *I can (and must) always perform with flawless competence, make the right choice or decision, excel in everything that counts and never be found wrong about anything. I can be, and should be, above criticism in every important personal attribute, including my values, attitudes and opinions. Thus, I can guarantee myself fail-safe protection against failure, criticism, rejection and humiliation, any of which would be unbearable.*⁶

1.4. Types of Perfectionism

Psychologists, down the years, have been trying to understand this phenomenon closely. Three major types of perfectionism have been identified by psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett.⁷ They are: *self-oriented perfectionism*, *other-oriented perfectionism*, and *socially prescribed perfectionism*.

1.4.1. Self Oriented Perfectionists

The Perfectionists with a *self orientation* are those who, in the early years of growing up, have internalized high personal standards from parents who burdened them with high expectations and punished or shamed them for failing to live up to them. They are internally convinced of their need to be perfect. Often their childhood times were ruined of their joy and fun by numerous instances of humiliation and belittlement for insignificant errors or failures by severe, unempathic parents. The parental injunction to them could likely have been: *“you must do and be better to be worthwhile.”* Besides, such upbringing makes the perfectionists believe *“I am responsible if something were to go wrong and therefore I must be reliable, responsible, competent and righteous.”*⁸ Self oriented perfectionists could also have been persons who had to assume adult responsibilities early in life so much so that they become little adults at a very young age with the responsibility to make sure everything was perfectly in its place. Children suffering attachment trauma with parental figures also share the tendency to assume guilt and blame for what happens to them which in turn leads to development of tendencies to please the perpetrators of violence by being perfect in order to regain their love or to avoid future punishment. They tend to assume the belief that if they can be perfect, they can be part of a coherent and predictable world in which they are acceptable, affirmed and valued as persons.⁹

However, as avoiding errors always is not realistic, such persons are bound to feel anxious, depressed and have very low levels of self esteem and high levels of irritability. In religious communities, common life can suffer to varying degrees depending on what type of perfectionist people are present therein. For instance, the self-oriented perfectionists could engage in compulsive behaviours like insistence on hygiene and cleanliness and so engage in excessive and compulsive cleaning, or strict adherence to timetable with the need to maintain the normal routine they are used to, and wanting to do each task with the maximum care and attention to avoid mistakes which in turn robs them of the pleasure of enjoying any activity and achieve doing very little at the end.

1.4.2. Other-Oriented Perfectionists

The *other-oriented* perfectionists are those who set for themselves and others unrealistically high standards and constantly end up feeling sad, upset and disappointed about those who fail their expectations. They often insist that others adopt their strict behavioural and moral standards without offering resistance. For fear that others may make a mess of the assignment they feel pushed to constantly monitor the progress, and reprimand without compassion if any mistake has been detected. Some others, in their apprehension that others may not do the job perfectly, volunteer to do the whole thing themselves, exhausting themselves in the process and passing on the pent up emotional burden to others. So closely they identify with the quality of perfection that they believe any mistake would eventually reflect on them personally. In the process, they become difficult persons to live with, in a religious community.

Such persons in religious life could find collaboration and group work very difficult. They often are scared of delegating work to someone they consider unable to meet their standards of perfection or because they believe the work would not be done the way they desire. They could make life for the rest of the members very difficult with their excess work orientation and demanding nature. Moreover, they are unforthcoming as regards praise for work that is well done by others. In community meetings they could also be oppositional in attitude to any idea they consider less than the best. Ironically, it is also not unusual to find that their ideas are propped up as the best.

They have difficulty to enjoy anything in which they are likely to find a flaw or imperfection. Be it a movie, a piece of music or performance, there would always be something that does not go down well with the perfectionists. It is when this fault finding and criticism of imperfections extends to comments or evaluation of other people's defects that problems begin to crop up in community living. The fault finding tendency has a twin component: the unmistakable capacity of being able to find the flaw or imperfection as if one were naturally attracted to it and the absence of relief until one has finally pointed it out or corrected it. Other members in the religious community living with the perfectionist would find themselves scrutinised, inadequate and

unappreciated and resentful. No wonder the perfectionists are often lone birds in communities as most members find it hard to bear their incessant fault finding.

