

THE GREAT CHALLENGES OF CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY

José M. Arnaiz, s.m.

*Become fire
that kindles other fires
(Lk 12:49)*

Consecrated life in the world must be seen within the context of a positive ecclesiality of communion, in an inclusive society and in an interactive cultural context. In this way, it can be transformed into a human and ecclesial group which is alive, fruitful and radically evangelical. *This presupposes a capacity to see the newness happening in the Church and in our current society. It is necessary to have a renewed awareness which is prophetic, sapiential and apocalyptic that can lead consecrated life to become a witness of transparent lives manifesting and rendering Jesus present; a consecrated life that can promote what is new, and become utopia that needs to emerge in our present time in the history of the Church and of our peoples.*

This reflection will be developed in three parts. In the first part we will offer some criteria to try to give a name to the great challenges of consecrated life in our times. In the second part we will list those challenges. And in the third part, we will seek to find a response for these challenges.

First part

SOME CRITERIA TO FORMULATE THE CHALLENGES

These criteria can become markers along our journey. They will help us deepen our experience of consecrated life, and direct us in the choice of our goal in the journey we are to undergo in these times.

Consecrated life, more than ever today, is called to become a fire that ignites other fires and “lights up the heart” (Benedict XVI). It is called to fervor, intensity of prayer, evangelical radicalness, and service in mission proper to the missionary and the disciple.

In the last few decades, communities have been offered various proposals: consecrated life present in one’s area, the thrust of renewal itineraries, the Emmaus journey, the preferential option for the poor, the horizon and the process of arriving at a mystical and prophetic life, economy at the service of the mission, new foundations in the periphery, processes of revitalization and reinvigorating the charismatic identity, the commitment for a just and fraternal society, greater sensibility in regard to fraternity in life and in the apostolic activity, prayerful reading of the Word, the mission shared with the laity, restructuring, nearness to the young.... We have the impression of having wanted to change everything, and notwithstanding, we changed very little. It is as if we missed out on the flourishing of a consecrated life that is more faithful to Jesus Christ and the charisms received from our Founders; as if we had need of assuming risks and abandoning false securities.

All this presupposes the reform and easing of structures, and using them for animation and revitalization of the consecrated life. The inter-institutional “itinerant” team of Amazon (Brazil) wrote a very enlightening text regarding institutional “lightening up”—a challenge aimed at producing an agile body in view of an abundant and fruitful evangelical life and a renewed mission, in agreement with and at the forefront of the consecrated life. Our institutions are undergoing a profound change of spirit and organization. All over the world, consecrated life is going through a difficult moment of transition: present structures no longer provide the answers like in the past, and

new structures must be born and emerge from a new spirit. For this reason, it is necessary to point to a new paradigm.

We need imagination and decisiveness to achieve important changes of structure and lifestyle. Consecrated life finds it hard to offer to the present Christian life a new synthesis and an alternative that could touch and renew its identity and become a significant contribution to the Church and contemporary society. It is trying to be more lay and less clerical; more *from* and *with* the poor; less secular; bringing about a mysticism of love, communion, and solidarity; less immersed in ecclesiastic “functionalism”; more centered on Jesus and in service. However, it seems that it cannot find the way to express all this. And yet, *the best thing about this ecclesial group is its constant effort to substitute barriers with horizons and to try to live in fullness.* This is the thread that weaves through its history and its wide geography.

The responses to this effort and to today’s needs are weak and fragile. In an article published in the magazine *Convergencia* of the Conference of Religious of Brazil, Fr. Carlos Palacio, SJ, affirms: “Consecrated religious life today is suffering from an undeniable ‘evangelical anemia,’ both personal and institutional. . . . To overcome this anemia it is necessary to redeem its passion for the person of Jesus Christ, the first love that consecrated religious life ought to radiate.”¹

These steps will be well taken when we set out from a *reality principle* and a *call to humility*. I think this is the right word: we are not as needed as we have believed ourselves to be, and maybe as we still believe. Neither our founders nor our spiritualities and missions have thought of us and projected us as unavoidable or essential, and yet, some of us tend to think in these terms. This explains the reason for a certain arrogance, corrupt use of power, contempt for or marginalization of the laity, the convenience of returning to the past, and even the repentance and displeasure for having changed so many things and renounced others during the turbulent years from 1960 to 1980.

However, to say that we are not necessary does not mean that we cannot be important. But we will be so only in the measure that we are capable of looking with hope at the horizon before us; that we commit ourselves to understand the dynamics of today’s global and diversified world; that we become men and women of depth so that we can be faithful to the charismatic spirit of foundation, instead of the centuries-old structures that were established for other times. In other words, know how to dedicate ourselves to seeking a new sanctity open to the future that permits us to recuperate the foundational intuitions and make them new; and so that we can launch into new adventures, even in the midst of uncertainty and running the risk of possible failure. It is worthwhile recalling Churchill who, with his wise irony, quipped that “the problem of our times is that men do not want to be useful, but important.”

Beyond being necessary or important *what matters is to be relevant in our particular missions*—seen as a contribution to society and a possible means of favoring its transformation; it means being significant to the poor, getting involved with them and “burning our bridges.” This is where our future lies and the opportunity of becoming evangelizing leaven. *It could be that young religious are finding a new way of being so, and those more advanced in age are not able to see it or interpret it.*

We cannot forget that the consecrated life in its present form—structures, organization, work methods, lifestyle—does not respond adequately to the needs and challenges of a society that is changed and is changing radically. This society that is changed and is changing can be described in many ways: pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized, shaped by modern information and communication technologies, producer of new forms of poverty and exclusion. . . . In other words, the change of an era is taking place, and it presumes a change in our understanding of the human person and its relation to the world and to God; a change leading us to a new paradigm.

¹ C. Palacios, *Luzes e sombra da Vida Religiosa Consagrada nos dias de hoje*, in *Convergencia*, September 2011.

