

## THE PROSPECTS TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN EUROPE



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The theme I was entrusted to for our meeting, "***The prospects to cope with the challenges***", is of course closely related to the report presented by Fr. Bruno Secondin, OCarm, "***Present challenges of/to the religious life in Europe***". The topic is very broad and should be treated more extensively than a contribution of about ten minutes would allow. Anyway, I want to tackle this common task with the conviction that any consideration can be useful in this regard to promote a debate which is very often sinking into pessimistic statements about the unfavourable conditions of religious life in Europe.

As you probably know, the theme is not new; even on the contrary, for some years now it has been the focus of attention of the whole Church and especially of the religious institutions. In this context one could quote a very famous and very often mentioned document – ***Consecrated Life*** – equally disregarded or overlooked.

In this ***Year of Consecrated Life***, the *Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* has given you a very special attention with a whole series of initiatives and events; the last of these celebrations, which I'll leave to your consideration, has just finished.

Also, the **USG** (*Union of General Superiors*) and the **UISG** (*International Union of General Superiors*) have made similar reflections; as have made - and here I speak only about Italy - the **CISM** (*Italian Conference of Religious Superiors*) and the **USMI** (*Union of Religious Superiors of Italy*).

At this meeting I would like to get closer to an intervention, made a few years ago at a meeting of the **USG** by **Antonio M. Pernia, SVD** (*Society of the Divine Word*) that I have properly adapted to the reality of religious life in Europe<sup>1</sup>.

The first - immediate - impression that emerges when one speaks of religious life in Europe is certainly its ***state of crisis***: *the religious institutions are facing a crisis, vocations to religious life decline continuously, so do the numbers, religious men and women get old, religious houses and works are closing, the future is in danger, if not totally negative*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio M. PERNIA, SVD, *Challenges and opportunities for Religious Life from the world and the Church today*. Unfortunately, I have lost the full quote. I'm sure that the speech was made at a meeting of the USG, perhaps in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Even if the vocations throughout Europe are in a crisis, the situation elsewhere isn't by far as black and dramatically. However, if you look globally at the absolute numbers, you must admit that the situation currently appears not to be that good. I can demonstrate that with some statistics:

**1975**, ten years after the end of Vatican II, there were worldwide 419.728 priests, including 270.924 secular and 148.804 religious; the friars were 79.408 in number, the sisters 1.004.304;

**1980**, the numbers look like this: 404.783 priests (259.331 secular, 145.452 religious), 70.388 brothers, 968.526 sisters;

**1985**: 413.600 priests (253.319 secular, 150.161 religious), 65.208 brothers; 917.432 sisters;

**1990**: 403.173 priests (257.696 secular, 145.477 religious), 62.526 brothers, 882.111 sisters;

It is difficult not to feel powerless in the face of these phenomena: some people even decisively announce: *religious life is over! The future is in the hands of the laity, the movements!*

Sure, if you look at the statistics, it is difficult not to give in to the temptation and not to conclude bitterly: *it's over; let us prepare ourselves to a beautiful death!*

But is it really the case? Can't you really stop it? Can't this development be stopped and do we actually only have to sadly face the end of religious life?

I don't think that you should indulge in such pessimistic considerations and that, on the contrary, a more peaceful and in-depth consideration is possible, even necessary.

1) I would start with this simple question: **what do we hear when we talk about the crisis of consecrated life?** I think that the ambiguity around the very word 'crisis' is quite common because, if it is said that the vocations go back and unfortunately continue to go back, there's nobody who would not agree; and in addition you just need to look at the numbers and statistics to become bitterly aware of that. However, if you want to affirm **that the consecrated life is in crisis**, we do not agree any more: I am deeply convinced that there is no evidence to make such assertions. Simply, the consecrated life is not in crisis! It is not in crisis because of all these religious people who, despite the years going by, keep their position, diligently and passionately pursue their mission and apostolate far beyond the thresholds of retirement and nursing homes, despite the inconsistencies and disloyalties give an unequivocal testimony of loyalty and commitment to the religious institute and the Church, attract hundreds, even thousands of young people by setting the example of an eternally youthful spirit, the never ending joy and enthusiasm over their decision, taken long ago and never repudiated, on the contrary renewed day after day with deep gladness of the heart. If the saying 'a tree which falls makes more noise than a forest which grows' is true, you can, yes you must, say this also about religious life. No one can deny the scandals and crimes, even in the recent past; however, this may not tarnish the zeal, the commitment, the dedication, in one word the holiness of so many religious people who have given their lives completely and forever to Christ the Lord and his Church, to build up the Kingdom of Christ.

