



What is meant when speaking of the prophecy of the consecrated life?

First of all, I would like to confess how embarrassed I am standing on this side of the table, in other words, on the side for those who speak, present and communicate, instead of those who listen. Although I am obviously honoured to have been invited to speak, dear brothers, I must however sincerely say that I am afraid that I have nothing to say. There are three reasons for this:

- 1) Because of the those here in assembly, who know more than me:
- 2) Because I find myself in the situation of being much more a researcher than a person with knowledge;
- 3) Because of the theme, or at least how it is formulated

Seeing that I am unable to eliminate the first two difficulties, I made an effort to summarise the third - this required a longer process - which I will try to synthesise, hoping that I don't take advantage of your patience too much.

1. A linguistic problem

I was saying that when I was asked to tackle the theme of “radicality and prophecy in consecrated life”, for a long time I asked myself what was exactly expected of me. It was clear to me that I was supposed to speak on consecrated life. However, the dual concept of radicality and prophecy was not so clear. This was due to the fact that no one had explained what was intended by these two terms, and also – and even more so – because it was not clear (at least not to me) what type of logical connection presumably exists between the two (radicality *and* prophecy, *from* radicality *to* prophecy, *not* radicality *rather* prophecy, and finally, “radicality *in* prophecy”).

It is not the first time that I find myself in such a puzzling situation. Today, when we are asked to “think of life”, in other words to reflect upon life to try and understand the structures of its sense,

semantic fields that intertwine and intersect and incoherence and grey area, we often run into a preliminary problem, which is represented by language and communication. In fact, in order to speak of things we use words, but – as linguistics and semiotics have been teaching us for more than a century – the relationship between the words (signs) that we use and the reality (objects) to which we refer is not direct. The word or the sign reaches an object only through its “interpretation”, which we usually call “meaning” (many of us will remember the famous semiotic triangle of Ogden and Richards in their book of 1923, *The Meaning of Meaning*). This is the way to make the process of codification of the sender and the decoding of the receiver possible. In an attempt to simplify at best, one could say that the sender starts from an idea, and “thinks it”, in other words, translates it into a concept, which is finally expressed through graphic and phonetic signs. The receiver, in order that communication work, must do the same the other way around, in other words starting from the signs and the words, perceiving the conceptual interpretation, thus identifying the object.

Correctly decrypting the meaning of a sign is a phenomenon that is more or less evident or predictable in two forms of language: everyday language (therefore reference to the dictionary is valid, in other words, the current use of a language) and that of a technical language, where every word corresponds to a precise codified meaning. They are in some way two extremes: one is a natural language, maternal, that we use “without thinking”, and the other is an artificial language, for which each word is like an abbreviated number of a logic to which it refers.

How must and how can we speak of consecrated life today? It seems clear to me that there is no technical language, universally accepted, as was once the case with philosophy and theology in school (for which each exhaustive explanation began with the *explicatio terminorum* that was done strictly in Latin). That language does not exist because the system that sustained it and to which it corresponded no longer exists.

However, there is still the “poor” alternative of everyday life, which is surely practicable, seeing that Jesus did so in the Gospel. It is a way of speaking through parables, images and stories of life experience. This type of linguistic game allows one to avoid the obstacle of conceptualisation, or to better say, of the communicative agreement on the concepts we use. For example, a dear brother of mine, Fr. Miguel Márquez gave a talk to religious men and women on the topic of contemplative life during the closing week of the Year of Consecrated Life, using a non-conceptual language: he used images, told stories on episodes of life, presented some figures, proposed the “*seven dances*”, invited everyone to stay in silence and gave his blessing¹. It represented an excellent example of communication: the message went from the sender to the receiver, so enriched with nuances that were

¹ M. MÁRQUEZ, *Contemplativos en la precariedad. Dejarse nacer*, Conference held on January 29, 2016, in the Paul VI Hall (it can be consulted in the blog delaruecaalapluma.wordpress.com)

not so easy to envisage, thanks to the competent use of icons and symbols (that in this case I separated from the signs, precisely for their immediate evocative connection to the object).

Most people - and in any case me, who does not stand out for having lots of imagination or literary creativity - must nevertheless pursue a sort of middle way, between everyday language and a technical one, and in other words the way of a conceptual language that builds up progressively and with difficulty, attempting to get the audience involved in an alliance or communicative complicity. I would say that this is very difficult in the face of what we find today when we are forced to think and speak about our lives: step by step we must build up the stairway that we wish to climb up or down.

2. Prophetic nature and consecrated life: the story of a bond

I will begin discussing the theme trying to define when, how and in what sense the prophetic category was adopted in religious life.

