



PRESENT CHALLENGES OF/TO CONSECRATED LIFE IN EUROPE

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"A charism is not an exhibit from a museum which stands untouched in a display case... No, a charism must be opened and allowed to go out, so it may come into contact with reality, with people, with their anxieties and their problems..... It would be a serious error to think that the charism can be kept alive by concentrating on external structures, on the framework, on methods or form. God frees us from the spirit of functionalism!" (POPE FRANCIS, Address to the Schönstatt Fathers, 3/9/15).

Consecrated life in Europe is a complex and multiform reality, rich in its great history and with fertile resources for the future. In spite of everything, this is a time of gratitude and wonder for consecrated life, a time of hope and new prophecy, as Pope Francis said in his *Letter to all Consecrated People* (21/11/2014). It is still pulsing with a generous service of intercession, interiority and asceticism, contemplation and transcendence, but also of closeness and solidarity, of martyrdom and parrhesia.

But it is certainly obvious that there are "crises" in European consecrated life. The problem is to interpret the reasons and causes, because the crisis does not wear the same face everywhere. In Eastern Europe, numbers are better than in Western Europe: in two decades religious in Europe have diminished by more than a third (we are about 250 thousand). And let us not forget that 70% of them are in five countries - Italy, Spain, France, Poland and Germany.

In Eastern Europe, growing vocations are not compensating for losses: numbers always remain low, and the future is not without problems. But even there, there are problems of ecclesial sensibilities and of growing secularisation. They are having to live through changes and globalisation more rapidly than the West ever did, where the changes took place over a period of more than sixty years.

In Western Europe there is a certain frequent and widespread "*apologia of decline*" (called *carismatica ars moriendi*). Numerical and motivational impoverishment has caused precariousness and displacement: uncertain, displaced, nomads in a sea of fog, religious appear to be a crowd of *zombies* hidden in their niches. In Central and Eastern Europe, the challenge is serious vocational discernment and the urgency of inventing a new model (or new models) of consecrated life, in dialogue with the cultural ethos, but also fermented by prophetic passion and daring evangelisation. At present, there is a real conflict with difference, and original models are in short supply. And it seems that the long tragedy of the "red ice age" (the communist regimes) has not been followed by a creative genius that is the fruit of martyrdom and faith razed to the ground. With the progress of affluence, the vocational boom is diminishing.

But whatever the case, and in any context, the original evangelical splendour that lives in us must never be lacking. The Gospel and following, communion and testimony must become irresistible, inalienable principles. Perhaps, at present, the prophetic soul is sick, lacking dream and uneasiness. But it is not a certain sign that the promised future is at risk.

New theological proposals for consecrated life are also lacking, both in the east and in the west. Certainly, we have had a lot of theology during these years, theology of good quality¹. The *aphasia* of inspiring newness indicates that there is no inventive genius to be interpreted and themed; theological proposals risk being exercises in *gnosticism*²... and theologians, therefore, lack the first raw material on which to work. And the "theology of consecrated life" can do nothing but repeat the recent past, or, worse, fantasise about miraculous solutions... or idolise models that are completely sterile and obsolete. We have to pass from efficiency and pride in works and in numbers, to the primacy of signs and communion in the perspective of compassionate solidarity and persuasive interiority.

1. Between *receptio* and *renovatio*

The post-Conciliar renewal was a period of intense activity of *exploration* and *reworking*. It is not easy to find in other Church groups anything similar to the vast construction site for *aggiornamento* that was realised by consecrated life; it was a prolonged task, and everyone took part.

This fact is even more significant if we consider that the time between the *receptio* of the event and the directives of Vatican Council II was not very extensive. 50 years are little in comparison with the four centuries that were needed for the full implementation of the Council of Trent. And for consecrated life, it must be said that the protagonist was less the *decrees of reform* than a diffused creativity, an ecclesial and historical passion that even exploded into "new forms" of life³.

The *receptio* of the *renewal* of Vatican II was polycentric and multicultural, within a cultural situation in rapid global change, but also - at first - without the original contribution of Eastern Europe, (then frozen in atheist regimes).

There was an *exploration* of new paths: places of unprecedented presence and risky pastoral methods, sustained by solid interpretative theologies of the identity of consecrated life and a reinterpretation of initial charismatic inspirations. But there were also internal Church relationships with a spirit of synergy and dialogue with contemporaries, recognising and interpreting unease and new sensibilities. There was a new *reinterpretation* of the *patrimony* which constitutes the specific identity of every institute, defined by canon law as: "The intentions and projects of the founders, sanctioned by the competent authority of the Church, relative to the nature, the end, the spirit and the disposition of the institute, and also its healthy traditions" (can. 578).

This is not confined to written texts and a reinterpretation of archival records, but includes new *hermeneutics*, both theoretical and existential, new ways of giving reality to new discourses: and there have been contributions of intellectual and ecclesial sensibilities from outside Europe. So, when the fall of the walls segregating East Europe and making it invisible and non-communicative made it possible to once again meet the brothers and sisters who had long remained concealed, discord and resistance exploded among them. They had not shared that travail, and they felt themselves being dragged along in a world they found unfamiliar and absurd, a betrayal of their dreams and their foundations. And the resistance still remains.

And all this was in a world in continual and rapid mutation, and it made *Gaudium et Spes*, the most open of the Conciliar documents, seem old very quickly. I quote some fundamental dates of the changes of that epoch: 1968 (France, May, student riots), 1989 (fall of the Berlin Wall), 2001 (the Twin Towers), 2008 (the economic crisis). All historical events that forced in new challenges and new strategies. For the Church, there were changes of Pope, with their different sensitivities to pastoral options and styles of witness. We can say that the twentieth century was *prolonged* in the Church, and closed with the resignation of Benedict XVI.

¹. The bibliography is immense. Cf. AA. VV., *Il Concilio Vaticano II e la vita consacrata. Fedeltà e rinnovamento*, Il Calamo, Rome 2014; BOCOS MERINO A., *Un racconto nello Spirito. La vita religiosa nel post-concilio*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2013 (orig. 2011); GARCÍA PAREDES J.C.R., *Teología de la vida religiosa*, BAC, Madrid 2000; GUCCINI L., *Vita consacrata: le radici ritrovate*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2014³; LÉCRIVAIN Ph., *Une manière de vivre. Les religieux aujourd'hui*, Lessius, Brussels 2009; MANICARDI L., *La vita religiosa: radici e futuro*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2012; ROVIRA ARUMÍ J., *La vida consagrada hoy. Renovacion, desafíos, vitalidad*, Claretianas, Madrid 2011; SECONDIN B., *Il profumo di Betania. La vita consacrata come mistica, profezia, terapia*, Dehoniane, Bologna 1997; IDEM, *Abitare gli orizzonti. Simboli, modelli e sfide della vita consacrata*, Paoline, Milan 2002.

². Cf. GUCCINI L., *Vita consacrata*, cit., 37.

