

THE COMMUNITY, SPIRITUAL AND APOSTOLIC LIFE OF RELIGIOUS

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A SINGLE THREAD links all that the new Code of Canon Law has to say about the community, spiritual and apostolic life of religious. That thread is God's call. This call is a challenging threefold invitation: to be with others in a specific ecclesial community while publicly professing the evangelical counsels; to love God above all, seeking ever closer union with him; to serve the Lord of life apostolically. To place the three main sections of this article in their proper context and give a sense of their inner unity, we turn first to the call.

The call to consecration within a religious institute

Vatican II in its Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (henceforth LG) had stressed the biblical concept of the Church as a People of God, with whom the trinitarian God enters the new covenant (LG 9). In chapter V on 'The call to holiness' this people is also seen as the holy Spouse of the 'alone holy' trinitarian God (LG 39). Within the Church, holiness is 'shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful' (LG 39) once they are sanctified at the roots through baptism. All Christians without exception are called to perfect holiness, achieved in a life-long process of inner transformation or 'conversion' towards the saving and sanctifying God.

Within the Church, religious families belong to the Church's life and holiness (LG 44). They foster the holiness of their members, providing for them a stable framework within which, through the profession of the evangelical counsels by public vows, they can 'derive still more abundant fruit from the grace of baptism' (LG 44). They help their members to contribute to the saving and sanctifying mission of the Church (cf LG 43).

This particular form of life is made possible within the Church in the first place because God loves and calls specific persons. He invites them to enter into a covenant of love with him, to be lived out

in an institute adorned with a particular charism discerned to be genuine by the Church's pastors. Thus the call originates in God, who loves and consecrates the person. God's love evokes the generous total response of the person consecrated by him: it makes such a response possible. Not content to be merely 'dead to sin' (cf Rom 6,11) 'but renouncing the world also', religious seek through the public profession of the evangelical counsels to 'live for God alone' (*Perfectae caritatis* 5, henceforth PC). Their vows are three aspects of a single 'yes' to God, giving expression to a basic acceptance of his loving design. God's grace-filled offer, once accepted, liberates the called person to love God totally and to serve him, as and where need arises, as an active member of the religious institute within which vows are taken.

A covenant of mutual love and fidelity is sealed between the trinitarian God and the responsive human being, to be lived fully within the community of the institute. By analogy to the relationship arising out of baptism between God and his adopted child, to be lived out wholly within the ecclesial community which mediates God's presence and holiness, the special pact of consecration of religious is lived out within the community of the institute, which is the 'ground' upon which the Holy One is loved and served.

We turn our attention first to this communitarian aspect of religious life, since a religious vocation is essentially a call to 'be-in-community'. Next we shall be looking at the spiritual life of religious; for the pact of love between God and the consecrated person must be constantly nourished in prayer, that open presence to the God of love and compassion which daily reaffirms that he is unquestionably 'first' in the life of the consecrated person. Finally we move on to consider the call of religious to share in the apostolic mission of the Church and to lend it support.

The fraternal life in common as a place of forgiveness

The 1983 Code distinguishes religious institutes from secular institutes and societies of apostolic life. Whereas members of secular institutes bind themselves by 'sacred bonds' but do not necessarily live in common (c. 714), and members of societies of apostolic life live in common but do not take religious vows (cc. 712, 714), members of a religious institute pronounce public vows and also live a fraternal life in common (c. 607 n 2). The fraternal life in common and the public vows of the members are thus seen by the new Code as essential elements of religious life, distinguishing it from life in a secular institute and in a society of apostolic life. This is fully in line with the historical tradition of religious life and with the teaching of *Lumen gentium* and *Perfectae caritatis*.

Since the public vows of religious are dealt with in a separate

article in this issue, we shall here concentrate mainly on fraternal life lived in common. What are the implications of fraternal vowed living as spelt out in the Code? We can list the following:

(i) The members are united into 'as it were, a special family in Christ' (c. 602). This special family is obviously based on faith. The members do not begin by choosing each other. They are brought together into the institute much like Christians are brought together into the Church by God who calls his people into unity. When they form a closely-knit unit they will be an effective sign of the love of Father and Son within the Trinity.

(ii) Their fraternal life 'is to be so defined that for all it proves of mutual assistance to fulfill their vocation' (c. 602). Shared living must aim towards being a support to each member: it is not enough that religious are together under the same roof. It is left to the particular law of the institute to indicate how this assistance is to be effectively given so that solid human relationships build up within community and give strength and encouragement in the living out of one's vocation.

