

IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN OFFICIAL TEACHING by Patricia Walter, OP

Introduction: Diverse historical phenomena under the umbrella “religious life” or “consecrated life.” Study of charism and identity reveals tension between two polarities: individual consecration and charismatic communities in mission. Tensions persist and can be productive.

Goal: To summarize and develop church teachings on religious life with its differing theological, anthropological, soteriological, and ecclesiological underpinnings or points of view, from preconciliar through conciliar to post-conciliar times. “Attention to these deeper issues may help to resolve some misunderstandings or to come to mutual recognition of legitimate diversity.”

| | <i>Pre-Conciliar</i> | <i>Conciliar</i> | <i>Lumen Gentium</i> | <i>Perfectae Caritatis</i> | <i>Evangelica Testificatio (1971)</i> |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|--|--|
| Church | Institution for salvation of souls Perfect society: ranks and states | Basic equality of all the baptized. Mystery, sacrament, communion of People of God | All called to live counsels for the holiness of the Church | Theologically inconsistent. Reiterates <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and presents a second view | Landmark theologically. Ecclesiology of <i>Lumen Gentium</i> stresses mutuality and diversity of vocations within ecclesial community. Apostolic spirituality based on mission. Thoroughly trinitarian. Avoids equating Church simply with hierarchy; keeps distinction between Church and reign of God. |
| Religious Life | State of perfection for the noble of soul; individual perfection through total consecration to God, asceticism, penance, separation from world, three- fold renunciation of the vows. | | Religious are those in a state of life constituted by profession of evangelical counsels, a divine gift in and to the Church; charity is key. | Key is following of Christ. Links love of Christ, God, Church, neighbor, contemplation and action | Concrete sign and privileged witness of constant search for God. Total commitment to spread of God’s reign. Preserves tension of “the salvific paradox of Gospel.” Avoids consecration as elitist, rather points to mutuality, reminds all believers of their vocations. Charism of religious life, a shift from juridical to pneumatic categories. Renewal is movement of the Spirit. |
| World | Seen in Johannine sense | <u>Mission</u> of church is same as Son and Spirit, <u>in</u> and <u>to</u> the world; all baptized are called to this same mission. | Witness to priority of reign of God, now and in eternity; ministries continue presence of Christ in the world | Founders as men and women throughout history who followed Christ in diverse ways. Divine plan of redemption | Public commitment to follow Christ more intensely as partners in mission with whole People of God. Vows are practical critiques of social sin. Prophetic witness. |

| | <i>Mutuae Relationes (1978)</i> | <i>Religious Life and Human Promotion (1978)</i> | <i>Code of Canon Law (1983)</i> | <i>Redemptionis Donum (1983)</i> | <i>Vita Consecrata (1996)</i> |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| Church | Relationships between bishops and religious; furthers thought of <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and <i>Evangelica Testificatio</i> . Charism is key to religious life lived in Church. Church safeguards gifts. | Prophetic mission of Jesus, good news of reign of God to poor. Conversion and liberation as formative of a new community of the Spirit. | Reiterates <i>Lumen Gentium</i> and <i>Perfectae Caritatis</i> , but does not reflect a more integrated understanding of religious life. | Mystery of redemption as origin and milieu of Church | Trinitarian ecclesiology; communion in Spirit; mystery of communion; particular charisms, including consecrated life, important gift/charism in dioceses |
| Religious Life | Unique founding gifts incarnated in distinct ways. Fidelity to charism is first responsibility of superiors. Spirit is source of diversity, innovation and originality. Discernment needed. Dedication marked by spirit of the beatitudes | Dynamic, charismatic, prophetic role. Religious life as radical response to beatitudes, persons of the Absolute, reminding all of transvaluation. Ongoing conversion to God's original plan for humanity. | All references to charism deleted from 1982 draft; consecration through profession of vows is generic description for all. Spousal, sacrificial, and ritual language, plus witness references (RLHP). Hence Code reflects duality and generality rather than integration of diverse charisms into life of the Church. Juridical stance. | Redemptive, Christic, spousal love, "consecrated to God in Jesus Christ as His exclusive possession." Consecration is main image; religious bring new spiritual energy to the one mission of the church in their particular vocations. Counsels linked to redemption | Confession and sign of Trinity; affects whole church, makes characteristics of Jesus' life visible; points toward reign of God; radical gift of self and following of Christ; personal witness; prophetic task |
| World | Initiative of Spirit is a great value for religious life responding effectively and pastorally to a changing world, especially to poor | Mission is contra-individualism; prophetic human community under reign of God is the effective message of religious life rightly lived. Evangelization and human promotion. Communities are architectural plans for unity envisioned for all. Love is basis | | Transformation of world, conversion of humanity by the love of God. Vows renew creation as mission of Christ | World in need of prophetic witness, dialogue, service, building of communion, interreligious dialogue, promotion of dignity of women, education; healing of sin through witness of vows |

Adapted from a chart prepared by Janet Franklin summarizing the article "The Identity of Religious Life According to Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents," by Patricia Walter, OP Review for Religious 51:4 (July-August 1992):550-561; material on Vita Consecrata added subsequently