



“Consecration” and the Emerging Theology of Religious Life*

All who write on religious life today acknowledge that religious life is in a period of transition, moving away from what it knew itself to be yet not knowing completely what it is moving toward. It too is experiencing a major paradigm shift as is much in society. Advances in physics, psychology, medicine as well as technology and newer forms of social networking all happening in a newly globalized world that has much less in common than the world of a generation of two ago, indeed very much less than older generations had in common with their predecessors.

Consecration can be viewed as a theological category which helps to determine the identity of Religious Life and to locate this form of Christian life among the varied charisms in the Church. This is basically a Vatican II contribution to the evolving theology. In # 44 of *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and # 5 of *Perfectae Caritatis* (the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life) the Church duly note the importance of consecration, dedicated oneself totally to God. Theological reflections of today always reference these texts. Although there are other theological opinions on the matter, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (VC) meditates on religious life in the perspective of theology of consecration: “In the Church’s tradition religious profession is considered to be *a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration* received in Baptism.”(VC 30a)

The Second Vatican Council marked an awakening, by the Church and by religious themselves, of a crucial need for a renewed understanding of the identity and mission of religious in the Church for the world. The Church recognized that religious life came to the Council with a rather poor theology, one based on the ecclesiology of Councils of Trent (1545-1563) and Vatican I (1869-1870) provided religious life a secure place inside the Church, as the “state of perfection”. In addition the publication of the Code of Canon Law in 1917 required all institutes to revise their own proper law. When these were submitted, the Vatican imposed on all revised constitutions the basic model found in classical monastic constitutions. While these were workable in stable time both in the Church and the world, newer developments outside and inside the Church especially after World War II shook up religious life from its security and stability. Vatican II ushered in a new ecclesiology, a new way of understanding the Church, one more dynamic, with the circle rather than the pyramid being a more fit icon to express it. Among the significant outcomes was the heightened consciousness on the part of the laity with regards to their rightful place in the Church’s life and mission. This ecclesiological shake up urged religious life to theologically rethink its identity and mission.

During the last thirty or forty years the identity of religious life has been an important subject of discussion and study among theologians and religious themselves. The Holy Father convened the 1994 Synod with its focal concern on Consecrated Life. It revolved around the question of the theological category that

defines religious life. A variety of expressions of its central role or core element were being proposed: the following of Christ, the charism of religious life itself, the importance of consecration, the traditional emphasis on the evangelical counsels, and the ever present commitment to mission. There were other proposals in the many theological discussions being carried on, such as evangelical radicalism and celibacy in community. There was no final solution at the close of the Synod largely because it hadn't intended to give a definitive synthesis of something that was clearly in transition. Time would eventually confirm what religious life should be about, how it is defined, what identity it will have in the Church. Pope John Paul II, in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, consecration, more precisely, "new and special consecration" at the heart of consecration. He says:

In the Church's tradition religious profession is considered to be *a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism*, inasmuch as it is the means by which the close union with Christ already begun in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of the evangelical counsels. (VC30a)

John Paul II reminds us in *Vita Consecrata* that consecrated life, "deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit." (VC 1) He further points out that our consecration is for mission:

In the image of Jesus, the beloved Son "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (*Jn* 10:36), those whom God calls to follow him are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission. Fundamentally, this is true of every disciple. In a special way, however, it is true of those who, in the manner that characterizes the consecrated life, are called to follow Christ "more closely", and to make him the "all" of their lives. The task of *devoting themselves wholly to "mission"* is therefore included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life. (VC 72)

For us as followers of St. Vincent who follow Jesus, the Apostle of the Eternal Father, this is of particular significance. Furthermore Pallotti teaches us that "the life of Jesus Christ was his apostolate.

All this shows that the theme of consecration belongs to the broader question of the identity of religious life. *Vita Consecrata*, even if it consciously adopts the model of "new and special consecration", does not put an end to the search. It encourages further reflective discussion and study. The Pope says: "...I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life..." (VC 13e)

In light of all that has been said it is clear that the search for a more precise and meaningful theological identity of religious life must go on, one that reflects the multi-faceted nature of consecration and mission.

* An overview based on material from a course once given at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia and written by Sr. Grace Gabrielle O'Brien, CSAC