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CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE PARTICULAR CHURCH
An On-going Ecclesiological Reflection

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*The most beautiful experience, though, is the discovery of all the different charisms and all the gifts of his Spirit that the Father showers on his Church!
And when the Church, in the variety of her charisms, is expressed in communion, she cannot be mistaken: it is the beauty and the power of the sensus fidei, of that supernatural sense of faith which is bestowed by the Holy Spirit.*

(Pope Francis, General audience, October 1, 2014)

Outline

The Bishop of the local Church, besides dealing with functional, pastoral and administrative issues, has also to "*safeguard and promote the various*

charisms of consecration" (LG 45). In this reflection we aim to overview, albeit with wide brushstrokes, the journey that Consecrated Life is doing in order to discern some converging points in the local Churches in the light of the *magisterium* of Vatican II and that of Pope Francis. Moreover, we would like to make ours the invitation to grow in missionary communion as a process of a fruitful relationship.

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Introduction

In his *Letter on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, Pope Francis, asked in a special way his «brother Bishops [...] to accept institutes of consecrated life, readily and joyfully, as a spiritual capital which contributes to the good of the whole body of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 43)»¹; he recalled an inspired expression from the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* of Paul VI: «Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the "salt" of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization».²

In the particular Church, besides treating functional, pastoral and administrative issues, the Bishop ought to «safeguard and promote the various charisms of consecration».³

This reflection intends to have an overview, albeit with broad brushstrokes, of the journey which Consecrated Life is doing so as to discover some points of convergence in the particular Church in the light of Pope Francis' *magisterium*. .

1. Belongs "indisputably" to the Church

The ecclesial *magisterium* offers many definition of Consecrated Life; what they have in common is that its identity is placed within what Pope Francis defines as the indispensable frame of the whole picture: the Church. The introduction of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* outlines soberly this identity: «The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit». ⁴ The Exhortation also gives the symbolical significance: «The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, "constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church" of the way of life which Jesus, [...], embraced and proposed to his disciples (cf. *Mt* 4:18-22; *Mk* 1:16-20; *Lk* 5:10-11; *Jn* 15:16)» ⁵, and reaffirms its belonging: Consecrated Life «indisputably

¹ FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter* to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, (November 21, 2014), III, 5.

² PAUL VI, *Evangelica testificatio*, (June 29, 1971), 3.

³ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 45.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, POST-SYNOD Ap. Ex. *Vita consecrata*, (March 25, 1996), 1

⁵ Ivi, 22.

belongs to the life and holiness of the Church. This means that [...] it can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her very nature. [...] The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament».⁶

Benedict XVI made a decisive distinction between the origin of Consecrated Life and that of the divers forms throughout the history of the Church which came about thanks to the Founders. Addressing the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Brazil, he said: *«We know well, dear Bishops, that the various religious families – from monastic life to the religious congregations and societies of apostolic life, from secular institutes to the new forms of consecration – have had their origin precisely in history, but consecrated life as such originated with the Lord himself who chose this form of virginal, poor and obedient life for himself. For this reason consecrated life can never be absent or die out in the Church».*⁷

I would like to quote a well-known text of John Paul II: *«Vatican II, the heir of two thousand years of theological and spiritual tradition, highlighted the value of Consecrated Life [...]. The Council speaks about it as a spontaneous manifestation of the absolute action of the Holy Spirit, who, from the beginning gave rise to a blooming of generous souls, moved by a desire for perfection and self-donation for the welfare of the entire Body of Christ (cf LG, 43)»*⁸.

This ecclesial catechesis is clearly inspired by *Lumen gentium*, n. 44b: *«Thus, the state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it is not the hierarchical structure of the Church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to its life and holiness».*⁹

Pope John Paul II's authoritative interpretation is important: *«This adverb - indisputably 'unshaken' - means that all the tremors which might upset the life of the Church cannot eliminate Consecrated Life, which is characterized by the profession of the evangelical counsels. This state of life will remain as an essential element of the holiness of the Church. According to the Council, this is*

⁶ Ivi, 29.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI *Address to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Brazil (Sul II region) during their «ad limina apostolorum» visit* (November 5, 2010).