(iii) Firmly rooted and based in God's pardoning love, the fraternal union of religious is to be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ (c. 602). The religious community should be a place in which pardon is daily given and received, a clear sign to its members and to all that God reconciles people to himself and with each other, enabling human beings to become active agents of pardon and reconciliation (cf 2 Cor 5,18-21).

(iv) Every community is under the authority of a superior (c. 608), who resides in the house (c. 629). 'The authority which superiors receive from God through the ministry of the Church is to be exercised by them in a spirit of service' (c. 618). The vow of obedience is effectively emptied of substance where there is no superior to whom one is accountable. Hence the Code envisages that every community shall have a superior, a human and frail spiritual head who, however unworthily, 'holds God's place' (PC 14).

(v) The institute supplies members with all they need to fulfil the purpose of their vocation (c. 670). On the other hand, all that a religious acquires by personal labour or on behalf of the institute belongs to the institute. This also applies to pensions, grants and insurances, unless the institute's own law decrees otherwise (c. 668 n 3). These provisions regarding temporal goods and the practice of religious poverty aim at consolidating the sense of community. They show an awareness of the real danger that goods (even when owned legitimately) may become a wedge between members of the community.

Where the nature of the institute requires it, religious renounce their goods totally at the time of their perpetual profession: in other

institutes, in accordance with the constitutions and with permission of the superior general, professed religious may renounce their goods in whole or in part (c. 688 n 4).

(vi) Religious are to reside in their own house; if they are to be away for a short while, they are to obtain permission to stay elsewhere (c. 665 n 1). For a lengthy absence, the major superior, for a just reason and with the consent of the council, may give the member permission to live outside the religious house for up to one year, and even beyond that for reasons of health, studies or a mission given to the member by the institute (c. 665 n 1).

(vii) To safeguard some real privacy, part of the religious house is to be reserved for members alone, in a way judged to be 'appropriate to the character and mission of the institute' (c. 677 n 1). Monasteries devoted to contemplative life have a stricter discipline of enclosure (c. 667 nn 2-4).

(viii) Religious lead a common life (c. 665 n 1). They will be content to follow a common norm regarding life-style, available facilities, and so on, neither expecting nor demanding more than is generally provided for all. This obviously does not exclude their asking for something when a particular need exists.

Particular law may need to define further the intensity and contours of community life. In doing this the constitutions will take into account the charism, specific mission and structures of government of the institute.

The thinking behind the provisions listed above is the belief that in and through their compassionate shared living, members of a religious community are together 'set apart' so that they may stand out, becoming like the Church itself a visible sign of God's inner trinitarian life.

The Church as a whole is 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (LG 4). On the analogy of the Trinity in whom distinct persons form an undivided unity, the separate members of the People of God are brought together into oneness in the ecclesial community. In being distinct and one, Christians reflect the Trinity which calls the Church into existence to further the work of redemption in Christ.

The Church as a saving reality is present in miniature form in the family: perhaps even more forcibly it can be seen in a religious community where, by virtue of God's call to each member, community is literally 'born of God' (Jn 1,13). The more the members of a religious community are bound to one another by bonds of deep friendship and love, the more that community embodies the reality of the Church as the 'sacrament of salvation' (LG 48). A truly united community becomes a sacramental presence of God's saving love.

Now God's saving compassionate love revealed itself at its height when Jesus shed his blood and died on the cross, his heart cruelly pierced (Jn 19,34) that we might be won over. There God reconciled the world to himself by making 'him to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor 5,19.21).

Community life is really a sacrament of God's compassionate love if and in so far as it embodies the saving reality of universal reconciliation in Christ. Religious community life can very frequently embody the reality of God's pardon, precisely because it is often itself hard and burdened by conflict, and so calls for reconciliation. Once religious really grasp the fact that God is mercy, they are freed to forgive and become agents of reconciliation. In the words of Jean Vanier:

It is when we discover that the Father sent his only beloved Son not to judge us, not to condemn but to heal, save and guide us on the paths of love and to forgive us because he loves us in the depths of our being that we can accept ourselves. There is hope. We are not imprisoned forever by egoism and darkness. It is possible to love. So it becomes possible to accept others and to forgive.¹

Community, Vanier stresses, is a privileged 'place of forgiveness'. Inevitably, when persons live close to each other, words will wound and susceptibilities clash; but the grace of God enables the members of an ecclesial community to forgive and start afresh. So, instead of projecting on to community unrealistically high expectations, or disliking community life, or escaping it on the pretext that it is necessary to go one's own way to survive and to function apostolically, religious will come to realize precisely what type of gift community offers, one that leads deep into the mystery of forgiveness: 'If we come into community without knowing that the reason we come is to discover the mystery of forgiveness, we will soon be disappointed'.² Because God is the God of compassion, a community is most God-like if it can rise to the heights of being a 'place of forgiveness' where with tender compassion hurts are healed and relations of love and trust are created anew.

