

STUDY GUIDE FOR
THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE:
REVISITING THE VISION

COUNCIL OF
MAJOR SUPERIORS OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

AVE MARIA PRESS NOTRE DAME, INDIANA

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PREFACE

The Foundations of Religious Life: Revisiting the Vision was published by Ave Maria Press in 2009 under the auspices of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious in the United States (CMSWR). Eight religious representing five religious institutes of consecrated life authored this work addressing some of the essential aspects of active religious life: the meaning of consecrated life, the reality of the spousal bond this life embraces, the necessity of the vows to live out this spousal bond, the call to be a witness to communion in the Church, and the resulting mission that springs from this communion.

The CMSWR received many positive reviews from members of religious congregations who read the book and were personally enriched by it. Several reviews also came from those who used *The Foundations of Religious Life* in their initial formation programs. These religious formators expressed the desire to have an accompanying study guide component that would help young religious organize the content of the original book in a way that would increase their comprehension of the sublime call to religious life and its role within the Church.

In other words, this study guide is intended to set the young religious on a lifelong path in which the essentials of vowed religious life, characterized by the particular religious tradition and charism of her religious family and combined with her graced personal response to God's daily loving call to be increasingly configured to Jesus Christ, her Spouse, will ultimately lead her to reach the degree of holiness to which God has called her.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the requests of several formators of young women following the call to vowed religious life, the CMSWR asked its Theology Committee to undertake the creation of a study guide for the book *The Foundations of Religious Life: Revisiting the Vision* (Ave Maria Press, 2009). The resulting study guide is intended to serve as a tool to assist the reader in her quest to deepen her understanding of Jesus' call to follow Him unreservedly as a vowed religious sister. Both the authors of the original book and members of the CMSWR Theology Committee contributed to its contents.

This study guide begins with a brief reflection on conversion. Conversion, of course, is a lifelong journey of growth in love of God and love of one's neighbor, ultimately, a configuration to Jesus Christ, the poor, chaste, and obedient One. The guide's Introduction, five chapters, and Conclusion each begin with a short prayer calling on the Holy Spirit for guidance and understanding. The prayer is followed by a summary noting some of the essential points of each of the book's major sections and chapters. For Chapters 1 to 5, discussion questions are also included; these questions focus on the content of the text, apply the content to the charism and tradition of a particular religious institute, and integrate the material with the experience of the woman religious in initial formation. Finally, each chapter offers a personal reflection from the author describing how she has sought to live the concepts about which she writes, a reflection from a religious formator illustrating a practical application of the chapter content, and a list of pertinent scriptural references and other supplementary material. A glossary of terms at the end of the guide covers key concepts found in all the preceding chapters.

It is suggested that a sister read one section of the *Foundations* book at a time. After each section, she can read the corresponding study guide material by following the sequence of prayer to the Holy Spirit, the summary, the author's personal reflection, and the discussion questions. Responses to the questions can be recorded in a journal and shared with others who are also reading *Foundations* while using this study guide.

AN ESSAY ON CONVERSION FOR THOSE IN FORMATION IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

BY SISTER ANN SHIELDS, S.G.L.

Conversion is a lifelong process in which we make the necessary decisions to turn away from sin and our selfish desires and turn toward Christ and the Father's will. The fruit of such a life is that we are drawn into intimacy with Christ. The price can be high, but the fruit far outweighs the price.

As you begin this new life, it is important to take a survey of yourself in this area of conversion. As we enter religious life, we cannot just layer its practices, customs, and—ultimately—our vows on top of our present condition as though that layering process would, in some way, cloak us in sanctity. It doesn't work that way. God, in His mercy, can remove or alter or heal our deficiencies and weaknesses in many ways—and He does! But our part is to continually and realistically assess our own areas of sin and weakness so that we can be open to receive the grace to change through the sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual direction, and the formation provided in our own communities. If we simply perform an “add on” of new customs and practices, the spiritual foundation will not be strong enough for the graces of genuine holiness to take root and, in time, bear abundant fruit.

Let me give you one inspiring description of the fruit that is possible. According to a story from the early period of monasticism, a little monk (a novice) came to his superior and inquired, “Holy father, what more can I do? I keep my little fast; I say my little prayers; I keep the little rule. What more can I do?” In answer, the abbot raised his arms toward heaven, and his ten fingers became like ten torches. “Why not be totally changed into fire?”¹

We can observe the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the Church, the constitutions and customs of our community. We can do all that is required, but that alone will not make us the saints God calls us to be. Gradually, in our spiritual growth, we need to turn over every area of our lives—our past, our present and our hopes for the future—entrusting God with everything at each step. We need to welcome Him, to give Him access to every part of us. And that takes grace and time, so never be discouraged. When God sees that we are trying to withhold nothing from His gaze—past, present, and future—we are in a place spiritually to walk the lifelong path of ongoing conversion. Day by day, we offer our lives to God, making those decisions that turn us away from sin and selfishness of all kinds and turn us toward His will, His way. It will be a bumpy path, but if we continue to grow in love for God, we will be given the grace to persevere. The power of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, is incalculable in this process of conversion and always will be. As we yield to God and His plans for us, we are in some way changed, and we begin to reflect the fire of Jesus' love for the Father and for all His people.

¹ This paraphrase is derived from materials for profession ceremonies of cloistered Carmelite communities. The full text can be accessed from <http://www.coptic.net/articles/sayingsofdesertfathers.txt>, *Cop Net: From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

At the World Youth Day in Toronto on July 28, 2002, Pope St. John Paul II said, “We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our very real capacity to become the image of His Son.” As we understand more deeply who we really are in God’s sight, we begin to see that our God longs for a personal relationship with us by the power of the Holy Spirit. But He has given each of us a free will and we can frame our spiritual life, our religious life, in such a way that God is only given access to what we want to reveal. Besides not having the unparalleled joy of entering into intimacy with Christ, such limitation deprives us of strength, confidence, and hope in God and His personal relationship with us. We can settle for so much less than God desires to give.

Obviously, this process is guided by the direction of our superiors, novice mistress, postulant director, and spiritual director as explained in our community’s rule or Constitution. But we have an essential part to play in that process.

In addition to the sacraments, another important means of growing in union with God is meditation on the Word of God. The more our minds are formed by God’s Word, the more we live in the truth and can more easily begin to distinguish God’s will from our own. Again, everything needs to be under competent authority, but when we seek God with all our hearts and place ourselves under the proper authority in our community, we can actually begin to run in the way of holiness!

Before you begin to study this guide, I encourage you to take each of the scripture passages listed below² and ponder them so that the light of God’s truth touches your inmost heart and reveals to you not only the sin each of us carries, but more importantly the hope that God supplies. We can never be truly converted unless we understand in our flesh where our personal weaknesses are, which lead us into sinful behavior. We need to face those tendencies according to God’s timetable rather than our own. This is where we need wisdom. Even after our particular sins have been forgiven in the sacrament of Reconciliation, our weaknesses will be with us, and we need to face them squarely so that they can be overcome by His grace and mercy. Even at our best we are nevertheless limited. We will always be limited, but as we pursue holiness through His grace, God reveals Himself to us, and the desire to be like Him grows more and more in our hearts. Again, as Pope St. John Paul II reminds us, we have a genuine capacity to become the image of God’s Son in spite of our weaknesses and sometimes even through them!