It is well-known that there is an antique tradition that reconnects religious life to the prophetic character of the Old Testament, particularly to Elijah, and to the last of the prophets before Jesus Christ. This was namely John the Baptist, who presented in any case, in the same Gospel readings: «he is Elijah, the one who is to come» (*Mt* 11:14)². In them, as Jean Leclercq observes, «rather than chronological models that preceded them, they were true prefigurations, a valuable preparation» of the monastic condition³. It is precisely for this reason that the aspects of a prophetic life that were taken into consideration were those that further recalled the practice in monastic life, in other words: virginity, retreat from the world and the choice to live in deserted places, praising God and a life of austerity.

Recalling this patristic tradition (which, by the way, had great influence on the Carmelite spirituality) is not meant to be purely erudite or anecdotal. It is evident that the fathers of the Church attributed the terms “prophet” or “prophetic life” to a sphere of meaning that has little to do with the historical reality of a biblical prophetic nature; rather it refers to the reality of monastic life of that period, or better the ideal that encouraged it. This helps us to develop a hermeneutical prudence, since our ways of comprehending and giving meaning are not that different or “better than that of our fathers”. In fact, in the measure in which we stray from a historical and philological analysis of a biblical prophetic character that we have today, and use prophetic terminology in the wide and

² The same is valid for the entire citation of a famous text by Guillaume de Saint Thierry, *Letter to the Brothers of Mont-Dieu*: «But your new vanity is not a new one. This kind of life is the ancient profession of religion, piety perfectly justified in Christ, inheritance. The Church of God came from the old days, shown at the time of the Patriarchs, established in innate and Saint John the Baptist (*Matt.* III, 1.) (PL 184, 310).

³ J. LECLERCQ, *La vie parfaite. Points de vue sur l'essence de l'état religieux*, Brepols, Turnhout-Paris 1948, p. 58. But see also the entire chapter II «La vie prophétique», pp. 57-81.

metaphorical sense, we also tend to attribute it with values and characteristics that deal more with our past experience and with ideal aspirations that stimulate it, than with a very diversified reality of the Old and New Testaments.

At the same time, we know that even a spiritual reading of the Scriptures enriches it in meaning, making the text “grow” (*Scriptura crescit cum legente*). In our case, for example, among the numerous patristic texts that Jean Leclercq cites, in his endless knowledge, there is one that stands out for its beauty and intensity. It is one of the sermons by Saint Bernard *in labore messis*, in other words during harvest⁴. In this piece, Bernard sings the praises of monastic life, in that it is angelic, prophetic and apostolic. As regards prophetic life, he writes:

The style of prophecy to which you are devoting yourselves is really great, the passion for prophecy to which you are committed is really great! What is it about? According to the Apostle, prophecy consists of not considering what is seen but what is unseen [cf. 2 *Cor* 4:18]. Living by the Spirit [cf. *Gal* 5:16], being righteous by faith [cf. *Rm* 1:17], thinking of what is above, not of what is on earth [cf. *Col* 3:2], forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead [cf. *Fil* 3:13], really means living as prophets. Otherwise, how could our citizenship be in heaven [cf. *Fil* 3:20], if not by the spirit of prophecy? The prophets of the past almost did not live among men of their times, they went beyond their times thanks to the strength and Energy of the Spirit, thus rejoicing in seeing the day of the Lord and seeing it they were glad [cf. *Jn* 8:56]⁵

Not only does Saint Bernard observe the external aspects of the traditional representation of the prophets: the man of the desert, wasted away by fasting, dressed in «skins of sheep or goats» (cf. *Heb* 11:37). Through a variety of Pauline citations, he describes the genre of prophecy to which monks are dedicated as a form of *quaerere Deum*, as if looking further past what is visible or of the present, to reach what is invisible and of the future. I would say that Bernard “spiritualises” prophecy, in the strong sense of the term, in other words he sees it as a form of life in the Spirit, according to the Pauline concept of Christian life. In this sense, Bernard jumps from the literal concept of prophecy (according to the categories of that time, of course) to a spiritual conception, including it in a (Pauline) context of charisms that characterise the life of the Church.

If, jumping ahead eight centuries, we take a look at the Second Vatican Council, we find that there is great mention of the theme of prophecy in the Church, but not in regards to religious life, rather in the context of a Christological and sacramental doctrine of the *tria munera*: priest, prophet and king⁶. Instead, there is no prophetic mention throughout the texts of Vatican II that deal with religious life, neither in Chapter VI of *Lumen Gentium* (LG 43-47), nor in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. The category that is used to describe the specific characteristic of religious life in the Church is instead “sign”. «The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign, which

⁴ *Serm. de diversis*, XXXVII (PL 183, 639-644).