1.4.3. Socially Prescribed Perfectionists

The *socially prescribed* perfectionist is someone who continues to carry over into adulthood the burden of expectations from the childhood environment. They believe that they can never measure up to the expectations of other people no matter how much and how best they try. But this does not stop them from continuing their vain search after perfection. The emotional responses that one notices in them often are high levels of anxiety, moodiness, and constant resentment. In a religious community they would take the role of people pleasers who would go to any extent to make their work perfect in order to make sure they avoid the feared condemnation or criticism. Their behaviour is prescribed by their fears regarding the negative judgment they are likely to receive if they were to make mistakes or falter on anything.

2. THE COST OF PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism could attain the status of a virtue so much so that people simply would not want to get rid of it. When doing a work that requires precision and thoroughness, the perfectionists take the cake and it could understandably be so. They are often appreciated too for such a feat. However, they do not realise the enormous burden they cause to themselves and to those who live with them as a result of their prized possession: desire for perfection in everything. In their effort to preserve their illusion of invulnerability, and search to avoid situations of public scrutiny of their imperfections, they pay a very huge price that takes its toll on their time, creativity, spontaneity, inner freedom, socialising skills, productivity, and possibility for close relationships. What follows is an examination of some of the ways in which perfectionists can hurt themselves.

2.1. Wastage of Time in Attention to Details

A major downside to their tendency to perfection is that in spite of giving their undivided attention and energy to a work and possessing the quality of being highly organised and scheduled, they tend to stay doing one thing right till the end and to the last detail that their other responsibilities tend to suffer lack of attention. The very thought of falling behind schedule on something else frightens them and it may cause lack of sleep, heightened levels of stress and irritation and major relational difficulties. In the end lot of time is wasted on insignificant aspects of the work that much of the rest of the work remains undone or poorly done. Some perfectionist religious feel driven and they tend to over-commit themselves and would look at every request for their time as a way to show others their capabilities and unflinching sense of responsibility. Their sense of integrity and commitment would not allow them to make easy of any assignment and they would refrain from doing anything that may give the impression that they had not given their hundred percent to the assigned work.

2.2. Vulnerability to Emotions Defended against in Frenetic Activism

Nowhere do perfectionists sense their vulnerability at a greater level than when it has to do with feelings. Their difficulty to deal with emotions and feelings makes them feel weak and out of control and so they cover up this sense of vulnerability by engaging in frenetic activity and by keeping a tight lid on their feelings. One rarely finds a perfectionist crying in public or letting the tight control over emotional expression in public eye. It only contributes to the continuance of their living lives of quiet desperation within the religious community. Their frenetic activity and desire for perfection serve in many ways as an antidote to underlying feelings of emotional despair that they do not want to face. The general attitude in religious communities against open expression of emotions, rigid role expectations, insistence on order etc. can tend to favour the growth of perfectionism in those who are already predisposed to it.

2.3. Constant Vulnerability to Feelings of Shame and Anxiety

Some perfectionist religious construct their self image around the trait of perfection. They would wish to be known in the congregation or province or community or at their workplace as the reliable, dependable, never-let down type. Some even make a career out of it. They believe in their potential infallibility and enviable excellence in the area of their competence. But this very belief can be a potential recipe for failure, quite desperation and mounting anxiety. The truth of the matter is that not for long can they continue on with this illusory belief as the reality of real limitations, mistakes and imperfections crop up every now and then denting huge holes on their self built defensive armour. Each time their illusory belief is contradicted by reality of imperfection, they equate it to humiliation and suffer a big dip in their self esteem. The danger of embarrassment and humiliation that would ensue any potential failure or mistake acts as a major source of anxiety for the perfectionists who would try to do all possible to avoid such a catastrophe. Anything that interferes with their need for control of the environment that surrounds them frightens them. It may explain the tense, rigid, over demanding, emotionally insulated selves that perfectionist religious often lead.