Two consequences of all this seem inescapable. First, it makes no sense at all for a religious to live in isolation within a community or to opt to live apart. Religious are called to stand out together as a presence of God's saving compassionate love. In the case of a person sent out on mission alone, the bond of unity with the community is present, though at first sight it might not seem to be. It is constituted by the obedient acceptance of the mission given by the superior. Here the member manifests the apostolic concern of the community. The community itself is virtually present when the member fulfils the mission he or she has received.

Secondly, if a religious community fails to resolve its inner conflicts adequately and to stand out as a 'place of forgiveness', it will be a counter-witness. Sadly some religious communities do not at all excel in the spirit of reconciliation. Communities that score poorly in this area will find the challenge in c. 602 to 'be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ' a difficult one. If, however, they respond courageously together, they will undoubtedly experience great inner liberation and deep joy in living up to their call as witnesses of God's compassionate love at work in our world.

The spiritual life of religious: growth and conversion

Where can the loving God who calls best be adored and supremely loved? Where does he offer the called person the affirmation which enables the religious to live a life in common characterized by reconciliation? Clearly in prayer, the 'daily bread' that nourishes an intense spiritual life of union with God.

(a) *Growth through union with God in prayer*

Canon 663 n 1 simply affirms that 'the first and principal duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of things divine and constant union with God in prayer'. In other words, through an intense interior life, religious are first and foremost to be persons for God. They should be clearly identified as prayerful persons. In a sense there is nothing new in this: it was certainly implicit in the old Code. What is new is that it is here stated so clearly and explicitly. Some may be put off by the term 'duty' in this context: should loving God in prayer be termed a 'duty'? What the Code means is very simply that all are to be able to see and sense that the consecrated person gives God absolute primacy through setting aside time regularly just to be for God alone; indeed that the prayerfulness of the religious becomes so intense that it always permeates action. The daily encounter with God at prayer deepens union with him and makes self-surrender to the Lord of life possible.

Clearly all moments of prayer, whether communal or alone with one's Creator and Saviour 'in secret' (Mt 6,6) are meant primarily to further the loving centring of a consecrated person on the trinitarian God. They are a prelude to communication with the one true God and with Jesus Christ whom he sent (Jn 17,3). This communication cannot simply be willed, but we can predispose ourselves for it by giving time and energy and by having a fervent desire. When God gives himself and grants the self-forgetfulness distinctive of the prayer of the believer, then a warm personal 'knowledge' of Jesus whom he sent ensues, and Jesus reveals the Father to us. Canon 663 nn 2-5 indicate those special 'situations' in which a deep encounter with God will normally take place.

(i) The eucharist. The ever deepening relationship with the triune God will find its sustenance and highest expression daily in the eucharistic sacrifice, in eating the Body of Christ and in loving adoration of the Lord present in the sacrament (c. 663 n 2). Each religious house 'is to have at least an oratory, in which the eucharist is celebrated and reserved, so that it may truly be the centre of the community' (c. 608). In this way the community can be 'visibly united around an oratory'.³

(ii) Scripture, prayer 'in secret', community prayer. Spiritual growth is furthered by the reading of scripture, by 'mental prayer', the celebration of the liturgy of the hours as laid down in the constitutions and by other exercises of piety (c. 663 n 3). That religious should habitually read and carefully listen to the word of God is taken so much for granted now that it comes as a surprise to note that the old Code made no mention of it in this context. It may help to consider the word of God and the eucharist, in good patristic tradition, as the 'twofold table' at which the spiritual life is nourished, as the Code itself does in c. 276 n 2 when discussing the prayer of clerics.

The old Code referred to one's prayer 'in secret' as 'mental prayer'; this terminology is retained. Alone with God, the consecrated person will use a wide variety of forms of prayer, including meditation, needed occasionally in the ongoing formation of a christian consciousness.

(iii) Love of the Blessed Virgin. Within the mystery of the loving relationship with Christ, the virgin mother of God is to be loved and revered by religious 'including by way of the rosary' (c. 663 n 4). This explicit mention of the rosary gives it a special place in the love of religious towards Mary without, however, considering its daily recitation the privileged way to express love of the Blessed Virgin, as the old Code did.

(iv) Retreats. Religious are to go on retreat every year (c. 663 n 5). The length of this retreat and possibly also the form it will take will be established by the constitutions of the institute.