More than ever, consecrated life must avoid spending its energies in internal and ideological criticisms, *and instead live in a more positive manner—an alternative manner* that is open to true pluralism, recognizing that the Spirit works in different ways to build up the Church and to develop the life of our peoples. *It must germinate the seed of a new society, according to the project of God's Kingdom, and of a new way of being Church, made-up of being community.* All this presupposes great changes that every charism will have to incarnate in its original traditions. No one is exempt from entering into this wavelength. It is a wise viewpoint, profoundly marked by faith, and in continual cultural and religious dialogue, open to the poor of all times, including today's poor, and to all those who generate new thoughts and new ways of proceeding.

Consecration makes us persons who are given to God without conditions. More concretely, it makes us “living memories of Jesus' way of being and acting,” of his obedience, poverty and chastity. It transforms us into signs and communicators of God's love for humanity.

This is the first contribution that we can and should offer as religious. Unfortunately, it is not recognized because a reductive anthropological model, very frequent today, robs from life its religious dimension, building it on short-term life projects. This is what happens with the myth of science, technology and economics and the illusion that progress is unlimited, condemning existence to the immanence of this world without horizons of definitive transcendence since everything ends with death. To a world centered on efficiency and production, on economy and well-being, the religious presents himself or herself as a *sign of God* and his grace and love. Jesus came to give us God and his love. This is God's good news! It is God whom, first and foremost, we can give to humanity. This is the great hope that we can offer. It is our first prophecy.

It is evident that this life centered on God and self-giving to others is *clearly “countercultural.”* It appears as a sign counter to the absolute value of money and materialism, counter to hedonism and body worship, counter to individualism and any form of authoritarianism.

We live in a historical, cultural and social context in which the evangelical counsels are not appreciated, much less understood. They are considered inhuman and culpable of rendering human beings not truly mature or fulfilled; in other words, the evangelical counsels are something from which to free ourselves. For example, obedience seems to attack the fundamental rights of the human person, the freedom to decide for oneself, to be self-determined and self-fulfilled. Chastity is seen as a deprivation of the good of marriage, and the renunciation of having a person with whom to share the beautiful as well as the ugly moments of life, its joys and sorrows, successes and failures; it is the renunciation of being parents, of tenderness, and of everyday intimacy, and the knowledge that someone is close to you; the renunciation of the sweetness of exchanging glances, and of hearing the words: “how wonderful that you exist!” Poverty is even less appreciated in a world that has made well-being and finances as supreme values. This leads people to think that poverty is considered as an evil to be overcome, an evil from which to free oneself in order to become completely autonomous, without having to depend on anyone. The important thing is *to have in order to be*; not to be deprived of something, and to seek forms of life that are secular and consumerist. This makes us insensitive to the poor and incapable of serving the neediest.

Undoubtedly, this socio-cultural and ecclesial context influences consecrated life and provokes a critical situation manifested by various symptoms, even some of which are alarm: decrease of those entering, increase in departures, aging of the members, weighty institutions, excessive and stressful activism on the part of the persons in charge of the works, the weakening of communitarian life, fraternity and the spiritual life, frequent financial problems, together with the preoccupation over an uncertain future. For some, the actual form of consecrated life in the world is touching bottom. For others, it is suffering from evangelical “anemia” translated as diminished passion and weak conviction leading to frustration and disenchantment. The power of disenchantment is quite vast. Becoming aware of it and reacting properly will lead consecrated life to be re-born in a way that is more alive and stronger than ever.

The present situation in our globalized world is perhaps *the most profound crisis of meaning in the history of humanity*. We say that people are disoriented and suffering. We are faced with this reality—described as “the breakdown of Christianity’s historical incarnation”—which we can consider as a new invitation for revitalization and reform in the Church. It is obvious that we need conversion and growth to resolve those distortions that have weakened the life and witness of the Church, including religious life. We have become too accustomed to privileges, considering our call an “office,” or worst yet, a “dignity.” We have become insensitive to our lack of austerity in regard to others, and infrequently do we question whether our life is coherent with the “image” of the servant who gives his life so that others can have life.

Our way of being must really be configured with that of the suffering Servant of Jhwh. It is our duty to question ourselves with honesty and humility, and see whether our life and activities are structures according to the principles of efficacy and utility, proper to this logic, or according to the countercultural witness of self-giving as unconditional love, of which Jesus gives us the example. Religious life was born as a countercultural reality, and one criteria of its fidelity to the mission is precisely that of maintaining itself as an alternative meaning. Chesterton said that every generation is saved by the saint who most contradicts it. We are invited to honestly re-look at the criteria on which we base and organize our activities. Is our preoccupation merely with making them efficient and productive? Are we ready to incarnate the logic of gratuity and trust, even if it implies the risk of failure? Do we believe that in the concrete experience of “failure,” God is manifested in a privileged way? Let us not forget that the Lord’s death on the cross was a real failure in the eyes of the world. And neither should we forget that Paul was convinced that in his weakness the glory of God was made more clearly manifest.

The challenges found on one side of the globe are similar to those of the other side. These are the conclusions that were reached in the various international meetings, such as the Assemblies of the USG, which studied this topic. These Assemblies are a good occasion to review the life of religious Institutes. They always conclude that, in the bottom line, the challenges are very similar between one continent and another, and the differences are not substantial ones. The challenges affect the apostolic religious life the most, both in their positive and negative dimensions.

Second part

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Beginning with these broad statements, consecrated life is facing some specific challenges which we will now present.

If we respond to the challenges, *we can change what is problematic and in crisis, into occasions of growth, and into a new stage*. It is to this that we are called. This is the task of the great “animators” and the groups guiding the consecrated life. It means to become leaven that ferments the dough of the consecrated life, and to become a gift and a living and prophetic presence of the Spirit who wants to renew the Church. We cannot look back but forward, and offer alternatives. In order to formulate and propagate alternatives, it is necessary to identify the seeds of the life that is being born. Even more so: God needs our hands to re-weave the fabric of the socio-cultural reality of our present time. In this regard, the consecrated life was pivotal in the past and it is called to be the same at present.

