

Reimagining Consecrated Life in a Changing World

by Robert Schreiter, CPPS

Pope Francis's letter announcing a year devoted to consecrated life in November of 2014 was nothing less than a stirring call to reflect upon where the different forms of consecrated life have come in the fifty years since the Council, as well as where they now might go in the vision of renewal of the church that he has set forth. As he so eloquently states at the beginning of that letter, "I am counting on you 'to wake up the world' since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy." As he goes on to say, "This is the priority that is needed right now."¹ He urges religious institutes to go about "responding to the new demands constantly made upon us, to the cry of the poor."²

We are gathered here for this initial, inaugural conference of the Center for the Study of Consecrated Life, which has set as its goal precisely such ongoing study and conversation about the nature and direction of consecrated life, both nationally and internationally, for today and tomorrow. It is a wonderful opportunity to reimagine and reengage the various forms of consecrated life that together serve to witness to the Gospel, deepen the faith and action of the church, and so build up the world for the coming of God's reign.

Robert Schreiter, CPPS, holds the Vatican Council II Chair of Theology at Catholic Theological Union. He is a frequent speaker at General Chapters of religious institutes of men and of women, especially regarding future directions in religious life.

To begin this process of reflection and discussion, I propose to do three things in this presentation. First of all, I wish to remind us of what consecrated life has been for the church and the world in the past as responses to changing times and needs. In the words of Pope Francis, I will be "looking to the past with gratitude." Then, I turn to the world today, and inquire about what are some of the leading areas of change where the witness of the Gospel needs to be present. And then in a third and final part, I will suggest a vision of the church that could support and guide our responses to the needs of this changing world.

Religious Institutes and Social Change

The religious institutes of men and women in the Catholic Church have often emerged at times of upheaval or profound social change. The eremitic and monastic movements of the fourth century began in Syria and Egypt in response to a Christianity no longer a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, but now the default religious position of the majority. Monasticism in the West both guarded a classical heritage and was the seedbed of a mis-

¹ Francis, *To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, November 21, 2014, no. 2, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html.

² Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, no. 5.

sionary movement that evangelized northern Europe and beyond. The rise of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century was a response to the rebirth of the cities in medieval Europe and to new institutions such as the universities. The apostolic orders of the early modern period, and then again at the time of the Industrial Revolution and the expansionist policies of imperial Europe in the nineteenth century, addressed social needs that had been exacerbated by urbanization, industrialization, and colonialism.

Alongside and interconnected with these institutions were the efforts of women to unfold visions of discipleship that kept running up against the patriarchal strictures placed upon them by society and Church authorities. One thinks of the Beguines, the foundations for aristocratic women in the north of Europe and the monasteries of wealthy women in the south of the continent. These movements—and the apostolic movements of women beyond cloister walls—frequently ran into male resistance, but managed to persist and enrich the life of the Church.

The proliferation of so many different ways to constitute themselves as communities and to respond to the needs of the time out of Gospel conviction showed the emergence of what Max Weber called charismatic leadership and authority structures. As such they identified profound needs and aspirations of a given period and so could call upon deep sentiments of trust and transcendence among Christians. It is said that Francis of Assisi had five thousand followers by the time of his death at the age of forty-four. But this very same appeal and enthusiastic response (what another sociologist, Emile Durkheim, referred to as “collective effervescence”) could make these same institutions unstable over a longer period of time. Of all the lay reform movements of the Middle Ages, for example, only one has endured down to the present time: the Alexian Brothers. This they achieved by reinventing themselves from a group of burial societies, to caregivers to the mentally ill, to more general healthcare providers. Two-thirds of the religious institutes that existed at the time of the Council of Trent no longer do so. Patricia Wittberg, a Sister of Charity and a sociologist, has suggested that the average lifespan of a religious institute is about two hundred years.³ We may well be living through such a time of contraction as has happened at different times in the past, as religious institutes merge their provinces in North America and Europe and Australia, and smaller institutes merge together into new entities such as the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas or the Dominican Sisters of Peace. At the same time, new religious institutes are being founded in Africa and Asia, as well as new lay movements in Europe and North America.