2) But even if you go into details: it's probably true that the vocations have declined but in the face of what reality? Until recently, one could speak of **Christianity** in our countries. Today we live, however, in a post Christian time. The Holy John Paul II did not hesitate to condemn the "*silent apostasy*"<sup>3</sup> of the European people *who live as if God does not exist*. Europe and the whole Western world is under the terrible effects of an impetuous **secularization**<sup>4</sup>, which has expelled large amounts of Christians from Church and religion and sent whole nations back to the times of the apostles and the **first evangelization**. It would be interesting to tackle this point, but neither place

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2000: 405.178 priests (265.781 secular, 139.397 religious), 55.057 brothers, 801.185 sisters;

2009: 409.166 priests (274.007 secular, 135.159 religious), 54.641 brothers, 739.068 sisters;

2013: 415.348 priests (280.532 secular, 134.816 religious), 39.356 brothers, 547.407 sisters. The seemingly «strange» numbers are taken from the numbers provided to the State Secretariat, which relate not only to the Institutes of Pontifical right (i.e. those listed in the *Statistical Directory of the Church*). The phenomenon of the "crisis in the vocation" and "crisis of vocations", cf. Franco DECAMINADA, *Crisis in the vocation*, in *Dictionary of Vocational Pastoral Care*, Rogate-Edition, Rome 2007).

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II., *Ecclesia in Europa* (28 June 2003), no. 9. Here is the full text: «*At the root of this loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ. This sort of thinking has led to man being considered as "the absolute centre of reality, a view which makes him occupy – falsely – the place of God and which forgets that it is not man who creates God, but rather God who creates man. Forgetfulness of God led to the abandonment of man". It is therefore "no wonder that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism – and even a cynical hedonism – in daily life". European culture gives the impression of "silent apostasy" on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist.*»

<sup>4</sup> «*"Secularization" means a process that characterizes mainly Western countries of the modern era which resulted in the gradual loss of religious patterns and a religious-like behaviour. According to the theories of secularization, modernity inevitably goes hand in hand with the decline of the sacred, which would be inversely related to the increase of progress, generalization of education, the processes of urbanization and industrialization*», Jürgen HABERMAS - Benedict XVI (Joseph RATZINGER), *Reason and faith in dialogue*, by G. Bosetti, Marsilio, 2005; see also the word "*Secularization*" by Silvano BURGALASSI, in *Dictionary of Vocational Pastoral Care*, cit.

nor time allows us to do so; however, we should deal with these considerations: all in all, **it's not a crisis of vocations, but rather a crisis of faith!**

Without faith there cannot be any vocation, and fool oneself about this is simply dangerous. That there are still boys and girls – surely only a few, if you see the immense needs of the Church and the world, but anyway, they are present - is a real miracle that makes us wonder about this free and unmerited gift. Should you compare the percentage of really present vocations on a specific area with really practising Christians, you would see that there is *no crisis of vocations at all!* What I bring here is not only a statement to inspire a discouraged audience who is inclined to pessimism, but is proved by the easily observable fact that there are vocations to priesthood and religious life in the *Movements* of any kind and every nature. In this regard, what happens during the so-called *Calls* on the occasion of major *Meetings* of the Neocatechumenates, where hundreds, even thousands of boys and girls answer 'Yes' when asked whether they wish to pursue such a way of life - and in addition, there is also the even more daring and humanly incomprehensible decision of often very large families (of 8, 10 or more children) to opt for the mission by leaving everything behind to proclaim Christ in the countries where the Church is no longer present - that only can impress you! Behind all this, there are years of in-depth work of evangelization and pastoral accompaniment of every called human being; this is already a *feature* and a *sign* of **prospects** to cope with the **challenges** of consecrated life today in Europe, with a strong and deep **pastoral care of young people and vocations**, which often coincides with a real **first evangelization**, or at least a **new evangelization** in an environment in which the *sense of the sacred* has disappeared long ago.