³. We tried a balance on the occasion of the 1994 Synod: SECONDIN B., *Per una fedeltà creativa. La vita consacrata dopo il Sinodo*, Paoline, Milan 1995. A particularly valuable book: HERZIG A., *"Orden-Christen". Theologie des Ordenslebens in der Zeit nach dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, Echter, Würzburg 1991.

2. With the *peripheries* at heart

Now, with Pope Francis, we have the impression that a new phase of conciliar *receptio* has opened. We are spurred to re-open the debate on *evangelical* poverty as a typical *forma Ecclesiae* and as a *forma Christi*. We are constantly being asked to rediscover the art of neighbourliness and charity towards the least, in the context of *global indifference*⁴.

Who more than religious could feel themselves challenged by this insistence on evangelical life and passionate service of every marginalised person? It is as if Pope Francis is launching ever farther ahead, into our own history and towards the existential peripheries, the capacities for evangelisation operative in the Church. He asks us to live as an *outgoing Church* - maybe even an *accident-prone Church* - abandoning the narrow positions we have adopted. He calls us to recognise, by service and contemplation, *the flesh of Christ* in the poor and marginalised. And he does this when our anaemia and our inability to recognise guide models could rather favour a prudent retreat to positions already acquired, maintenance without risk, saving what can be saved. He chastises withdrawal and sadness, closures and weary hands. "Wake up the world!" he said to the Superiors General.

Consecrated life has a glorious history, rich in holiness and prophecy, in its service of the poor and weak. Even during the last decades there has been no lack of attempts at fraternal solidarity and ingenious, enterprising service in the midst of the new poverties at all the peripheries. The enterprise perhaps seems less lively today, but it remains true that this is one of the characteristics everyone admires. If anything, it is risking new beneficiaries and new frontiers, still exploring daringly inside the *refuse* of history, the social rejects, the thousand forms of disfigured faces and trampled dignity: "branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing" (*EG* 273).

The *works* of every kind are there to testify to a glorious history, fruit of an unwearying willingness to dirty the hands, to get going, to invent new ways for healing and liberating, for human promotion and evangelical neighbourliness. The differing wounds of the last and least have become apertures for seeing wider and farther, and have generated forms of service to sensitise the heedless to a tangle of injustices, for offering the balm of solidarity and tenderness, dignity and hope to those who have never known respect and fraternity.

The crisis of our "works of mercy" - so numerous and historically important even for the history of civilisation - are posing us serious problems for the future. We are feeling the ground giving way under our feet, because we thought these works gave us dignity and the right to exist and feel ourselves Church, gave us a claim to rights and utilities. When they crumble away, a certain model of consecrated life disappears, an ecclesial model, a whole history of charity, of services, of feminine enterprise - and everything becomes unsteady. We have, perhaps, confused the testimony of charity with the organisation of "onerous social services". Many transfer this model (now worn-out and unfocused in the West, where it was born and consolidated) to other places that are less evolved. But sooner or later, even there, they will be discarded, not so much because the works of mercy become useless, but because the standardised model no longer holds up (cf. Brazil). There is need to invent others, in response to new needs, new challenges, new emergencies: but also in synergy with new responsibilities, new availabilities.

Let us not limit ourselves to short-sighted, administrative conservation of what we are already doing. Pope Francis suggests: "I ask you to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the poor, and finding creative ways to catechise, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach others how to pray. Consequently, I would hope that structures can be streamlined, large religious houses repurposed for works which better respond to the present demands of evangelization and charity, and apostolates adjusted to new needs" (*Letter to all Consecrated people*, II,4). This very realistic sentence was part of an invitation to "create 'alternate spaces' where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive" (II,2).

⁴. Besides the fundamental text of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 Nov.2013), see also the two famous interviews transcribed by da SPADARO, A. *Intervista a Papa Francesco*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 164 (2013/III), 449-477 and the talk to Superiors General: "Wake up the world!!!". But books to quote would be abundant, as there are so many being published on the ecclesial strategy of Francis. Bookshops are full of them in various languages.

3. A Biblical page: *Acts of the Apostles 16:1-40*

I shall try to re-visit with you a biblical page which seems to me capable of giving inspiration to our present situation. I am referring to a critical moment Paul found himself in during his second missionary journey. It is in chapter 16 of the Acts of the Apostles; the first experience of evangelising in Europe.

I would like to make some notes in the margin.

3.1. *The moment of suffering*: Paul was wounded by his sharp disagreement with Barnabas (Ac 15:36-40), and this may have even influenced his work, generating a certain confusion and uncertainty, as we see from the difficulties. This surfaces when he lets himself be carried along by events, and especially when he intuits a new call during a nocturnal dream (the appeal of the Macedonian). He responds with generosity, there are no half measures: indeed, he takes the initiative to cross into Europe, and to go significantly further, to a Romanised city. He was not discouraged by the lack of organised religious structures (there was no synagogue), but sensed an opportunity... along by the river, where he found himself among a small group of women.

3.2. *The surprise*: It is strange to find Paul - a bit of a misogynist - seated among the women, speaking and anticipating some response. Lydia was the first adherent: "The Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying" (v. 14). God's action is expressed with a bold vocabulary: the Greek verb (*diènoixen*) is reminiscent of throwing wide open, the opening of a woman's womb for the child to come out. Already a "believer in God", she lets herself be carried to fullness of life. The verb "adhere" (*prosékein*), means grasp, grab, seize, find solidarity. Lydia's adherence to the faith is complemented by insistence that her house should be accepted as the place of the new community: Paul is part of her plan, and he feels "constrained" to accept.

3.3. *Life becomes complicated*: The event proceeds in a rhythm of prayer and preaching, until an incident breaks it up. There was a woman slave, a seer, exploited by her masters, and when Paul and his companions went to pray, she cried out that these foreigners were "servants of the Most High God", making a nuisance of herself (v.18). Eventually Paul, irritated, casts out the spirit of divination that possessed her, so ruining the business of her exploiters. These spread the rumour that these preachers are undermining the usual religious customs: the magistrates are quick to believe this, and have the missionaries beaten and thrown into prison. In spite of the suffering and injustice, even in prison they "sang hymns to God while the other prisoners listened" (v. 25).

3.4. *A light in the night*: while they are still praying and singing, there is a kind of earthquake, their chains fall off and the doors fly open. The gaoler wakes and thinks there is a mass break-out. Reassured by Paul, he cares for the prisoners, washes their wounds, accepts baptism, and invites them to his table to celebrate the baptism of his family. Paul finds friends and disciples where he least expected it. With two families as protagonists, he founds a community at Philippi, in the house of a married woman and the house of a gaoler.

3.5. *What a relief*: the following day, Paul is set free because an injustice had been done to him as a Roman citizen, but it is thought prudent for him to leave the city. But first he goes to the house of Lydia, meets the brothers and sisters and gives them encouragement, and leaves for Thessalonica. The arbitrary choice of accepting an invitation to stay in someone's house becomes a providential resource. Paul will continue to have special concern for the community at Philippi: he informs us about its developments, and accepts support for his work only from them. Above all he gives them, besides his nostalgia and affection, a lovely Christological hymn (Ph 2:6-11), to interpret the sentiments with which he had been welcomed and helped.

