



*Reflection from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's Article 13 of Porta Fidei*  
*By Sister Virginia Herbers, ASCJ*  
*July 2013*

Article 13 of Benedict XVI's apostolic letter *Porta Fidei* speaks of the unique and indispensable contributions of the community of believers to the life of faith within the Church. As we have seen from the beautiful reflections of the past three months, the Blessed Mother and the Apostles are powerful examples of faith for which to be grateful and from which to learn. Mary's "*Fiat!*," and the Apostles' willingness to leave all things behind in order to follow Jesus, demonstrate with powerful straight-forwardness what long-lasting effects a life of faith in Jesus Christ can have both for ourselves and for the larger Christian community.

As a subsequent reflection to these, we turn now to the third subject of Article 13: the faith of the disciples. The Holy Father writes, "By faith, the disciples formed the first community, gathered around the teaching of the Apostles, in prayer, in celebration of the Eucharist, holding their possessions in common so as to meet the needs of the brethren (cf. *Acts* 2:42-47)." Who are these disciples? In the Gospel of Luke, the mission of the disciples differs from the mission of the Apostles (cf. *Luke* 9-10). Jesus sends seventy-two disciples "ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit" with clear instructions as to their mission of preaching and healing. The disciples prepare God's people for the presence of Christ—this is their unique mission.

In the Gospel of John, we see that in addition to its beauty, this vocation also challenges the disciples, testing their faith. In response to the Bread of Life discourse, "many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him." (*John* 6:66) Their life of faith was invitation *and response*. Jesus left them free to respond personally either to follow or to return to their comfortable former life. We see in Peter a model of courageous acceptance to follow, rooted in a total reliance on faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." (*John* 6:68) The faith of discipleship is thus not merely the *result* of the disciple's commitment to Christ—it is also its antecedent.

Looking at discipleship and the Year of Faith, particularly through the theological lens of *Porta Fidei*, then, we find five characteristics of discipleship in this brief paragraph:

1. Disciples *gather around the teaching of the Apostles*
2. Disciples *gather in prayer*
3. Disciples *gather to celebrate the Eucharist*
4. Disciples *hold their possessions in common*
5. All these aspects of discipleship exist *so as to meet the needs of the brethren*.

Let us take a moment to examine briefly how each of these elements finds relationship with the consecrated life.

*Gathered around the teaching of the Apostles*

Consecrated religious men and women celebrate a consecration that comes through the Church while also being a gift to the Church. *Perfectae Caritatis* states that for religious, apostolic love is how we endeavor to be identified with the work of redemption and the spread of the kingdom of

God. (PC §5) It is this apostolic love, rooted in the imitation of Christ and faithful to his teachings as they have been handed down by the Magisterium, which unites and impels religious men and women to carry on their mission of evangelization.

#### *Gathered in prayer*

Prayer as an essential aspect of discipleship deepens and strengthens our relationship with Christ and binds us one to another as members of his Body, the Church. In consecrated life, Pope John Paul II reminds us, prayer “is truly indispensable if consecrated persons are to remain faithful to their own vocation and follow Jesus on the way of the cross.” (VC §38) Gathering together in private, communal, and liturgical prayer, consecrated men and women find the strength and unity necessary to accept with faith the daily crosses and difficulties of their life.

#### *Gathered to celebrate the Eucharist*

We, as consecrated men and women gather daily to celebrate Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life. (SC §10) The Eucharistic celebration is the supreme act of prayer, uniting us to one another as the Mystical Body of Christ while also transforming our hearts and souls so as to more authentically become his compassion in this world, as St. Teresa of Avila so beautifully reminds us. The celebration of the liturgy allows us to renew our consecration to the Church, committing ourselves to a daily commissioning to be sent forth to love and serve the Lord.

#### *Holding their possessions in common*

In religious life, our vow of poverty provides a graced invitation and a hope-filled commitment to a life of faith in the providence of God. We claim no personal possessions and thus hold all things in common, trusting that God will both provide for our needs through the community, and invite us to provide for the needs of others from our own giftedness and blessedness. The holding of all possessions in common thus becomes, not just for religious but for all the faithful, a sign of union as a community of believers. (cf. Acts 2:44)

#### *So as to meet the needs of the brethren*

The consecrated life exists not for its own sake but for the sake of mission to the People of God. Through our vowed commitment and our ecclesial consecration, our vocation is to imitate Christ whose mission was to be incarnate Love; to be for all people the Way, the Truth, and the Life; to announce the Good News of God’s love. Consecrated men and women continue this mission. We are called to imitate Christ so that the needs of all people might be met through our consecration and ministry, rooted always in a life of faith and faithfulness.

In this Year of Faith, we thank God for the gift of discipleship, particularly the discipleship of following Christ more closely through our vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Sent as consecrated members of a particular religious community, we are united in our faith life through prayer, Eucharist, and ministry to the People of God. May our common vocation serve as a means to greater unity in the Church and in the world—and may we daily heed Christ’s commission to his disciples to “go out to all the world and tell the Good News.” (*Mark 16:15*)