As we have seen in the first part, *it seems to have lost its course*. This unease is becoming always more conscious, as demonstrated by the *indignados*. However, it is ever more evident that indignation is not enough; we need to find the way to go forward. Society not only feels the hardship, but it is also disheartened. There are no alternative and convincing leaders on the rise to

persuade individuals to choose a new direction. Perhaps the reality of oppression and depression weaken the possibility of consolidating the work of leaders which we need.

To reinvigorate the consecrated life

Vitality is identified with such expressions as: *impassioned following of Christ, radical discipleship, evangelical radicalness, witnessing to the primacy of God, evangelical spirituality, intense prayer, apostolic dynamism, missionary enthusiasm, lively communities, simple and open communities, option for the poor, and intense fervor.*

The war cry is: “return to Jesus,” “return to the Gospel,” “return to the Word of God,” and forget all else. This comes from the Spirit and is identified with the passion for Christ and for humanity. It expects to create and support people who are consistent, men and women marked by evangelical truth, immersed in the Spirit of God; and create lively communities, simple and open, which are missionary and have an intense spiritual life. These communities and persons will be moved by fervor, fraternity and missionary dynamism. Consecrated life in our world has to work at recuperating the *mystical aspect that comes from the prayerful reading of the Word of God*, which is at the heart of being Christian and consecrated, and which leads to an impassioned following of Jesus and sharing with the poor. It must be *fire*, that is, Christian life and missionary self-giving. In other words, this *religious life* requires *quality*, as Fr. Arrupe used to say.

We are expected to learn and to transmit *authentic Christian spirituality, and certainly, one’s charismatic identity*. The Conference of Religious of Mexico recognizes that men and women today—without distinction of age, nationality, language, education, profession, religious belonging, political affiliation—seek in every place and with every means at their disposal a religion cut “to measure,” where everything is in agreement with different tastes. How can consecrated life fail to deal with this situation? We find the answer in the Conference of Religious of Equador: we are to draw near the people of our time in a new manner, with a new language and new attitudes; we are to know how to dialogue and allow ourselves to be enriched by the questions of contemporary men and women; offer them, through our witness and our words, the proposal of a life full of meaning, marked by generosity, compassion, generous self-giving service, acting in a way that is inspired by freedom, truth and love.

All this is accomplished through a vital and deep relationship with the Lord whom we wish to follow with a style of life and mission to which we are dedicated full time and with our whole heart.

This “offering” will be possible, authentic and fruitful only if it comes from a profound evangelical spirituality that helps people to mature in all the dimensions of their lives; a strong spirituality, incarnated, committed, nourished with the Eucharist, prayer, communitarian life, like a true school of holiness, flowing into a profoundly mystical experience that is contemplative both in daily life and in the mission.

In living the Gospel, to which we have been called, we have to exercise a *greater interaction between formulation and reality, theory and life*. We have very clear policy formulations, but they are also very far from really leading to change, so much so that the reality is almost schizophrenically contrasted with the current formulations of religious life.

We ought to move to a spirituality and theology that are truly incarnated. In his interesting confessions, a bishop emeritus from Canada who participated in the Second Vatican Council and who wanted a new Council, said that he changed his great expectation citing, as his reason, the fact that today there is no theology, nor notable theologians, to inspire the necessary reforms, as happened at Vatican II. His reflection makes us think. This is certain: we are not in a time of theological novelties. The consecrated life of the past was able to create a profound and original

theological reflection, which we feel is missing in the Church today. *But this is still a sign of the “fall,” a sign that something new is yet to be born.*

Experience warns us about the strong dichotomy between human processes and spirituality. In the life of the community, we also feel the need to talk about our faith in a credible and intelligible way, and to speak of our life in a purposeful way, expressing hope and good news. Many words inherited from metaphysics are empty of concrete content. Life stories seek a language that goes beyond details to inspire reflection and a new synthesis. We theorized the de-mystification of sacred texts and symbols. *It’s easier to theorize than to live, assume and invent new syntheses, and find the right mediations for an intense religious life.* Our challenge is to participate, patiently, in this search with others.

There are very important steps to be taken, some of which have been suggested on several occasions when dealing with reflection and revitalization of the consecrated life. We need to pass from an *external* conduct lived out of requirements and regulations, to one experienced *from within*, a more demanding one according to the saying of Augustine: “*Ama et quod vis fac*”. This requires *more Jesus and less Church*, more kerygma and less paralyzing hermeneutics, more service and fewer impediments, more intensity and less quantity. It is the new face of consecrated life which implies the replacement of lapsed structures, overcoming disenchantment, recognizing new meanings, returning to the Word of God and the foundational charism, responding to the signs of the times, the ability to dialogue, and the value of encounter especially with the poor and with the laity.

For some, all this leads to a stronger alternative, one that goes beyond renewal, re-founding and restructuring. For some, today, the religious life must be reinvented, and a *new paradigm* is to be found. We don’t quite know what this statement means, but it expresses the desire for significant change. It is a direct consequence of the provocation of this challenge. We are well aware that religious life must be reinvented starting from a renewed experience that is mystical-spiritual-charismatic, and that relates it with the source of life, energy, and meaning. It is a strong experience of transcendence that leads it to live more in the “beyond” than in what is seen. And not only live, but also *symbolize*, that is, find those symbols that today urge humanity to reflect, look up, broaden the horizon, get out of routine, materialism, indifference, emptiness and the existential fatigue of disenchantment.... This means, no more and no less, than to return to Jesus, to go back to the Gospel, and almost forget everything else. To meet this important challenge and find that new paradigm, it is *necessary to intensify prayer, community life and mission; but it is also necessary to point to the needed change in order to understand and experience the sense of consecrated life in our present epochal change.* (DA² 44).