2.4. Oversensitivity to Public Scrutiny and Ideations of Reference

The perfectionists on the more intense side of the spectrum are also acutely sensitive to the environment as they unconsciously believe that other people consider their behaviour or presence as a matter of great interest. Hence, they need to be cautious to avoid any possible gaffe or public scrutiny of their imperfections.¹⁰ Such perfectionist religious feel paralysed at the very thought of delivering a public lecture or preaching a sermon or doing activity that can place them at the centre of public attention. Ironically enough, the very fact of being a religious often offers them such unavoidable situations. Perfectionism is also to be understood not as an attitude of hostility to imperfection in

others or recognition of it in oneself, rather, it is a silent cry to gain acceptance and attempt to repair the emotional conviction of being inherently defective.

2.5. Inability to Forgive Oneself for the Mistakes

The perfectionists do not go easy on mistakes made. They tend to obsess and fret about anything that has gone wrong. It makes them feel guilty about the mistake and feel ashamed of themselves. Anything less than perfect may be a necessity of the occasion but is never acceptable to the perfectionists. Accompanying the perfectionist is the constant anxiety of not being good enough. The feeling of shame that comes from recognition of the impossibility to be always perfect is covered up and soothed by the narcotic effect of temporary success of having done something perfectly which allows them to enjoy a momentary grandiosity. Success, no matter how big or important, never satisfies them. Perhaps this is the reason perfectionists are unable to take with gratitude honest appreciation of their work when it is offered. Their impaired ability to take appreciation is also reflected in their being less appreciative of other people. Other community members feel grudge against the perfectionist because there has never been any genuine appreciation or recognition of their contribution at any point. The only thing they get to hear is a criticism for the inevitable flaws or imperfections.

2.6. Inability to Enjoy What They Do

When everything one has to do must, of necessity, be beyond possible criticism and flaw, even small tasks assume gigantic proportions that require huge investments of time and energy; one begins to perceive it as hard to be done. The natural reaction before such a proposition is an unwillingness to begin and as a result to postpone the work. How many times have we heard about people having starting trouble? Of course, the anxiety that accompanies having to begin some job is common to most people but some perfectionists feel blocked to do anything creative. What they do must be the best, the very best and nothing less than the best! How often one comes across in a religious community a very talented religious feeling blocked emotionally to do a paper or any other activity that most people find easy to do? If ever the perfectionist were to begin the work, so much of time would be invested on perfecting it that if they have to meet a deadline the last part often would have to be done in a hurried and sloppy manner for lack of time. Besides, the fun of doing the work is totally lost in the exaggerated attention to details. This defeats the very purpose of their effort. Their difficulty to distinguish the essential from the trivial also makes them unable to enjoy anything well.

Ever seen perfectionist religious learning a new language? Most likely you would notice them feeling so embarrassed about each small mistake made. They find it hard to practice speaking the new language before others as they feel inhibited and exposed of their vulnerability. We also find people who do not really bother much about mistakes

made when trying to learn a new language. These people stand in stark contrast to the oversensitive and inhibited perfectionists feeling embarrassed at their imperfections.

2.7. Defensiveness against Close Relationships.

Anyone who has lived with perfectionists in community knows how hard it is to feel emotionally close to such people. The perfectionists consider feelings and emotions as sources of vulnerability and weakness and, therefore, are cautious about not getting emotionally involved with people. They may even brag about their being rational and not sentimental. But one can't help notice the cold, unempathic and colourless lives they lead. Perfectionists are wary and hesitant about trusting, loving and, consequently, becoming vulnerable emotionally. Hence they shut themselves off from others by emotional isolation even as they really long for closeness and emotional bonding. They are likely to take as criticism any suggestion made to them to do things differently. The obsessive thoughts keep them protected from feelings and sentiments.¹¹

2.8. The Agony of Decision Making

Perfectionists are poor decision makers¹² as they foresee in every possible decision risking the possibility of error and the possible disaster of being vulnerable, imperfect and being proven to be wrong. Hence, they delay taking decisions until they have explored every minute nuance in order to avoid the possibility of error and being seen as fallible. Hence decision making, instead of becoming a joyous event of choosing among alternatives, turns out to be an excruciating agony for the perfectionists.¹³ The perfectionists feel comfortable only on tested ground and they prefer the security of predictable environments. If a perfectionist happens to be in a position of authority, the level of willingness to begin something new—be it a mission, a new project etc., that may possibly contain an element of risk—is likely to be very low as the very prospect of exposure to risk and failure is frightening and, hence, better left unattempted. The perfectionists avoid taking decisions until when there are very limited options available. This would likely give them the excuse that they did not have much to choose between if anything would eventually go wrong. The difference between a perfectionist and a non-perfectionist lies in the manner in which a potential wrong decision or bad risk taking is seen. For the non-perfectionist it becomes just another normal thing to do but not so for the perfectionist. Failure is simply unacceptable as an option and, therefore, the natural fallout is unlikelihood of anything new being tried out or any new project being given the go ahead.