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis*, General Audience, (September 28, 1994), 2.

⁹ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 43b.

an 'unshakable' truth»¹⁰ (that is, cannot be subjected to shocks or be demolished)

At the same time John Paul II pointed out: «Historically we see that some (religious communities) have in fact disappeared, as, after all, even some 'particular Churches' have faded away. The guarantee of perpetual duration till the end of the world, which was given to the Church as a whole, does not necessarily apply to the individual religious Institutes».¹¹

The juxtaposition of the transience of the individual Institutes and that of particular Churches is quite interesting: the perpetuity of Consecrated Life as a stable form does not guarantee the life of the individual Institutes and of the various forms of Consecrated Life which, in time, might experience the changes and the dynamics which, along the centuries, gave rise to the Church budding into many particular Churches.

2. Themes, dynamics of processes in action in Consecrated Life

Consecrated Life is closely associated with the *implantatio Ecclesiae* and its continuous service in the *missio ecclesiae*. Moreover, through its multi-faceted capacity for the enculturation of the charisms - even witnessing by martyrdom - it is clear that Consecrated Life has always been part of history to this very day. I would define the condition that Consecrated Life is passing through as a new exodus, a discernment and faith dynamics, a process which requires pruning and asks for generative thoughts and actions. It is a situation which the Church, throughout her history, lived out in various ways: «the charism of Consecrated Life is always in motion, showing its capacity to find new ways, and, we may almost say, to reinvent itself»¹² - as John Paul II affirms - since «the idea of a Church exclusively made up of lay persons [...] does not correspond to Christ's intentions, as evidenced by the Gospel».¹³

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis*, General Audience, (September 28, 1994), 5

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Ivi, 6

I think it is useful to have a look at the theological themes, the issues, limitations and processes in action in Consecrated Life.¹⁴ These references form a framework of values regarding the way today's Consecrated Life is *to be and live the mystery of the Church*.

2.1. The hermeneutic horizons

In the last decades, as the post-Council renewal was continued, some hermeneutic principles came to the fore in the re-interpretation of Consecrated Life. These are: a) the Baptism as the common dignity and bonding project for all; b) communion and fraternal life as the source and goal of every evangelical project in today's Church; c) mission - as *missio Ecclesiae* - as an intrinsic and inevitable elements of the identity and the discipleship; d) the Holy Spirit as the protagonist through the impulse of the charism and the *prophetic push*; e) the new *anthropology* and the cultural insertion as serious and demanding challenges.

I would also like to mention the great theological categories which act as paradigms for the identity. a) *consecration*, intended both as God's action as well as a personal offering through the Church; b) the values, based on Christ, of the *discipleship and evangelical radicalism*, which does not mean literal imitation; c) the *evangelical counsels* not only as a wisdom path and interior dynamics, but also as a cultural response; d) the terminology of *charism*, which recalls the multiply dynamism of the Spirit in creating an open identity and develops it in harmony with the Church and history; e) holiness, not only as perfection of charity, but also as a '*signum levatum*' in the Church and history; g) *prophecy* as a typical dimension of Christian existence and its critical and explorative function; h) *mission* understood as witnessing and evangelical planning open to the Kingdom; k) *enculturation* understood as a process of incarnation of the discipleship in history with integrative, freeing and promoting aims.

2.2. The pneumatological root

¹⁴ Cf B. SECONDIN, *Abitare gli orizzonti. Simboli, modelli e sfide della vita consacrata*, Paoline, Milano 2002; Idem, *Il profumo di Betania. La vita consacrata come mistica, profezia, terapia*, Dehoniane, Bologna 1997; Idem, *Per una fedeltà creativa. La vita consacrata dopo il Sinodo*, Paoline, Milano 1995; Idem, *La théologie de la vie consacrée. État present et perspectives*, in *Vie Consacrée*, 1994, n. 3/4, 225-270. Idem, *La vita consacrata tra teologia e spiritualità*, in *Rivista Teologica di Lugano*, 8(2003/1), 9-25.