It is becoming commonplace to claim that this paradigmatic change requires not only an attitude of simple renewal, but a more profound and radical process. Some, in the search for a suitable vocabulary, speak of *refounding*, that is, starting anew from the ground up, or better yet, from the “Foundation.” Anyway, whatever vocabulary is valid for the future, it is certain that from the perspective of a believer one begins to perceive that we are living collectively through a very dark night, and precisely from there, we hear a call for a global revival of the meaning of our existence and our practices; we note the necessity for a true conversion of our life of faith and theological reflection in tune with the new challenges of our time.

The poet Ernesto Cardenal in his *Cosmic Canticle* writes: “In darkness, the throbbing flesh of life grows.” Hölderlin already had said: “In the danger of the night grows what will save us.”

² V General Aparecida Conference, Final document, 2007.

Restructuring in view of revitalization

As we said at the beginning, the consecrated life has urgent need of reforming structures—communitarian, administrative and pastoral—of loosening them, and placing them at the service of an authentic animation. The Church and also religious Institutes need a profound change in terms of organization. Growth centers are shifting. We have become “globalized” lately and, on the other hand, we have diminished numerically. We are less significant and less fruitful. The institution itself (*consecrated life*) is living a difficult time of transition; the current structures do not respond as they did in the past, and it is necessary to rethink its organization and its services.

This restructuring has a double side: the mission and the life. Before closing communities and ceasing commitments and activities, it is important for consecrated life to reduce and decrease its presences, and to think about joining forces so that all can work together and share the mission to varying degrees. These forces can come from the laity, from other congregations or institutions. We must set the rejuvenation of a life form that includes the mission. But we must also say that we cannot secure the future of communities and apostolic activities at the cost of the form of life. First and foremost, *we must live* in view of being what we are, and not allow what we signify to become dull.

It is true that the structures can asphyxiate the vitality of a province or a delegation, but they can also be a cause of dynamism. They can be a stupendous mediation for the mission. The apostolate structures must be connected with the motivations that gave them their origin and they should have certain characteristics: they must not be heavy; they must let the charism shine through; they must transmit life and be renewable. Sometimes they get detached from the initial motivation, lose their original meaning, or do not fulfill the function for which they were born. Here are some questions that are always helpful: do we carry the structures or do they carry us? How and what can we do to make them go from being like heavy stones to become supports on which we can rely and use as apostolic and evangelizing tools? For this reason, it is important to tackle decisively certain paths towards inter-congregationality in all their dimensions and stages.

We need to set out in search for new structures that are well adapted to a throbbing life. Certainly these steps will include both errors and success. Some of the new institutes are already trying it out, but not always successfully. Our restructuring efforts are shedding a little bit of light on this commitment and responsibility.

Being able to continue the mission and the animation of our life, with evangelical effectiveness and efficiency, it is necessary to reassess its structures and mediations. The consecrated life should not focus too highly on its institutional aspects—although it cannot fail to attend to them—to the detriment of its function of animation and incentive of life.

Listen to God in the outcry of the migrants, the indigenous, the women, the poor, the prisoners, the sick, the elderly and the young

Listening must lead us to respond creatively to the new forms of dehumanization and poverty, and to make the contribution of an eco-theological reflection for the defense of life threatened throughout the ecosystem. This encourages us to say, and even more so to achieve, what the voice of the Spirit suggests. The Spirit moans and cries out in us and in those suffering in our history and our present situation as a whole, in which several thousands of millions of human beings are the protagonists.

The call to the consecrated life is the ecclesial spearhead of all life that is threatened, and it is the defense of another world that is possible and necessary. Few things arouse as much admiration,

surprise and attraction as to see religious who give themselves in favor of the impoverished and of those who, in one way or another, are considered the least of society (VC 82), who are where others don't want to be. There is no doubt that it was the preferential option for the poor that configured the life and mission of Jesus (Lk 14.18). And it was the same option that configured the life of our congregations. All of them were born at the threshold of some type of inhumanity. Therefore our mission priorities cannot be with those who exclude others, but with the excluded. It can be said that the history of this option merges with the history of the consecrated life.

This involves a commitment to systemic change as a response to the cry of the poor and a supporting role in the construction of more just societies. It involves processes of awareness, formation and action that encourage and produce changes in mentality, culture and activities. It involves a spirituality and consistency of faith that react to the progressive deterioration of the living conditions of human beings, and that can contribute effectively to the elimination of hunger, the eradication of poverty, to environmental sustainability, to gender equality and the recognition of women, to reduction of infant mortality, to overcoming diseases such as malaria and aids, to recover the *sense of the poor* held by our Founders, which is very different from charity merely as assistance. This is to be considered as a resonance of the current movement of the *indignados*.

It also involves setting up religious life in *frontier areas*, as an expression of its mystical aspect, its prophecy and its defense of life. It involves making one's own the boldness of the Founders, the evangelical response where life calls, the commitment to migrants/refugees, the trafficking of persons, the environment, the poor, the elderly, the indigenous people, the woman; a response to integral and sustainable human development, and a systemic change that can humanize and unite.

These attitudes lead to prophecy in the face of runaway corruption, both in the world of economics as in the world of politics at all levels. They imply a culture of honesty, transparency and solidarity, as an alternative to the culture of corruption and selfishness, founded on a vision of the human person called to a transparent relationship with God, with all our brothers and sisters and with creation.

It is a challenge that requires us to renew, and to live profoundly, our option for the impoverished, those from all times and those of today (DA 407-430), starting from its radical theological motivations: the God of life does not want the life of his weakest ones to be taken away (DA 392). Once again, this option should get away from petty structural safety, and recover the original sense of the religious life as viewed by the Fathers of the desert and the charismatic intuition of our Founders. The consecrated life should continue to offer the path and the reality of an effective and relevant option for the poor.