Let me emphasize that this is a lifelong process. But in His mercy, God allows us to begin to bear fruit, even as we try to yield to His will moment by moment each day. Although John Henry Cardinal Newman’s complete prayer appears at the end of this essay, these lines show the powerful fruit that is possible through such willingness: “Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus!”³

This is the vocation we are called to live!

² 1 Pt 1:23–25; Heb 4:11–13; Col 3:5–17; Jn 3:16–18; Rom 5:6–8; Ti 3:3–8; Rom 6:1–14; 1 Cor 15:51–58

³ The prayer may be accessed from <http://lordcalls.com/dailyprayer/radiating-christ-prayer-by-cardinal-newman> or http://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/dear_jesus_help_me_to.html. John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801–1890) was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on September 10, 2010.

The goal is not to try to make ourselves better. We cannot. But in humility, when we bring our deficiencies to God, He sheds the light of His love on us and will supply all we need to conform our frail flesh to His will! Over time, we will experience the blessings of mercy, wisdom, and courage that are available as we allow ourselves to be more deeply converted to Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We must never settle for anything less.

When I live in this posture, I begin to see more clearly that His invitation to me to live a vowed life is not a sign that I am better than others but that in God's wisdom, He has invited me to live a life that will bring Him glory and lead others to Him through the vows:

- *Poverty*: Poverty entails a firm renouncement of being “the source of my life, the ‘captain of my soul.’” The vow of poverty is a clear and concrete choice to give up all material goods and what flows there from to allow God in His love to form me into His Spouse, day by day, event by event. He gave it to me, and I seek to fully return that life to Him for His glory, His honor, and His purpose—not mine. He is the one treasure of my life. When this begins to be lived, and again it takes time, but when it is, you will find yourself less and less attracted to the treasures and pleasures of this world.
- *Chastity*: He is the Bridegroom of my life to whom I surrender all my body with all its physical desires, my emotions, my human longing to belong to someone who will love and care for me. I surrender my body, mind, and heart that I may be so consecrated to Him that He alone fully possesses my life, my future. I surrender my need to love and be loved to His heart, and I become a living holocaust of love.
- *Obedience*: Physically, mentally, and spiritually, I wish by my obedience to show forth my love for God above all by renouncing my independence for His glory. I want to be identified with Him in my obedience. “I do only what the Father tells me so that the world may know I love the Father” (Jn 14:31).

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, reception of Holy Communion, and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament are the chief ways in which we draw into deeper identification with Christ, our Spouse. May the Holy Spirit flourish in our hearts by the grace He imparts and lead us as vowed religious into union with God for all eternity. May those we serve be fed by our lives totally given to Him.

These are the precious realities I wish to share with you. I will pray that grace be yours as God makes Himself known to you. “Fear not, little flock. It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:3).

PRAYER OF BLESSED JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly,
That my life may only be a radiance of Yours.

Shine through me, and be so in me
That every soul I come in contact with
May feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus!

Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine,
So to shine as to be a light to others;
The light, O Jesus, will be all from You; none of it will be mine;
It will be You, shining on others through me.

Let me thus praise You the way You love best, by shining on those around me.
Let me preach You without preaching, not by words but by my example,
By the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do,
The evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You.

Amen.

INTRODUCTION

BY SISTER MARY JUDITH O'BRIEN, R.S.M., &

SISTER MARY NIKA SCHAUMBER, R.S.M.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Come and open my mind and heart to study this beautiful way of life that You have given us through the example of Jesus and that has been passed on to us through the ages. I ask for the grace to learn, not in an abstract way but in a personal way. Help me to hear Your voice speaking in these pages. Help me to understand what I read and to apply what I understand to my own vocation—for others. And in all things, help me to go forward in love. Amen.

SUMMARY

The Foundations of Religious Life begins with a quote from Pope St. John Paul II, in which he called for “a renewed appreciation of the deeper theological reasons for this special form of consecration.” The Holy Father continued, “We still await a full flowering of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the transcendent value of that special love of God and others which leads to the vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience.”⁴

Foundations was written to promote such a reflection on the transcendent value of religious life in the light of the conciliar documents. This reflection leads us to respond to the question sometimes raised: Is there still a place for religious life in our world today?

The Introduction to *Foundations* emphasizes that religious life is rooted in the firm tradition of the Church and is consonant with the ecclesial vision of Vatican II. Writings of Vatican II state that religious life is essential to the life and holiness of the Church (see LG 44; VC 29).

The subsequent chapters of the book reflect on these selected components of religious life:

- the meaning of consecrated life
- the reality of the spousal bond to Jesus Christ this life embraces
- the necessity of the vows to live out this spousal bond with Jesus
- the call to be a witness to communion in the Church
- the resulting mission that springs from this communion

Each chapter, written by a different author, reveals a unique approach and style and often reflects the author’s membership in a particular religious institute. Yet the different approaches are reconciled by a shared commitment to consecrated life as set forth by Vatican II.

The Introduction sketches the historical beginnings of religious life prior to the twentieth century. Active institutes that were nonclerical were granted formal canonical recognition as religious in 1900. Prior to that time, religious life was considered a personal form of asceticism, and the institutes had no autonomy; they were considered pious sodalities. As briefly outlined in the Introduction, the evolution of the Church’s understanding of religious life leading up to the documents of the Second Vatican Council is fascinating.

⁴ John Paul II, “Homily,” May 9, 2001. Cited in Statutes CMSWR, 2 fn.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. Considering the historical outline given in the Introduction, how do you see the inspiration of the Holy Spirit guiding the development of religious life?
2. Briefly outline the important dates and milestones in the history of women in religious life as described in the Introduction.

APPLICATION

1. Give a brief history of your congregation. Where does your community fit in the timeline of the history of religious life?
2. What essential role do you and your community play in Jesus' call to the New Evangelization?

INTEGRATION

1. Meditate on Pope St. John Paul II's words about "that transcendent value of that special love of God and others which leads to the vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience." How does this relate to your own call to religious life?
2. How does your congregation envision the continued development of religious life in relation to the Church's efforts at helping the baptized be more faithful and effective in communicating Jesus' love to others?

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Pius XII. “Apostolic constitution *Provida mater ecclesia*, February 2, 1947.” AAS 39 (1947): 114–124. Available at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19470202_provida-mater-ecclesia_en.html

_____. “Encyclical letter *Sacra virginitas*, March 25, 1954.” AAS 46 (1954): 161–191. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25031954_sacra-virginitas_en.html

Paul VI. *Perfectae caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*. Proclaimed by Paul VI. 28 October 1965.

Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*. Rome, May 31, 1983.

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Cole, Basil, O.P., and Paul Conner, O.P. *Christian Totality: Theology of Consecrated Life*. Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1997. (Note: Parts of this book show the development of various aspects of religious life through church history.)

Frank, Karl Suso, O.F.M., and Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. *With Greater Liberty: A Short History of Christian Monasticism and Religious Orders*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1993. (NB: Mostly appropriate for formators rather than those in formation. Read with discernment.)