Are we living in a time of upheaval that will call forth new forms of consecrated life even as current institutes either radically reconstitute themselves or disappear altogether? Most international religious institutes have been grappling now for twenty years with a radical shift in their demographics. Their membership has been aging and diminishing in the North Atlantic region, often while experiencing dramatic growth in Africa and Asia. Most recently it was acknowledged that the country with the most Jesuits is now no longer the United States, but is India. One thousand of the seven thousand members of the Society of the Divine Word hail from Indonesia, and now Bahasa Indonesia is an official language of the SVD, while German—the language of the founder—no longer is. We are only at the beginning of a profound realignment within international religious institutes of both human as well as financial and material resources.

Likewise, new institutes are being founded and seeking recognition at diocesan and international levels. So are we at the beginning of a new era or simply at the end of another one? The answer is: probably both. It is somewhat reminiscent of the end of the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, where the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Era saw the suppression of religious institutes in France, followed by similar suppressions in Switzerland and the *Kulturkampf* in Germany. At the same time, however, a host of new (mostly apostolic) communi-

³ Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

ties were being born. We are seeing decline in some areas, and growth in others. The factors that are shaping this double movement are various, and will be discussed a bit more in the next section. But a factor that is sweeping across all of the decline and rise is Pope Francis's vision of a renewed, more evangelical church that is closer to people and their struggles in general, and to the poor in particular. I believe that the message he has given us in *Evangelii Gaudium* and now focused in his November 2014 letter calling for a year dedicated to consecrated life gives a newfound coherence to what might otherwise be seen as disparate, even contradictory, developments. I want to explore this by following his direction to look at the world once again to see what is manifesting itself as the peculiar needs of our day, and an appropriate response from the heart of the Gospel to those needs.

The World: Postsecular, Plural, Peripheral

The world in its present state can seem to be a dizzying place, especially under the impact of social media. The communications technologies accompanying globalization have accelerated the pace of life. Disruption of life through civil and armed conflict has led to floods of displaced persons and refugees that overwhelm the capacity to care for them. Migration is changing the face of the world as the majority of the world's population now lives in large conurbations that have created a pluralization of societies never before seen on such a scale. The erratic patterns of global capitalism are increasing patterns of inequality in many parts of the world, itself an issue that is a tinderbox for future conflict. And all of this is happening amid climate change that will cause oceans to overwhelm coastal areas, put potable water at a premium, and may interrupt food security—all of this to the extent that the planet may be on the slide into a new age of extinction.

One can easily slip into an apocalyptic frame of mind with all the change, conflict, and injustice to which we are now regularly and unremittingly exposed. Perhaps a calmer approach might be called for. The shape of the world has always been defining for the founding of religious institutes, be it for critical engagement with the world or for a countercultural withdrawal from it. This ambivalence toward “the world” is already evident in John's Gospel, where God is depicted as deeply loving the world (Jn 3:16), but it is a world that is deeply corrupted as well. To be sure, the founding and development of religious institutes is not solely constituted by social processes. But it does mean that a critical, reflected engagement is always part of concrete discipleship.

For the sake of discussion I would like to concentrate on three dimensions or characteristics of the contemporary world: it is postsecular, it is plural, and it abounds in peripheries. The world, of course, is a very big place. And anything that can be said will be a generalization. But I believe these three pivotal points give us a view into certain aspects of the contemporary world and, in so doing, suggest an evangelical response to it.

