

*“The word of the Lord came to me” (Jer 1.4)*  
Where are we, where is the Spirit calling us to?

*Synthesis and vision*



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I have been asked by His Excellency, Mons. Joseph Tobin, Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, to “listen” to the voices of this XV Assembly of the UCESM and to make a summary. Therefore I do not propose to present a text which has been prepared in advance, but only the immediate results of the listening that I wanted to do with careful and sincere attention during these days.

**I. The framework within which the XVth General Assembly of UCESM is taking place**

Postmodernity is defined as a condition of radical plurality<sup>1</sup>. In this our century, pluralism has accelerated at an explosive pace, with differences in lifestyle, ways of thinking, frames of reference, ways of acting and the massive marginalization of religion. The present cultural change is often considered a challenge to Christianity itself, rather than a framework within which creative solutions can and must be found: “The question of man, and thus of modernity, challenges the Church ... . Christianity must not be relegated to the world of myth and emotion, but respected for its claim to shed light on the truth about man ... to enable men and women to carry out their vocation in history<sup>2</sup>.”

In the West, consecrated life is swimming in this current of new cultures, while for decades we have all been living through a mutation similar to that which happened at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when, with the development of religious congregations of so-called simple vows, especially women’s congregations, a new path opened up, a new way of living, a new form of consecrated life which first affected Europe considerably. This mutation was a spiritual, cultural and charitable ferment, a historical reality which entered into the social fabric of our Europe.

In the fragmentation of postmodernity, today we are living through a further transformation: the historical and cultural phenomenon of consecrated life has entered into a process of remodelling.

But what subject can renew itself? The capacity for renovation belongs to every subject that is able to reclaim its own ontological identity, and therefore, it is able to become the subject of transformation.

The “new” forms of consecrated life and new communities, for example, like the many institutes of much older traditions, are achieving this renovation, while they are immersed in the stream of cultures, within the evolution of anthropological, social and communicative developments, within the fluidity of values and in the new culture of the present moment.

These are expressions of a consecrated life which welcomes, in the present situation, the elements of seeking meaning and ultimate purpose which dwells in the human heart. They are witnesses to the welcome of the Spirit which in every age brings life to history and to the Church: “By the power of the Gospel the Holy Spirit makes the Church keep the freshness of youth<sup>3</sup>.”

The *parresia* of the Spirit is strengthening consecrated life, making it move towards new understandings and new forms, in response to the great demand of the Gospel within human destiny: “The Spirit, who at different times has inspired numerous forms of consecrated life, does not cease to assist the Church, whether by fostering in already existing Institutes a commitment to renewed faithfulness to the founding charism, or by giving new charisms to men and women of our own day so that they can start institutions responding to the challenges of our times<sup>4</sup>.”

History is our teacher. How can we not remember, in this context, the discomfort which Francis experienced, right up to the end of his life, at the thought of writing a rule for his own Order, similar to those in force in other Orders: "Brothers, my brothers, God has called me to travel the path of simplicity and he has shown this path to me. Therefore I do not want you to choose any other rule, not that of St. Augustine, nor Bernard's nor Benedict's. The Lord has revealed to me that He wants me to be crazy in the world for his Gospel<sup>5</sup>." Francis, like other founders in history, had centred on the Gospel.

This is a primary and absolute grace which moves the hearts, the minds and the actions of those who choose to *live according to the Gospel* in the Church. I believe that we must steer our way of living towards this icon.

## II. What I have heard in this Assembly

For this reason, it has been with genuine appreciation that I have taken up the theme of this XVth GA of UCESM: a courageous theme, which brings us back to the beginning, and therefore questions our personal truth.

The understandings which form the foundations of our life consecrated to Christ and to his Gospel in the Church today merge together in the theme that you have chosen to discuss from various perspectives, and to which you have offered your united reflections of the religious men and women present here from Europe and beyond. I would say that there is a variety of understandings spoken and unspoken, or perhaps barely hinted at, indeed not only understandings, but also alongside these were doubts, discouragement, brief glimpses, problems and real difficulties which we deal with each day.

Let us try to hear the movements, the dynamic flow of the event that we are experiencing.

In the first movement, the presentations given at the conferences converge. A rich, practical time, a mapping of the presence of religious men and women in Europe as a geographic, as well as a political reality. An archive of data, of plans, of situations at the margins, of problems which touch the lives of men and women characterized by ageing, a drastic reduction in numbers, overexposure to work, the need for work as a source of revenue.