Schaumber, Sr. Mary Nika (Monica). “The Evolution of the Power of Jurisdiction of the Lay Religious Superior in the Ecclesial Documents of the Twentieth Century.” Ph.D. diss. Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 2003.

CHAPTER 1: RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION—
A PARTICULAR FORM OF CONSECRATED LIFE

**BY MOTHER AGNES MARY DONOVAN, S.V. &
SISTER MARY ELIZABETH WUSINICH, S.V.**

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Come and open my mind and heart to the wonder and mystery of my baptism. Light a new fire in me to respond to the call to holiness. And as I reflect on my call to be consecrated and entirely conformed to Jesus, my Lord, I ask You to bring it about. Reproduce the countenance of Jesus in me that His face would be seen on earth again through me and through all religious consecrated for a closer following of Him. Amen.

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 initially looks at the foundational graces of baptism, from which comes the universal call to holiness, and then examines the grace of a vocation to the consecrated life, the origins and experiences of the call, and the form and fruit of assent. Lastly, it considers those distinctive components essential to an authentic living of religious life.

Each human person is uniquely called to enter into communion with her Creator; that is, she is called to holiness. The fundamental consecration of baptism as a total dedication to God enables this reality by effecting an entrance into the paschal mystery through the forgiveness of sins, the communication of grace, and divine filial adoption. Baptism calls one to become increasingly conformed to Him through one's specific vocation.

Consecrated life, in which a person is specifically dedicated to God for His honor, the upbuilding of His Church, and the salvation of the world, builds upon the foundational consecration of baptism. The different forms of consecrated life (i.e., individuals in the lay state, within a secular institute, vowed religious life) are characterized by profession of the evangelical counsels. The evangelical counsels are Christ's invitation to respond to the divine initiative of love, through which one conforms one's whole existence to Jesus Christ, and so foreshadow the heavenly glory.

The profession of public vows received by the Church establishes the religious in a distinct state of life that is perpetual in nature and frees her to love God with an undivided heart. Consecration as a definitive response to God occurs at religious profession itself as an interior, spiritual act of God, mediated by the Church, in which one is espoused to Christ the Lord.

The authentic living of religious life is distinguished from other forms of consecration by several essential components: profession of public vows, public witness, a life lived in common, a certain separation from the world, and a corporate apostolate.

Through the profession of vows, the religious enters into a special covenant of spousal love with the Lord and becomes a "public person," witnessing to the eschatological reality of the marriage of Christ and His Church. The public witness required by the religious makes tangible the presence of our merciful God and proclaims in hope the mysteries of His kingdom present in the world. Public witness is nourished and enlivened by the common life, which provides stability and gives concrete expression to the vows. The common life, founded in baptism and nourished by the Eucharist, is a real participation in the Trinitarian Communion of Persons and offers the powerful witness that love is possible in a fallen world.

The religious's separation from the world helps guard the living of the common life and fosters a contemplative outlook. The concrete way of life and corporate apostolate adopted by each religious institute is animated by its particular charism and is supported by individual and communal asceticism and discipline. The works of the apostolate as a participation in a common mission flow from union with Christ. To the degree that religious consecration is embraced, those thus called are "inwardly seized" by Christ and become "lovers," bearing fruit in the Church and the world.

DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. How do self-sacrifice and renunciation of this world's goods awaken the deepest yearnings of the human heart and elevate and enhance human nature? How important is interior freedom to living religious life?
2. In what ways might we consider the annunciation of Mary as a model for living religious consecration?

APPLICATION

1. What is the charism of your congregation? How is your charism reflected in your apostolate? How does your charism reflect the life and mission of Jesus Christ?
2. How does your congregation live the essential elements outlined in the document *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*?

INTEGRATION

1. How do you understand the connection between prayer and contemplation and a fruitful apostolate?
2. What do you personally contribute to the upbuilding of community life and ultimately to the Church?

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

As we live and work amid a growing culture of death, the Sisters of Life as well as other religious are a sign of contradiction and of hope. Our vows are an antidote to the widespread secular culture that promotes materialism, hedonism, and individualism.

Our consecration frees us to love God with an undivided heart and to engage in the apostolate as a fruit of our spousal relationship to Jesus Christ. Pope St. John Paul II describes the maternal potential of this spousal love in *Mulieris dignitatem*:

Spiritual motherhood takes on many different forms. In the life of consecrated women, for example, who live according to the charism and the rules of the various apostolic Institutes, it can express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the edges of society. *In this way a consecrated woman finds her Spouse*, different and the same in each and every person, according to his very words: ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40). Spousal love always involves a special readiness to be poured out for the sake of those who come within one’s range of activity. In marriage this readiness, even though open to all, consists mainly in the love that parents give to their children. In virginity this readiness is open *to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ the Spouse*.

We experience the power of our consecration as a spiritual reality and an efficacious sign in our apostolic work. Even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable or overwhelming circumstances, spiritual maternal love has a mysterious power to open the door to hope, to tap into uncharted reservoirs of inner strength, and to grow goodness in another. This love nourishes the soul of the other and calls him or her to respond wholeheartedly to God’s grace. Within this context of affirmation and support, dreams and noble aspirations are awakened, and a person can find the hope to begin again, confident that “nothing is impossible with God” (Lk 1:37).

Through our consecration, we are set aside for the sacred and called to love and serve the Lord with undivided hearts, becoming living icons of His love and mercy to a world thirsting for hope. Community life, wearing a religious habit, and engaging in a corporate apostolate are significant aides that anchor us in our identity as women religious. However, as it is for anyone, it is easy to get caught up in day-to-day activities and lose sight of who we are or of what God is calling us to in that moment.

As we strive to live a way of life rooted in faith, it is essential that we find daily times to lift our minds and hearts to the Lord and refocus our vision. While praying the Angelus three times a day, as we echo Mary’s fiat: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to your word,” we seek to enter into her spirit of availability, receptivity, and total “givenness” to the Lord. These three moments of prayer, punctuating the day, awaken in us a consciousness of our consecration and direct our hearts back to the Lord. We are able to bring everything happening in our lives into this light, which offers a supernatural perspective to it all. Amazingly, things that were bothering us melt away or shrink back to their proper proportion,

insights and new ideas emerge, and we find ourselves grounded and strengthened in our identity as ones who are totally given to the Lord.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BY SISTER CATHERINE LYNN FORSYTHE, T.O.R.

Most Catholics were baptized as infants and do not remember receiving the sacrament of baptism, but what a glorious event it is to receive the Triune God into one's soul and become a member of God's family, the Church! When I began discerning a call to religious life, thoughts about my baptism surfaced as I gradually realized that it was the basis of a call to be espoused exclusively to Christ and to learn the way of love for all His people. It was then that this scripture passage from Matthew's gospel began to take on new meaning: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (22:37–39). I began to know a deep, persevering call within to what Pope St. John Paul II termed "an all-encompassing commitment" (*Vita consecrata*, 16) to be "totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all" (Canon 573). God's action in my life became more evident in a sense of being "set apart for the sacred" (*Foundations*, p. 15), literally *consecrated*. While reading the scriptures, I began to hear the call to be espoused to Christ and to belong exclusively to Him. With this call came the realization that to love a husband and children would not be enough for me; the love I had come to know in Christ had to be shared more widely to include all of His children.