(b) *Growth necessarily involves conversion*

In and through all this, 'religious are earnestly to strive for the conversion of soul to God. They are to examine their consciences daily and to approach the sacrament of penance frequently' (c. 664). The deeper the interior life the more sensitive a person becomes to the need to respond to Jesus's pressing call to 'repent and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1,15). Openness to God sharpens awareness of sin in all its forms and heightens the desire for inner transformation.

A daily examination of conscience is an aid in this direction. This spiritual exercise has been abandoned by many because it was

allowed to degenerate into a burdensome act of self-accusation which often reinforced a poor self-image, causing harm. Rightly understood, however, it enables us to become daily aware of God's loving tender dealings with us. His presence in people and events is discerned, and light is thrown on one's responses to given situations. On the one hand the religious identifies strengths and wishes to consolidate them. On the other hand, the awareness of weakness also grows. It is exposed to God's loving pardon for healing, and strength is sought from God to change sinful response-patterns into ones pleasing to him.

'Frequently' the consecrated person who is aware of sin will feel the need to seek reconciliation with God through the ministry of the Church in the sacrament of penance. The old Code laid down a rule of weekly confession for religious: the norm is now more flexible, leaving the matter up to the individual. The reference to frequency, however, does indicate that the sacramental encounter with Christ should be a regular feature in the life of religious.

The desire for conversion also leads to a generous asceticism, a death to self beyond the penance found in the ordinary situations of life (cf c. 673).⁴

Needless to say the spiritual life of religious is strengthened and their ongoing conversion brought about by their vowed living itself, which involves a death to self and the walking in newness of life. Daily the consecrated person will experience the enriching liberation that is the direct result of following Christ poor, chaste and obedient.

The apostolate of religious institutes

The chapter in the 1983 Code on the apostolate of religious is new, there being no similar chapter in the old Code, with its more markedly monastic model of religious life. The Code now reflects the teaching of Vatican II that the whole Church is missionary and that every Christian is to be an apostle. Thus every religious vocation, even that of the contemplative, is apostolic, although this may not involve direct apostolic activity.

(a) Witness and the primary apostolate

Primarily religious are apostles by what they are. Their apostolate 'consists primarily in the witness of their consecrated life' (c. 673). 'What counts most is not what religious do but what they are as persons consecrated to the Lord' (Pope John Paul II).⁵ Through their vowed living religious affirm that God is to be supremely loved. Their vows are apostolic in the sense that they 'state' that earthly life is of value in so far as it is imbued by heavenly goods already present, and that essentially this life is a pilgrimage towards the glory of the heavenly kingdom (LG 44). An austere life of prayer and

penance further strengthens the witness of consecrated persons (c. 673), 'prophetically' raising questions about values that human culture takes too much for granted.

In so far as dress in human society is clearly an expression of values and can also signify a person's role, religious are expected to wear the habit of their institute 'as a sign of their consecration and as a witness to poverty' (c. 669 n 1). It is implied here that superiors may dispense from this if there are serious reasons, at least on a temporary basis. Members of clerical institutes without a distinctive habit are to wear ecclesiastical dress 'in accordance with the norms established by the episcopal conference and legitimate local custom' (cc. 284, 669 n 2).

(b) *Contemplative religious institutes*

Religious institutes wholly directed towards contemplation support the apostolic thrust of the Church through their witness, their prayer of praise, their holiness and example (PC 7; c. 674). However urgent the needs of the active apostolate, members of these institutes may not be called to assist in pastoral ministry (c. 674). These religious will themselves at times find it hard to resist the inclination to take on much needed activity. Since their life has a 'hidden apostolic fruitfulness' (PC 7; c. 674), the Church asks them to play faithfully their clearly defined role, thus in fact supporting the saving mission of the People of God.

(c) *Apostolic religious institutes*

Most religious institutes seek to serve and praise God by apostolic and charitable activity: for them 'apostolic and charitable activity is of the very nature of religious life' (PC 8; c. 675 n 1). Apostolic activity here is neither a hindrance nor something extrinsic to the members' search for perfection of charity. In channelling God's charity to their fellow-men, members of these institutes are themselves saved by that charity, present and active in and through them.

Clearly echoing the Council, the Code enunciates this further as follows:

(i) 'Apostolic action' which has its roots in the call 'is always to proceed from intimate union with God' (PC 8; c. 675 n 2). In so far as it is a loving response to God's call, involving service and death-to-self, apostolic activity will 'confirm and foster' union with God (c. 675 n 2). There is therefore an interaction between prayer and apostolic activity: union with God is the soul of apostolic activity, and in turn service of God present in the brethren is fresh input for prayer. Appropriate prayer for members of apostolic institutes will regularly if not always include apostolic concerns.