Impressions: movement, commitment, hope. More understated were the problems - the status of consecrated life in Europe, perhaps with three fundamental attitudes, with three viewpoints. The first is cultural: the *intelligentsia* of consecrated life, the professionals and planners of religion. The second is managerial: we are seeking to manage what we are living, to follow through to the end what is destined to finish. The third viewpoint is theological: we are living the faith, taking good care of its foundations and the *sound tradition*, sometimes stressing the separateness or underlining the teaching role: "to be a beacon for the others" – from such a vision new paths are emerging, less obvious, but alive and full of hope; poorer, but open to the *kairos* of God and humanity.

The second movement brings together the words which have been addressed to us by Archbishop Tobin, by the young voices, by the social survey and by the life of UCESM itself.

Archbishop Tobin offered the biblical basis of "vocatio" and the challenge that this event places before consecrated men and women in the sign of obedience, of mission and of faithfulness, so that love would not be quenched, but would be fostered and nourished at all times. The sociological survey has opened up issues about Europe which are both very interesting and seriously challenging.

The event in itself and the report about of the life of UCESM presented by the President, by the Treasurer and by the Secretary General challenge the religious of Europe towards supportive communion.

I consider that it was a privilege when the young religious shared something of their experience of following Jesus Christ. In telling their stories they have demonstrated a way of communicating the experience of life in faith.

Symbols and metaphors have abounded: to cast out into the deep, to set sail for the far shore, to undertake the journey of life; words such as adventure, beauty, creativity, prayer, silence, adoration, an experience of faith which changes our relational life, transforms the quality of our community and facilitates acceptance across the generational gap. Likewise the foundation of the call as a truth of humanity and its potential have been pointed out. We have also heard the need for accompaniment that refers to the word and to

communal relationships as theological places. We have been given examples of new language in which to communicate the experience of faith. We have received a call: "The voice of the future". In this the word of God, from Jeremiah, accompanies the call, the response and its maturation in faithfulness.

<sup>6</sup>Our response to this word arose in the third movement. Here clear facts did not emerge, but rather tensions in confrontation.

### **1. Person and obedience**

- Negative values when it becomes unidirectional and univocal;
- A basic value lived as continuous listening and discernment that flourishes into service.

### **2. Professionalism and pilgrimage**

- Icons which are placed in opposition, images of stability and exodus.

### **3. Vocation: between freedom and encounter with mystery**

- The need to revisit such a theological event
- Stability evident in the present, without new lights
- Journeys which trace new paths needing difficult discernment

### **4. Generations in community**

- Generational divergence and conflict: these are objective difficulties; in many communities there are young superiors of very old communities;
- To discern and choose a few common elements on which to base the future path; the young are looking at the quality of relational life (model of Pentecost) not all from the same mould. Challenge to let the young be creative, the youth want to be different, they need to be who they are; from function to meaning of lives, to desires, to dreams, creative spaces for them, to experiment with freedom.

### **5. Diversity and uniqueness**

- The art of coming to terms with diversity, of combing different cultures. A dialogue which will prune us but enrich us with the culture of the Gospel because nationalities will be relegated to their places and what will emerge is the culture of the Gospel. It is the culture of the Gospel which forms the community.

Moments of faith and doubt (pointing to atheism in practice?)

- To be able to go forward telling the story of experience; from reflection as a source to experience as a source; to communicate with the person in order to communicate an experience of God, the joy and the peace of this sort of experience.

### **6. Joy-Hope and pessimism out of breath**

- Communities which hope, institutes that are experiencing the shortness of their time, without a future.

### **7. Synergy and lonely journeys**

We have recognized the gift that we are for Europe in the Church and the role of UCESM, which is faced with an ever greater challenge to create networks with as many as we are and how much we have, in a way that is prophetic and communal.

## **III. From listening to seeing**

Truly we have shared a treasure of great depth and inspiration, and the message of the young has given it wings.

Therefore it is time to ask ourselves: "Where is God opening the door? What threshold has he invited us to cross?"

I give you three icons, three movements of the spirit, which invite us to make decisions and carry out actions.

## LISTENING

**"LET THE POOR LISTEN AND BE GLAD" (Ps 34.2)**

In the culture of the Bible, listening is in the first place. To listen without believing to be able to count the numbers and make up statistics: "look up into the sky and count the stars if you can".

Since the origin, the human venture is to go out and leave what we had for a ground that life will show us. It is a call which offers the grace, the "gift" of a 'today' which is always a new beginning.