During a silent retreat, I came across Pope St. John Paul II's exhortation to consecrated men and women, *Redemptionis donum*. As I read about the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as lived in religious life, I felt my heart's desire was being answered. I desired to say with our father St. Francis, "This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart" (St. Bonaventure, *The Major Life of St. Francis*, LM, III, 1). Although I had truly experienced an "interior encounter with the love of Christ" (RD, 3), part of me was still not convinced that religious life was my call.

Seeking greater closeness with Jesus, I began attending daily Adoration. One day in thinking about a man I had just met, I wondered: "So, Lord, what about marriage? I mean, married people are called to holiness, and I know married people who are striving for holiness." It was a moment I will never forget. In the midst of these thoughts, a gentle but firm interior voice interrupted me, indicating, "You belong to Me, and you will never belong to another." I knew clearly and without question that my call was to a permanent vocation. This experience brought with it freedom—tremendous freedom—and joy.

I did not feel called to any particular apostolate but to a life of prayer, lived in community, out of which would flow whatever ministry I was asked to do. The draw to silence and solitude was strong for me, so I found our community's blend of contemplative and active elements attractive, and this combination seemed to answer my heart's desire.

At entrance into novitiate, I received my baptismal name, and this has taken on greater significance for me as I have realized that my vocation is truly founded on my identity in the Trinity and His life at work in me.

With vocational discernment behind me, I am what we affectionately call a “lifer,” with a gold wedding ring and all. The gift of my baptism means more to me now than ever, as I know that the promise of these vows was placed in me that day.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

SCRIPTURE

Consecration in General

Ex 29:7, 36+; 30:26–29

Lv 27:28+

Lv 8:10+

Nm 18:14

Dt 7:1–6

1 Sm 10:1; 16:13

1 Kgs 19:19

Ps 139:13–18

Is 49:1, 5

Jer 1:5

Baptismal Consecration

2 Cor 1:21–22

Eph 1:13; 4:30

Religious Consecration

Mt 19:10–12

1 Cor 7:36–38

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Essential Elements, 5–17; Norms 5, 8, 10, 25

Evangelico testimonio, 4, 7, 22, 33, 34, 37, 38

Fraternal Life in Community, 2c, 15, 35–37, 45

Lumen gentium, 11, 43, 44

Perfectae caritatis, 5, 8

Redemptionis donum, 3, 4, 7, 8, 15

Vita consecrata, 14–30, 46, 72, 76

CANON LAW (CIC 1983)

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CHAPTER 2: THE SPOUSAL BOND

BY SISTER PAULA JEAN MILLER, F.S.E.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit, Sanctifier of Body and Soul, come and prepare me to live—and love—my call to virginity of heart, spousal love with Jesus Christ, and maternal fecundity. Make my love pure, generous, and life-giving by Your divine help. Amen.

SUMMARY

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to highlight the vocation of the consecrated religious and the unique gift given to those called to witness to the conjugal meaning of the body by becoming “two in one flesh” with Christ the Bridegroom. This call is fulfilled through the gift of self to the Divine Spouse in a continuing quest for self-surrender through the lived sequence of virgin, bride, spouse, and mother. The diminishment of the theological analogy (Bride of Christ) to mere metaphorical attribution is countered through the rich theological tradition of the Church beginning with the Fathers and developed throughout the centuries. Catholic tradition maintains that the consecrated life is a living sign of the marital covenant that actually exists between Jesus Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride the Church and so calls each vowed woman the “spouse of Christ.” The tradition has never held that in calling the Church and its members the Spouse of Christ that we are simply “creating a correspondence which does not really exist” (as in a metaphor) but that each human creature has been called by God into a spousal relationship with Himself and that the vowed religious exists as a living sign of that gratuitous call.

Particular emphasis is placed on the magisterial documents of Pope St. John Paul II, culminating in the synodal document *Vita consecrata*, but these magisterial teachings draw on the whole of Catholic tradition that enables us to understand the vowed religious as a “spouse of Christ” because of a life formed through daily self-gift and self-surrender. The religious, vowed to Christ the Bridegroom in a spousal covenant of redemption, is committed with Him to shaping the “new creation” through a process of transfiguration, conformation, configuration, and transformation beginning with her own disfigured human heart.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. Read the quote by Origen on page 49 of *Foundations*. Discuss how it is possible that the Church can be called “Spouse of Christ” from “before the creation of the world.”
2. What is the definition of “consecrated”?

INTEGRATION

1. How does the daily *horarium* of a religious house shape the inner life of a community?
2. Evaluate the Marian quality of your “yes” to the evangelical counsels and your growth in each of the following dimensions:
 - Faith in God
 - Trust in others
 - Openness to God’s providential plan for your future
 - Receptivity to the demands that the evangelical counsels will make on the life of the community
 - Witness that makes Jesus Christ present in the world

APPLICATION

1. When studying the meaning of “sign,” discuss the complementarity between sacramental marriage and religious consecration.
2. In what ways is it important for the authentic meaning of religious life for sisters to live together in community rather than alone?

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

The spousal mystery of the consecrated life has been a central focus of the spirituality of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist since its foundation. We strove to respond to the call of the Second Vatican Council to not only “return” to the spirit of our founders but to incarnate their spirit in a life form relevant to the contemporary culture. We believe that permanent, lifelong commitment to Christ through the Church and through our congregation remains an essential quality of consecrated life. The spousal nature of religious life requires the total reciprocal gift of persons that establishes a communion of persons able to participate in and manifest the Divine Communion of Persons and its dynamism of kenosis, a total outpouring of self into the Other. That principle is made visible to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it becomes his one commandment to us at the Last Supper: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Thus, the spousal nature of religious life comes to us as a community from the Trinity, through Jesus Christ, the Spouse given in love to each and all of us. It is a mode of relationship between the Church of Christ and our religious congregation as well as within the congregation among its members. The second quality of the consecrated life is then a permanent, lifelong commitment to the people of God we are called to serve.

These two spousal principles become concretized for us in a way of life that is identified with Christ, with the Church, and with one another by being visibly signed with the religious habit; by publicly witnessing to chastity, poverty, and obedience; and by living a life of prayer and community. In being faithful to the demands of this spousal relationship, we can support married couples called to live sacramental marriage in the Church and support ordained priests called to be faithful to the bridal Church.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BY SISTER STACY WHITFIELD, S.G.L.

Sister Paula Jean Miller, F.S.E., has done a marvelous job of presenting the truly spousal nature of the consecrated life and its implications. Such reminders deepen our appreciation for the gift of our vocation to religious life. But what does this spousal bond mean for me when I wake up in the morning?

I wake up to Love. I wake up to a Bridegroom. I wake up to the thought and desire of Another. I wake up to the presence of One who has utterly poured Himself out for me for the sake of uniting me to Himself. I wake up to the reality that I belong to Another. In the joys of my day as in its sorrows, I wake up to One who shares my life journey and who invites me to enter into His. I am not alone.