That you are looking then for ways like "*let us import vocations from abroad!*", of which even Pope Francis has spoken several times, comes to the detriment of the joke, because - as the Pope told us personally at the audience to the *International Congress for formators in the field of consecrated life* last April – **the bread of today will be the hunger of tomorrow!** Which means that serious and difficult problems cannot be solved with these small measures. Today, you can fill a gap, but the ship will certainly sink tomorrow! You could say the words of the Gospel: "*no one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak and a worse tear is made*" (Mt 9.16; cf. Mk 2.21; Lk 5.36).

**3)** A third observation would be worth mentioning: for centuries consecrated life was at the forefront in all areas of mercy and solidarity in the face of human needs: from hospitals to schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly and others, there was no area where religious had not shined by their considerate presence and tireless apostolic dedication. But with time, the State has withdrawn slowly and definitively many of these areas, driving out, sometimes by force and violence, the Christian presence, i.e. men and women who devoted themselves to this specific apostolate. All these apostolates corresponded to the **specific mission** of the institute, its **charismatic mission**. But all that led, probably unconsciously or rather unnoticed, to a certain *confusion* in the light of the **mission of the Institute and its works**, its specific apostolate, since even within the ecclesial community the **functionalist vision** of religious life ("*the Sisters help me in kindergarten, at school, at the hospice, in the parish, etc.*") was promoted, so that **the charismatic and prophetic vision** of this religious life quietly ended almost in the shadow<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The logo of itself of the *Year of Consecrated Life* ("Gospel, Prophecy, Hope") is reminiscent of this reality. I would like to mention briefly some statements of the Secretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, at the *prayer vigil* on the 29 November 2014 in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore: "*Mainly two things are important to consecrated life. First of all, that the consecrated people become aware of the beauty of following Christ, according to the type of their vocation, and that they then cry out the beauty of this life to the world, without complexes, without superiority or inferiority. Today, the world needs more than ever men and women who live according to the Gospel, being prophets and sewers of hope. In this sense consecrated life is very up to date, against the current, but very topical. Fifty years after the Council, Archbishop Carballo said, the consecrated people are called to commemorate a living experience, in which we have recognized our deepest identity and that causes a method: the method of reasoning that we, based on the word of God, give to the world and the*

Pope Francis expressed it very clearly: "*I am counting on you "to wake up the world", since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: "Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way." This is the priority that is needed right now: "to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy"*"<sup>6</sup>.

Independently of where the consecrated person is located, **prophecy** is also the capability to testify of Christ and his Gospel in the history of today, giving confidence, joy, hope to the men and women of his time. The time doesn't allow us to take up this important aspect, and this indeed is not the proper place to do so; I merely point out here the **prospect** and leave to the consideration and personal exploration everything I cannot explain here; however, it seems important to me to emphasize this question, because it is based on these points that you can plan a strategy of *trend reversal* of what seems to be the irreversible decline of consecrated life.

On the other hand, I believe that it is more than ever necessary and urgent to conceive and manage an **identity and quality transition** in the concept of our religious life: from the *vision* that I have called *functional* (which has as a logical result the risk of the *primacy of the management of the works*) to a **fundamentally charismatic model and style**.

We need to go back to the roots of the identity of consecrated life. A dynamic which addresses not only the consecrated people called to this conversion, but also the pastors of our local churches themselves, because the consecrated life will only be an *integral part* of the local Church and ultimately a *vocational appeal* for a full and attractive life if it is lived and appreciated in its real identity.

4) Before continuing, it seems interesting to emphasize some other **challenges** of consecrated life, which I only count up and will not thoroughly explore:

a) **the rise of globalization**<sup>7</sup>

b) **the international migrations**<sup>8</sup>

c) **the decline of members**<sup>9</sup>

d) **the perception of social irrelevance**<sup>10</sup>

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*human adventure. Consecrated life "presently goes over a ford, but it cannot remain there. We are called to make the crossing": being a "Church which goes beyond" following the interpretation of the Pontiff. With particular attention "to accept the challenge of the calls coming from the crossroads of the world, consecrated life is also prompted to identify" new and bold ways in meeting others" and "to experience with a special intensity the stage of the intercession"».*

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to all consecrated people on the occasion of the year of consecrated life, II, 2. The Pope added as follows: «*Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events: they are like sentinels who keep watch in the night and sense the coming of the dawn (cf. Is 21:11-12). Prophets know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side*», ib.

