



Consecrated Life in the Ecclesiology of Vatican II

For all its controversy, the Apostolic Visitation has certainly gotten us talking about religious life, and sometime an important question comes up. One such “important question” for me is: just what is this thing we call religious life after all? What makes it tick? Across the globe, across cultures and across the ages, people have been drawn to this life, to a sense of purpose, of spirituality and of mission. They seek to live together, work together, and pray together. But what makes this life what it is?

Religious life doesn’t exist in a vacuum but in relationship to the community of faith, and to the global community. The answer to the question “what is religious life?” will depend on where a person stands when answering the question. Those of us in religious life

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could give an answer; those outside would probably give another. In this article, I would like to reflect on this question, drawing on some statements from three different places in the church: first, from the Second Vatican Council, a very particular place in the church; second, from the recent International Congress on Religious Life, in which religious women and men reflected on the meaning of religious life; and finally from the Code of Canon Law, revised and promulgated about halfway between the other two events, and again, coming from a very particular place in the church—from a single legislator, the Pope.

The Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) took the church and the world by storm and had far reaching effects on the way Catholics pray, work, and live the Gospel. Most Catholics I meet are aware of the council, but those who were alive during the council and followed its development and early aftermath are aging. This was not my experience; like my contemporaries, I heard of the council second hand and have taken many of its innovations for granted.

Religious life was not a central topic of the council; the central topic was the nature of the church itself, and its place in today’s society. Religious life, however, is so central to the church and to its place in society, that the council had to discuss it, and there are two principal places where that discussion entered the council documents. *Perfectae caritatis* was a minor document of the council, devoted entirely to the adaptation and renewal of religious life. *Lumen gentium* was the council’s major document. In its discussion of the Mystery of the Church, it devoted one chapter to religious life.



In the first chapter of *Perfectae caritatis* we read: Indeed from the very beginning of the church men and women have set about following Christ with greater freedom and imitating Christ more closely through the practice of the evangelical counsels. . . . Driven by love with which the Holy Spirit floods their hearts (see Rm 5:5) they live more and more for Christ and for Christ's body which is the church (see Col 1:24). (PC, 1)

The document acknowledges that religious life reaches back to the earliest Christian centuries, and history testifies that there is a continuous succession of women and men who have followed this way of life over the years, right down to our own day. Names and places have faded, generations have passed away, but there remains the witness to a desire to live the Gospel with greater freedom, to follow Christ in the vowed life and in mission, and to respond to the “love with which the Holy Spirit floods their hearts.” Throughout the document, *Perfectae caritatis* describes religious life as a life imbued with the spirit of the early Christian community, a life profoundly marked by a powerful pneumatic element. This description is the basis of the call to renewal of religious life.

Lumen gentium takes a different tack in its description of consecrated life in Chapter 6, entitled On Religious, where it says:

A person is totally dedicated to God, loved above all things, [and is] more intimately consecrated to divine service. [The religious life] more fully manifests . . . the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below. (LG, 44)

Total dedication and service are a sign and manifestation to the church in our own day of the end times when the promise of the Gospel will find fulfillment in the reign of God.

The place of consecrated life in the ecclesiology of Vatican II is that of people who have consciously chosen to live with one foot planted in the vibrancy of the early Christian community and the other foot placed squarely in the end times, where the reign of God will be manifest in all its splendor—one foot in Pentecost and the other in Glory.

This is the place to which we are called. This is the place in which we are most at home, most ourselves. This is the place that our consecration, dedication, vows, and constitutions seek to establish. From this place we live and pray, we unite in community, and we serve a world in need.

I came to religious life more than ten years after the close of the council, but its vision enchanted me when I saw it radiating from the lives of my sisters and when I first took up the council documents in theology classes. It inspires me still.

The Congress

In 2004, the first International Congress on Religious Life was organized in Rome for religious and by religious. It drew insights from across the globe and across the generations, and from religious in various ministries and lifestyles. Two speakers at that event explored the nature of religious life, each taking a different orientation, but together coming close to an integral understanding of the nature of the life.¹

João Batista Libânio, a Brazilian Jesuit, discussed the place of religious life in the work of development and service to the very poor. He described religious life as having three structural elements, a founding experience of God, community life and mission, and not as based on the vows to a great extent. . . . In the most adverse



situations, such as illness and old age, vocation persists, even if it is only in prayer and in the giving of one's life. It is characterized by its perennial nature, specific to giving oneself to God.

Thus he sees the experience of God, community, and mission as foundational, and the vows as a secondary matter.

Sandra Schneiders IHM also addressed the nature of religious life in her presentation on the future of religious life.² In her approach however, the vows themselves are central:

Religious, by the vows they profess and live, create an alternate "world" in the midst of this world, the *saeculum*. Religious do not simply attempt to live differently in the world, which all Christians must do, but to create a different world which will offer a prophetic witness in, to, and sometimes against the world and even the institutional church.

The vows address the basic human drive for money, sex, and power, seeking to create an alternate world, with an alternate economy, an alternate relational world, and an alternate politics, at least within the institute itself. This alternate world is an attempt to take definite steps to live into a society completely based on Gospel values.

The vows, whichever ones are made in particular congregations, are Gospel-based, global metaphors for the stance religious take toward the fundamental coordinates of human existence, material goods, sexuality, and power.

While Schneiders describes what religious life is in general, Libânio reminds us that every religious institute comes together around a particular experience of God, community, and mission. The two insights together come close to describing the experience of religious in understanding their own vocation.

The Code

Midway between the council and the congress, the Code of Canon Law was promulgated. It is interesting to note how it attempts to characterize religious life as a preamble to laying down the new canons governing that life. The first canon in each section of the code is a theological statement about the topic being treated. Thus the section on religious life begins with the following canon. (I have indicated with brackets where the canon touches the notions we have explored above.)

Can. 573 The life consecrated through the profession of the evangelical counsels [Schneiders] is a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit [PC], are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to God's honor, to the building up of the church, and to the salvation of the world [Libânio], they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the church, foretell the heavenly glory [LG].

With Schneiders, the text acknowledges the importance of the evangelical counsels in creating the life of religious; Schneiders, however, goes further to explore the function of the vows in religious life. Quoting *Perfectae caritatis*, the canon acknowledges the action of the Holy Spirit. However, whereas that document spoke of the love of the Spirit flooding our hearts, this Code speaks simply of the action of the Spirit. This is an example of the weakening of the pneumatic element found in the Code. The canon also completely lacks the reference to consecrated life as providing the freedom to follow Christ. However, this is law, and law is often in tension with the spirit. With Libânio, the Code notes the importance of a dedication to God and to mission,

though the sense of community is less evident. Finally, with *Lumen gentium*, it calls attention to the orientation of religious life toward the end times and the fulfillment of the Gospel.

These various statements from various places in the church seek to articulate the central values and meaning of religious life. Coming at it from different angles, they identify important coordinates that are valuable in reflecting on this life in which we as individuals and as groups choose to respond to a calling and to live a life that doesn't make sense in terms of contemporary standards of money, sex, and power, but which is intended to foster a life of Gospel service in communion and spiritual integration.

Notes

¹ Both papers are available in *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity* (Rome: Proceedings of the First International Congress on Religious Life, 2005).

² Sandra Schneiders's paper is available online at <<http://www.members.bvmcong.org/papers/schneiders.htm>>



Personal Reflection / Group Discussion

1. How long has it been since I have looked at the documents of Vatican II or the foundational documents and commentaries pertinent to my religious congregation?
2. Do I find any tensions integrating the overarching theology of consecrated life into my experience of daily, lived reality? If so, can I use that tension to understand and live my consecration better?