4. From Word to life

In the light of this icon, I would like to give some considerations and applications about consecrated life in Europe today. We must not forget that this episode reminds us how evangelisation began in Europe; outside the city, along by the river, among a group of women, the usual methods scotched (Lydia constrains Paul to *accept* hospitality) and through violence (prison without a previous judgement). But we also see here meals taken in solidarity, homes that welcome, brothers and sisters taken into the heart, gifts exchanged freely, the desire to sing to God from the depths of prison.

4.1. *Paul's adventure* at Philippi is set in the context of a cultural passage that Paul was afraid to face: that of the European and Roman culture, almost unknown to him. But when he is aware that the mysterious hand of the "Spirit of Jesus" is blocking other roads, he accepts the risk and takes an intelligent part in the proceedings. He shows us all that certain difficult and risky situations may make us afraid, but that it is essential to accept the delicate signs of God's will, to cling to them, to go forward as protagonists and without anxiety. Even a dream can be a signpost, in the biblical sense, if we are willing and intuitive: but for a testimony that is generative, not merely hyper-efficient.

4.2. *Lack of a public synagogue* constrains Paul and his companions to find less robust, alternative solutions - they "went outside the gates, beside a river" (v. 13) and it is there that they find the women gathered to worship God. Lacking sacred places, it is in this poor and profane environment that they become heralds of the Word of the Lord. Inside the prison, chained and in darkness, they offer the desperate gaoler the light of a faith that has never been chained, and receive from him a solidarity that has the flavour of ecclesial maturity. They sow with willingness and simplicity and the first Christian community is born - without rites, vestments, walls or special sacred objects - for prayer and proclamation.

4.3. *The Lord works*: while Paul and his companions do their part, the Lord *is working* with them. It is the Lord who opens the heart of Lydia to accept what Paul is saying (v. 14). The Lord alone, and only he, has the key to the heart, and knows how to arouse the true and saving reaction of faith. Experience teaches that, in every case, our activities of proclamation and dialogue have the right effect only if the Lord accompanies them. The problem is that we do not always know how to recognise the Lord's hand. We are always there, measuring and evaluating, smugly checking, drawing up statistics, asking for what we consider as efficiency. He sows in the gaps, on the threshold, where frontiers and schemes get broken up: in order to generate new interpersonal relationships.

4.4. *The entire household* is involved in the baptism - *oikon* means friends and relations, servants and domestics - of both Lydia and the gaoler. In Paul's pastoral method, these "households" are the living foundations of evangelisation and reinforcement. It is a call to appreciate the domestic Church, the entire household involved, not just individuals; it shows the sacramental value of the family table. It is another call for a domestic Church, rich in hospitality, prayer, service and exhortation, with many participating, and with women as protagonists. We have to learn - and at times allow ourselves to be *constrained* - to come out of rigid sacrality and ritual (often merely personal) for a warmth that is familial, hospitable and supportive. The new galaxy of experiences of consecrated life called "family" - with intense participation of laity, families, men and women, is a pathway to be better explored.

4.5. *Keep nostalgia alive*: After being in prison, Paul had to hurry away from Philippi, and head towards Thessalonica (Ac 17:1). It had therefore been a brief and painful stay, yet he retained an intense nostalgia for that community, for his first European experience. And he took interest in it throughout its evolution and growth, sustaining it in difficulties and gifting it with the jewel of his Christological hymn (Ph 2:5-11) to reaffirm the crucial place of Christ in its faith. Difficulties, risks, wounds, all became symbols and agents for something new, to make their question about God an *open* question, a soul-journey, a search that would lead to all rules and regulations, objectives and results being re-interpreted.

4.6. *When the gods fall*, when the time of faith comes, like opening a credit account with no guarantees and established rules, then it is time for wisdom and *parrhesia*, not for useless idolatry. And does the "new evangelisation" in Europe have some resemblance to this biblical passage? We too are intent on returning to old ways of thinking, recalling past glories, defending what has already been realised, because we do not have the imagination to think of anything else. And, like Paul and his companions, we find ourselves facing obstacles without knowing why, a barrenness of good intentions and habits, unclear interventions from our nature or from the heart's hidden yet available resources; and everything begins there.

4.7. *An intermediate conclusion*. The challenge of talking about God in a European culture that is losing its Christian memories could find here an original inspiration and mystical itinerary that passes through uncertainties and the unexpected, domestic conversations and traumas of despair. Going "outside the gates" along rivers, or to seashores that swallow up desperate refugees, finding courtyards or open spaces to talk informally: all these are in Europe today. It is also rich in new women protagonists, in new forms of aggregation capable of creative hospitality, guided in the dark by a *light*

of trust, and bending over to wash and tend wounds⁵.

We have learned to keep memories of experiences of fragility, situations of poverty and unjust suffering, and of totally risky improvisations by many founders and foundresses at our origins. We are not just talking about moving memories, and we cannot reduce everything to *golden legends*. We are talking about recovering the state of invention, charism in a state of being born: opportunities that we must always retrieve and live with daring - but also with concreteness and availability. Otherwise we risk earning the Spirit's reproof spoken through the seer of Patmos to the community of Thyatira... (cf. Ap 3:15-29).

5. Schengen in precarious balance, and beyond...

In Europe, we are nearing a very dangerous decision: the present proposal to suspend free circulation of people within the European states (the famous Schengen Agreement). This reveals not only exasperated fear of the new migrants, the apocalyptic and uncontrollable threat of Islamist terrorism, but also closure among the old identities which risk inter-breeding without being prepared for it: and this is the reason why imaginations are at work, why they are afraid and aggressive.

There is an evident crisis in European awareness of itself as a common homeland of peoples and destinies. In the space of a few months we have entered a critical vortex; there is mounting clamour against the strangulating dominance of economic stability, balancing the books, and reciprocal imposition of soulless financial bonds. The disintegration of the Arab Spring, the drift towards fundamentalist, fanatical, cut-throat Islam (we think of Isis), resulted in waves of chaotic migration from the Middle East towards Europe, creating an unexpected and ungovernable chaos.

All Europe has, as it were, woken up to a nightmare: at first this was thought to be confined to Italy, Spain and Greece, their coastlines easily reached by migrants. The routes of migration are now extending from Turkey and Greece, through the Balkans, and have reached the heart of European wellbeing, Germany and further north. We see neither the end nor the solution: Europe is closing its frontiers, renouncing both its hospitality and its solidarity. New walls are being built to block the flux; violence and fear are spreading like a new pestilence. We are assisting - with various degrees of awareness - at the crumbling away of European unity, as ideal, communion and synergy.