<sup>7</sup> See USG (Union of General Superiors), *Inside Globalization: Toward a Multi-centred and Intercultural Communion*, (Rome: Edition "Il Calamo", 2000), pp. 10-21; John FUELLENBACH, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 2000), pp. 107-108; 15th General Chapter SVD, "Chapter Statement", *In Dialogue with the Word*, No. 1, Sept. 2000, pp. 16-20; John ALLEN, *The Future Church* (NY: Doubleday, 2009), pp. 256-297.

<sup>8</sup> The international migrants today come from all parts of the world and travel around the world. At the beginning of the new millennium, the number of international migrants worldwide was estimated at 150 million, i.e. one person in 50 (see IOM [International Organization for migration], "Global Migration Trends: An Era of International Migration", IOM publications, Geneva [(http://www.iom.int)]. At the same time, refugees and forced migrants, at the beginning of the new millennium, were estimated to be approximately 50 million, i.e. one person in 120, (cf. Michael Flower, "The global phenomenon of migration", Pontifical Council for the pastoral care for migrants and people on the road, Vatican City, 29 May 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Some numbers have been given above, but I would like to recall other phenomena related to the *decline of vocations*: the gradual *decline of members of religious institutes* (of women religious especially), the *ageing of religious personnel*, the *workload* for the remaining members of religious orders (with as a result of *burnout* phenomena), the *closing of the works and of the religious institutes*, the *sale of real estate*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> This is not only due to the fact that many young people join the *Movements* or *New Forms*, but also to the perception, on the part of many religious, of not being appreciated enough even by their Hierarchy, which sometimes seems to *distance itself* from consecrated life and almost only see it as *labour force* depending on the hierarchical Church; others suggest in an even more radical

**e) the emergence of a worldwide Church<sup>11</sup>**

**f) multicultural membership and composition<sup>12</sup>.**

Of course, the list could be completed and I don't have the presumption to say that I would have shown religious life exhaustively, with its *challenges* that are far more numerous. Those I have just enumerated have only the purpose to promote the idea of facing a critical comparison: if you want to get out of what many perceive nonetheless as a crisis, the first step is the profound knowledge of the problem, its clear determination, its naming, identifying its nature and substance.

5) In addition to the *challenges*, I want to point out some valuable *opportunities* for consecrated life:

**a) INTERCULTURALITY OF THE MEMBERS**

Today, many religious institutions have become *international* in their composition. Some have always been international; some others have become it recently, *as they have opened to the southern parts of the world*. The real value of internationality is the *testimony of universality and diversity that are inherent to the Kingdom of God*. This is very true today, where *globalization* tends to erase all *differences* and *to seek a general dimension*. It is therefore urgent and necessary to testify that the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of love, which includes absolutely every person and is at the same time open to the peculiarity of each person and every people. But *internationality* is also a strong testimony of the fact that people of different cultures and nations can live in fellowship and solidarity, peace and harmony if they derive from the values of the Gospel. The international religious institutes can play a prophetic role in a fragmented world and be a source of hope for a world that is riven by cultural, ethnic and racial conflicts, violence and war. So, the *promotion* of intercultural and international religious orders is not based on the lack of vocations in some parts of the world, but on the fact that at the core of the religious *vocation* is *the call to testify of the Kingdom of God* and to be a *prophetic voice* in human society and a source of hope for the world.

**b) INTERCONGREGATIONAL COOPERATION**

Today there is also the *chance* of (maybe it would be better to say, the need for) a greater intercongregational cooperation. Many male and female religious institutes are already working together in the areas of finance and human resources. In practice a religious Institute is the «*pilot community*» and the others work according to their possibilities. There are many difficulties and problems, especially at the beginning, because it is not easy to go beyond indigenous habits and

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way, that *the crisis of irrelevance* of consecrated life is only one aspect of the deeper crisis of meaning of religion as such or, rather, the religion in its present sociocultural form (cf. Mgr. Pierre Raffin, *Considerations about the present and the future of religious life in France and in Western Europe*", Conference at the 75th bi-annual meeting of the Union of General Superiors (USG) , May 27, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The perhaps most significant development of the Church from the Council of Vatican II is that it acts as a "Worldwide Church". With Vatican II, the Church was seen for the first time in its history as a real "Worldwide Church", whereas at the Vatican Council I the representatives of the Episcopal sees of Asia and Africa were missionary bishops of European or American origin, because there still was no single local episcopacy in the Church. At Vatican II, this was different. The seats of bishops from Africa and Asia were occupied by local bishops. Even if they were not very numerous in comparison to the European Bishops, they were still present and have legitimately participated in the decision-making process of the Church. At the Council of Vatican II, the Church was experienced, even if it was only initially, as a real worldwide church with a world episcopate, which was in accordance with the Pontiff.