2.9. Difficulty of Discernment

The same dynamic of delayed decision is likely to repeat even in questions of discernment. The obsession with wanting to avoid errors at all costs can undermine the very process of discernment. The net result of the unwillingness to take risk or make a

decision is the postponement of the decision making. The perfectionists may also brag about it claiming that they are not wont to rash and un-thoughtful decision making. However, in the end nothing is decided and the cost of the delay in decision making can be enormous at the institutional level, not to say about the personal or communitarian level. Another reason why the perfectionists delay their decision making has got to do with their thought pattern that reveals exaggerated pessimism. The only possible outcome they can think of, when having to take a risk, is the negative one. So focused are they on the avoidance of error that failure eventually becomes predominant in their thought as the only possible outcome.¹⁴ The lifelong history of all or nothing thinking along with unrealistic expectations make them perfectly fit to fail or at least to expect failure if they ever took a risky decision.

2.10. Equivocation in Communication

In communication also the tentative style of the perfectionist is noted. They are most likely to fill in every statement they make with qualifiers and disclaimers that give them sufficient ground for defence against going wrong about anything. Those who listen to them can often get bored or frustrated for the lack of precision in their highly intellectualised style of speech that gets lost in unwanted details. The perfectionist religious often gets preoccupied with the need to avoid making errors in their communication by being tentative in their speech. This often results in lack of clarity in communication and makes their speech look sophisticated, non-committal, unnecessarily elaborate, diplomatic, intellectualised and boring, not to say deeply frustrating for the one who wants to hear a specific or concrete answer. Yet another trouble for the perfectionists is their attention to details when having to explain anything. The focused attention even to minute details in the midst of qualifiers, parentheses and disclaimers makes their speech often an elaborately boring act.¹⁵

2.11. Intolerance to Novelty and Change

The perfectionists have a natural predisposition to identify and feel anxious about inconsistencies, novelty and anything out of the ordinary routine. Anything that is different from what they have been used to makes them anxious and troubled. It often makes them become obstinate in their demand to let things remain the way they are without allowing change and creativity that interferes with their sense of consistency and order. They could also become unsparing in their criticism of the novelties. One may notice the perfectionist becoming anxious or troubled in a chapel when somebody tries to bring in creativity in prayer by changing the normal routine. Change poses threat to their need to live in a predictable environment and so automatically causes them to react in unhelpful ways. It is not unusual to see a perfectionist religious angrily reacting to any last minute change in a planned activity of the community. This inflexibility regarding the need to maintain the used-to-environment and routine often destroys whatever traces of

spontaneity and creativity that still remain in them. Letting creativity or change, according to them, is tantamount to risking a possibly poor outcome and so is often defended against.

2.12. Lack of a Solid Sense of Identity

Psychodynamic perspectives speak of a possible lack of integrated identity in the perfectionists.¹⁶ As is the case with other obsessives, the perfectionists lack the ability to integrate experiences. An integrated sense of identity stands on a well-integrated sense of one's personal history. The personal history comprises not only of the obvious *external* experiences in one's past, like things that have happened to oneself, or what one has seen and heard, the successes and failures in life, or one's relationships, but also of clearly experienced awareness and ownership of one's *internal* history. This includes one's history of decisions, likes and dislikes, preferences, feelings and convictions, and the results of these inner processes like choices, decisions, actions or commitment taken or avoided. As for the perfectionists, they defensively avoid awareness of their preferences, feelings and conscious ownership of the consequences of their choices. As a result important components of their inner experiences are not available in their conscious awareness for integration making it difficult for them to solidify a clear sense of identity. The rigid and repetitive routines, preoccupation with minute details and insistence on rules are compensatory mechanisms placed at the service of a weak and non-solidified sense of identity. It is also associated with their fragile sense of control over the world they inhabit. This lack of a solid sense of identity also causes the perfectionists to feel threatened by the presence of those who have a solid sense of identity and who seem to be certain about their choices, preferences and opinions. This can lead to serious interpersonal conflict issues in a community. Faced with such a situation, their efforts to seek self protection may assume the form of rigidity, emotional distancing, stubbornness or plain oppositional stance to just about anything the other has got to suggest.

3. SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITY LIVING WITH PERFECTIONIST MEMBERS

3.1. Accept Them for Who They Are

Efforts to change perfectionist thoughts and behaviours frequently tend to have less desirable results because perfectionists are likely experience such interventions as personal critiques and respond by trying harder to be even more perfect. Hence, there is need for compassionate understanding and persistent effort on the part of other members who live with them. Other community members can help make them feel accepted for what they are and not for what they do or are able to do however perfect it might be. Paying attention to improving one's sense of acceptability, in part by

separating personal value from what is produced, is quite likely to help set the stage for recovery from perfectionism.

3.2. Gain Access to their Emotional World by Validation and Affirmation

Perfectionism arises from the emotional conviction that one needs to be perfect in order to be acceptable to other people. Other community members can help the perfectionists by creating an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and by making them feel that they are valuable and accepted for what they are and not for they are capable of doing. Engaging in dialogue aimed at understanding the perfectionists' emotional world not only makes them feel understood but also accepted and could go a long way in helping them in their predicament. By affirming and validating those positive personal characteristics of the perfectionists that are different from their performance, the community members can in small steps help them arrive at insight about their emotional and relational world. Feeling accepted is preceded by feeling understood and validated for what one is. Realizing that perfectionism is not just about having total control over others and situations and feeling arrogant but rather an inadequate effort to repair feelings of inherent insufficiency and defectiveness can help generate feelings of compassion, understanding and tolerance in community members living with the perfectionist member.

3.3. Caution against Counter-transference Feelings in Formators

Another area for the formators to focus on is the counter-transference issue of attending to one's own perfectionism when dealing with candidates. Being aware of one's own perfectionist tendencies can be helpful when trying to help a candidate with the same tendencies. The perfectionist formator's counter-transference feelings in relation to the candidate can be detected when he or she feels the need to offer smart answers to every question posed by the candidate, in his or her need to be always right, in the inability for decision making, in the highly intellectualized style of speech, in the need to find faults however minor they are, and in the intense dislike for the same tendency seen in the candidate. The tendency of the perfectionist candidate to contest every suggestion and assert his or her view, his or her unwillingness to commit self to anything immediately, and resistance to being controlled, may provoke frustration and anger in the formator and may lead to emotional distancing and defensiveness that does not help the candidate in handling his or her predicament. Regarding formation it is important not to give the candidates the message that their self worth is contingent upon good performance. It is especially evident when the good performing candidates get preferential treatment by formators who have a perfectionist bend in their character. The candidates need to be helped to develop a strong sense of identity based on their conviction of who they are and not on the basis of what they are capable of doing. An empathically attuned formator can also calm the anxiety associated with attachment and dependency issues in the

perfectionist candidates by appropriate validation of their identity and encouragement to enter into closer interpersonal intimacy in community.

3.4. Create Reliable Interpersonal Security in Community

In a community context, a deeply empathic understanding of how the perfectionists subjectively understand themselves, others, and how they deal with their deep fears, anxieties and preoccupations can go a long way in establishing a healing contact with such members. Perfectionism is a defensive manoeuvre that aims at creating and maintaining potentially reliable interpersonal security so that they are not vulnerable to criticism and hurt. The change can happen when they are slowly helped to realize that in spite of mistakes and imperfections, they are still lovable and acceptable in the eyes of those who are important to them.