The starting point of the re-interpretation is the pneumatological root: Consecrated Life comes about by the presence of an impulse/experience of the Spirit (which we call charism with an exclusively Western terminology, which is, in part, reductive). This allows us to widen the horizon of the charism - and above all, of the pneumatological Christology¹⁵ - to all its consequences. This was the outline of the Council (cf PC I; LG 42,43,45),¹⁶ and one which was taken with particular vigor after the Council. It is an impulse, and therefore, of a 'theological' character (because the Spirit entails the activity of the entire Trinity), for a discipleship of, and conformation to Christ, witnessing to the Father and his Messiah/Servant for the salvation of the world. The Christological configuration, mediated and brought about by the pneumatological dimension, allows us to highlight - as history shows - the classical categories of the discipleship, the radical following, the tireless listening to the Word and the Master's Counsels, of the *continuous conversion, vigilance, wakefulness, incessant prayer*: these are all to be read in a perspective of the salvation history, wanted by the Father and by him 'planted' in the life of persons who accepted the call and live it in a messianic perspective, while waiting for the full Epiphany of the Kingdom. Consecrated Life is ever more aware of being a 'movement' of love - *compassio, koinonia* and *contemplatio* - which cannot be lived if not in the Spirit and with the power of the Spirit.¹⁷

Thus consecrated persons acquire the meaning of *totality*: that is, of a capacity for love, freedom and hope, which finds its most authentic paradigm in the *Beatitudes*.¹⁸

2.3. The anthropological perspective

This is an area which is expanding rapidly, and we need to accept the challenge of the *new anthropology*, in order to purify the historical and spiritual patrimony. We may speak about a new anthropology as a function which the consecrated persons could deliver: in theology, it

¹⁵ Cf. V. GASPAR, *Cristologia pneumatologica in alcuni autori postconciliari* (1965-1995). *Status quaestionis e prospettive*, Ed. PUG, Roma 2000.

¹⁶ Cf. VATICAN II, *Perfectae caritatis*, 1; *Lumen gentium*, 42, 43, 45.

¹⁷ In this context the pneumatological root interprets the 'multiple counsels' (cfr. LG 42): they are part of the 'revelation' of the face of God given to us by Jesus, and they are structures of life in God and with God¹⁷.

¹⁸ Cf. VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 31b.

surely has a primary and central role; however, it must also be seen in the presentation of a 'new creature' in Christ, as a response to the new demands and sensitivity of contemporary culture. Consecrated Life is also being rethought according to an anthropological vision. An example of this are the vows, which, from abstract absolutes, are now looking for a humanization interpretation, a true anthropological therapy guided by Faith and Love (this is how can. 602, in relation to can. 607, 1 could be interpreted).¹⁹

We may speak about a new anthropology within Consecrated Life thanks to the recent and, often sudden, internationalization of many Institutes. The multicultural reality, the enculturation processes, the generation gap, the projects adapted to personal and social experiences and situations of the new members: all these characterize ever more the Institutes of Consecrated Life.

Therefore, the cultural identity and that of discipleship cannot be seen as immobile and theoretical data, but as an open process which is enriched by the participation in a community. This is seen in an evident way in the local realities (communitarian, ecclesial and social), which is the first habitat of Consecrated Life.

This cultural discrepancy, together with the swift epochal changes are, for the last decades, impinging upon the internal life and limitations of Consecrated Life in the Church, thus generating crises.

What needs to be done is interpreting the reasons and the causes of the crises, because these differ from place to place. In the Northern hemisphere, it is a crisis of numbers and lifestyles, ageing, tiredness, huge works that are no longer manageable. The complexity comes from the way the resources are being regenerated: the lack of new vocations; the gradual closing down of the formation itinerary, the diminishing numbers of members of the Institutes; the increase in deaths; the alienation of property with the suspension of the relative services. In the

¹⁹ This is what *Vita Consecrata* has recognized and amply explained (cfr VC 87-92): “The prophetic task of the consecrated life is brought into play by *three major challenges* addressed to the Church herself: they are the same challenges as ever, posed in new ways, and perhaps more radically, by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world. These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, impelling the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, to clarify and testify to the *profound anthropological significance* of the counsels. The decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation.” (VC 87).