And religious are not raising their voices; neither are the European bishops, Pope Francis is the exception; he cries out loudly and courageously. Yet where there are emergencies and suffering, victims and violence, all religious life - both men and women - should be present, enterprising and in solidarity, in harmony and cooperation, inspiring themselves with the Gospel, revealing the Church as hospitable and orientating history. A presence that is not sporadic, does not aim to be at the forefront in the media, but has truly evangelical daring. I think that, in this context exploding daily among us all, there is a primary challenge for us to intercept, advantageous to the entire Church and with repercussions for present society. That is, to be protagonistic and bring an effective contribution, not only using the works and resources we already have, but also as a daring and prophetic *provocation*. We are talking here about courageous denunciation of egoism and fear, of alternative proposals about closures, of a hospitality that is operative and *com-passionate*, in order to restore an attractive and intelligent testimony to our history of hospitality and fruitful living together with all our differences. As Pope Francis says: challenging "sinful structures linked to a model of false development based on the idolatry of money, which leads to lack of concern for the fate of the poor on the part of wealthier individuals and societies; they close their doors, refusing even to see them" (*Message for Lent 2016*).

It seems to me that except for the generosity of scattered initiatives - which surely should be praised and admired - consecrated life as a whole has not known how to make itself into a critical voice, neither has it found systems and networks for alternative action within a Europe full of egoism and fear. Monastic life, with its *cross, plough and book*, laid the foundations of Europe after the dissolution of the Roman Empire. The mendicant orders, with their *evangelising itinerancy* and acceptance of the ethos of popular religion, accompanied and generated the formation of urban culture and democracy. And in early modern times, when culture expanded into wide sections of the population, college and

⁵. The *Talitha Kum* initiative must be remembered here: the International Network of Consecrated Life against People-trafficking, begun by **UISG** in the context of a collaborative project. For an example of exploration by a man of frontiers, like those much approved by Pope Francis, see DI PIAZZA P., *Fuori dal tempio. La Chiesa al servizio dell'umanità*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2011.

school foundations were driving forces for a new civilisation. During the last two centuries, the numerous foundations of *works of charity* (education, schools, nursing, preaching, rehabilitation, etc.) created a dense network of well-earned presence, redeeming the negative effects of the first industrial revolution. A precious memory, which should inspire new protagonism and new prophetic exploration, without wasting time in continuing to give life-support to situations and services that are now defunct and de-cultured.

Today we are already at the third or fourth *industrial revolution*. But we are just at the dawn of a disrupting *hybridisation* of primary local cultures within states and frontiers. The more than 200 million migrants today will increase beyond measure in the next few decades, according to realistic estimates: and they will bring with them more than seas of tears and the bloody scars of violent destruction. They will bring the resources of their cultural diversity, vast problems of integration, and new epochs of miscegenation, as already happened with the *barbarian invasions* of the fifth to ninth centuries in the Middle Ages. And then this was repeated in other contexts, particularly in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the various waves of migration from Europe; only now has a form of miscegenation and multicultural amalgamation been accomplished. For us in Europe, a creative and fruitful synthesis will take place only slowly, and a new civilisation will be born in a form unimaginable to us today. It will take many decades, if not centuries, to arrive: but for now we are in great tribulation and a reaction that is bewildered and apocalyptic.

6. Re-discovering the "state of invention": for our future in Europe

Those who experienced religious life before the Council know well from experience the extent of the upheaval produced by the Conciliar stimulus to realise the requested *suitable renewal*. More important still was the renewal of the great categories of life, spirituality, theology and canon law.

The Council was a supreme example of the complex relationship between continuity and discontinuity. Its responses to challenges and suffering, to traumas and utopias of that time - fifty years ago, but it seems like centuries! - are only partly suitable for our situation today. But its practice of the *art of living* the critical contemporaneity of the faith is still valid and inspiring⁶.

We have to rediscover the *state of invention* which made those years truly boil and effervesce. And perhaps the papacy of Francis could offer a new opportunity for exploration and invention: strategically he has for us, the consecrated, a particularly inspiring interest. Indeed, he touches the most sensitive chords of our ecclesial mission⁷. Not that we want to take over his initiatives, but to participate in his ecclesial project as protagonists, freeing ourselves from certain apprehensions of chaos and apocalypse that paralyse all of us at times. We tend to feel too sorry for ourselves!

"This sickness will not end in death" (Jn 11:4). There needs to be a new docility to the Spirit: God seems to be waiting for us at the roots, as Rilke said: perhaps the crisis is not only about aims, but about foundations. We cannot keep the *charism* and the *following* in old wineskins, even if they were made in the post-conciliar decades under the illusion that they would be long-lasting. There are many questions to touch on, and they are fundamental ones. I have chosen to speak only on certain themes, to call for an exploration of the horizons in a spirit of listening and collective discernment.

7. The *living Word* for the renewal of following and prophecy

We all know well that returning to the centrality of the Word in the life of the Church was one of the great innovations of the Council. Today, we recognise *Dei Verbum* as one of the key points of permanent influence, and the most decisive of the conciliar reforms. It is also true for consecrated life, called by the Council to have a *daily familiarity* with the Word (PC 6; DV 25)⁸.

7.1. *Centrality of the Word*. A new spirituality flowered from this renewed familiarity: and will always flower from it: "This primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without starting from a renewed listening to the Word of God" (NMI, 39). It is expressed above all by the widespread recovery of the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. Though having various names, according to places and

⁶. Cf. LECRIVAIN PH., *Une manière de vivre*, cit., 100-124.

⁷. 3 circular letters from the CICALSAL echo this and suggest ways forward: *Rejoice* (2014), *Scrutinize* (2015), *Contemplate* (2015). Their dialogue and mystical style was welcomed and appreciated.

⁸. An evaluation by GARCIA PAREDES J.C.R.-PRADO AYUSO F. (ed.), *A la escuela de la Palabra*, Claretianas, Madrid 2008.

experiences - *prayerful reading, biblical meditation, bible encounter, prayed listening, etc.* - it is to be maintained, taught in formation, practised, and even shared with groups of laity who practise it⁹. But the centrality must also express itself in many other ways: as *Verbum Domini* (2010) described in detail, in reference to forms of life, to ministries, and to evangelisation (parts 2 and 3).

From this familiarity must come the process of purification of many practices of piety widespread in religious houses, especially those for women. Even now, unfortunately, baroque forms, sentimental forms without any real substance are strongly persistent. The process has to be carried forward. All living and onward-going spirituality must be nourished at this "pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life" (DV 21). "The creative and liberating Word which took a body in Jesus Christ, then in the Scriptures, does not cease to incarnate itself in those who live by his Spirit" (P. Claverie). It is to be remembered that only putting the Word *into practice* makes an obedient and fruitful listening possible, otherwise we have *gnosticism*.

We are talking about rediscovering or reinserting this centrality into the charismatic inspiration of foundation, or at least to approach it today with vigorous awareness, and live it as a "work of truth" (1Jn 3:18). *Vita Consecrata* stated: "From meditating on the Word of God, and particularly on the mysteries of Christ, is born (as spiritual tradition teaches us) intensity of contemplation and enthusiasm for apostolic action... From *frequenting the Word of God*, they (the founders) drew the light necessary for that individual and community discernment which helped them to seek the ways of the Lord in the signs of the times. They thus acquired a *sort of supernatural instinct* which enabled them not to conform to the mentality of their time, but to renew their own minds in order to "be able to discern the will of God, to know what is good, acceptable to him and perfect" (Rm 12:2) (VC 94). This is a truth that should not only be praised but also re-learned, for a contemplative and active discernment.