Religious life is meaningful and attractive not when it becomes alarmed in the face of difficult socio-cultural reality, but when it becomes leaven and energy in the history that we are living so that there will be new heavens and a new earth and God, who is absolute newness (Ap 21:1-7), will live in our limitations, overcome them and fulfill his dream for all humankind. The mission of religious finds full meaning if our action and reflection, or our praxis, as we called it in other eras, converge in the engagement with the poor and the promotion of justice.

Create fraternity and awaken hope

Nowadays, consecrated life is faced with an opportunity and a very special task: that of creating, inspiring, enlivening and sustaining everywhere *authentic fraternal communities* that radiate friendship, incentive, support and reconciliation. Consecrated life must strengthen community life, to which new generations are very sensitive. It must accommodate the cultural and spiritual diversity of its members, knowing that living community is already mission. It ought to be open *ad extra*, towards all those excluded from history. We can ask ourselves: *what is required of a*

community so that it can transmit to others the appeal of living together, united in diversity, creating heartfelt and humanizing spaces that are open and joyful for each person and for others?
To achieve this, it must progress:

- *from a life in common to a community of life* rich in personal relationships, welcome, dialogue, discernment, responsible freedom, concern for the other and for what is diverse, where more than mere physical presence what is worth is the melding of spirit and the union of hearts;
- *from structures that make individuals childish to supports that can form people in freedom.* It is not uncommon that, even with good will, certain structural supports have been multiplied making people childish, without creativity or imagination; they were agents more loyal to executing orders than people able to discern, from their own responsibility and their own loyal knowledge and understanding to live the mission assigned them. We do not help people to grow in maturity and responsibility by forcing them, but by encouraging them.
- *from an impossible uniformity to communion in diversity* . Every Christian and religious community is a pale image of the Trinitarian community. And *the Trinitarian community is realized in difference not in uniformity: each divine Person is different and works differently.* The unity of the Holy Trinity is made up of the oppositions and differences of the three distinct Persons, co-sharers in love;
- *from a fortified trench to an open field* where we battle for the Kingdom. An introverted community is a neurotic community. Our communities would live in a healthier and more airy manner if they opened up their doors and windows to the world; or if they came down to the streets and accompanied the caravans of men and women, listening with their hearts to how much people suffer, struggle and love. The place where we stand is not the convenient tail end without risks, but the line of fire where we fight for justice, solidarity and peace.

Humanizing ourselves so as to humanize

Offering contemporary society and culture *an alternative way of living the human condition is not a minor challenge.* In the past, consecrated life fulfilled this very service in some of history's great social and cultural changes, by presenting an alternative project of human achievement and a cultural proposal that turned out to be the indispensable response to the need for values, attitudes and practices of the society of those times. With this as a starting point, the final message of the XVII Assembly of CLAR, in 2009, expressed it this way: "We want to move towards another type of revitalized consecrated life that responds to the new paradigms that stir us, making sure that our fraternity and union are more humane and humanizing."

We have to recognize that at this time there is little human maturity in religious. There is a "precarious physical and mental health" exacerbated by a significant decrease in the numbers of members. Bearing this reality in mind, we face the urgent challenge to support every initiative that leads to overcoming immaturity and lack of personal knowledge manifested in attachments, relationships of superiority or inferiority, and in not knowing how to value or learn from various ways or degrees of each one's formation. In addition to using what the human sciences offer, it is essential to have an authentic spiritual experience, a welcome meeting with grace capable of transforming our human inconsistencies.

This challenge requires serious initial and ongoing formation to apostolic religious life that touches the depths of the soul of the religious and is essentially Christocentric (DA 12, 41, 220). Moreover, human and affective formation consistent with the postmodern times in which we are living must be given much space and attention; this formation is to help all to walk through life with

autonomy and mature responsibility. When we want to deepen this topic, in our current socio-cultural context, we need to highlight three words, or three stresses, three strong sensibilities of our times:

- ***Freedom.*** As finite human beings, open to infinity, we can choose freedom, a freedom that is at the origin of being human, as the author of Genesis intuited. Freedom to search and find new faces and new names for God in the following of Jesus of the Gospel. Freedom to empty ourselves of power, privileges and honors given by our ecclesial and social position, and place ourselves really and effectively with the most marginalized, impoverished and excluded. The epochal crisis offers us the opportunity of freedom to live new experiences to say our word, to make our search visible, to move from fearful obedience to fidelity out of love. This freedom blends well with docility. Freedom continues to be a key topic and, in a certain way, a “turbulent” one in the processes of revitalization of the consecrated life, and in the cultural moment in which we find ourselves today.
- ***Compassion.*** Conscious of our finiteness and that of all creation, we experience compassion as a visceral love that unites us in our common identity, illness, impotence, and death. Compassion puts passion in our proceedings and gives our existence an essential quality for human development. The compassion that we want to live, and which finds its source in the Gospel, requires a lucid and loving option for those who suffer as a result of acts of inhumanity in our present times. We must suffer “together with.” This signifies making a strong decision to manifest the love of God and to heal the deep wounds of humanity, of others and our own. Our concern, like that of God, should be for suffering humanity, and our love, like that of Jesus, should be the love which seeks life for everyone and for all things.
- ***Communion.*** We all share the wound of the finite, and the openness to the infinite. We all suffer the rupture that conflicts cause in us. These common realities call for communion between us and with God to give rise to new relations and new realities. In addition to community understood in a limited way as sharing the same roof, we must choose to create communion daily by embracing our differences, allowing the wisdom of God to stir us and direct us, lovingly, including even what disturbs us. Humanity today asks us to practice the aspect of meeting each other and “connect” with one another. A truly fraternal community is one of the most eagerly awaited signs from our culture.

The triad: *freedom, compassion, communion*, can lead us to live the Trinity in a manner that fulfills our desire for the infinite out of our own finite grandiose existence open to eternity. It can also challenge us to live intensely the deep aspirations of humanity present in the human beings of all times and accentuated in our days; it can help us give a human and evangelical face to men and women religious.