<sup>12</sup> *The multiculturalism* of the worldwide Church expresses itself in numerous religious communities that have a *multicultural composition* or because they were designed from the beginning in this way or because they were forced to do so through the lack of vocations in the Western world. Where the substructure was mono-cultural, a certain order and harmony in the religious community was guaranteed. Usually, mono-culturalism ensures a common understanding of certain issues such as *community, prayer, silence, poverty, chastity, obedience*; in particular the religious orders which were culturally homogeneous in composition. But it was also true for the international religious orders at the time before Vatican II. In fact at that time they accredited little importance to the specificity of cultures of their members. On the other hand, unconsciously was expected from all members that they learn or adapt to the dominant culture of the religious community, usually the European. In practice, what generally happened was that the training program of the "mother province" in Europe mostly was implemented and copied to the "mission provinces" in America, Asia, Africa, Oceania.

mentalities, but after all everything will be dealt with and the projects go ahead<sup>13</sup>. The intercongregational cooperation brings a great enrichment to religious institutes even by the presence of the diverse charisms. But it should not be seen only as a strategy in view of the declining numbers but more like a *confirmation of communion*, i.e. what combines, what underlies the consecrated life is the *imitation of Christ*, which is bigger and more important than the variety in the *interpretation* of this *imitation*. *The call to share the Mission of God in Christ includes the call to work together with all others who are called in the same way by God*. In fact, cooperation means to accept the fact that the mission is greater than what each person or each congregation can do. It is even greater than what all institutions can make together. Cooperation is the very essence of the mission, because it is the *confirmation of being Church*. We not only work together, because we want to be more effective in the mission, but above all because we want to put God in the first place and do acknowledge that the first mediator of our mission, of the mission of the Church, is God's Spirit.

### **c) PARTNERSHIP WITH THE LAITY IN THE MISSION.**

The appearance of the Laity in the Church is certainly one of the most beautiful features: an active, well prepared and highly motivated laity<sup>14</sup>. Many factors have determined the growth and the rise of the laity in the Church: one of them is the lack of priests in the North as well as in the South. This has led to the growth and spread of the "*amateur service*" in the Church, which has ensured that many lay people have occupied positions and played roles, which were previously almost exclusively those of the priests. Another factor arises from the new representation of the laity by Vatican II, i.e. that *the apostolate of the laity is a legitimate apostolate, which is based on the baptism*, and not a *representation* of the priest's office, with the specific task "*to renew the temporal order*". This has led to the rise of the so-called "*new lay movements*", in which many people take over the task to evangelize the culture and change society<sup>15</sup>. The religious institutes have always had groups of associated lay beside them: *third-order, tertiary, associated and connected*. These are lay people who are attracted by the charism of the religious Institute wishing to share the spirituality and to work in the mission. A different kind of cooperation between religious and laity is the **partnership** with lay or independent movements. These are not only lay people working on the mission of religious institutes, but also institutes that work with or support the mission of the laity. These two forms of cooperation must be encouraged. In the past, mainly religious have worked with the priests and the bishops. This has led to the risk that the orders were active mainly in the field of Church and regarded as "*labour force*" of the hierarchy of the Church. As we have seen, it diminished the *specific identity* of religious life, its *prophetic charismatic value* in the Church. Cooperation with the laity reminds religious people also of their role in the world of the laity by saving the specific identity and charism of religious life. The **partnership** with the laity also reminds the religious that the religious consecration is to *bear witness of the Kingdom of God*, which includes the *call to transformation and renewal of the world on the basis of the Gospel*, and

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<sup>13</sup> Maybe you should remember what Pope Francis himself in his aforementioned *Apostolic letter* says (*the Horizons of the Year of Consecrated Life*, no. 4): «*nor can we forget that the phenomenon of monasticism and of other expressions of religious fraternity is present in all the great religions. There are instances, some long-standing, of inter-monastic dialogue involving the Catholic Church and certain of the great religious traditions. I trust that the Year of Consecrated Life will be an opportunity to review the progress made, to make consecrated persons aware of this dialogue, and to consider what further steps can be taken towards greater mutual understanding and greater cooperation in the many common areas of service to human life. Journeying together always brings enrichment, and can open new paths to relationships between peoples and cultures, which nowadays appear so difficult*».