A regression is taking place, a return to old rituals and a spurious form of *pious exercises*, maybe inspired by supposed apparitions of Our Lady or messages from the saints, also strange vestments, baroque devotional rituals and old prayer formulas taken up again with fanaticism and without theological or liturgical criteria. Here we need to have the courage to impose a healthy liturgical theology. In these tendencies, the centrality of the presence of the Word of God is considered "protestant mania" (!), and archaic formal rituals and the number of candles are preferred to the living Word of God.

7.2. *A prophetic following of Christ*. The Council asked all religious - but logically, it is true for all Christians, (cf. GS 22) - to rediscover their identity in an authentic "*following of Christ as proposed in the Gospels*" (PC 2a). This was the first and decisive criteria of the *renewal* to be undertaken. This is not one criterion among others, but the *primary* one (*principium*, as the Council says) that towers above and is the foundation for all others; it judges and justifies the other criteria. Pope Francis continually reminds us of this, in one of his typical uses of language: in particular, often linking the *flesh* of Christ and the *flesh of the poor*. And he also insists on moving from radicalism to prophecy: "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"¹⁰.

Certain communities give the impression at times that the Gospel and the following of Christ are there as a sort of habit, an "honorary presidency" for the daily routine. What seems to count as their true and resonant centre is the founder or foundress and their baroque utterances, their personal objects, funeral urn, effigy, etc. The *Word* and the *following of Christ* are not convenient decorative ornaments: they are the supreme motivation for life, for living in a prophetic dynamism.

We have inherited a Christology full of emotional sentiment, baroque devotions and romanticised language. Many religious are still in a Christology found in parochial first grade catechism classes, in familiar devotions full of popular *pathos*. A re-interpretation of the Christological foundation, guided by the biblical Word and according to today's ecclesial awareness, is the first requirement. There is a great richness in the Christology of the last few decades¹¹. To know and assimilate it in order to translate it into life can bring about - and has often done so - a radical purification. Christ did not found a new religion; he brought new life! (J. Moltmann). We have to insist on a return to authentic radicalism, a language centred on *the following of Christ*, that is, on him who is the *messianic prophet*

⁹ . Cf. SECONDIN >B., *La lectio divina. Dal monastero al popolo di Dio*, in *Lateranum*, 74(2008/1), 115-144.

¹⁰ . Meeting with Superiors General (USG), 29/11/2013; also in the *Letter to Consecrated People*, II,2.

¹¹ . For a review of Christological research: SESBOÛÉ B., *Les "trente glorieuses" de la christologie (1968-2000)*, Lessius, Brussels 2012.

of the poor¹².

The intentions and projects of founders and foundresses have to be read in the new light of the Word, rediscovering an evangelical and biblical wisdom that has been obscured by cultural manipulations. We have to learn to identify a “masked” religiosity (like Paul at Philippi with the woman seer) and not identify it with the faith that heals. The exile of the Word from normal Christian praxis (result of the post-Trent ban on reading the Bible) is still producing harmful effects. We have to continue to lay foundations: and ecumenical dialogue, especially in the context of a lively evangelical protestant presence, has a valuable source here, as *Vita Consecrata* said: “Sharing of the *lectio divina* in the search for the truth, a participation in common prayer...are actions pleasing to our common Father, which show the will to journey together towards perfect unity along the path of truth and love” (VC 101). Last week, in the basilica of St Paul, Pope Francis reiterated: “Conversion means allowing the Lord to live and work in us. For this reason, when Christians of different Churches listen to the Word of God together, and seek to put it into practice, they take truly important steps towards unity”.

7.3. *School of prophecy*. This rediscovery of the primacy of the Word in the truest intentions of the founders was accompanied by the regaining of the *prophetic* outlook for consecrated life. This is not consoling, devout, individualistic listening to the Word, but a familiarity that kindles hearts and projects for God’s designs as manifested in his Word. “True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his Word in the different circumstances of history” (VC 84). From listening to and meditating on the Word, we pass to prophecy in gestures and choices, in denunciations and proclamations, in exploration of new ways and new models of mercy and communion.

There was a time in the Council renewal when to speak of *prophecy*, *prophetic nature* and *prophetic function* caused some anxiety, even at the highest level. Especially if *prophecy*, *poverty* and *martyrdom* were associated. But after the Synod of 1994, and the exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, with a lengthy section entitled, “A prophetic witness in the face of great challenges” (nos. 84-95), all suspicion vanished. That “section” widened the horizon of the *prophetic testimony* of consecrated life to include martyrdom, the three vows, fraternal life, spirituality, liturgy and also *lectio divina*. Caution was cast aside!¹³ Many perhaps never noticed: the magisterium does sometimes truly *anticipate*.

Today, Pope Francis has many times reiterated that religious must *be* prophets, not play at being so: “The prophecy of the Kingdom is not negotiable. The stress has to be on being prophets, not playing at being prophets”, in the famous interview with A. Spadaro, published in *Civiltà Cattolica*. Again he repeated: A religious must never renounce prophecy!”¹⁴

Christological and evangelical writings today put more emphasis on *mercy*, *prayer*, *vigilance*, *tenderness*, *reconciliation*, *sobriety*, *justice and charity*: all values that our three classic “evangelical counsels” (chastity, poverty, obedience) seem not entirely to evidence. Might we deduce from this that the classic “triad” (going back to the 13th century *tria substantialia*) could be reformulated for a new cultural challenge? Pope Francis frequently speaks of mercy, tenderness, closeness and service as binding evangelical expressions of the *following of Christ*. Could we speculate on a different choice in the “profession of the evangelical counsels”?

Would it not be very valuable - at least equal to those values expressed by the profession of the three counsels - to make profession today of *mercy* in a world of violence, of *reconciliation* in a world divided and unjust, of *sobriety* in a world of senseless waste, of solidarity and empathetic *relationships* in a world of embittered individualism? Some new communities “profess” only chastity and communion of goods, others insist on solidarity with the poor (*conviventia cum pauperibus*), others are characterised by ecological solidarity or “horizontal” fraternity, or a therapy of humanisation. Is only one of them admissible as a “fourth vow”? Or is it permissible to think that these proposals give a clearer “challenge” to present idolatries, and so have a more provocative “evangelical” impact? Does the *theological anthropology* implied in the three classic vows still correspond to *our anthropology*, to present cultural sensitivities, and still speak to a digital culture and a virtual world? I have a number of doubts about this.

¹². Cf. MOLTMANN J., *La via di Gesù Cristo. Cristologia in dimensioni messianiche*, Queriniana, Brescia 1991.