⁵ *Serm. de diversis*, XXXVII, 6 (PL 183, 642).

⁶ For a short but accurate explanation of the history of this doctrine, see ROSE M. BEAL, «Priest, Prophet and King: Jesus Christ, the Church and the Christian Person», in *John Calvin's Ecclesiology: Ecumenical Perspectives*, edited by G. Mannion, E. van der Borgh, T & T Clark, London 2011, pp. 90-106.

can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation» (LG 44). In *Perfectae Caritatis*, N. 1 uses the same phrasing of *Lumen Gentium*, affirming that religious life, or even better, «the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels [...] reveals itself as a *splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom*».

Saying that religious life is, or is called to be, a «sign of the heavenly kingdom» is quite a broad form of expression to embrace the various dimensions of this sign: eschatological (a sign of future situations)⁷, Christological (a sign of the form of Christ's earthly life)⁸ and theological-Trinitarian (the sign of transcendence and might of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit)⁹ - all present in the text of N. 44 of *Lumen Gentium*.

The document of the Teachings¹⁰, in which for the first time there is explicit mention of the prophetic nature of religious life, is the Instruction of the Congregation for the Religious dated 1980 on *Religious and Human Promotion*. The evangelising mission of the Church, which cannot exclude the integral promotion of human beings and safeguarding their rights, requires «scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Religious are called to give singular witness to this prophetic dimension»¹¹. In the same document there is mention of the evangelical counsels as a «prophetic sign of intimate union with God, who is loved above all things» (N. 24; EVC 5365) and, in the same line, there is also: «The profession of the evangelical counsels, in the context of religious life-Church-modern world, may require new attitudes which are attentive to the value of prophetic sign as a power for the conversion and transformation of the world, of its mode of thinking and of its relationship» (N. 33b; EVC 5375). Therefore, one begins to realise that religious life has a prophetic force, capable of having a bearing on the secular mentality and structures, in particular when referring to the profession of the evangelical counsels and reading the signs of the times.

Nevertheless, it was during the Synod on the Consecrated Life in 1994 that the theme of the prophetic character of religious life strongly emerged. The Synod's preparatory commission avoided speaking on this theme, which in fact appeared in the *Lineamenta* published in 1992, only in one

⁷ LG 44: «[The religious state] more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below. Furthermore, it not only witnesses to the fact of a new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ, but it foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom».

⁸ *Ibid.*: «Christ proposed to His disciples this form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. This same state of life is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church».

⁹ *Ibid.*: «The religious state clearly manifests that the Kingdom of God and its needs, in a very special way, are raised above all earthly considerations. Finally it clearly shows all men both the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ the King and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvellously working in the Church».

¹⁰ I am referring to the Teachings of the Pope and the Holy See. In 1968 the document written by the Latin-American Episcopal Conference of Medellin already mentions the prophetic mission of religious and identifies it in an «eschatological witness» (XII.2-3).

¹¹ *Enchiridion della vita consacrata* [= EVC] 5313-5314.

paragraph, in reference to secularisation in today's world¹². On the contrary, both in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and during the debate in the meeting hall, reference was often made to the prophetic character of religious life. However, not always was this language «used in an explicit nor perhaps appropriate manner»¹³. In numerous interventions, the prophetic charism of consecrated life was connected to an «alternative way of living and relating to one another» (Msgr. Kevin Dowling, South Africa), «a preferential option for the poor» (Msgr. Maurice Taylor, Scotland) and also a «bearing witness in an incisive manner towards the Church and its very hierarchy» (Msgr. Herman J. S. Pandoyoputro, Indonesia)¹⁴.

Among the other interventions, there was also that of the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who – as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – tried to give a theological clarification of the category of the prophetic authority, the essence of which was not explained during the Second Vatican Council, which – as we have already seen – includes «the notion of prophetism in Christology and the doctrine of the Sacraments»¹⁵. Cardinal Ratzinger, who made reference most of all to *Deut* 18:15 ff. and 34:10, pinpointed three characteristic elements of prophetism:

- 1) Every true prophecy originates from an intimate friendship with God: «Only the light of the face of God can there come the revelation that allows one to discern true things from those untrue and to teach man the right way».
- 2) The duty of prophets is «to make God's will known» and «to interpret the Word of God in concrete situations». In this case, the prophet is driven by a «passion for the truth», which is preferred to a «false peace».
- 3) «Every true prophetic action reflects Christ and is an introduction to His paschal mystery».