<sup>14</sup> Cf. John ALLEN, *The Future Church*, NY, Doubleday, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> It is said that the Vatican recognized until today the canonical status of approx. 120 "new lay movements". The majority of these movements (such as *the Ark, Community and Liberation, the Focolarini, the Community of Sant'Egidio*) were founded in the course of the last century. These movements undertake a whole series of projects, missions and institutions and see themselves as missionaries in their own life course, to make sacred or transform the secular world.

that this vocation and mission must be lived in the middle of the "joys and hopes, the pains and fears" of real women and men in a world that is often injured and fragmented.

### **AT THE END:**

In the light of what I have been trying to tell - well aware that one could say much more and much better about this – my intention was just to bring some additional starting points for a common reflection - of course without prejudice to the *differences* and particular *features* of each European country - while I go towards the end of my contribution, I believe it is not unnecessary to present to our assembly what the fathers of the *Plenary Assembly* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and societies of Apostolic Life - who have come together in Rome (November 26 to 29, 2014) for the opening of the *Year of Consecrated Life*, just on the last day, November 29, with a solemn prayer vigil in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore - said, studied and thought. As you know, the theme of the Assembly was "**New wine into new wineskins**" (cf. Mrk 2.18-22).

The conclusions were gathered in 3 **propositions**<sup>16</sup> probably issued in a document of the Congregation in a hopefully not too distant future.

After a long and interesting debate between all fathers<sup>17</sup> the *propositions* were put together in **3 topics**, namely: 1) **community**, 2) **formation** (initial and ongoing formation), 3) **leadership and economy**.

Here are some brief explanations on these topics<sup>18</sup>:

#### 1) **COMMUNITY**

1. *Community structures and charismatic mission*. The communities and every consecrated person, enshrined in the mystery and the mission of the Trinity of God, would be ready to assume a *missionary 'going forth'*, in accordance with their charism, to ever new scenarios and challenges, especially to those peripheries which need the light of the Gospel. Each consecrated person and every community must "discern the path that the Lord points out" (EG 20). Therefore, they are aware of the fact that all structures of the community become more missionary and that the activities are dynamic and open, so that all members remain in a posture of "going forth".

2. *Processes of increased communion*. That, in the process of missionary conversion, the communities would be always more aware of their «closeness to Jesus on a common journey» (EG 23). And may every consecrated person never forget to be in a constant state of disciple (cf. EG 23; 266). He/she should maintain the listening to the word of God by the *Lectio divina*, being formed by the liturgy and the liturgical year, and by the personal prayer, and always have in mind the conditions for a proper community discernment of the will of God, in the circularity of relations. History tells us that «*even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them*» (EG 26).

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<sup>16</sup> The propositions had a brief introduction of the premise, which I prefer to quote fully, to make the text more comprehensible: "In the light of the Evangelical Word: "New wine into new wineskins"(Mrk 2.22) we have reflected in our Conference about religious life in the Church today, fifty years after the dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium and the Decree Perfectae Caritatis». In audience Pope Francis granted to us, he explained that "following the Second Vatican Council, the wind of the Spirit has continued to blow with force, on the one hand pushing the Institutes to implement the spiritual, charismatic and institutional renewal that the said Council asked for, and on the other raising in the heart of men and women new ways to respond to Jesus' invitation to leave all in order to dedicate one's life to follow Him and to proclaim the Gospel". But he reminded also of some weaknesses, which we ourselves have recognized: "the weakness of certain formative paths, the desire for institutional and ministerial duties at the expense of spiritual life, the difficult integration of cultural and generational diversity, maintaining a balance when exercising authority and in the use of goods". If we follow the proposal of the Pope «not [be] afraid to discard the «old wineskins» to apply new ones, we suggest the following "propositions" in the three areas that were considered in the work of the Plenary».

<sup>17</sup> The fathers are Cardinals of the Curia and of seats of Archbishops, bishops and archbishops, consultants of the Congregation, general superiors who are all appointed by the Holy Father.