Northern hemisphere we often witness an "apology for the decline" (*carismatica ars moriendi*). The decrease in numbers and symbols have given rise to a sense of uncertainty and disorientation.

In the Southern hemisphere, the complexity is of another nature: the necessity of vocational discernment, of initial and continuous formation, of a formation for leadership, of de-localization without losing the local cultural patrimony with its limitations. There is an urgent need to invent a new model (or more than one) of Consecrated Life, in dialogue with the cultural ethos, but with a prophetic passion and an evangelical audacity. Presently what comes to the fore are the contrasts of the differences; however, there is an ever greater clarity regarding the criteria, aspects and gestures which are deemed as necessary for this endeavor.

The particular Churches know well this crisis and Consecrated Life, both in the Northern and the Southern hemispheres, needs to take a look at itself in the Churches' territories. Pope Francis affirms that the Bishop does well to consider lovingly the communities of Consecrated Life with their problems and limitations, going beyond the functional approach.²⁰

This entails introducing, forming, consolidating and, often, rediscovering the ecclesial conscience, the zeal for evangelization, the journey toward holiness in a higher measure, built pedagogically, precisely in the particular Churches, where the consecrated men and women live.

2.4. The ecclesial immanence

Here we arrive at the third great horizon: that of living in the ecclesial immanence.

Let's start with an affirmation which isn't so daring after all: men and women consecrated need to enhance their awareness of being gifts not for themselves but for the Church: «*Consecrated Life is a gift for the Church, is born in the Church, grows in the Church and is totally oriented*

²⁰ FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter* to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, (November 21, 2014), III, 5.

toward the Church»²¹. This entails an *immanence in the particular Church*, recognizing *the Bishop and his authority* as a reality inherent to the experience of consecration and not as a reality which is outside one's own charism.²² In this sense, it is necessary to correct the perception of *Consecrated Life as a reality which may be considered on its own*, without any relation to the concrete ecclesial experience of a diocese.

The Church is not a reality which is added on to Consecrated Life; indeed, the Church is the reality in which Consecrated Life finds the possibility to exist. Consecrated Life is a gift given to the Church, but the ecclesial mystery is not fulfilled if this gift is not welcomed in the particular Church. In fact, «*A diocese is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the presbytery. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative*».²³

It is in such places that Consecrated Life has the possibility to witness some of its precious options so that these are donated to the People of God. These include choices with a 'theological' character, like a certain *absoluteness* of the experience of God. Then there are choices of a 'sacramental' character, a way of fulfilling the *koinonia* which becomes a *sign, provocation* and *parable*. Again, choices with a 'functional and operative' character through the participation of the consecrated persons and their communities in the building up of the city of humans,²⁴ by responding to their expectations, anxieties, projects, and sufferings with services inspired by the Spirit (*pneumatikai diakoníai*) - services which are both efficacious and practical.²⁵

In this way, Consecrated Life becomes an ecclesial presence made up of words and silence, in the desert or in the city. Stable presence of monastic life, a presence and itinerancy of the divers Forms and Institutes; a sign and symbol, provocation and evocation, celebration and

²¹ J. M. BERGOGLIO, *Contribution during the Synod about Consecrated Life and its mission in the Church and the world*, XVI general Congregation, October 13, 1994.

²² Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* (May 15, 2016), 20.

²³ VATICAN II, Decree *Christus Dominus*, 11.

²⁴ VATICAN II, *Lumen gentium*, 47.

²⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, (March 25, 1996), 87-91.

exodus, service and proximity: a Presence which offers an evangelical criticism and points out hope, united to all persons who practice justice and nurture hope in the future. The classical terms of the *eschatology*, of the life oriented toward the *Kingdom*, the value of the 'sign' and 'example' are all lived out in the particular Churches; it is here that they are fulfilled. Therefore, Consecrated Life may be substituted in its works, but not in its fundamental witnessing, in its lifestyle and the lived-out and communicated spirituality. Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* affirmed that: «*The essential contribution that the Church expects from consecrated persons is much more in the order of being than of doing*».²⁶

3. In the local Churches "in a missionary going forth"

In the Church there is a widespread impression: that the divers Forms of life in the Church have not grown enough in profundity with respect to the renewal required by Vatican II, in spite of the development of the ecclesial awareness regarding the organic communion of charisms and ministries. This is evidenced by the Synods on the Laity (1987), on the ministerial priesthood (1990), on Consecrated Life (1994) and on Bishops (2001) which all had the function to orientate and enhance the dynamics of the relationships within the Church.