3.5. Perfectionist Members: “Wounded in Need of Our Help”

Community life can often be difficult thing to bear especially when there are difficult people to live with who get on our nerves so often. But one continues to accept it because it teaches a hard lesson of loving those who seem to have no respect or love for us. Difficult people like perfectionists who find fault in anything we do, and who find it hard to forgive themselves for their imperfections need to be loved with empathic understanding and not just be coped with or tolerated for the way they are. Then, ironically, those who find us hard to live with would love us in return as well.¹⁷ The perfectionists share a conviction at an emotional level that one must be perfect to be acceptable to others. Taking care of one another in community, even of those who are difficult to live with like the perfectionists, can mean involving oneself in a process of constantly leaning more authentic ways of relating that facilitates a greater adaptive flexibility. In this manner the difficult-to-live-with persons become not a burden to bear or a problem to be solved but persons who are “wounded and in need of our help.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Perfectionists are going to be with us in every season of life. The question is, to what extent are we willing to accept them as they are and not on the basis of what they are able to perform, and understand them by entering into their vulnerable emotional world to be of help instead of becoming just another source of anxiety that they intensely fear and avoid. Community living could be far more enjoyable if there is sufficient interpersonal security and empathic validation of each other’s worth as persons. The fear of becoming perfectionists should not deter anyone from striving for excellence in doing one’s best with the God-given talents for God’s glory. The value of such a fine intention is determined by the extent to which it is motivated by genuine desire for doing good for God’s glory in the best possible manner. If the motivation for striving for excellence is for buttressing one’s vulnerable sense of self-worth as a person, then, we are closer to the undesirable

attribute of perfectionism. Even as one must try not to become perfectionist oneself, it is also important, in the context of living together in a religious community, to offer empathic understanding and emotional closeness to effect the healing of those wounded selves who vainly yet constantly search after perfection. One must help such wounded individuals to achieve the ‘courage to be imperfect.’¹⁹

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BOOK REVIEW

Felix Podimattam, *Consecrated Chastity Revisited*
Media House Publications, Delhi, 2006, Pages, 216. Rs. 222.

Felix Podimattam's *Consecrated Chastity Revisited* is definitely a resource book for understanding consecrated celibacy for modern times. It takes into account the theological teachings of the Church as well as the modern philosophical, literary and scientific insights. The author brings out a clear exposition of the understanding of celibacy as a christian commitment towards a higher marriage, a choice made in the context of faith. Moving beyond the traditional definitions and elucidating its internal meaning and purpose, the author presents consecrated celibacy as a commitment to authentic gospel living that mediates the reign of God characterized by deep loving, committed and just relationships. The elaborate explanations concerning these aspects provide the readers with a detailed grasping of the meaning embedded within the gift of consecrated celibacy.

The book begins with a brief introduction explaining the attention that celibacy has received in recent times as it is being affirmed, denounced, lauded and denigrated in both, the secular and the religious press. It speaks of the three essential elements in understanding celibacy, first of all, as a christian virtue and states that authentic celibacy is fundamentally and essentially about relationships and not about isolation. Secondly, celibacy is viewed as interacting and engaging with all other aspects of our developmental process, and finally, as the possibility for the transformation of life through generative love at all levels rather than as a denial, protection, escape or deficit. The book contains three chapters covering all the different aspects of consecrated chastity.

The first chapter depicts the traditional understanding of consecrated celibacy and widens it with a scholarly exploration on different areas of that understanding and presents them in their evolution. It explains that sexuality with all its manifestations is the most mysterious phenomenon in this world, initially connected to the dialectics of life and death. The positive values of traditional sexual morality for married as well as vowed persons are also stated here.

The second chapter deals with the new understanding of vow of chastity with a further affirmation on the need for a conviction that the vow of chastity is a vow to love and a way to witness God's love. The author shows that this vow offers the freedom to love broadly, deeply and honestly God and those whom God sends to us and, later presents it as a vow of interpersonal relationship. Consecrated celibacy is the liberative

pathway of possessing God which is achieved only through contemplative prayer and, finally, becomes a means of prophetic mission in our world.

The third chapter throws light on the living of the vow of chastity, living a life of greater love for God and for human beings, and in this sense, all consecrated persons must be professional God-seekers and lovers of all people including one's enemies, strangers and loveless. This calls for preferential option for the poor which includes the love of hospitality and a greater love for homosocial friendship. This is further being reaffirmed by the examples of Jesus' special love for John, James and Peter in the Gospels and, then, by the relationship between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament.