It is obvious that in Ratzinger's introduction, prophetic charism is seen prevalently as a gift of discernment and a revelation of the truth that often requires the courage of going against the mainstream and oppose the dominating mentality.

3. Prophecy and history: three different models

On March 25, 1996, Pope John Paul II signed the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*. In the previous magisterial documents it was hard to find any connections between religious life and the prophetic dimension, while this document is so filled with references to the prophetic character of

¹² «One of the crucial problems of today in consecrated life is that of facing the impact with the modern times and society's "post-modern" culture, deeply contrary to the evangelical counsels. This must be done without losing the zeal of one's consecration, on the contrary, drawing from it the ability to react in an evangelical manner, with a *prophetic dimension* that is manifested in the call to conversion» (*Lineamenta* 29e).

¹³ JOSÉ ROVIRA, *Vita consecrata e profezia*, Suppl. a «Testimoni» n. 5 del 15/3/2001, p. 17.

¹⁴ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵ Card. Ratzinger's intervention can be read in ADISTA/doc n° 74, 29 October 1994, pp. 2-3.

consecrated life that it raises some uncertainties about its precise meaning and implications. I think that it is possible to identify at least three different models of interpretation that differ under several aspects, although they are obviously not contradictory. The key for interpretation that in my opinion allows one to make a distinction between these three different models is the relationship between prophecy and history. It seems to me, in fact, that **when today we speak of the prophetic dimension of religious life, this is exactly what we imply, that is to say the specific relationship with history that characterises this state of life within the Church and in the world.** The first

model claims that the root of the prophetic character of consecrated life is the profession of the evangelical counsels¹⁶. Numbers 87-92 exhaustively develop an anthropological interpretation¹⁷ of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience as prophetic answers, or testimonies, to «*three major challenges* addressed to the Church herself [...] by contemporary society, at least in some parts of the world» (VC 87), namely:

- «that of a *hedonistic culture* which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms» (VC 88);
- «a *materialism which craves possessions*, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources» (VC 89);
- «those *notions of freedom* which separate this fundamental human good from its essential relationship to the truth and to moral norms» (VC 91).

In this sense, the prophecy of consecrated life would entail giving witness of a way of living and acting that represents an alternative to the one offered by the world and contemporary culture. By reaffirming God's primacy and relativising created goods, it offers mankind «spiritual therapy» (VC 87).

A second model bases its prophetic charism upon the relationship of intimate friendship with God, and is consistent with the speech I already quoted by Cardinal Ratzinger. In fact, N. 84 of *Vita Consecrata* states:

True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.

¹⁶ VC 15: «For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them [consecrated persons] a kind of *sign* and *prophetic statement* for the community of the brethren and for the world.»

¹⁷ VC 87: «These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, impelling the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, to clarify and testify to *the profound anthropological significance* of the counsels. The decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation.»

The characteristic features of prophets are, therefore, the search for God's will, spiritual discernment and love for truth. This is a less moral and rather more theoretical perspective, meaning that at the centre of the prophetic mission there is the defense of truth, expressed through life, but also the explicit acknowledgment of error. It is not by chance that the biblical model to which the text refers is Eliah, the prophet who lives in the presence of God, but who also sets himself up as the champion of Israel's true faith against Baal prophets and for the rights of the poor against the powerful.

Number 73 of the Exhortation can be associated to this model. This number is one of the most important in defining the prophetic task of consecrated life. It reads: «The consecrated life has the prophetic task *of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity*, as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history». In this passage, the prophecy of consecrated persons is clearly depicted as the ability of interpreting history in light of God's experience, as discernment of the signs of the times, capable of identifying «God's hidden call to work according to his plan by active and effective involvement in the events of our time» in historical events.

If compared to the previous model, one is struck by the different manner in which contemporary history is considered. Here it is seen as the place where God's call is manifested, whereas for the first model, it was instead considered as a worldly kingdom opposed to God's. Therefore, the same attitude of consecrated persons towards history takes on different aspects: in the latter model it entails discernment and careful exploration, while in the first one, it opposes a different hierarchy of values.