The various Synods favored a deepening of the ecclesiology in the divers vocations in the framework of a missionary communion. They promoted a renewed ecclesial awareness, recognizing that in the church no Form of life or ministry is self-sufficient. What needs to be done now is to translate that idea into a reality and live it in practice.

All the Baptized are consecrated as spiritual dwelling places and holy priesthood;²⁷ this opens new possible relationships between Bishops, priests, consecrated and lay persons²⁸, all members of the same body, disciples and witnesses of Jesus Christ, overcoming all opposition between communion and juridical structure.²⁹ Let's keep in mind that in this ecclesial season, as well as in the social one, the relations between the divers collective components (particular Church, consecrated

²⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis* (February 22, 2007), 81.

²⁷ Cf. VATICAN II, *Lumen gentium*, 10.

²⁸ SYNOD ABOUT CONSECRATED LIFE (1994), *Propositio* 34.

²⁹ VATICAN II, *Lumen gentium*, 4.12.

persons, priests, lay persons, movements, theologians, women, families, etc.) are in evolution, and this means that they could be difficult and also problematic.

The culture of the difficult, and often dumb, dialogue reveals an apprehension throughout the ecclesial '*body*' and requires a reform, starting from an ecclesial form capable to interact and generate reciprocity.

Pope Francis invited us - through a *magisterium* that includes the great intuitions of Vatican II and the post-Council pontifical *magisterium* - to enter in conversion mode: the Church in a missionary going forth to announce the joy of the Gospel.³⁰ Is this invitation, addressed to the Church, a convergence point according to which we need to operate together in the particular Church in a «permanent state of mission»?³¹ In this perspective we will now hint to some points regarding the pathways of synergy.

3.1. *A Church edified on the "mysticism of living together"*

We are being invited to go beyond the idea of dual relationships (Bishops-consecrated persons; Bishops-priests; Bishops-lay persons, secular priests-regular priests, lay persons-consecrated persons, etc) and make ours the principle of multi-directional relationships. The function of the one who presides in charity the particular Church, that is, the Bishop, is to facilitate these multi-directional relationships. He must be capable of weaving and re-weaving good relationships, building the community through an attentive discernment and the involvement of all.

The variety of charisms is not an obstacle for unity, but an infinite possibility to live together the missionary transformation of the Church, in a variegated experience of mutual service and evangelical witnessing: «*all of us are called to take part in this new missionary 'going forth'*».³²

We are called for an ever growing awareness of the *missionary* character of ecclesial communion. It is what Pope Francis affirmed: «*we*

³⁰ Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 17.

³¹ V GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE LATIN-AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN, *Aparecida Document* (May 31, 2007), 551.

³² Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 20.

*sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage».*³³

This human "caravan" is «*a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God*»³⁴, but is also a people which announces the joy of the Gospel to all the geographical and existential peripheries, because if she is only communion and not missionary too, the Church would be egocentric, sick, still self-enclosed in her fears³⁵.

In being aware that we are on a mission entails that we discern together in order to journey and work together.

In this perspective of a missionary Church,³⁶ whatever the vocation (priest, consecrated or lay), each person is called to announce the *joy of the Gospel*, because every Baptized is, by vocation, essentially a missionary,³⁷ in that believers united with the Trinity cannot remain closed on themselves. In this sense the Church-Sacrament is an "extrovert" Church³⁸; «*it is an eccentric type, because it extends to the whole human race*».³⁹

The insistence upon missionary communion, and upon the fact that the diverse components of the People of God are complementary, has brought about a wider range of relationships in the Church; the consecrated persons, as well as the lay persons, are members of the ecclesial symphonic choir of charisms and ministries.