¹³. See my comment on exhortation in the book: *Il profumo di Betania*, 94-106: *L'indole profetica della vita consacrata. Una prospettiva tradizionale rivisitata*. A series of reflections: ALDAY J.M. (ed.), *I religiosi sono ancora profeti?*, Ancora, Milano 2008.

¹⁴. I dialogue with USG, 29/11/2014.

8. Theology of the *charism*; towards new frontiers

Vatican Council II did not apply the term *charism* to consecrated life, but by (Pauline) allusions and citations it encouraged a similar application. The recent development of a “theology of charism” applied to religious life is an obvious fruit of the Council’s stimulus. Today we possess a well-structured “theology of charism”, with numerous applications and distinctions: *charism of consecrated life*, *charism of the founder/foundress*, *charism of the institute*, *personal charisms*, *charismatic families*, etc.¹⁵.

8.1. *Evident advantages*. This interpretative key has helped all institutes to re-interpret their fundamental identities in a dynamic way; planning for the future, not merely accumulating. Large historical institutes and smaller groups alike have found that this principle gives them a possibility of interpreting themselves. Moreover, the terminology, if used well, helps to interpret the historical events of various institutes, their crises, their frequent urges to reform, as creative periods in specific ecclesial and social contexts. But it also gives a basis for every new attempt at “re-founding” the religious family in new contexts, and for responding to new challenges and urgencies. The “theology of charism” we call on is not always genuinely founded in Christology and pneumatology, it is still a work in progress. It is a pity that the word *charism* was eliminated in the latest version of canon law, for fear of being too vague: it was turned down in favour of the word *patrimony* (c. 578). But *abusus non tollit usum!*

Certainly, this interpretive category was an effective instrument for putting energy and discernment, project-making and inventiveness into motion. Faithfulness to the charism lives by purifying the identity of cultural layers that are no longer fruitful or meaningful on the level of evangelical radicalism. We live, under the guidance of the Spirit and of its pastors, by exploring *new ways* towards a fruitfulness that is innovative, not merely repetitive. As Pope Francis says, “The charism is not to be preserved like a bottle of distilled water; it should courageously be made to bear fruit, as it confronts present reality, cultures and history”¹⁶.

8.2. *Heuristic resources*. The “charismatic project” of an institute is not the sum of its deeds and works. Neither is it crystallised in events or foundational texts, or in the edition of the *Constitutions*. It has a deeper dynamism, a mysterious impulse which needs to continue to be incarnated, which is guarded like a *flame* or a genetic inheritance. If it is to be true and living, scrupulous research in the archives is not enough, an idolising *evocation* of its memory is not enough: what is needed is the charismatic art of exploration, and commitment to inculturation. Institutes are “communities of narration”; they know how to narrate together, in their different ways, God’s care and his still incomplete designs entrusted to our hands. When the whole emphasis is on the *founder* as an icon of the charism, and the supposed model, the theology is not healthy. Vigilance is needed for there truly to be “a credible presence of the Holy Spirit” not solely based on “usefulness and suitability in the field of action... or ambiguous devotional phenomena” (MR 51).

The Holy Spirit does not abandon the charisms to their own devices; as giver and interpreter he works continually to prevent us confining our schemes of interpretation in sacralised formulas. Neither must we imagine that a charism can be monopolised by a group and then contrasted with other charisms, or even isolated in the Church as an elite group. The charism is given to the Church through a man or woman, and remains ecclesial by its very nature and purpose - a radical dedication to Christ and the Gospel and in history. It is “an experience of the Spirit” transmitted to its disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the body of Christ continually in the process of growth” (MR 11).

So there should be no *autocephaly*, no enclosure within impenetrable corrals. Fermentation is what we need, not generation of separate “little churches”. The multiplication in the last few decades of forms of “family” in many institutes - with laity participating in their spirituality and activities and in responsibility for the fruitfulness of the charism (cf. VC 54-56) - demands some directives for suitable management. It is the Spirit who is making the laity co-responsible for the fruitfulness of the charism, not a concession by the institute. We need not only to indicate limits, but to give directives that will back up the Spirit and his new adventures. Many initiatives are at the “wild” stage; suitable boundaries

¹⁵. Cf. ROCCA G., *Il carisma del fondatore*, Ancora, Milano 2015.

¹⁶. POPE FRANCIS, *Message to the CISM Assembly*, Tivoli, 7 Nov. 2014.

are urgently needed to unite the old and the new¹⁷. We can speak of a true movement of innovative *miscegenation*, not of racial, ethnic or cultural groups, but of forms of ecclesial life, of gradual assimilation and “consubstantiality”.

One thorny question is the relationship between the model of the incarnation of the charism enculturated in Europe, in a particular historical and ecclesial situation, and its fruitfulness in new and unprecedented contexts outside Europe, or even within Europe today. Its transmission is necessary and appropriate, but has to be done in a way that clearly shows the *fire of the Spirit*, evangelical intuition, “the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them... all the creativity it has sparked” (Letter to the Consecrated, 1). The task for the new generations is to evangelise the past experience of the charism, to rediscover the genuine and creative flavour inside a mythologized memory. We need to give them opportunities for doing this, both in the new non-European contexts and within our own Europe, with its new culture and new urgent needs.

A charism that is “hibernating” inside historical interpretation of the facts, and “sclerotic”, inflexible, within sacralised works and lifestyle, is a sin against the Holy Spirit! A charism that fails to promote a widespread ecclesial “ministeriality”¹⁸, but tends to monopolise essential ecclesial values to its own advantage, (prayer, charity, Christian initiation, communion, etc.), is contradicting what Paul recommends: mutual support and up-building, *oikodomé* (Rm 14:19).

8.3. *Synergy of the charisms*. The situation of widespread weakness is carrying many religious families towards a “re-structuring” of works and aggregations; the phenomenon is obvious in all institutes. Not only are many houses and many works closing, even famous ones, but provinces, novitiates, houses of formation are uniting, together with their financial economy, communication, and many other things. They are also asking for personnel from other provinces, in order not to make closures. The situation is chaotic, solutions are often improvised and precipitate, incapacity to adapt is not accompanied with discernment; in Europe, there are thousands of religious “imported” to fill gaps, insufficiency of personnel. This is no genuine “missionarity”, but activities without criteria, if not the senseless one of idolising the *works*, ephemeral glory, “tarot card evolution”. Pope Francis called these imports, “artificial insemination” (1/2/16).

Why not think of putting into practice what *Perfectae caritatis* (PC 21-22) has already suggested: union, fusion between religious institutes? Unions are not made when death is at the door: two sick people do not make one healthy one¹⁹. Do it when there is still vitality, when it is possible to live an adventure of evangelical and charismatic fruitfulness.

Behind fanatical and obstinate insistence on isolating ourselves, on believing ourselves to be “unique and unrepeatable”, other issues are lurking. The houses and works we are no longer capable of administering are being eyed by spurious “benefactors”. While they give the appearance of coming to help, counsel and protect, they are plotting for their own interests. And many institutes find themselves in trouble! Why not encourage *synergy, federation, association, fusion* - and even *union*? Many situations are absolutely lifeless and unevangelical: can we allow them to go adrift, without resources, in palpable sadness, alone and in agony?