At some point I thought of the triad, *liberty, interiority* and *creativity* as a way to set anew and radically our following of Christ in an unprecedented and clearly poetic vein, even mystical and prophetic. It offers something a little different and complementary to what has been expressed above.

Moving from protagonism to service

This is a challenge for the whole Church coming out of Christianity and mourning its glorious past. But we must move on to another time, a time of service that does not bother too much about roles or power, and not even about one’s “impact,” but instead focuses on authentic witness. It does not worry about “protecting one’s image,” but rather, “living and serving with meaning.” There is no doubt that confusion exists between service and protagonism; there are many socio-

psychological mechanisms that make “easter” difficult, that is, that can accept a different time in which to fulfill the figure of the Servant who is risen.

Today’s crisis in the Church calls us to become a “little flock.” It offers an opportunity to present a new image of the Church, a more humble and less powerful Church, seeking to influence society only through the good news of the Gospel and the values of the Kingdom, and not through political or economic power. The crisis of consecrated life can be seen as a call to be a “little flock,” a helpless servant of humanity and a humble witness of God’s Kingdom. It is to be a consecrated life of modest and humble presence; with an intercultural presence of its members, a collaborator in the inter-congregational level, both as a community and with the laity in mission. The signs of the presence of this consecrated life will not be in large institutions and structures, but in its service and solidarity with the poor and the little ones of this world.

To reach a mission and a life shared with the laity

The real meeting with the laity in the life and mission, in action and spirituality, will be transformed into a journey and a process of revitalization for the consecrated life and for the Church. We meet again with them in our charisms, which are for us and for them the common source of living water to irrigate the field of our shared mission and spirituality.

Certainly this challenge requires different steps: *collaboration, participation and belonging*—steps that clarify the degree of sharing. All are possible. Of course, what we share is a charism in its twofold dimension: mission and life/spirituality. The proximity to the laity and union without confusion can do much good for the revitalization effort both for the laity and for religious. *It is not an easy process and it requires a lot of clarity in its various aspects: theological, spiritual, apostolic and at times even juridical.* It also requires a new attitude on the part of the religious and the laity, and not always are individuals prepared to do this well.

The missionary and charismatic integration of laity with religious is a gift of the Spirit for the whole Church. The Church has the duty of encouraging it. The fruits will come and they will give a special fecundity to the people of God. For consecrated life this integration can mean much more. According to some, on this integration depend the genuine renewal and revitalization of the laity and of the consecrated life itself. Unity creates strength and increases dynamism.

Highlight and be open to the inter-intra as a religious lifestyle

Inner and outer harmony is necessary: inter-congregational, inter-cultural, inter-religious, inter-community, inter-personal.... Actually, every Christian and religious attitude must be based on the category of the *inter*, understood as presence, *being in* and *being with*, to listen, accept, meet up with, establish links, build bridges. This goes far beyond the scopes or concrete spaces of one’s Christian community and puts us in contact with those who are distant, indifferent, critical, and even with other Christian and religious traditions. Identity has been presented in the past, and frequently in the present, to differentiate and identify ourselves. Instead, identity serves above all to make us complementary, and to offer one another what one has and the other needs. The time has come to feel united and not separated from others.

The *inter* is horizontal and tends to overcome distance, separation and estrangement; it seeks to draw close and to complete. Each mission *ad gentes* must be *inter gentes*, i.e., in closeness and fraternity. Today the Church’s mission – particularly the consecrated life – should be characterized as being “inter,” in search of common ground with every person of good will, to promote the most authentic life and spirituality that exceed the unnecessary religious and institutional restraints, and strongly propose a shared journey so that *humanity will have life*.

In more concrete terms, it is necessary to develop the cosmic dimension and bio-diversity; listen to the voice of God in “creation as it groans and suffers the pains of childbirth” (cf. Rm 8, 22) to generate new life. This happens by means of climate phenomena: floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. From the biblical text: “... and God saw that it was good” (Gen 1, 4); redeem the sense of nature as a gift from God who is Father-Mother. Take into account the new relationship with the cosmos-creation. *We must stir up in the world the nostalgia for God and for communion.*

It is necessary to move forward in promoting knowledge, gestures of solidarity with other religious denominations and participation in their rites and traditions..., learning how to identify and recognize the presence of God in the wealth of other religions and cultures.

This great insight of encounter, of *inter*, will lead us to build bridges and social ties with the emerging new subjects, in new scenarios, with new knowledge, political, financial, cultural, social and religious; to establish new alliances, conscious of the plurality of the world. It leads to join forces and to discover great and shared ideals.

Among the various institutes, inter-congregationality is gaining strength, as well as “work and life on the internet”—not just from the point of view of a quantitative and opportunist assessment, but a qualitative one. It arises not from the reduction of forces, but from the great objective of integrating religious forces to achieve larger goals in life and mission.

In summary, interculturality has the possibility of achievements in community life, apostolate and mission: interculturality, inter-congregationality and inter-vocationality or partnership with the laity. For us the challenge is how to be *inter-culturally cultural*, *inter-congregationally congregational* and *inter-vocationally vocational*.

First, be *inter-culturally cultural*: although being well rooted in one’s culture, uphold essential openness to the enrichment that comes from interaction with other cultures.

Be *congregationally inter-congregational*: although being well rooted in the specific charism of one’s congregation, uphold essential openness to the enrichment that comes from collaboration with other congregations.

Be *vocationally inter-vocational*: although being well rooted in our specific vocation as religious, uphold essential openness to the enrichment that comes from contact with other vocations in the Church, especially with the laity.

We must look at all this in the context of the wider challenges in the Church today. According to the words of the Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan, we must ask ourselves how we can be “anti-religiously religious,” i.e., how our reality and particular religious tradition should be open to the enrichment that comes from dialogue and contact with other religions.