This theological-missionary perspective is at the bases of the post-Synod exhortations *Pastore dabo vobis*, *Vita consecrata* and *Pastores gregis*. In particular, *Vita consecrata* affirms: «*that [the Church's] members can and*

³³ FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 87.

³⁴ *Ib*, 111.

³⁵ *Ib*, 49.

³⁶ Cf. P. CHUNSHIM KUK, *La comunione missionaria. La vita consacrata nella teologia postconciliare*, Città Nuova, Roma 2011.

³⁷ Cf. "hierarchy" *Lumen Gentium*, n. 19; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 2; "lay faithful" *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 31.33-36; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, nn. 1-4; *Christifideles Laici*, n. 32; "consecrated" *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 43-46; *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 20; *Vita Consecrata*, n. 72.

³⁸ Cf. S. DIANICH, *Chiesa estroversa. Una ricerca sulla svolta dell'ecclesiologia contemporanea*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1987.

³⁹ M. SEMERARO, *Mistero, comunione e missione. Manuale di ecclesiologia*, EDB, Bologna 1997, 233.

must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church's mission»⁴⁰.

3.2. *A Church going forth with charisms in communion*

In the document *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, the Bishops, who were bestowed with the hierarchical gifts, are invited to be docile to the initiative of the Spirit in their own Church, by listening to what the "Spirit tells the Churches", so as to avoid the neutralization of the charismatic dimension of the Church, of which Consecrated Life is a peculiar expression; if this happens it would be at the detriment of the building of the Church herself.⁴¹ The risk of neutralization is present *when the gift of Consecrated Life is appreciated only in terms of functionality toward the pastoral action, forgetting that consecrated men and women «are thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. They embody the Church in her desire to give herself completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. By their lives they are a sign of total availability to God, the Church and the brethren. As such they have a special importance in the context of the witness which, as we have said, is of prime importance in evangelization».*⁴²

This is particularly efficacious for those forms of Consecrated Life which do not perform direct ministry through their own characteristic services: suffice to mention the *Ordo virginum*, the *hermits*, *contemplative life* and the *Secular Institutes*. The virgin consecration, as a sign of the Church-Bride, becomes a splendid witness of the primacy of God, an eschatological sign in the common conditions of life. The diocesan hermits choose a more rigorous separation from the world and live in the silence of solitude, continually praying and doing penance; they dedicate their life to the praise of God and the salvation of the world.⁴³ The Bishops are asked to have a special care especially toward these

⁴⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, (March 25, 1996), 54.

⁴¹ cf. VATICAN II, *Lumen gentium*, 12; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, (May 15, 2016), 15. 17

⁴² PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, (December 8, 1975), 69.

⁴³ Cf. can. 603 § 1.

forms of Consecrated Life which are characterized by their special entrenchment in the particular Church. The consecrated virgins proclaim the holy resolution of perfect chastity and the hermits profess the evangelical counsels in the hands of the Bishop, who is responsible for their admission as well as their accompaniment during the initial and continuous formation. The communities of contemplative life are true spiritual lungs for the dioceses. The Secular Institutes, together with the New Forms of consecration, are characterized by their secular status; they are to be recognized, esteemed and promoted, and considered in the texture of the particular Church as witnesses of the *evangelica vivendi forma*. It is precisely a *Church which goes forth* that recognizes, appreciates and supports every Form of Consecrated Life in the communion of charisms which allows Christ to be present in the unity and plurality of his mystery. By means of the life of these sons and daughters, the Church announces the 'joy of the Gospel', by weaving interactions between the lay persons and Consecrated Life in a common missionary process of a Church which goes forth. The new correlation between ordained ministers, consecrated and lay persons, compels us to go beyond the historical forms which have become linked to clericalism and mere substitute - or, vice-versa, of exasperated autonomies and self-sufficiency - and exhorts us to revise with realism the relationships "*within and outside the walls*" of the Church, and to consider positively the interaction of the entire People of God, non only in terms of services to be given, but, above all, in terms of identity, witness and prophecy.