8.4. *The crisis of apostolic works*. These are the glory and the torment of every institute. Someone has called the innumerable *apostolic works* “the epiphany of the industrial revolution” (G. Canobbio), as if they were (for example) medieval military Orders, or the *Monti di pietà* (institutional pawnbrokers) of the Renaissance. There are other revolutions today. Certainly, in developing countries they still have a fundamental role. But in advanced countries, and where welfare states provide many of these services, the question arises: do they still make any sense? They were courageous and effective responses to certain deficiencies and urgent situations of the past - from schools to assistance, from education to prevention, etc. Today they have lost much of their usefulness and plausibility.

It is not enough today to say that they are well-managed, that they give a good service, that they are means of passing on Christian principles, etc. It has to be recognised that they are trying to respond to requests that nobody is making, to sustaining the *élite*, who then behave according to principles that are far from Christian. At times, their structures are so complex and heavy that they are crushing the

¹⁷. Cf. our work *Abitare gli orizzonti*, cit., 164-201, 245-261.

¹⁸. Cf. CICALSAL, *Religious and human promotion* (1980), 6.

¹⁹. According to not recent statistics, from 1960 to 2009, CICALSAL has approved the disappearance by fusion/association of 370 institutes; at the same time it has approved 469 new ones (secular institutes included).

few religious still at work in them, fuelling a deep discomfort and causing problems. We end up with real “human sacrifices” for the love of honour and glory, greediness for gain, and social vanity.

We are not talking about recycling these enormous edifices into religious agritourism at modest prices, or into holiday homes for religious tourism - as has happened in many places, Rome in particular - but of sending people back to the roots of their consecration to evangelical radicalism. Because in these huge works there is no trace of the gospel, no transparency of God. Often there is no desire for authentic testimony: everything is rolling around, suffocating for lack of air... The problem is not only one of administration and efficiency; it is something deeper; how evangelical is all that we want to testify through these works? And if it was evangelical in the past, how is it perceived today by those who guard and judge it?

Could not Pope Francis’s call to go out to the peripheries open a new period of *re-foundation*, in order to explore new, courageous and daring initiatives of apostolic service, of presence among the poor, of companionship in the name of the Lord and his Gospel? The means adopted in the past have done much good, and have become a culture of reference. And the state has learned to take care of many services that we did first: so taking the air we breathe and the grass from under our feet. Let us not harm ourselves with our particular idolatries, but recognise that it is the work of the Spirit blocking our accustomed paths in order to open new ones towards many an unknown “Phillipi”. In fact, there are many areas, urgent situations and sufferings the state does not know how, (or wish) to deal with. Recovering the charismatic fire of their origins, many institutes may be able to invent something, “going outside the gate”, passing from the sadness of fatalism to joy in the creativity of charity. God is waiting for us “elsewhere”; he asks for a “far-sighted” spirituality, one that sees beyond, sees through, for a testimony that is not only efficient but also generative and explorative. Crisis will be turned into opportunity for a better humanity, to fill the empty, sated and egoistical soul of Europe.

9. “Fraternity” Church: an alternative model

We all know that the *spirituality of communion* is one of the key points of Council impetus, though not in an intimate and romantic sense. But the Council also used other words and images, offering us a rich ecclesiology. In particular, perhaps its image of *the people of God on a journey* was the terminology most appealing. Today, the magisterium of Pope Francis has recovered the centrality of *the people of God*, with its religiosity, its sufferings, its utopias, and its *sensus fidei*: “The people of God possess an infallible instinct in recognising good pastors and distinguishing them from mercenaries” (*Audience*, 23/11/2014).

Different sensitivities and different cultures have different interpretations of what they read. And the same words, in different cultural contexts, can acquire power and meanings unknown in other places. The preference of the 1985 Synod, also of Benedict XVI, for *Church communion* was not free from theological and ecclesial concerns linked to the crisis about identity and unity of the Christian West. The expression “people of God”, besides being conciliar, has a special existential and theological depth because he comes from the Church of Latin America. Similar vocabulary used in an Asian context will resonate differently; used in Europe or in Africa, it will have yet another meaning.

Both Benedict XVI and Francis like to use the term *fraternity*²⁰. I am going to employ this term. And from this ecclesial viewpoint we can draw inspiration to develop some applications to consecrated life.

9.1. *Fraternal life*. Those of us who are older remember the concept of *common life* in the canon law of 1917, the prevailing and visible rigidity, the meticulous and scrupulous *regular observance*. PC 15a has a quite different vision when it speaks of *fraterna conversatio (living together as brothers)* and asks us to put stress on the *vinculum fraternitatis*, the bond of brotherly love. The new Code is moving in the same direction when it speaks of: *fraternal life proper to each institute... fraternal communion* (can. 602). This means more than moving on from an old interpretation, of overcoming the former rigid and de-personalised model. We are talking about a model of *Church*, which consecrated life intends to propose and make visible. A Church of fraternity, dialogue, proximity, service and co-responsibility.

²⁰. Cf. RATZINGER J./BENEDICT XVI, *La fraternità cristiana*, Queriniana, Brescia 2005; POPE FRANCIS, *Fraternity, the foundation and pathway to peace*, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2014; cf. DIANICH S.-TORCIVIA C., *Forme del popolo di Dio tra comunione e fraternità*, San Paolo, Cinisello B. 2012.

This is not a modification of language, but of substance. Even if it is difficult to foresee the juridical consequences, and to modify institutional models - or at least open them up to new growth. These days there have been many attempts by the consecrated to live experiences of *fraternity*; many groups have been inspired by the attractiveness of simple, flexible, warm, prayerful, willing-to-dialogue fraternity during these years. But I would like to go a step further. We have to go wider than these phenomena for a new ecclesiology.

Life in fraternity can be proposed as a model for the Church. It has always been so, from Basil to Francis, from Augustine to our present experience. *Fraternity* is not a romantic illusion, a generous and pious desire, but an alternative model for being Church, one that is authentic and faithful, centred on relationships that are primary, sincere, immediate and not hierarchical. And at the same time open to differences of culture and to synodality²¹. In this it would be better to have recourse to the pluralistic and missionary community of Antioch in *Acts*, rather than the too close-knit, monocultural and narcissistic one of Jerusalem²².

9.2. *Workshop for interculturality*. Communities where people of different origins, cultures and languages live together and collaborate are multiplying quickly. In the past, this was very rare. Today, this phenomenon, once occasional, is becoming planned, necessary and popular. So we need to manage it, not merely endure it: there will have to be much re-thinking. But it is not enough to be together in the same house to overcome barriers and mutual incomprehension. The community has to assume the task of permanent conversion, of *inventing* a new model for living together: "so that for all it proves of mutual assistance to fulfil their vocation" (can. 602).