<sup>18</sup> Each topic has a brief introduction. The first is as follows: «*the CICLSAL would contribute to the adaptation of individual structure forms of communion and community in the consecrated life, so that the "new wine" of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood become filled in "new wineskins"*».

3. *Multi- and intercultural communities.* The presence of numerous cultures in the communities is a gift of God for consecrated life and the Church; however, there is not always an intercultural communion both in training and in the mission. For this to happen, everyone must be free and responsible for his own talents and open to those of the other. May he who leads be able to encourage and enable the convergence of diversity to synodality, synergy, co-responsibility. The reciprocal contemplative sight, the desire to be together Church and the solidarity-based hospitality will be the ferment of dialogue and trust in a world which is lacking hospitality and fraternal reciprocity.

2) **FORMATION** (initial and continuing formation)<sup>19</sup>

1. The *formation* is the act of the Father who, starting from conversion, designs in us the heart of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore recommended that the formation be *integral* (humanly, intellectually, theologically, spiritually, pastorally and regarding community), that it tend to form a consecrated person consistent in the will (integer, docilely) through an *integration* model to "be so minded as Christ" (Phil 2.5; *Vita Consecrata* 70ss). It has to be in particular a formation nourished by a wise vocational discernment and keen on the sense-related and sexual area - even in the face of the recent scandals - a training method that is well balanced between spiritual and psycho-pedagogical elements.

2. *Docibilitas and formators.* May be targeted as much as possible in the *Ratio Institutionis* the obligation to *prepare the formator* through an integral preparation: for a formation not only technical, with the help of the humanities (in agreement with a Christian anthropology), but also not only spiritual alone. May the formator be a mature person, who is able to integrate the two dimensions in himself and to put himself in a situation of listening to the culture of young people. A specific task of the initial formation is the *docibilitas*, i.e. the person who has learned to learn from life for the whole life. *Docibilis* is *vir ob-audiens*, searching God in everything, ready to let form himself from the hand of God in the mission and in prayer, inserted in the framework of the local church, in the brotherhood/sisterhood and in the "peripheries", in the expected and unexpected aspects of life, in the successes and in the failures in every stage of life. It is not only up to the novice to form the consecrated person, but it is the whole life, in every minute and circumstance, being the mystical mediation of the hand of the Father, our unique Father-formator.

3. *Ongoing formation.* Each institute assumes the question of *ongoing formation* with seriousness and coherence. Thus, it promotes a culture of ongoing formation in its two key dimensions: the *ordinary* (which occurs any day and at any time), for which everyone in his community is responsible; and the *extraordinary* (which occurs due to various formation courses or on the occasion of particular problems in the life of the consecrated person), for which the Institute itself is responsible. To this purpose, it is to consider the possibility to give life to a *structure* of a community of consecrated persons who assumes the task of ongoing formation, to help everyone in the ordinary and extraordinary life situations (crisis, age passages, new tasks, various difficulties...). Given these requirements for initial and ongoing formation, a rewriting of the document *Potissimum Institutioni* is necessary.

3) **LEADERSHIP AND ECONOMY**<sup>20</sup>

1. *Areas of participation.* *Vita consecrata* had stated that "it is urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women

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<sup>19</sup> Introduction: "the young people who want to enter consecrated life are the "new wine". «The "new wineskins" are the structures of the welcome and formation, initial and ongoing formation, so that this wine will be a "rich wine that will strengthen the life of the Church and can rejoice the heart of many brothers and sisters" (Pope Francis)».

<sup>20</sup> Introduction: «to identify the "new wine" and to assess the quality of the "wineskins" holding it, we should be guided by some criteria mentioned by Pope Francis: "the priority of service, the attention to the smallest and weakest, the respect for the dignity of every human being".



*themselves" (VC 58). Considering further the obvious majority of numbers of consecrated women in contrast to consecrated men and the values of the female genius, the Congregation is asked to promote ways of reciprocity and to accede to the wishes of Pope Francis to incorporate a larger number of consecrated women in the structure of the Dicastery.*

2. *Specific nature of joint institutions. "Priesthood... can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general" (EG 104). The Dicastery is urged to continue the work in relation to the recognition of the specific nature of the "mixed" Institutes and the exercise of authority in their legal structure.*

3. *Rewrite Mutuae Relationes.* Starting from the Synods on the stable forms of life and priesthood and the continental Synods, it is strongly required to review the modalities and the dynamics of the relationships between consecrated life and the various religious issues. For this, a rewriting of the document *Mutuae relations* in relationship with an ecclesiology of communion, which expresses the common meaning of the hierarchical and charismatic elements, is expected.