First, then, the world is *postsecular*. By postsecular I do not mean that the secularity that has marked especially Europe, North America, and Australia as a result of the European Enlightenment is fading away. No, it is here to stay. But many observers now believe that it will not live up to the predictions made about it a century ago by Max Weber: that religion would first become solely a private affair and then would disappear altogether. What appears to be taking the place of that hypothesis is a sense of postsecularity, articulated in one way by Jürgen Habermas in Europe and in another way by Charles Taylor in Canada. Secularity will persist, but it must make room for religion as a public conversation partner (Habermas), or secularity must make room for religion and other ideologies alongside itself (Taylor). What both of these positions acknowledge is that undercurrents of quests for transcendence or reaching out beyond the tangible have never disappeared in secular societies, and that those aspirations make themselves manifest in individual spiritual quests, in responses to public disasters and catastrophes, and in public remembrances. These aspirations for transcendence may not be as closely tied to religious institutions as they were in the past, but they are nonetheless real and should be acknowledged. Immigrants to secular societies

bring with them a kind of religiosity that secularists may feel that they have superseded, but not to engage those religiosities is to misunderstand them.

If the postsecular is emerging as a social form in secularized societies, then what should be the response of religious institutes? I would suggest a deeper engagement with the *political* and the *mystical* dimensions of social existence.

The *political* here is critical engagement with the *polis*, the public sphere of society in all its aspects: the centers and the peripheries, the positive and negative dimensions, the successes and failures. The “political” and “public” theologies now being developed in those same secularized societies are examples of this. The conscious embrace of social justice ministries in religious institutes over the past four decades (with a longer history behind this) paves the way for this encounter. Where does the *polis* need to be engaged today? In its vision of the human? In its vision of happiness? In its vision of the good society or the common good? Here is the arena of inquiry.

The political has to be paired with the engagement of the *mystical*, a mysticism that has to embrace the soul or the spirit of peoples and events. Below the surface of militant or even humdrum secularity and consumer societies can be discerned a gnawing hunger for something larger than ourselves. Responses to the environmental crisis in some sectors have evoked this need for a deep spirituality. This hunger for something greater is found especially among the young, and can be channeled into positive forces for good and for a better society, or be derailed into something like jihadism, as we are now seeing in Syria and Iraq. There is a need too for stillness and presence over against the juggernaut of globalization and the relentless assault of the social media. Consecrated life, in its variegated forms and schools of spirituality, offers resources for the mystical dimension that is deeply engraved in the hearts of human beings.

Pope Francis urges that our approach to the world be shaped by what he calls a “*mistica*” of encounter. By that he means, I think, one that approaches the world out of love and deep respect, that listens and allows itself to be carried by the hopes, aspirations, and fears of that world, and then gently accompanies the world, as the Risen Lord did the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Second, the world is *plural*. Migration of peoples and the global flows of information, images, and products have made pluralized societies increasingly the case everywhere in the world. Pluralism can be hard on identities, as what it means to be who one is, and what it means to belong, are being more and more challenged by alternatives. This is especially the case when powerful economic, political, and social forces threaten current identities and press one into options one would rather not pursue. Indeed, it is a fair question to ask: Just how much plurality can individuals—and communities—sustain?

Two responses stand out in our coming to terms with plurality that religious institutes are already engaged in: interculturality and interreligious dialogue. International religious institutes have been concerned for some time about how members of their institutes, coming from different cultures, can come to work together—often in third cultures, new to all of those gathered there for ministry. The Society of the Divine Word, already mentioned for its intercultural character, is engaging in a major project of interculturality that will, I believe, benefit other religious institutes and the wider Church beyond that. More than ten years ago, the Center for the Study of Religious Life, a predecessor institution at Catholic Theological Union, developed a “cultural audit” to help local religious communities understand better into what sort of “culture” they were inviting potential candidates.

Interreligious encounter is in the forefront of media attention today, with religious persecution taking place in many parts of the world, and radicalized forms of religion threatening social stability and even survival. Religious institutes have histories of interreligious encounter, from Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, to Franciscan

legates along the Silk Road, to Jesuit efforts in India and China several centuries later, down into our own time: one thinks of the Trappists at Tibhirine in Algeria or Mother Teresa in Calcutta. For the sake of helping the world to live in pluralism, greater efforts at effective intercultural living and interaction, as well as greater interreligious dialogues of life and social action, will be needed. And religious are helping to show the way.