Re-look at the consecrated life from the perspective of our digital world

We must be present in this “new technological culture that every day expands with the rapid development of science, technology and communications.” This digital world, also called the sixth continent, can accentuate the “*light culture*,” which favors the new anthropological findings and ways of thinking already mentioned above. It leads us to listen to what refers to the contemporaneity of relations, openness to the diverse and the breadth of horizons.

It is necessary to deepen and promote global thinking that is universal and Catholic, and that moves beyond specific, contextual, local practices. It is urgent to understand in depth—not only the knowledge and appropriate use of new information and communication technologies for “evangelizing oneself and evangelizing others”—but the anthropological, cultural, and religious implications of this great digital scenario. It is also important to integrate the digital culture in relationships and in the fulfillment of people. This infers that the new information and

communication technologies will be incorporated in consecrated life and become instruments of evangelization in our mission and lifestyle, helping to achieve solidarity, avoid immediacy and overcome distances.

Listen to new anthropological findings and new ways of thinking

The globalized world has accelerated internal and external migration, producing a new style of family and new interpersonal relationships, which in turn create new individual and group identities. These transformations require that the Church and religious Institutes listen to and accept sincerely and seriously both diversity and otherness. Although complex by nature, the encounter with otherness and diversity invites us to offer new, creative proposals, under the guidance of the Spirit. Precisely this respect for diversity and plurality on a local and global plane *forces us to understand that there is not a unique culture, nor a unique thought, nor a unique history, nor a single vision, nor a single language.* Everything leads us to stake our lives in terms of co-existence and respect for all human beings, without discrimination of any kind.

This text from the Acts of the Apostles can be a good reference: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.... Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’” (At 2, 4-7).

The time has come to turn our gaze to the post-modern culture, to perceive the wealth of challenges for our life and mission that the new scenarios and emerging subjects propose to us, and be able to identify some paths of these scenarios in the face of these subjects.

The bi-polarity present in the culture in which we are immersed thrusts us on to a creative alternative, what well could be called *tertium datur*.

Third part

MOVING BEYOND CHALLENGES TO A NEW WAY FORWARD

We are remembering and taking stock and perspective of consecrated life in the world. What is the alternative? Without a doubt, it is a new paradigm of consecrated life. It is not easy to define it with a mere table discussion. It will blossom from some lives of religious men and women who, in the face of the challenges that I reported, do not want to repeat twenty years from now what we have already seen before. “We have changed a lot, but have not changed anything in practice.” It doesn’t pay for this to happen. What is continuously suggested are paths to reach a new alternative reality, a new paradigm.

The current structures of the consecrated life, its organization, lifestyle, and work methods do not respond to the needs and challenges of a society that has changed and is changing in a radical way. There is no doubt that the current crisis of the consecrated life is deep and real, but we cannot say that the consecrated life has become a museum piece. Once again we must try to turn the crisis into an opportunity.

The issue regarding consecrated life today is a delicate one; it is a matter of choosing between life and death. The consecrated life was born out of faith in the resurrection, out of a re-birth (like Nicodemus). Once again the consecrated life, as ever in its history, must be transformed into a mystical alternative in the face of global crisis. It should not place itself in restrictive situations. As some would express it, it must *leave the balcony and enter the procession*, walking well within the everyday reality of the people. Jesus’ example is clear: he walked with the people without fear of

contagion. He knew the everyday reality of the sick, the poor, and of women; he ate, drank, cried, touched....

Naturally, choosing life means going from the “not yet” of the Kingdom to begin from the humble and demanding “already” of the Kingdom. This is a very difficult exercise; it is an exercise of charity and hope. In other words, where does the consecrated life place its hope? In the number of those who enter each year and in their perseverance? In the continuity of the Institute and its charism? In the thrust of our spiritual, pastoral and missionary life? In the dynamism of our personal and community life? Without a doubt, its hope comes from placing Jesus at the center of our lives, in the poor who shows us the path to Jesus, in the incarnation in this world which is pagan. This is how a *new paradigm* is born.

However, there are some things to be taken into account.

All this leads us to approach the problems that are presenting themselves, and to listen and allow ourselves to be challenged by them with a contemplative and prophetic stance, and leave a mark with concrete actions.

Everything is included in the new paradigm of the primacy of praxis from the theological place of the poor. “Only when we live the faith in an ever new way— adds Pope emeritus, Benedict XVI — and fulfill it in a living way through the flesh and blood of every time, can it be proclaimed anew, by virtue of that life and suffering.” In this reflection there is an underlying message. The consecrated life may be in crisis, but the Spirit is not. We must do all we can for consecrated life, as if everything depended on our effort and as if everything depended on the grace of God. The consecrated life, today and always, is a gift and a task.

Nowadays, consecrated life must cope with the “end of the world.” It is living in a new world. It’s not even an epochal change. It is much more. Christianity is over, but in our DNA we have the chromosome that will allow us to survive in the new context, even though it won’t be easy.

For many people nowadays, consecrated life is a museum piece. Some who like us, look upon us with compassion and perhaps with a bit of admiration (in some cases) when they see us happy. Many good Christians think that we have no future. The challenge for some religious is to survive in a historical context where “the religious has changed radically as a sign.” In this crisis situation, some will be absorbed by the crisis; others will come out revitalized. Where does the secret lie?

The consecrated life cannot ignore the great social and environmental challenges that threaten humanity’s future. We must feel the very preoccupation of Jesus, that of defending life where it is threatened, particularly among the excluded. The apostolic religious life is called to be similar to the new life of the risen Jesus and the plan of his Kingdom of life and liberty for all. We cannot forget that in every critical juncture of history there arose always new forms of consecrated life that have revitalized the existing congregations. Hopefully this will happen again, so that religious life will be truly evangelical, nazarene, paschal, mystical and prophetic.