I wake up to a Love as overflowing as I am receptive. However, I also wake up to One who utterly respects my freedom, my choices. I wake up to One who has given His “yes” but awaits mine. I wake up to One who preferred my life over His own, and He continually asks me who I will prefer today. I wake up to One who surrendered Himself to His Father and who awaits my own surrender. I wake up to One who lives this spousal relationship with me in complete fidelity and expects me to do the same. I wake up to One who includes all of humanity in His loving gaze and awaits my participation in its redemption.

So, how will I let go of self to follow my Spouse precisely in this self-emptying? How will I fulfill my vows to Him through my life with my sisters? How will I allow my Beloved to make me, just as I am, a means of redemption for others? How will I allow Him to transform my heart? Because I must find Him where He is and love Him as He is, where will I need to forgo my comfortable but imagined Christ to embrace the “real beloved Spouse discovered in the world” (*Foundations*, p. 75)?

What a relationship! What a call to joy! But isn’t it available to all? The astounding answer is yes, and we as consecrated religious are precisely the sign of this. How will I communicate the desirability of this common destiny on a daily basis? Does my life point to the joys of heaven, to God as the utterly desirable One, or has it begun to smack of marital drudgery? Here I must also wake up to the possibility of being a sign of contradiction.

When I live the counsels today, will they be Christ’s spousal way of life made present in our time or a skeleton without a heart? Will my apostolic work be only that—work—or spousal love poured out? The “yes” of my Spouse was costly, “incarnated” in His Passion and death. Likewise, my “yes” needs to take on flesh and blood. So today, in what will my “yes” consist?

The spousal dimension of my consecrated life presents itself as a very high ideal toward which I strive more successfully some days than others. Mindless, muddling-through days are common, far too common in fact. But on those days when, by grace, I retain the consciousness that I belong uniquely to Jesus Christ as His bride in an eternal moment of choosing, giving, dying, and living, I find I am “reset” toward an ultimate and eternal fulfillment, and this

awareness generates hope and joy. He chose me that I might choose Him! I indeed wake up to Love. The challenge is to stay awake.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

See footnotes at the end of Chapter 2 for various scriptural, patristic, and church references concerning the spousal bond.

SCRIPTURE

Gn 2:21–24 (Creation of woman)

Hos 1:2–3:3 (God addresses humanity as His bride and spouse.)

Sg 4:12 (“She is a garden enclosed, my sister, my promised bride. . . .”)

Jn 19:34 (Christ’s side was pierced, out of which the Church, the Spouse of Christ, was born.)

Eph 5:32 (Relationship between Christ and His Church)

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**CHAPTER 3:
THE THREEFOLD RESPONSE OF THE VOWS**

BY SISTER MARY DOMINIC PITTS, O.P.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Come and re-create the very life of Jesus in me. May this study increase the fullness of my “yes,” and may Jesus’ own poverty, His own chastity, and His own obedience be lived out again in my threefold “yes.” Amen.

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 considers the place of the evangelical counsels in religious life. A graced response to Christ's invitation to "Come, follow me" enables a radical imitation of his earthly life. From the early centuries of the Church, chastity, poverty, and obedience were understood to signify the closest imitation of the Lord in his salvific Incarnation.

By its nature, a vow fixes the will's determination to carry out an intention that it rightly discerns as a good. The vow begins a lifelong holocaust, which the religious undertakes at the time of profession. Religious profession joins the religious in a unique way to the Church's life and mystery. The mutual bond between the religious and the Church enriches the religious with an outpouring of grace in her prayer and her apostolate. Her witness in fidelity to her profession and service to others in turn enriches the Church.

The vow of chastity frees the religious to keep her heart totally undivided for God. In the charism of chastity, Jesus invites the religious to give her life as His bride, completely devoted to Him. Chastity is an eschatological sign, for "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mk 12:25).

The vow of poverty is the call to "leave all and follow" the Lord. Even before there were formal vows in religious life, voluntary poverty was central to a life devoted to God. The lives of St. Anthony of the Desert and St. Francis of Assisi reveal that it is the poor Christ who calls us to become His disciples.

The evangelical counsel of obedience is rightly described as "Christ's obedience unto death." Based on the action of Jesus when He did the Father's will out of love, the religious chooses to empty herself on the cross as He did. This will entail strong faith to see in a superior's command the will of God or to contribute to the community her talents and gifts with little recognition in return.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

Vows in General

1. What is the meaning of a vow?
2. How are each of the vows gifts to the religious and to the Church?

Chastity

1. Explain the distinctions among the terms *virginity*, *chastity*, *celibacy*, and *continence* and explain their place in the theology of religious life. What is their relationship to Jesus and Our Lady?
2. In what way does the vow of celibacy impact one's relationship with Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary?

Poverty

1. What are the defining characteristics of poverty? In what two ways must this vow be lived?
2. What is this vow's particular relationship to the mystery of redemption?

Obedience

1. What virtues does obedience call forth from the individual?
2. How is obedience properly lived in community?

APPLICATION

1. Relate the history of your congregation's progress from its beginnings to the adoption of the evangelical counsels by public vow.
2. What is the particular emphasis of your congregation in its understanding and living out of the evangelical counsels?

INTEGRATION

1. In what sense can you consider the vow of obedience to be the most central of the evangelical counsels?
2. What effect do the vows of poverty and chastity have on a religious?

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Women are naturally attracted to love, and the Spouse lures a religious to Himself with the promise of love. The structure of our life with its frequent times of prayer keeps us close to Him. He does point out that at times we will not feel His presence, but He wants us to stay with Him anyway. He wants for each of us to have an undivided heart that belongs to Him and not to fill up the space in our hearts with created things and with people. To live the vows fruitfully, we must realize that this gift of a vocation is fragile. It needs guarding in a world where advertising and media images stamp themselves forcefully onto our senses.

To realize that we religious are an eschatological sign, a sign of the future world, is powerful indeed. When people stop us on the street or want to talk to us on airplanes, it is because we belong to them. We are a sign of their future, too. In the midst of a world tainted with a distorted view of human sexuality and all but devoid of faith in a future life, we witness to that purity for which the world longs.

There is great joy in an authentic living of poverty. Christ tells the rich young man to “go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mk 10:21). Voluntary poverty, in imitation of Christ Himself, calls for detachment from material things. Poverty checks our desire to control and choose our own possessions. It simplifies life lived in community: “Call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common” (*Rule of Saint Augustine*). It allows a religious to keep choices simple and to accept gratefully what is given to her. It is very freeing.

Obedience can be the easiest vow—and the hardest! Normally, we find that life goes on, smoothly riding on duties and assignments that were accepted under obedience. And then suddenly, we might be broadsided by being given a teaching assignment that we do not like, or we might not be allowed to do what seems to us to be a good idea. One's own way can take on very subtle and urgent reasons for needing to be done! This is when obedience becomes difficult, especially if our will is fixed on something other than God's will. Thankfully, with the vow of obedience, we can “go into training” to resist the self-centered tendencies of our own will. We can resist the impulse to have our own way. United with Jesus, we participate in the most important of the three vows—obedience—which made possible His sacrifice on the Cross, for He saved the world precisely through obedience.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BY SISTER CLARE SULLIVAN, M.S.