The call (the vocation) occurs in this dynamic place: the crossroads where the need to go out and the present (the convenient period, Kairos) meet. It is in this dynamic place, in today, that the word of God, which is listened, brings forward what it says. Then, I can learn to listen in truth, which nobody else can do on my behalf ... but I will set out, I will leave, I will accept the exodus with the kenosis which it implies, only if at the very bottom of myself I receive the Word as a blessing and the promise of a new heritage and horizons.

I will welcome the joy which is given "to the smallest who can listen". In this place of smallness, I will rejoice on simple things. I will enter the limits of human finitude, in the human truth, and I will be able to welcome myself and welcome the others, in this peace which is a peaceful joy.

I can and we can learn to welcome what is actually given to us, in the places of weakness where we really live.

The Spirit will show us which art we must learn on this way between dead and *autopoiesi* (rebirth).

I can and we can work to create a dynamics of begetting and not simply be happy with administrative tasks, a dynamics which would be able to welcome the spiritual events occurring in me and in our communities, the movements and the grace which come from the Spirit at work in any person, looked at as a person (Bernadette said as to the look of the virgin on her: she looked at me as a person looks at another person).

I can and we can implement a listening which relies on discernment in community, but which involves the personal liability of everyone, so that the discernment is exerted on what is "my personal question": where are we going? Being personally involved on fundamental questions gives way to a shared expectation, hence rich in promises of life.

But we also learn to listen together, "*may you be assiduous listeners to the word, because all wisdom concerning life comes from the word of the Lord! May you seek the word, since consecrated life is born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life?*" (Benedict XVI, Homily, Vespers 2 February 2011), to learn to witness and evangelize together on the paths of the Areopagus of the new Europe, even if everyone walks his own pace.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

**"LOOK TO THE FUTURE, WHERE THE SPIRIT IS SENDING YOU" (VC 110)**

The future is a horizon which the faithful may not or should not give up: "Christians have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. The Christian message was not only "informative" but "performative". That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life" (*Spe salvi* 2). With this in prospect, when referring to a vision of the future, it is not to make forecasts, because looking at the future does not mean to describe what will occur, but to perceive what could be according to the aims set. We must have the courage to pose alternatives because our future does not happen by chance, but it is chosen and built according to privileged objectives based on values which are fundamental in our life. Let me read out to you the testimony of a lay journalist: "You say to me: how can you have hope in times like ours? It is not a time to make projects! You are right. But I do not believe in the eclipse of hope. Despair is the opposite of Christianity. For Christians the definition of hope is not "sugary" or sentimental: it is the eschatological tension which gives new dimension to any illusion and any human project. The eternal sign

of the cross shows that the God in whom we believe is not the God of domination but the God of love present in the middle of the apparent defeat of history, the crucified God. If we were not to cross obscure moments we would be perfect, i.e. we would not be human”.

All this makes sense if it is a learning of hope, that is to say to look at the discordances of consecrated life with a new glance, with the eyes of the one who, because he is fully aware of it, does not let himself be crushed but takes them on, as Christ does and invites the Gospel. The believing reading of the signs of times, i.e. the reading of the presence of the kingdom in history, cannot be only a sociological reading, but it is born from the tenderness and the friendship for the men and women who, like us, seek only one thing: happiness. I have in mind the image of Hosea showing God as the one who takes Ephraim against his cheek like a little child. Look at the future without seeking to conceal it, not to generate fear nor feed defeatism, is a concrete exercise which lets us enter into hope (cfr *Spe salvi* 32).

#### LIVED IN A CLIMATE OF PENTECOST

“WE HEARD THEM SPEAKING IN OUR LANGUAGES THE MIGHTY WORKS OF GOD” (ACTS 2.11)

I can and we can learn to welcome what is actually given to us, in the places of weakness where we really live.

I can and we can work to create a dynamics of begetting and not simply be happy with administrative tasks, a dynamics which would be able to welcome the spiritual events occurring in me and in our communities, the movements and the grace which come from the Spirit at work in any person, looked at as a person (Bernadette said as to the look of the virgin on her: she looked at me as a person looks at another person).

I can and we can commit ourselves to undo the models which are not bearing life to tell the human and his mystery, never entirely revealed (in the manners of saying and of acting) (Bernadette, we heard it, said: I have the duty to say it to you, not to make you believe).