(ii) In institutes dedicated to apostolic activity, the whole life of the

members is to be imbued with an apostolic spirit and the whole of their apostolic action animated by a religious spirit (PC 8; c. 675 n 1). The life-style of the institute will take into account that it exists to reach out apostolically: too much withdrawal is out of place in an apostolic institute. On the other hand, the apostolate is clearly to bear the imprint of consecrated persons who publicly profess the evangelical counsels and joyfully live the fraternal life in common. Thus the life of an apostolic institute should be characterized by a thoroughgoing interpenetration of apostolic activity and the prophetic values of religious life. The consciousness of the members will be clearly marked both by the apostolic spirit and by the religious spirit.

(iii) The apostolic activity of religious institutes as a 'holy ministry' (PC 8) is exercised in the name of the Church and by its command, and is to be performed in communion with the Church (c. 675 n 3). Through their active apostolate, religious contribute to the coming of the kingdom and participate in the Church's saving mission (cf LG 43). They may not do this as a sort of parallel autonomous Church, independently of the hierarchy. Their specific charism is recognized by the hierarchical Church, and apostolic activity is carried out in full communion with the bishops. Canons 678-683 contain provisions regarding relations between bishops and religious; these are dealt with in a separate article in this issue.

(iv) Superiors and members are 'faithfully to hold fast to the mission and works which are proper to their institute. According to the needs of time and place, however, they are prudently to adapt them, making use of new and appropriate means' (c. 677 n 1). Apostolic religious are acutely aware of a wide range of needs. Bold new initiatives seem to be constantly called for in our rapidly changing world. The situation calls for wise, courageous discernment. It is impossible to be everything and unwise to scatter resources on short-term projects not closely related to the charism of the institute. There is always the 'temptation to leave works which are stable and a genuine expression of the institute's charism for others which seem more immediately relevant to social needs but which are less expressive of the institute's identity'.⁶ Obviously c. 677 n 1, while encouraging prudent adaptation, does not clamp down on apostolic creativity or lend support to a static immobilism; it does, however, contain a prudent warning against over-hasty abandonment of solid works characteristic of the institute and embodying its founding gift.

(v) Apostolic institutes that have associations of the faithful joined to them are to have a specific concern 'that these associations are imbued with the genuine spirit of their family' (c. 677 n 2). This calls for a strong ongoing effort to form the faithful who are members of

such associations in the specific spirituality of the apostolic institute in question, so that they in fact become bearers of the charism of the institute alongside its religious members.

(vi) We have seen above that religious by living in community and making their community a 'place of forgiveness' can witness to the universal reconciliation brought about by Christ. In the field of direct apostolic activity, religious like clerics 'are always to do their utmost to foster among people peace and harmony based on justice' (cc. 287, 672). Religious can become agents of peace and justice through evangelization in the strict sense and through education that makes people sensitive to social issues that call for just and peaceful solutions. Religious 'are not to play an active role in party politics or in directing trade unions' unless this is judged necessary by Church authorities to promote the common good or defend the Church's rights (cc. 287 n 2, 672).

A welcome clarification

In the areas we have been discussing, the 1983 Code of Canon Law clearly reflects the teaching of Vatican II, the lived experience of attempts at appropriate changes and the serious evaluation of contemporary religious life undertaken by the hierarchy and by religious themselves.

Through all this there has been a welcome clarification of the basic identity of religious within the Church — baptized persons called by God to enter into a special covenant and be wholly God's by virtue of their consecration; persons who profess the evangelical counsels publicly by vows and who live a fraternal life in common in a spirit of forgiveness, while sharing in ways appropriate to the specific institute in the apostolic mission of redemption entrusted to the Church.

What is new in the Code's model of religious life, by contrast with that of the old Code, is the stress on call and consecration, on the sign-value of living in community in a spirit of forgiveness, and on the apostolic dimension inherent in every religious vocation. This clarification leads at once to a consolidation of the valid and solid traditions of religious life and to a forward movement which assigns religious their proper role in the Church and involves them in different ways in the enterprising apostolic thrust of the Church.

NOTES

¹ Vanier, Jean: *Community and growth* (London, 1979), p 15.

² *Op. cit.*, p 16.

³ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica testificatio* (1971), n 48.

⁴ Cf also Pope Paul VI: *Paenitemini*, II, IIIc.

⁵ Pope John Paul II: *Message to the plenary session of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes* (March 1980).

⁶ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Essential elements in the Church's teaching as applied to institutes dedicated to the works of the apostolate* (May 1983), n 27.