

# The Consecrated Life

On 1 February 2009 the Archdiocese honoured the consecrated life, i.e., those men and women who have taken the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It is therefore worth recalling that this form of life was the topic of the synod of bishops that met in Rome in 1994; in 1996 a summary of their deliberations was issued by Pope John Paul II.<sup>1</sup> Given the historical and contemporary importance of the monastic movement and its offshoots in active communities, such as the Basilian Fathers, the Pope's words are still relevant for all Catholics.

In his "apostolic exhortation" the Pope acted as a gifted amanuensis to the synod. Although this papal role represents a certain compromise with the principle of episcopal collegiality, it had a practical advantage: it produced a unified and relatively brief document instead of several volumes of reports and speeches. Furthermore, the Pope's subservience to the synod's conclusions as well as the necessarily generalized nature of his remarks constituted a recognition of the apostolic authority of the bishops who were called upon to apply to their dioceses the general principles enunciated in the exhortation. For example, in number 80 the Pope states what is virtually a truism:

. . . a genuine inculturation will help consecrated persons to live the radical nature of the Gospel according to the charisms of their institute and the character of the people with whom they come into contact.

There is here no guidance in assessing the validity of the radical inculturation of, say, a Bede Griffiths in his Christian-Hindu Ashram. In other words, it is the prerogative of the local bishop to adjudicate in this and other individual cases.

Even today, many readers will recognize John Paul's style and method, quite different from that of Benedict XVI. The material is highly organized, the topics exhaustively discussed. The first of the three parts—"The Origins of the Consecrated Life in the Mystery of Christ and of the Trinity"—shows the Pope at his most effective. As with his famous encyclical *The Splendour of Truth*, he begins with a protracted meditation on a biblical text, in this case the Transfiguration, which is expounded in the manner of the Fathers, the great mediaevals, and the liturgy. Prescinding from the technical and (all-too-often) irreligious methods of professional exegetes, the Pope convincingly finds all the good and the achievements of religious life implicit in the Apostles' vision of the glorified Christ. John Paul's application to religious life of the trinitarian character of the Transfiguration is particularly effective.

The evangelical counsels are above all *a gift of the Holy Trinity*. The consecrated life proclaims what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness, and his beauty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text of this apostolic exhortation may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> No. 20.

The Pope repeats the familiar Catholic teaching that all Christians are called to perfection. The consecrated life, therefore, cannot constitute a new way of being a Christian; there is only one, and it comes with baptism. How then can the vowed life be described as “objectively superior” to other Christian states of life? Again, the Holy Father turns to Tradition for his answer:

The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved and when the children of the resurrection “will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angles of God.”<sup>3</sup>

A footnote refers to the Council of Trent, but the doctrine is as old as Christianity (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 7). That this teaching embarrasses and angers many Catholics today arises to some extent out of an exaggerated commitment to democracy but mainly, I would say, out of an indifference to the afterlife at the practical level.

A significant feature of the exhortation is its careful placement of the manifold forms of the vowed life in the context of the life of the Church as a whole. For example, part 2 is entitled “Consecrated Life as a Sign of Communion in the Church.” A religious community ideally exemplifies the mutual support to which all human groupings, and especially the Church, aspire:

By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that *sharing in the trinitarian communion can change human relationships* and create a new type of solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

In making this point and throughout the exhortation, John Paul draws upon the full range of the Church’s experience: Scripture, the Greek and Latin Fathers, the mediaeval Church, and the contemporary magisterium,<sup>5</sup> especially Vatican II . . . and his own considerable corpus of writings. No explicit use is made of contemporary theological thought, although the discerning may note the influence of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar who died in 1988. The importance of the magisterium is a constant theme. Even the allegiance of followers of the consecrated life to the love of God and neighbour is presented as the fruit of their harmony with the local and the universal magisteria: they “think with the Church.” From these principles, John Paul moves into new concerns, such as social justice and ecology. This broad context should suggest to religious communities innovative ways of associating with the laity, and the Pope, following the synod, remarks on the manifold forms of the consecrated life, from contemplative nuns to new foundations in which couples, single people, celibates, and clerics live together.

Part 3 again emphasizes that the consecrated life is “essential” to the Church, this time in her relation to the world. As his “mission” was the fruit of Jesus’s love for his Father, so the religious who has been formed to love God will inevitably be led to an effective love of neighbour.

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<sup>3</sup> No. 32, quoting Matt 22.30.

<sup>4</sup> No. 41.

<sup>5</sup> The “magisterium” is the official teaching authority in the Church.

. . . the witness of life and the witness of works of the apostolate and human development are equally necessary: both mirror Christ who is at one and the same time consecrated to the glory of the Father and sent into the world for the salvation of his brothers and sisters.<sup>6</sup>

Discernible in such statements is a tendency to idealize the consecrated life. Nowhere is this idealization more evident than in the Pope's expectation that it is religious—to many not much more than a shrinking and aging group of querulous men and women—who will “present new answers to the new problems of today's world.”<sup>7</sup> To the cynic in all of us, however, the Pope effectively to saints such as Vincent de Paul, who do demonstrate that it is possible for religious to achieve the ideal represented in the life of Jesus: total commitment both to prayer and to an apostolate.

Some of the best pages in the exhortation occur in part 3 where John Paul describes the prophetic character of the consecrated life.<sup>8</sup> The vows are presented in dialogue with a secularized world: to hedonism they respond with “the *joyful living of perfect chastity* as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition”; in place of materialism, they offer “evangelical poverty which can be lived in different ways and is often expressed in an active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity”; and lawless “freedom” is countered by obedience which, like that of Jesus to the Father, shows that “*there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom.*”

In its respect for traditional means to holiness, the exhortation fully describes the need for formation, spiritual direction, the Eucharist, the meditative reading of Scripture, and devotion to Mary—including a daily rosary. Among the works of religious institutes, the one which the Pope sees as most necessary for the Church today is Catholic education, in institutions manned by the religious themselves. While the Pope's ideal religious-educator will seldom if ever be met in real life, the glowing description of his accomplishments, like the effective charity of a Vincent de Paul, reminds us of the need of having a goal, even an unrealizable one. This combination of idealism and realism is typically Catholic. I would even say that the whole Catholic system is based upon that combination which, if you think about it, accounts for the Church's approach to worship, ecclesiology, theology, and morality.

John Paul II, as usual, casts his net wide. As well as social justice and ecology, he associates ecumenism with religious life, in a manner that must be described as somewhat forced. The Eastern Church, of course, is frequently instanced as the place of origin and as a continuing exemplar of the consecrated life; but they, like other forms of Christianity and even different religions, so the Pope claims, will be interested and impressed by the beauty of the consecrated life in its Catholic forms.

One must ask what the effect of this and other such Roman documents has been. The Pope clearly wanted to reach Catholics everywhere in his conscientious fulfilment of the obligations incumbent upon the Church's universal teacher. Some Catholics responded with joy and obedience, others with a critical attitude close at times to contempt. Nevertheless, it was John Paul's view that the consecrated life in its explicit

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<sup>6</sup> No. 72.

<sup>7</sup> No. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Nos. 84 ff.

commitment to the Gospel is still the Church's best witness to the ideal relationship between the Church and society. We should all take note.