4. *Administration of goods.* To let our poverty be the evidence of a "poor Church and for the poor", you need to start from the knowledge of the economic background in which one lives. You have to organize the economies with expertise and transparency; to confirm equality and participation among all members; to determine the structures of co-responsibility in the communion; to ensure the training of bursars; to extend the exchange areas of the community to the global horizon.<sup>21</sup>

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

Which conclusion can we draw at the end of this general overview, which, although by no means exhaustive, wanted to take a look at the current situation of consecrated life in Europe, by examining some statistics about the state in the last 20 to 25 years too, to have a prospect for the future?

Certainly, the greatest **challenge** is undoubtedly the **drop in vocations** in almost the whole of Europe. The Religious Institutes look with great concern at the nearly empty formation houses; the generational occurring renewal has failed for years; the average age of consecrated people is very high; the numbers go back; the workload becomes daily more unbearable; searching for ways out (including the 'import' of vocations from other countries) caused more problems than they have solved, etc. That has led many people to say - and it has now become an almost universal slogan - that **consecrated life is in crisis**. This is obviously not true: the quality of life - and in particular of consecrated life - cannot be measured at the numbers, even if they are important. Despite some incidents that have severely tarnished the consciousness of many religious persons (referring to the *phenomenon of the abandoning the service* in the 70s and 80s of the last century and some new cases in the last few years, and especially to the very serious *scandal of paedophilia*, in which were implicated not few religious men (here we must say in all fairness that this globally did not touch the religious women), **consecrated life in Europe is not in a crisis**. It is not in a crisis because of the *admirable commitment* with which consecrated people tackle this very difficult change in the history of their institutions; it is not in a crisis because of the holy life testified by many in such difficult situations, because of the interconnectedness to their vocation and their religious family, because of the sacrifices for the Church and for the world. All that may be insufficient to get out of the ford of the consecrated life, but the times and the possibilities of human history are known only to the Lord.

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<sup>21</sup> *There's also a short "conclusion": «The fathers the General Assembly convey the proposals to the Dicastery so that it circulates this in the light of the Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis to consecrated persons, to assist them in the generous and creative fidelity. May they live this special "Year of the Consecrated Life" by looking to the past with gratitude, living the present with passion and embracing the future with hope». In fact, the text was not published because they hoped to release a real document in the course of the Year of Consecrated Life (being thought as an instruction). For various reasons this could not be done, among other things because the Congregation preferred the method of "Letters" (published every 3-4 months), and in particular: "Rejoice", "Explore", "Scrutinize". The fourth and last letter, which is already in preparation, should be called "Go".*

**What are the prospects for the (near) future?** Given what I just have said, it's not easy to point out the secure perspectives. Europe experiences an often wild and fierce time of *secularization*: we should stop being blind, whether we like it or not, and try to live with it in the best possible way. The *season of Christianity is definitely over and we are living in a post-Christian world*: the sooner we recognise this, the better. The Church, and consecrated life at its heart, have to deal with a completely changed reality: it is the time of the *new evangelization* or perhaps the *first evangelization*. Entire European countries are dechristianized now; it is unrealistic to "look for vocations" where faith is missing! It needs to build itself for new, through slow, long and hard work. Only then you will reap the fruits of it: but first of all the field must be cleared, worked, looked after, watered, with sweat and fatigue.

The third perspective is closely linked to this: we have to **go back to the sources of consecrated life**: the Gospel, the founders/foundresses, the charism of the order. The *essence of consecrated life* - Pope Francis often repeats this - is **prophecy**, the ability to offer again and again, and in each case, the person of Christ in all the realities of the life of the Church and the world. If necessary (and it is!), go out of a **functional perspective** of consecrated life and build on the **charismatic perspective**. Religious life has played the role of a forerunner for many needs of mankind over the centuries (schools, hospitals, kindergartens, hospices, etc.); for a long time now, the Government has taken this role back. The solution is not to flee into the parishes, "to do something", but to go back to the spirit of the founders and with joy and strength bear witness to the "beautiful life of the Gospel".

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