Will consecrated life follow the way of *apatheia* (absence of passions) or that of *synpatheia* (taking part in the joys and sorrows of the others)? To know if it will live with or without passion for God and the world is a fundamental question, but it will lose any meaning if the first way becomes only an ethics and the second one only a social and political way. It is probably wise to remember that these two ways are only means which we have to evangelize. Throughout our road, we have integrated the upheavals of the world and its changes and that deeply transformed the anthropological bases of our life. But anthropology influences theology and vice versa. As seeker of God, we have also been influenced by the great representations of God which marked the various epochs of Christianity: a God architect of the cosmos, a God who stoops and suffers, a God who keeps silent and withdraws. Each one of these representations of God has marked and continues to mark our lives. A God who keeps silent and withdraws can make us believe that we have reached a dead end and stop our walk. And that is the challenge of this XVth Assembly of UCESM.

We are asked to be listeners and to seek the truth which appears today. The Lord invites us to say a Word, a Word which is at the same time founded in tradition but uses a different semiology, which needs our intelligence, our heart, our life for a new understanding, interpretation, practice of the Gospel. We are invited to have the courage to place the Gospel and the communion in the middle of our future, and to think it in the flow and the brittleness of the new cultures. Perhaps we are asked not to be the evidence of the existence of God but to open humanity to questions about God.

Here are some biblical icons, which can show consecrated life new ways of being present in Europe, presence as vocation/call<sup>7</sup>.

#### **1. 1 Kings 17.14-24**

Presence of solidarity and research and not of miracles and certainties<sup>8</sup>

#### **2. Mk 12.41-44:**

Presence of sobriety and poor resources and not of *greatness* and ritualisms<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Acts 8.26-40:

Presence which runs to get close, listens, sits beside the other, joins him in the search for transcendence<sup>10</sup>

### 4. Acts 11.19-26:

Presence which speaks to the Greeks and sees the grace at work in today's world<sup>11</sup>

Journalists and writers asked themselves fundamental questions, after having met consecrated people all over the world "I met extraordinary persons who, with their selfless love, their commitment and their imagination to build hope, moved and fascinated me. I have discovered the stories of "persons of God" who in silence embrace all mankind"<sup>12</sup>.

"Persons who leave behind the safety of a roof, of a work they like, who give up affections and goods to run away to where you pray, where you struggle, where you fall ill, where you risk your life: this is really puzzling.

It is an upside-down world to our eyes. A world so unfamiliar and so far from the vulgarities we are accustomed to that you may wonder whether it really exists. We are never told their story, which is of course considered little interesting. People like these are the salt of the earth and their example is a great richness for everyone: each one of them, in a different way and at a different moment, with firmness full of gentleness, made the choice not to give lessons, order, decide, but the choice to defend, help, understand"<sup>13</sup>.

We are or we can be this history which is continued, because the interior act which is Christian faith is continued! Daily adhesion to the Gospel is continued!

In the theological place in which God reveals us to ourselves, at the same time that he reveals himself to us, he asks us to return to the task of seeking, *fides quaerens*, a seeking faith. "Aim at righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim 2.22). Paul was worried, in a certain sense, because of evangelical gossip and boasters: "People holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim 3.5) are invited by Paul to stand fast in faith. Taking his inspiration from this expression "aim at faith", Benedict XVI says in *Motu proprio*: "We hear this invitation directed to each of us, that none of us grow lazy in the faith" (*Porta fidei* 15).

Perhaps we are all here in Lourdes to listen to the invitation that the Virgin addressed to Bernadette on one particular day, in a particular place, in a cold and snowy winter in the Pyrenees, at a time when she had absolutely nothing, living in squalor in her wretched home *au Cachot*: "Please, would you like to come back here?" This invitation to an encounter in truth is extended by the one who is able to give birth to a new life for everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr W. WELSCH, *Hegel und die analytische Philosophie*, in *Information Philosophie*, 1 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict PP. XVI, *Address to University Lecturers: A New Humanism for Europe*, Vatican City, 25 June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 4, EV 1/287.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita Consecrata* 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Leggenda perugina*, 114 in *Fonti francescane*, 1 Assisi 1977, 1673.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr B. SECONDIN, *Vocazione e Lectio divina*, inedito, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> "This is the episode in which the prophet Elijah finds himself with the dead child in the house of the widow who offered him hospitality in Zarepta. The prophet truly believed himself able to represent the Word of Yahweh, first by shutting up the heavens threateningly and then by guaranteeing flour and oil - God is the guarantee of a life without hunger. The death of the child forces him to reveal his doubt and his impotence, to cry out and beg. In this unashamed weakness the widow glimpses the face of God, compassionate and sympathetic, just as Christ was to be. This teaches us a new transparency, moving out to those who are poor, those who are beaten, to these horrors, with wounded hearts, with hands joined in solidarity, in an embrace full of hope. We are too worried about having jars and mammoth containers. What people expect is perhaps something else, in which God the Father of the Crucified truly appears, not a Prometheus badly disguised as a Christian. Here is a journey that we could undertake ourselves, that we might do miracles of all sorts, but today we are called to present a new face to God, knowing ourselves to be *servants* ... "