This imposes a new way of living and exercising *leadership*: diversity must not be concealed for fear of compromising unity; diversity must not be emphasised to the point of fragmenting everything for fear of wounding somebody. The leader must have the art of *motivating* diversity to become synodality, synergy, the dynamic of collaboration and co-responsibility. The classic conception of superiors as city policemen channelling the traffic of regular observance is no longer viable. They must see their responsibility to live a reconciled diversity - not as a mere bringing together of diversity, but as a "conviviality of differences". Making everything converge in projects, aims and initiatives, just as in prayer, co-responsibility and solidarity.

There do exist many inter-cultural and multi-cultural communities, but they lack a mutually contemplative outlook, the desire to make Church together, and the commitment to being workshops of *hospitality in solidarity* through networking. This is because we are used to operating closed systems, with standard procedures for efficiency and functionality. But the religious community is not a business company and cannot live on schemes produced by "external directors". It has to be capable of governing itself, managing its own internal dynamics. The fundamental problem is that those holding responsibility have no tested models for this mentality. They serve fraternity with unmodified codes of experience and membership. Synodality and *koinonia* should not be equated with a continually simultaneous presence, with everyone being punctual at the hour appointed, with a formless levelling down; and certainly not with mutual indifference for the sake of peace.

It is more difficult, if not impossible, when we are dealing with complex activities/works which are required to give more functional management than inspired orientation from *leadership*. Too often, superiors of international houses seem to exercise the role of hotel managers who offer shelter after payment has been made, not that of the Samaritan who descended from his mount and bound up wounds... (cf. Lk 10:34). This new role does not call for extemporisation; what is needed is for the heart to have resources of empathy and service, to make persons the object, not the organisation. This is not automatically given with a canonical appointment ...

9.3. *A poor Church for the poor*. This expression of Pope Francis became famous after his meeting with journalists a few days after his election. In these 35 months of his pontificate, we have seen that it truly is a fundamental option, and it continually emerges in his actions and his exhortations, in the

²¹. Cf. CICLESAL, *Fraternal life in community "Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor"* (1994). Very inspiring for fraternity is the recent document of the CICLESAL, *Identity and mission of the religious brother in the Church "And you are all brothers" (Mt 23:8)*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2015.

²². I have already elaborated on this idea in: *Abitare gli orizzonti*, cit., 136-163; anche in AA.VV., *La vita fraterna inizio di risurrezione*, Gabrielli, S. Pietro in Cariano 2010, 31-75; *De Jérusalem à Antioche. Repenser le modèle biblique de la vie consacrée*, in *Vies Consacrées*, 77(2005-3), 174-195.

pungent criticisms he loves to make, and in the concerns he expresses. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, we notice this theme running through the entire text, because he is convinced that “God has a special place for the poor in his heart” (EG 197). He wants “a Church go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor. God save us from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings! This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God” (EG 97).

The entire history of consecrated life is marked by this centrality, expressed in various ways according to circumstances and emergencies. St John-Paul II stated that “serving the poor is an act of evangelization, and, at the same time, a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in the consecrated life” (VC 82). All reforms in the thousand-year history of consecrated life have a decisive fulcrum in their choice of poverty and the poor. And today, the situation of poverty, the poor and marginalised has many facets, according to places and contexts. But it is both a challenge and an opportunity, and there is need to resume that inventive protagonism which we so praise in our past²³. It is all a question of love and of qualities of relationship: “Those who have little love see few poor around them”. Mercy is genial, intuitive - and creative.

But the response, or responses, cannot simply be works inherited from the past, though still meaningful and necessary. New solutions have to be invented, new “works” launched as responses to new emergencies. There has to be the splendour of a life of sobriety, honesty and gratuity, without squandering. Administrations without trace of illegality, administration without stress on idolatrous accumulation. More eloquent still is a choice of living like the poor and embracing the cause of the poor: John-Paul II recognised that “there are many communities which live and work among the poor and the marginalised; they embrace their conditions of life and share in their sufferings, problems and perils” (VC 90).

With today’s “globalisation of indifference” and unethical, inhuman financial systems, we have to rouse ourselves to denounce injustices, to encourage a new alliance against the commercialised individualism of capitalism. Pope Francis gave a daring speech at his meeting with the Popular Movements (28 October 2014), when he manifested his solidarity with the poor who were protesting against the structural causes of poverty, and called for the promotion of protagonism and the dignity of those poor. He took the same tone in various meetings during his visit to South America (July 2015). He repeats, always pungently, similar things each time he encounters groups aiming to promote consciousness of the marginalised and the rejects of society.

Just as religious in the past realised how to make permanent concrete responses for the promotion of the poor and marginalised, so today they need to invent new ones. There is need for initiatives, for “getting in first” as Pope Francis would say: “Boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast” (EG 24). Charisms can become obsessive fantasies or untouchable totems: but they should be “the fragrance of the Gospel” (EG 39). Because “Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God” (EG 272).

CONCLUSION

I have dealt with some aspects only, indicating some pathways in the light of some of the great values that characterise consecrated life. Because, in today’s new Europe, in precarious balance between closure and solidarity, there still may be the possibility - under the guidance of the Spirit - of evangelical testimony, transparency before God, attraction to Christ and the promised Kingdom.

We are called to inhabit the horizons and explore pathways, not simply for recycling ourselves, as much as for our survival. Those who do not anticipate the future will not find places in the future²⁴. Religious have always been testimonies to the awaited future and anticipatory symbols of what we are all waiting for in faith: “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of

²³. Cf. GUTIERREZ G.-MÜLLER G.L., *Dalla parte dei poveri. Teologia della liberazione, teologia della Chiesa*, Emi, Bologna 2013.

²⁴. DE MAHIEU W., *Quel avenir la vie consacrée se donnera-t-elle? Ou quel avenir accueillera-t-elle?*, in *Vies Consacrées* 87 (2015/3), 209-216.

justice, love and peace”²⁵ . St John-Paul II invited them “courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world” (VC 37). But to do this, there needs to be a recognised “juridical statute” for consecrated life, open and capable of respecting and appreciating a certain “genius” for exploration and inventiveness. If this is channelled within already fixed schemes, for fear of losing control, or because fascination for the past prevents us thinking in a new, creative way, there is the risk of putting new wine in old wineskins. An assured disaster for the wine and the wineskin... “The wine and the wineskin are lost” (Mk 2:22).

Certain survival techniques are merely a game with mirrors: the same figure repeats itself to infinity. Certain institutes and communities are like this, imagining they are doing something new by recycling old routines, doing a superficial painting job. Good things will always be useful! As they said in the parable: “Old wine is best!” (Lk 5:39).

"Look, I am doing something new: now it emerges; can you not see it?" (Is 43:19). The Spirit is calling us to new things by his creativity: they are already growing, calling our charisms to enter new seasons, within the travail of a Europe contorted by the pangs of painful and unforeseen childbirth. May we not experience, like Isaiah, that “we have conceived, we have writhed, but we have given birth only to wind: we have not given salvation to the earth”(Is 26:18).

Bruno Secondin, ocarm
Rome, 3 February 2016.

²⁵ . *Preface* for the feast of Christ the Universal King