In the general conclusion, author states that consecrated life is on the verge of an in-depth revitalization. He asks consecrated persons to root their hope ultimately in the resurrection and to free themselves from many of the ideological and organizational inhibitions of the past. Finally, he invites the readers to grow into a freedom to create more effectively the structures of celibate training and to respond adequately to the religious and psychological needs of our people for new celibate communities.

This book is really a prosperous aid to all the celibates to know the areas where they need to be more informed and deepened in their understanding. A rich collection of the bibliography added at the end opens a wide-door to the readers to study and research more on this subject. The generosity of the author to share his deep knowledge, experience and vision, visibly manifested throughout the book is really praiseworthy. The Media House is also to be thanked for publishing such a great work and making it available to us at an affordable prize.

BOOK REVIEW

Rosmitha, MSJ, Rudolf V. D'souza, *Meeting in God Experience*
Dhyavanava Publications, Bangalore, 2010, Pages. 172, Rs. 125

This book, *Meeting in God Experience*, by Fr. Rudolf V. D'souza is an attempt to bring the two religious traditions of St. Theresa of Avila and *Bhagavad Gita* in a discerning confrontation with one another especially in the experience of *prayer* and depicts its importance through a comparative method. The book gives a lot of insights to those who are interested to know the importance of prayer in other religious traditions. It also affirms that the Spirit of God works mysteriously and effectively in other religions especially through the practice of prayer and contemplation. Besides, this work is also filled with numerous insights drawn from the author's deep study and research on various religious traditions and from his own experience of conducting seminars, workshops and conferences on prayer in India and abroad.

Beginning with a brief introduction that takes the reader to the heart of its content, the book is divided into four parts; the first part explains the various stages of prayer both in Christianity and in Hinduism in general. The author shows that the root of the christian prayer is to be found in the Jewish tradition, though its essential elements are to be sourced in the teachings of Jesus himself. Hinduism also does not restrict prayer with mere norms or acts and the life of a Hindu, according to the author, is a continuous encounter and communion with God in and through prayer which is the index of his /her faith. In this sense, every act of prayer ends with self surrender and adoration and thus the climax of prayer is union with God, perceived as pure identification with God through a total self surrender.

The second part deals with the doctrine on prayer according to St. Teresa of Avila, which is an exegetical analysis of the definition of prayer in her autobiography. The author explains that her doctrine on prayer is simple and lucid which is mainly on mental prayer and this part covers the whole range of her teaching on prayer; from the point of departure in meditation to the point of arrival at union with God. Teresa is depicted as a model and a living example of prayer. For the author, what counts ultimately is not the time spent in prayer, but the growth in love towards God and neighbor which is the greatest of the commandments that can clearly gauge the depth of prayer life.

The third part is a systematic exposition of the doctrine on prayer in *Bhagavad Gita*, based on the three classical ways of *Karma*, *Jana* and *Bhakti*. According to the

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author, these three *margas* are dynamic ways of prayer experience in its intensity, and enables the seekers to get integrated at the culminating stages of their spiritual life. In his exposition of the theme, the author is very empathetic to the needs of the seekers in the course of their daily activities and affairs. Prayer is presented not as a detached experience but one that unifies all the experiences into God experience.

The fourth part is a laudable attempt to compare and synthesize part two and three, highlighting the similarities and differences on the theme of prayer. In drawing out similarities, the author perceives the strong emphasis which both traditions place on God's role in the dynamic spiritual growth that happens through prayer. For Teresa, prayer is a 'friendly intercourse' with God and, for *Bhagavad Gita*, it is a friendly conversation between Arjuna and Krishna. Both indicate the limitations in reaching the ultimate reality on our own personal resources and, therefore, emphasize the need for grace and the cultivation of trust and faith.

This book is surely an encouragement and inspiration for all who seek God in prayer. The dialogical approach used in this work helps for the promotion of a better understanding of the Divine Spirit moving among the followers of both traditions. This work will also be of immense help to those directly involved in inter-religious dialogue, helping them discover the elements that are common in different religious traditions. The well documented foot notes, glossary of Sanskrit terms, abbreviations, and a vast list of bibliography give a wealth of information and provides opportunity to the reader for further enhancement in the same line of thought.

Juby Scaria AASC

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