<sup>8</sup> "This is the gospel episode about the widow who throws two small coins into the treasury, whom Jesus praises as a model of authentic faith. On the one hand the gesture seems to be foolish, because she is depriving herself of what she needs in order to live. But on the other hand she is proclaiming that God alone is the meaning of her life, the very structure that keeps her upright, her hope and her substance. God is her meaning and her guarantee of life. *Is there no salvation today outside the marketplace?* (Concilium). This would be a disturbing sign of an omnivorous idolatry, which has often tempted even the Church and its ministers,

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and today, in a more subtle way than ever it ensnares them and makes them complicit in a society where the economy claims to be the new religion, the new redemption and the new beatitude. If only our vow of poverty and our preferential option for a Church of those who are poor and marginalized might become also a truly voluntary impoverishment, a chosen and watchful simplicity in a world of spurious needs and neurotic consumerism, artificial inducements to a way of life which refuses to impose any limits on itself. The prophetic imagination in this case should find ways of giving challenging form to gratuity (cf. *Caritas in veritate*, 6, 34, 35), to non-commercial hospitality, to caring for our poor resources as an exercise of freedom from the slavery to accumulation and ostentation. It is a vocational proposal.”

<sup>9</sup> “This is the biblical icon of the encounter between the itinerant missionary, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza. Philip amusingly chases the carriage. The character of the reader is a reject and an outcast, without posterity and without justice. And then the friendly conversation and the decision to be baptised in a completely unsanctified place, without the least solemnity, as matches the character. Then the flight of Philip towards another place and the simple joy of the newly-baptised man. Here is a style of prophecy which should be re-invented, to set out on the hot desert road on an apparently fruitless venture, meeting people dried up by human or natural violence, who are looking for a meaning for their lives, who are open to dialogue in simplicity if there is someone to sit beside them and to enlighten them, “starting from where they are”, a fragment, a wish, a text, a doubt, a worry. We need to re-learn this art of dialogue without complications, without prejudice, to begin by eavesdropping, looking, recognizing on our roads a thousand forms of violence - physical, psychological, intellectual, religious or social - men and women who are stumbling about in the dark, confused about the meaning of their lives, who have suffered much and have no companion on the journey to help them carry their load. Sitting beside them, responding appropriately, offering the *good news* of Jesus, without forcing the pace, without imposing plans and deadlines, waiting for the seed to germinate, decision and courageous conviction - then together living the rebirth from water and the Spirit. This too is a vocational proposal”.

<sup>10</sup> “This is a collective adventure, the foundation of the community of Antioch. It happened almost by chance. Antioch on the Orontes in Syria was a large city of about half a million inhabitants, with a variety of religions, cultures, races. It was a tolerant commercial crossroads. This situation challenged their plans and the fears and forced them to preach “also to the Greeks”, and there followed grace and tumultuous growth. Then Barnabas arrived and also he “saw the grace of the Lord”. It was here that he enabled Paul to be reinstated, after a time of marginalization. A break with habits, languages, the same rigid rituals, to invent new forms of preaching, new rhythms of meeting and new priorities with the same good news, responding to hearers of another culture, demanding friendliness and boldness, even in the leaders. To reinvent this precious prophetic ferment in the Church, we must stop speaking only to the Jews, stop speaking to each other about our own interests, about our own difficulties, our own glories, of the injustices that this or that authority imposes on us, preventing us from living in peace. We are too much tempted to build fortresses around ourselves, to put up defensive walls, to fire cannons at “the others” who do not share our values, our point of view, our ideals and our non-negotiable interests. Now the whole world is a new Antioch, and we need Cypriots and people from Cyrene, we need some like Barnabas who can set aside his role of security and inspection, to start out on a search, to find the marginalized ones, like Paul, to rediscover the wasted and discarded resources, kindness forced into exile. This too is a vocational proposal”.

<sup>11</sup> M. BONANATE, *Suore vent' anni dopo*, Paoline, 2010, 7.

<sup>12</sup> D. MARAINI, *Premessa in Suore... cit.*, 3.