The great challenge for consecrated life is none other than the discovery of a form of life in which the person of Jesus and his project, in a process of true discipleship, becomes the heart of everything. Religious will have to continue deepening the mystical, prophetic identity of the consecrated life at the service of the Kingdom, founded on the Word and the Eucharist. They are to re-look at the structures in a daily process leading to revitalization.

In the radical following of Jesus, it is essential to constantly ask ourselves: which Jesus are we following? What image of Jesus nourishes our spiritual life? What face of Jesus are we manifesting through our life and our mission? What face of God are we witnessing? What face of God is subject to our structures or our way of exercising power?

This requires that we look carefully at the concrete existence of the consecrated life and the real life of religious. The *day by day* of the religious is marked by the evangelical counsels, and the vows must fill our lives with meaning. The way of expressing them and especially of living them

often leaves us unsatisfied, and it means nothing to many people. *And so, it would be a great challenge to give new meaning to the vows.* Only in this way will they mark our lives and our spirituality. It is necessary to give them new meaning because they have become insignificant to quite a few of those who live them, and for many of those who are witnesses to this form of life. The vows mark our relations with the Father, with others, with mother earth and with ourselves. They are like good wood that feeds the fire needed to ignite other fires.

We are to be concerned with the widespread malaise of the consecrated life as it is reflected in cultural disorientation, disappointment with major projects, difficulty in responding to the great aspirations for happiness, in looking for ways to get out of this situation, ways that are quick and easy paths in front of a disturbing situation of consumerism and the widespread sense of frustration at the inability to solve these problems. Future prospects are not lacking, however, they still do not have the necessary strength to let the new paradigm emerge.

Whenever society and the Church are blocked in the face of new socio-cultural currents and, ultimately, in the face of new life, new forms of consecrated life have arisen that have helped revitalize the existing ones. Hopefully the same will happen again today. We hope it will be an evangelical consecrated life, and thus it will be *life* and it will be *religious*.

This parable invites us to walk in this direction:

A pilgrim was on his journey when he met a man who looked like a monk sitting in the field. Next to him, another group of men were working at a stone building.

You look like a monk, said the pilgrim.

I am, replied the monk.

Who are these who are working on the abbey?

The monks, he replied. *I am the abbot.*

It is magnificent to see the building of a monastery, said the pilgrim.

We are destroying it, said the abbot.

Destroying it? Exclaimed the pilgrim. But why?

In order to see the sunrise each morning.

The difference in this tale, recounted by Sister Joan Chittister in her book *Fire from These Ashes*, is that we are not the only ones tearing down the building of the consecrated life. It is being destroyed by socio-cultural events, ecclesial ones, and others closer to us. But this reality is our *kairos* to be able to see the sun rise each morning, to see a religious life that is happy, fruitful and faithful and that generates abundant life. We rebuild in order to generate new life within us and around us, in those close to us and those who are far away, in the depths and in the heights. Everything has to be accompanied by the effort to reinvent structures that lead us to announce the Gospel from our new way of meeting with God and others, and to sow seeds of eternity in the history in which we live.

There is no doubt that we are at a turning point in the history of the consecrated life in which we see almost nothing of the new era. When will come the time when we will see and touch a fruitful and meaningful life? We are encouraged by the certainty that the Spirit guides our history and our groups towards something new.

It is important not to want to clasp everything, but do so with firm faith and hope, and continue to rebuild. We must forge a present that has a future. The words of the Sufi poet Rumi (13th century) shed light on this: “The past and the future hide God from our sight; burn them with fire.” What reveals the future is the living present. When we embrace the present, the past and the future are included in it in a healthy and non-pathological manner. Only the present has the power to concentrate time. “The past and the future become clear in the present. The arrow of the future, instead of pointing to an undefined tomorrow, aims towards the *now* in which everything happens, and in which everything has its origins. The present is that reality that summarizes the past and the future, and gives meaning and value to all.”

We are to launch out on new adventures in the midst of uncertainty and with the possibility of a failure, but with absolute confidence in God's love that transpires in transformative amiableness. Without tenderness, without a heart and without love there will be neither prophecy nor credible witness.

I can't help but quote extensively, although not literally, a text by Angel Dario Carrero who has reflected much on this topic. Currently he urges religious life to undergo not merely an ethics of liberation, which it has already adopted, but an aesthetic, poetry of existence, a mysticism of the senses open to contemplate reality in light of the Word, and out of this loving intimacy start a brand new journey. We need to see the time and the place where the new begins.

The poet Maria Wine has faith that *somewhere* there will remain a space and a program open to hope, so that it can address the present with lucidity of spirit:

Somewhere
there must be a ray of light
that dispels the darkness of the future,
a hope that does not permit itself to be slain
by disenchantment,
a faith that does not lose
immediately faith in itself.

Somewhere
there must be an innocent child
that demons have not conquered,
a freshness of life which does not emanate rottenness,
a happiness not founded
on the misfortune of others.

Somewhere
there must be a wise wake-up call
that alerts one to the dangers
of self-destructing games,
a gravity that one dares
take seriously
and a goodness whose root
is not simply restrained evil.

Somewhere
there must be a beauty
that continues to be beauty,
a pure conscience
that does not hide a solitary crime;
there must be a love for life
that does not speak an ambiguous language
and a freedom that does not rely
on the oppression of others.

Men and women religious and the Church of North, South, East and West—we are called to be one of those places of utopian freshness against every anti-utopia. To this end, we have to combine life, poetry, community, creativity, mysticism and prophecy.

Thus we can conjugate the Gospel of Jesus with life itself in all its significance. We will not lack the desire to divest ourselves of disenchantment bit by bit, as well as superficial pragmatism and easy idealism, in order to live in that tension filled with hope of the Kingdom, a fruitful atmosphere of the fruitful and faithful discipleship of Jesus.

Every religious life must want and be able to say: we are moved by the fact of being the humble and simple sign of a star that flickers in the middle of the people's night, attracting everyone to the centrality of life, and converting us into *fire that ignites other fires*.