This chapter describes the Church's understanding of consecrated life as one of dedication to and imitation of Christ: the Virgin, the Poor Man, and the Obedient One (*Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life*, 1). The Lord invites the religious to follow Him with an undivided heart, and the religious sister offers herself together with her sisters as a holocaust to the Lord each day at Mass in union with Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the Cross.

What is my experience of living each vow as a member of the Marian Sisters of the Diocese of Lincoln?

Chastity—In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, I strive to “spend sufficient time before the Lord each day to tell Him of my love, and to let myself be loved by Him.” Deepening my relationship with God and developing my spousal relationship with Jesus are key components of my prayer life. Striving to recognize and accept God's unconditional love for me in the ordinary events of my day prompts me to offer a warm welcome to each of my sisters and to others. A smile given or received is a source of great encouragement, as is the promise of prayers for another. Offering help joyfully when everything within me wants a break becomes an expression of Jesus' sacrificial love. As Bishop James D. Conley has stated in “The Language of Love: A Letter to the Catholic Families and Healthcare Providers of the Diocese of Lincoln” (May 25, 2014), “sacrifice is the language of love.” Witnessing the generosity of my sisters in their selfless giving is always an incentive for me to be other-centered in living community life.

Poverty—We follow the rule of St. Francis, and his desire to live the poverty of Jesus has always been an inspiration to me. Although our needs are well provided for, I strive to follow the advice of our foundress and her example of accepting smaller portions of preferred foods, choosing the humbler task, willingly engaging in manual labor, and being satisfied with whatever is provided. To identify more deeply with Jesus' self-emptying, I pray the Litany of Humility and have become increasingly aware of areas of vanity that I still need to let go of so that I can reflect the poverty of Jesus as authentically as St. Francis did.

Obedience—My vow of obedience is to share in Jesus' obedience to the Father and to participate in the work of His redeeming love. Because any assignment I am given is accompanied by God's grace, it is a great source of reassurance and peace to me. I make every effort to observe the rule and Constitutions as well as to take seriously the wisdom of our foundress, Sister Marta: “we must be particularly strict with ourselves when away from home and fellow religious” (*Constitution Guide of the Marian Sisters of the Diocese of Lincoln*). In the practice of asking permissions, all our decisions have the blessing of obedience. Looking back, I can see that my life has been greatly enriched through my vow of obedience. In the more difficult challenges of an apostolate, it has been a blessing to realize that I am here to do God's will and not my own, and that has made all the difference.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The text of Chapter 3 is the best guide for sources of enrichment because many points in the chapter are drawn from sources such as canon law, papal encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, and scripture. However, the particular sources provided below also may be used for further enrichment.

SCRIPTURE

General

Acts 4:34–35

Chastity

Gn 2:24

Mt 17:4

Mt 19:3–12

1 Cor 7

Poverty

Mt 6:25, 31–32

Mt 13:45–46

Mk 10:17–27

2 Cor 8:9

Obedience

Gn 12:1

Gn 22:16–18

Mt 18:20

Mt 20:27–28

Mk 10:21

Lk 1:26–28

Jn 4:34

Jn 15:10

Jn 19:25–27

Rom 4:18–19, 20–21

Phil 2:5–8

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 914–927 (on consecrated life and religious life)

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CHAPTER 4: COMMUNION IN COMMUNITY

BY SISTER MARY PRUDENCE ALLEN, R.S.M.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Come and bring about a deeper integration within my soul. Come and increase my desire for true loving communion with my sisters in community so that by living in a “school of love,” we can be used by You to help draw all the world into deeper communion, into the oneness You enjoy with the Father and the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, for all eternity. Amen.

SUMMARY

Chapter 4 begins with the Church's invitation to religious to live a spirituality of communion and to be "experts in communion" (*Religious and Human Promotion*, 24). The theological basis for this invitation flows from the Communion of the Three Divine Persons. From this premise, erroneous claims about religious life, namely pure democracy, evolution, and the question of process, are discussed. This section ends with an explanation of the theological reality of a vocation to religious life and to a particular community.

When a person enters a particular community, the formation process begins within the specified community with its founding charism. Following Vatican II, religious communities were asked to develop a *ratio institutionis*, which is a formation program for all stages of religious life inspired by their particular charism. However, most importantly, the community is to be organized in such a way so that its center is the Eucharist because the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of Charity, intensely binds the religious together, in allowing the religious to both contemplate and receive the very Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our dear Lord, Jesus Christ. Further, simply living together in a common house as a local community is not enough. For a true spirituality of communion, a continuous divine-human cooperation is needed.

The final section of Chapter 4 offers practical insights on how to build a spirituality of communion with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships. This discussion considers four areas: (1) identifying authentic ways of participating in interpersonal relations, (2) learning how to engage in a dialogue as a new way of charity, (3) developing virtue-friendships and friendships of charity, and (4) welcoming the hierarchy of truth and authority that guide communion in community. In this way, religious can learn how to build a spirituality of communion that integrates the divine and human aspects of religious life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. The Church's mission for consecrated religious is that we become "experts in communion." Why does the Church emphasize this repeatedly in so many documents? How does this communion point to the communion with Jesus Christ that we are called to individually and collectively?
2. To experience true "communion in community," what is needed besides common life? What is the spiritual basis of common life, of communion?

APPLICATION

1. How is the *ratio institutionis* used in your community?
2. Pope Paul VI outlined the proper characteristics of dialogue. How can your community apply these principles of dialogue more actively?

INTEGRATION

1. We have many means available to help us develop a deep intimacy with God. How can I make better use of these means: prayer, Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, scripture, study of church documents, etc.?
2. What do I need to change in myself so that I can make a greater contribution to the community's fraternal growth in charity and union?

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Since Vatican II, the Church has asked religious to become “experts in communion” in analogical likeness to the Communion of love among the Three Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Venerable Catherine McAuley founded the Religious Sisters of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland, and communion among our sisters has always been emphasized as union in charity through the practice of the little virtues in common life and a common apostolate of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Mother Catherine understood common prayer, and especially common participation in the Holy Mass with reception of the Eucharist, as a necessary source for our communal living. Our common celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, *horarium*, preparation for and sharing of meals, manual labor, and recreation provide further venues for the practice of union in charity. Where possible, we also have common apostolates in health care and education.

In the second half of the twentieth century, when our institute was refounded in 1973, various cultural attitudes directly conflicted with the fundamental structures inherited from our original foundress's approach to common life and common apostolates. In this context, it seemed appropriate both to evaluate these conflicts and to offer concrete suggestions for contemporary ways to support religious institutes seeking to live communion in community.

When all the members of a religious community share the goal of actively working for a spirituality of communion in each local convent, with the Blessed Virgin Mary as our pilgrim guide, we begin to become more vibrant living signs of love in the eschatological kingdom of God. As we are more configured to Jesus Christ, our mission flows outward from this communion so that we seek opportunities to mutually serve in complementary ways members of the clergy, the laity, and other vocations within the Church. Then, we discover the wonderful joy described by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) in *Fraternal Life in Community* (15): “In this way, a religious community becomes a centre radiating outwardly, a spiritual force, a centre of animation, of fraternity creating fraternity, and of communion and ecclesial collaboration, where the different contributions of each help build up the Body of Christ, which is the Church.”