3.3. *A Church which evangelizes the interior space*⁴⁴

A consolidated tradition in the history and experience of the CICLSAL is the availability for the spiritual accompaniment and to provide a listening ear. Men and women religious, through the net of communities and, especially, oratories, have provided a ministry of evangelization of the "interior space" and today, they may be encouraged in this service of the spirit in a particular Church. Today, this is proposed again by the vast world of the Movements and lay associations. Pope Francis alerts us regarding «*dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality*

⁴⁴ FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 262.

*which can change hearts. These unilateral and incomplete proposals only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel. What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity».*⁴⁵

The relationship between evangelization and the "interior space" - in the perspective of *Evangelii gaudium* - puts the emphasis on the evangelization as the reference to the centrality of the announcement of the mystery of Jesus and his Gospel, which gives meaning to life, and gives the answer to the "*desiderium videndi Deum*" which is present in the heart of each one and the need to live all that in the mystery of time and history, and, within it, in the mystery of the Church-Sacrament for the salvation of the world. Therefore the problem of evangelization is not a *pastoral* problem, but an "ecclesiological and spiritual" one"⁴⁶. The recovery of spirituality is not a spiritualistic short-cut. As the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien concluded, it is all about a 'place' (*topos*) where our encounter with God, revealed in Christ, takes place, as a grace, and where our identity of believers is built.⁴⁷ In these years we have repeatedly affirmed that Consecrated Life must be itself a 'place' of evangelization. We may become 'place' when we ensure for us, and in favor of all, the 'interior space' to enhance our relationship with God.

We may offer with discretion - almost on tiptoes - the possibility to experience and allow other believers to experience the Christian difference.⁴⁸

This would be a very eloquent sign in a world which is again searching for what is essential. Here we may also recover the authentic meaning of the *fuga mundi*, not as a contempt of the world, but as an indication for the world which we love, depending on whether it humanizes us or not. This is in line with the 'human ecology' about which St John Paul II spoke and which Pope Francis quotes in the Encyclical *Laudato si'*: «*Saint John Paul II [...] noted that little effort had been made to "safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology" [...] because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound*

⁴⁵ Ivi.

⁴⁶ *Instrumentum Laboris* n. 39, Synod on Consecrated Life.

⁴⁷ J. L. CHRÉTIEN, *L'espace intérieur*, Ed. de Minuit, Paris 2014, 214.

⁴⁸ E. BIANCHI, *La differenza cristiana*, Einaudi, Torino 2006.

*changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies».*⁴⁹

3.4. A Church of shared projects⁵⁰

In their relationship with the particular Church, the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life are further called to «become the place of a real partnership»⁵¹, that is, they are asked to offer a professional service more as a provocation to the community of believers rather than as a pretention to be the provider of services. Provoking questions means responding to the real expectations of the ecclesial community according to its possibilities. If Consecrated Life were to fail in this capacity of *pro*-vocation, its prophetic witnessing would be greatly weakened. Therefore, we need to discern our identity by looking at the foundation charism; at the same time this entails asking ourselves what do the Church and humanity expect from us. Therefore, an authentic ecclesial relationship, in order not to alienate and be exploited, must be based on the mutual recognition by the divers ecclesial subjects (particular Church, parishes, Movements, other Institutes of Consecrated Life, etc) and together provide the answers.

Therefore, this means going beyond the horizons of one's own institutional boundaries. Consecrated Life presents itself also as a *way of thinking* ecclesial interaction and how to *plan* this in tune with the spaces of insertion. Thinking and planning is a binomial which may be explained by giving new meaning to the presence of consecrated persons. *Thinking* from the particular Church's point of view and not only from 'ours'. *Planning* - ought to mean 'planning ahead', that is, activate processes which may keep on going even in the future. Obviously, this entails a change in mentality, a true and proper *metanoein*. Thinking is *knowing to discern*, and as with all knowledge, it requires time which, for the consecrated persons, becomes *a time for conversion* to discover how to respond to the new socio-ecclesial 'demands'.

⁴⁹ FRANCIS, *Laudato sii*, (June 18, 2015), 5.