And finally, the world abounds in *peripheries*. These are innumerable even as they are of critical importance: the peripheries of the poor and voiceless, of the immigrant, the refugee, and the trafficked persons, of oppressed women, of a deteriorating environment. They are on the peripheries because they have been pushed there by powerful centers who want to disregard them, disown them, and put them out of reach. But they are not peripheral to human existence or to God's design. The preferential option for the poor, one of the most important developments in Catholic Social Teaching, tells us that God is revealed in a special way among those who are made peripheral by the powers of this world.

In his letter for the year of consecrated life, Pope Francis urges us to go to what he calls the “existential peripheries,” to those places and persons who are not peripheral in God's eyes, but may be in our own. This is not a new message, especially for apostolic institutes, many of whom were founded precisely to reach out to the peripheries of their time, be it in manumitting slaves, educating the poor, addressing the plight of women, or caring for the ill and despised. We need to reimagine ourselves once again in terms of these peripheries: Where are they? Who are they? Why are they? And how shall we respond?

A Vision of Church: Trinitarian, Sacramental, Pilgrim People of God

Institutes of consecrated life are ecclesial institutions, important sites in the Mystical Body of Christ, committed to communion with all the Body's members. As we look at the world today in its postsecularity, its plurality, and its many peripheries, everything that has been said here about that world could be taken simply as a sociological analysis. Such analysis is necessary but it needs to go further, and embrace a theological vision to ground consecrated life's commitment to the Gospel (which Pope Francis calls our “absolute rule”), to Jesus Christ, and to his church.

In order to do that, I suggest the consecrated life's vision of church and its mission within the church must be Trinitarian, it must be sacramental, and it must see itself as the Pilgrim People of God.

The vision must be Trinitarian. Religious life has often grounded its view of itself primarily Christologically—in faithful discipleship to Christ. I do not want to diminish that commitment here, but only to say that, at this time in history, that Christology must be situated within a Trinitarian vision. This for a couple of reasons. There has been a renaissance in Trinitarian theology in the Western Church in recent years, and I do not think this is an accident. The mystery of the One God in Three Persons may be central to our developing a new approach to pluralism: in social living, in identity formations, in our approach to other religious traditions. A Trinitarian, rather than a more monological approach, may help us build more cohesive and effective societies, understand better the pluralities within the whole church of Christ, and even come to terms with the place of other religions in God's salvific plan. Second, a more Trinitarian focus coincides with a growing commitment to seeing our mission as participating in the *missio Dei*—the mission of the Trinitarian God, especially in sending the Son and the Spirit into the world. Here a more Spirit-derived Christology, such as the one in the Gospel of Luke, may be helpful.

The vision must be sacramental. Sacramentality is a characteristic of the Catholic imagination, as many authors have noted. Sacramentality takes what is seen seriously, but is able to see much more, how what is seen has sign value that points beyond itself. A sacramental imagination will be essential for living and working in a postsecular society, where one of the continuing tasks of consecrated life is to put through the seen to the unseen.

And finally, a compelling image from the Second Vatican Council is that in *Lumen Gentium* of the Pilgrim People of God, an image retrieved again for us by Pope Francis. We need to see the Church as a people on the move, much as is our world in a time of globalization. We need to see ourselves as the People of God who are united in our baptism as the primary sacrament that makes us who we are. And we need to see ourselves as Pilgrim—that is, not wandering aimlessly as we move, but going deliberately from place to place, stopping at sites that are holy to reveal their mystical dimension, and journeying to that final point where “God will be all in all.” (1 Cor 15:28). Along that pilgrim path, we should, in Francis’s words, “create alternate spaces, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.”⁴

This year of consecrated life is a grace for us. May the work of this new Center for the Study of Consecrated Life here at Catholic Theological Union take its energy from this broadened, reimagined vision and continue that vision into the future, for the Church in this country and around the world.

⁴ Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, no. 2.