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BY A SCHOOL SISTER OF CHRIST THE KING

“Communion begets communion: essentially it is likened to a mission on behalf of communion Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.”

—*Fraternal Life in Community* (58)

At the end of a week of working in our apostolate, I was feeling a lack of community spirit. I felt we had accomplished many tasks and positive achievements with the children in our summer camp, but our acceptance of one another felt low to me. I had coordinated a few projects but felt that sometimes my carefully mapped-out plans were changed from what I had intended. Furthermore, my suggestions were rejected numerous times, and I wondered if I had even been heard.

I enjoyed the apostolic aspect of the week, but in community, I was feeling a little rejected and unappreciated by my sisters. I was tired and just glad to be finished when one more “straw” was added to the load: a sister came to make a suggestion on how to improve one of the projects I had coordinated. While I knew it would be important to someday bring up to her my sense of her lack of “team spirit,” I was too tired at the time for the honest communication such a discussion would require.

A few days later, I was able to confide in a sister who knew me well enough to not mistake my negative attitude as truth. I also knew this sister to be a friend who would call me to more when needed. I shared my frustration—and even my fears—about the problems I had experienced that week. By this time, I was better “prayed” and more rested. The three-way healing of body, mind, and spirit (rest, confiding in another, and prayer) helped me see that I had been at least partly guilty of grasping for encouragement and even control.

Rather than “radiating outwardly” (CICLSAL, 15), I had spent the week pulling, and even grabbing inwardly, to “accomplish success” in the apostolate. I came to realize that there was an internal attitude in me that needed to be redirected outwardly. I will not pretend that all the “scales” fell from my eyes and that I have never fallen into the same attitude since then. However, this experience opened my eyes to discover that I had previously believed a “lie.” Seeing the lie at that time has helped me to catch myself in future falls. When I am feeling “rejected,” I probably need to be more honest in discerning whether what I have perceived as rejection might really be a deeper kind of acceptance.

Sensing the need for greater encouragement from others is also more carefully sifted to see if this feeling includes at least a trace of “grasping” for affirmation as I think it should be given. It is hard to be free enough to radiate outwardly when we are overdependent on the encouragement of others. Only Jesus Christ can completely fill us. At the same time, it is hard to enter into a mission if we need no one. When we have Christ to fill us to the brim, we can enjoy one another without grasping. When we are in relationship with others, Christ can enter into us and complete us. The balance between receiving from others while letting Christ completely fill

us is crucial in our communal missionary work. For me, it requires being grounded in Christ and also developing a healthy interdependency on others.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

SCRIPTURE

Ex 16:9–10

Lv 8:3–4

Jn 13:35

Jn 15:13–15

Jn 17:21

Acts 1:14

Acts 2:42

Acts 4:32

1 Cor 10:16

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Essential Elements, 18–27, 48–52; Norms 4, 9, 10, 12, 14

Evangelico testimonio, 23–25, 27, 39, 44, 48

Fraternal Life in Community, 2, 3, 5d–e, 10, 14, 32, 37, 39, 41, 43, 58, 59e

Perfectae caritatis, 1, 4, 14, 15

Lumen gentium, 11, 43–47

Novo millennio ineunte, 43

Redemptionis donum, 15

Starting Afresh from Christ, 12, 15, 18, 26, 28–32

The Service of Authority and Obedience, 1, 2, 3, 14, 16, 20

Vita consecrata, 17, 18, 30, 36, 39, 41, 43, 46, 51, 55, 66–68, 74, 92, 93, 95

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CHAPTER 5: EVANGELICAL MISSION

BY SISTER M. MAXIMILIA UM, F.S.G.M.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Draw us into the life of Jesus Christ that we may help accomplish His mission in His Mystical Body, the Church. May doing the Father's will sustain and nourish each of us as it sustained and nourished Christ. And may the Father's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

SUMMARY

Chapter 5 addresses the topic of the evangelical mission of the Church and the participation of religious institutes in that same mission. First, the chapter describes that in which the mission of the Church consists. Clearly, before any movement *ad extra*, the Church herself receives the Son sent by the Father to redeem a “dis-graced” world. This mission of the second Person of the Trinity creates a communion that we call the Church. In and through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ remains present as the animating Head of this communion into which the faithful are incorporated through faith and baptism. This communion is expressed in the Church’s unity of faith, sacrament, doctrine, discipline, and governance. Living in fidelity to the grace of baptism, the image of Christ the Son is brought to maturity in the Christian. This conformity affects the Christian at every level of his existence, enabling him to love the world with the peerless tenderness of Jesus Christ.

The second part of Chapter 5 claims that the wonder of love that lies at the heart of the Church discloses something about God Himself. Not only does God love perfectly, but in Himself, He is love. The Son abides in the Father, and the Father gives Himself to the Son in the mutual delight and surprise who is Himself another Person, the Holy Spirit. The communion of love, wonder, and gratitude distinct from God (i.e., the Church) depends on a source capable of generating something similar to itself. The Father desires that all of creation be transformed in Christ. Hence, the mission of the Church consists in extending the transformative presence of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth through an urgent proclamation of the Gospel.

Third, the chapter considers the contemporary cultural context of the West and the particular role of religious in the missionary task of the Church. The average modern man of Western civilization finds himself in a culture indifferent to God and religious or moral claims. However, because he has been made for communion, the embrace of this cultural vision may well alienate man from God and from his true happiness. In such a situation, the vowed religious becomes a witness to the truth of the beauty and fulfillment inherent in giving oneself completely. The apostolates of various religious institutes participate in the essential mission of the Church according to a particular charism and within a particular place. Religious who exercise an apostolate both provide a concrete service and imbue the work with the inexhaustible love of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. Discuss the claim that evangelical mission is rooted in the Christian's participation in the Person of Jesus Christ.
2. How do the evangelical counsels show what is authentically human, and how are they missionary in nature?

APPLICATION

1. How does formation, both initial and ongoing, educate the members of your institute for the apostolate, and are there elements of formation specific to your institute?
2. In what way does your institute's vision of the apostolate impact one's personal experience of God's action in the world?

INTEGRATION

1. What is the relationship between prayer and the apostolate?
2. How do you experience the evangelical counsels in relation to the apostolate?

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

As a member of a Franciscan congregation, I look to St. Francis of Assisi as the founder of the order to which my religious institute belongs. The hallmark of the charism bestowed upon St. Francis of Assisi is poverty. Poverty is perhaps most tangibly embodied in freedom from material wealth and possessions. However, the detachment from things always indicates that deeper poverty is being dispossessed of one's own self. St. Francis's poverty was indeed a freedom from material encumbrances, but precisely as his expression of having God as his sole possession.

At the heart of the charism of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George is a simple readiness to obey God's call as discerned within the concrete situations of the times and the needs of the Church. Thus, I have a vivid and abiding sense of serving as one who is *sent*. I feel strongly that I represent the Church and my own congregation—even in an apostolate in which I may work, for the most part, alone or in a hidden way. I feel myself ultimately sent by Christ the Lord, who stays with me throughout the day and teaches me to welcome every moment as the provident gift of the Father.

The Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George exist to make the merciful love of Christ visible. It is perhaps here that the theme of evangelical mission is most prominent in the life of the members of the congregation. We believe wholeheartedly that every apostolate in which we engage is an expression of Jesus' love.

Prayer, both personal and communal, is the wellspring of my work. Holy Mass, meditation, and the Examen prayer are the hinges on which my apostolate turns. These particular exercises, together and over time, have formed in me a way of understanding people and evaluating situations beyond what is immediately obvious to the senses. It is as if the Lord has "infected" my gaze and understanding with His own. Every service rendered is service to a person who has been created to be loved by God and to love Him in return.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BY SISTER JOYCE CANDIDI, O.S.H.J.

Sister Maximilia Um has written a fine chapter on evangelical mission. She reminds religious that the ultimate goal of every religious institute's apostolate is to communicate the beauty of a life totally given to God as the truth of man (*Foundations*, p. 171) and that the mission of the Church is to engage man in the ultimate question of his own happiness (*Foundations*, p. 169).

In 2011, a privileged episode took place in my own life as an Oblate Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Our charism is to offer our lives for priestly holiness, and I had an opportunity to walk closely with a priest during the last six months of his life. I had known this priest for over forty-four years as teacher, friend, mentor, spiritual director, and pastor. He was considered by many to be a living legend and also was known for his strong, fearless, and independent nature. Issues with his heart and diabetes brought him to the hospital, where he remained for three months—at times very close to death.

He was then transferred to a special nursing home that could accommodate his need for a ventilator. Because I was his health care proxy, some of his parishioners would question me about his “quality of life.” I simply but firmly reminded them that he was more than capable of making good moral choices. Monsignor was a man of faith and hope. Throughout those entire six months, he was clear minded and wanted to live!

He communicated primarily through writing and frequently with his eyes. Upon entering his room, I would often find him gazing at the image of the Sacred Heart that I hung on the wall across from his bed. My visits to him were almost daily; we would pray and reminisce, and I would keep him informed on what was happening in his parish and throughout the diocese.

During this period of suffering and purification, his morale would often fluctuate. A deeply transformative moment came when one day he wrote, “What kind of a priest am I confined to this bed for months, not able to do anything?” He seemed to look into the very depths of my soul as he waited for my response. I no sooner begged the Holy Spirit for guidance when I heard myself reply, “Monsignor, where did Jesus, the High Priest, primarily accomplish salvation? On the Cross, immobile, nailed, humiliated, suffering! You—as did the Lord—are fulfilling your priestly vocation now in a most significant way. You too are immobile, confined, humiliated, suffering. Jesus invites you to join your suffering with His. Offer your suffering for the good of your parishioners, for vocations, for the diocese, for the world.” And then, with a little twinkle in my voice, I continued, “You know I am right; you taught this to me.” He smiled and then gazed once more at the image of the Sacred Heart.

Sister Maximilia wrote, “Those who have made a total gift of themselves through the profession of the evangelical counsels are in a unique position to proclaim this gospel of suffering” (*Foundations*, p. 172). When I read this, my thoughts went back to my dear Monsignor during those last six months of his life when the Lord, through suffering, raised the quality of his life to unexpected heights. I feel privileged to think that I might have helped him “configure to Christ in his disfigurement of suffering and transfiguration in glory” (*Foundations*, p. 174).

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

SCRIPTURE

Mission of Christ

Mt 5:17; 11:27

Mk 2:17

Jn 4:34; 9:4; 17:8

Mission of the Church

Mt 28:19

Lk 9:1+; 10:1, 16

Jn 13:20; 20:21

Acts 1:8

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Essential Elements, 4, 6, 12, 23–27; Norms 1, 31, 33

Evangelico testificatio, 9, 48, 50, 52

Fraternal Life in Community, 2c

Perfectae caritatis, 8

Lumen gentium, 2–5, 9, 43–47

Redemptionis donum, 7, 8, 15

Reflection and Guidelines on Consecrated Persons and Their Mission in Schools, 20

Starting Afresh from Christ, 9

Vita consecrata, 14, 25, 29, 30, 44, 48, 53, 55, 57, 72–74, 76, 81, 84, 96–99

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CONCLUSION

BY SISTER MARY JUDITH O'BRIEN, R.S.M., &

SISTER MARY NIKA SCHAUMBER, R.S.M.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit. Draw us into the inner life of the Church. Purify us so that we, as a Body, may add to the holiness of the Church. Inspire us so that we may contribute to the mission of the Church, and make us ever faithful to Jesus Christ the Bridegroom. Amen.

SUMMARY

The Foundations of Religious Life closes with a brief history of the ecclesial documents from the Second Vatican Council on religious life and poses pertinent questions regarding the Church's teaching.

The sixth chapter of the apostolic constitution *Lumen gentium* is dedicated to religious life as "integral to the holiness and life of the Church." Following this, the Vatican Council II decree *Perfectae caritatis* encourages the appropriate renewal of religious life. The basis of religious revitalization is renewal of spirit in continuity with the original inspiration of the founder/foundress and adapted to the external circumstances of society. Following the Council, Pope Paul VI promulgated an apostolic letter *Ecclesiae sanctae II* that provided guidance for renewal and permitted experimentation within religious institutes. While caution was encouraged, the general chapters of religious institutes were given autonomous authority for change. At times, this led to ill-conceived adaptations occurring in some religious institutes with little reflection on the guidelines offered by the Church to ensure the vitality of religious life. In 1983, the document *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life* was written at the request of some bishops of the United States to clarify the guidelines of the Church regarding religious institutes. It also describes the ecclesial nature of a religious institute in its origin, mission, and governance. In 1984, the apostolic exhortation *Redemptionis donum* quickly followed *Essential Elements*. In it, Pope St. John Paul II describes the duty of a religious to refer to Jesus Christ, who was obedient unto death in the exercise of his or her obedience. This apostolic exhortation encourages religious to meditate on their own vocation in the light of the mystery of redemption. The Conclusion also refers to a 1994 document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) titled *Fraternal Life in Community*; it describes religious life "at the heart of the Church's mystery of communion."

The Conclusion emphasizes the Church's understanding that baptismal consecration is the foundation for the vocation of all Christians. Some also receive the unique call to religious consecration, which witnesses to the spousal bond of Jesus Christ and His Church. In response to the divine invitation to a spousal relationship, the individual religious vows chastity, poverty, and obedience within a specific institute. Religious consecration builds upon and strengthens communion with God and, in God, communion among members of the same institute, thereby fostering the spirituality of communion within the entire Church. In this way, communion leads to mission.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENT

1. What contribution did the Vatican Council II document *Lumen gentium* make to the Church's concept of religious life?
2. The document *Perfectae caritatis* calls for renewal in religious life by what primary means?

APPLICATION

1. Reflect on the content of *Essential Elements* along with the content of *Redemptionis donum*, and explain the value of these two documents taken together.
2. The document *Fraternal Life in Communion* exhorts each of us to become an "expert in communion." What is your understanding of this phrase? How does being an "expert in communion" configure the religious more closely to her Spouse, Jesus, the Bridegroom?

INTEGRATION

1. Describe your understanding of the relationship between religious life and the larger Church.
2. What forms of self-transcendence are required of a young religious to contribute to the renewal of her institute?

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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