⁵⁰ FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 239.

⁵¹ PH. LÉCRIVAIN, *La vita religiosa in tempo di crisi: un rischio e un'opportunità*, EDB, Bologna 2012, 185.

In this context, to activate a 'shared project' - which means widely accepted - entails, first of all, the elaboration of a shared interpretation of the Church's orientation and the believers' role in that Church. This draft definition contains a decisive element for a correct understanding of the significance of a project: *shared interpretation*. This is possible in the measure of a responsible involvement by all to produce a reasonable reflection, that is, full of the expectations and hopes of all. It's not only a matter of elaborating an efficacious project, but also one that is sustainable in relation to the resources and personal/communitarian motivation which orientates toward the insertion in that Church.

The *sharing in a project* - which entails mutual listening and a loyal dialogue - allows for an attitude of mental openness; in such an attitude the particular Church and Consecrated Life grow, while sharing requests, consents, projects and pathways.

3.5. *A Church of participation*⁵²

The particular Church has various organism: the Presbytery and Pastoral councils, the college of consultants that form a kind of "participation/collaboration system" with the government of the particular Church. In the perspective of a particular Church as "a communion of charisms", it is important that the resources of meaningful collaboration given by the "representative" organisms (the inverted commas are underlined) of the Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life, the *Ordo virginum* and the so-called 'New Forms' are not lost. It is evident that the gradual reduction in numbers has affected negatively the efficacious "representation" of the communities of Consecrated Life inserted in a particular Church.⁵³

Almost all the Conferences of Major Superiors (of men and women) work together and where this collaboration is consolidated, the fruits are seen even regarding the diocesan pastoral projects. An "acting together" *«in order to provide for constant and timely coordination of*

⁵² FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 31.

⁵³ Cf. P.L. NAVA (ed.), *Le Conferenze dei Superiori maggiori organismi di collegamento e di comunione*, Il Calamo, Roma 2003.

*initiatives as they come up [...] In this way they will make a positive contribution not only to the growth of communion between Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Bishops, but also to the advancement of the mission of the particular Churches».*⁵⁴

In the perspective of *organisms of participation in the life of the particular Church*, there needs to be a convergence of the consecrated men and women into *only one diocesan organism* which groups together the various charism in close collaboration with the Episcopal Vicar or Delegate for Consecrated Life.

The *Letter* (May 15, 2016) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* affirms that: «*Because these charisms “are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church”, through their diverse richness, the People of God are able fully to live their evangelical mission, discerning the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel*» (n. 15). Convergence must become a «*full appreciation and insertion "in the local Churches and in the parishes, always in communion with the Pastors and attentive to their indications" [...] In this way, there would be the bases for the relationships between hierarchical and charismatic gifts within the relations between universal Church and particular Churches. In fact, on one hand, the charismatic gifts are given to the whole Church; on the other hand, the dynamics of these gifts can only be exercised in the service of a concrete diocese, which is 'a portion of the People of God entrusted to the pastoral care of the Bishop aided by his priests*».⁵⁵

If the organisms of Consecrated Life do not become part - with full rights - of the "participation system" of the life of the particular Church, they would end up as "offices of representation" bent on themselves, and relegated to act in occasional and improvised initiatives.

Conclusion

In *Novo millennio ineunte*, St John Paul II invites us to a commitment to cultivate and dilate the spaces of communion, day by day, and at every level, in the context of the life of every Church.⁵⁶ The missionary

⁵⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, (March 25, 1996), 53.

⁵⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, (May 15, 2016), 21.

⁵⁶ Cf JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio ineunte*, (January 6.), 45.

communion could be a vital proposal, a shared pathway, an efficacious space for this growth. Pope Francis affirms: «*The most beautiful experience, though, is the discovery of all the different charisms and all the gifts of his Spirit that the Father showers on his Church! [...] And when the Church, in the variety of her charisms, is expressed in communion, she cannot be mistaken: it is the beauty and the power of the sensus fidei, of that supernatural sense of faith which is bestowed by the Holy Spirit*».⁵⁷

⁵⁷ FRANCIS, *General audience*, Rome, (October 1, 2014).