Finally, the third model highlights the eschatological dimension that is dealt with especially in numbers 26-27 of the Exhortation, even though reference to the consecrated life as sign and announcement of the world to come is also made elsewhere¹⁸. N. 26 starts with the early Church's expectation of the Lord's coming, to then point out that «it is in this perspective that we can understand more clearly *the role of consecrated life as an eschatological sign*.» The connection between waiting for the Lord's coming and religious life may produce interesting results for the relationship between prophecy and history. However, the document prefers not to take this direction, rather to concentrate on the traditional connection of the eschatological dimension with «*the vow of virginity*, which tradition has always interpreted as an *anticipation of the world to come*». Allow me to point out however that in this way the expectation for the coming of the Lord risks being considered only in a personal and sentimental way, as the desire «to live in the hope of meeting him, in order to

¹⁸ Cf. for example N. 32 («The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved, and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (cf. *Mt 22:30*).») and N. 111 («men and women who will be, for the people of our time, dispensers of mercy, heralds of your return, living signs of the Resurrection and of its treasures...»).

be with him for ever.» However, in the paragraph that follows, it also says that the expectation of the Kingdom does not lead to a lack of interest for today's world: «although directed towards the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission, that the Kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness. » In this sense, it can be stated that «*eschatological expectation becomes mission*, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now. »¹⁹

4. A critical interpretation

Exactly twenty years after its publication, *Vita Consecrata* is still a reference document for defining the meaning for reflection on prophecy in consecrated life. According to the interpretation I tried to present, I believe that the framework in which applying the concept of the prophetic character of consecrated life becomes meaningful is that of the relationship between some features of consecrated life and the historical context in which they operate. In the three models I presented this relationship acquires rather different aspects²⁰.

The first model is clearly visible and easy to identify. It is a way of living in the world with a life style that goes against the world. This model re-interprets the concept of professing the evangelical counsels as a criticism towards the attitudes of contemporary culture. It is a model that is easily understood and because of this, it is widely used (I do not know in how many homilies for temporary or perpetual vows I have heard it repeated). Nevertheless, the risk of a moralistic deviation of this model is quite obvious, because it identifies religious vows (and evangelical counsels) with some moral values, and it places them in opposition with the lack of values of contemporary culture. In this way, religious life is put on the same level as the world, in order to give witness to a “just”, “honest”, “fair” way of being a person, which goes against injustice, dishonesty, unfairness of contemporary ethos. One of the worst dangers to which religion is exposed lies within this “worldly” interpretation of religious life: the belief of being the best and building up a fence that not only separates internally, between good and evil, but also externally, separating good people from bad ones, holiness from sin. This separation denies two basic elements. The first is that the world is not

¹⁹ *Vita Consecrata* applies N. 39 a broader teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 39 to consecrated life: «the expectation of a new Earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one, for here grows the body of a new human family, body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age. Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's Kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better order of the human society, it is a vital concern to the Kingdom of God.»

²⁰ Recalling the expressions used by Italo Mancini to talk about the “forms of Christianity”, we could similarly speak of presence, mediation and paradox models: cf. I. MANCINI, *Tornino i volti*, Marietti, Genoa 1989, pp. 3-31.

made only of dark places, but it also includes many lights, that light up while one travels along a painful path in the search for truth. The other is that religious life lives neither of promising certainties nor of faultless coherence. Rather it also trudges along with difficulty through the desert, filled with temptations, doubts and falls (in the words of a Father of the desert, Giovanni Nano: «the monk is pain»). It was not by chance that Enzo Bianchi chose the following title for one of his books «*Non siamo i migliori* (We are not the best)»²¹ about «religious life in the Church, among the people». This expression recalls the words that the starets, Zosima uses to address his disciples in the book *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, we are no holier than those that are outside, but on the contrary, from the very fact of coming here, each of us has confessed to himself that he is worse than others, than all men on earth.... And the longer the monk lives in his seclusion, the more keenly he must recognise that. Else he would have had no reason to come here. When he realises that he is not only worse than others, but that he is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins, national and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained. [...] This knowledge is the crown of life for the monk and for every man. For monks are not a special sort of men, but only what all men ought to be²².

This is the blessing of a religious person, as the Fathers taught, among whom, Evagrio Pontico:

Blessed is the monk who regards himself as 'the off-scouring of all things' (1 Cor. 4:13). Blessed is the monk who looks with great joy on everyone's salvation and progress as if they were his own. Blessed is the monk who regards every man as God after God. A monk is one who is separated from all and united with all. A monk is one who regards himself as linked with every man, through always seeing himself in each²³.

It would not be difficult to go on adding quotes, but I think that the two previous ones are enough to make us feel the authenticity of the experience lived by a monk, a religious person, who has explored his inner emotions and knows the deep motivations and the tangible reality of his vocation²⁴.

The second model of the prophetic relationship between consecrated life and history is the one that emphasises the discernment of God's plan of salvation by listening to His Word and making a careful reading of the signs of the times. I already mentioned the positive value that this model attributes to history, as the place where God's call is heard, and the invitation to an «active and effective involvement in the events of our time» (VC 73). It is basically the position that *Gaudium et Spes* entrusted to the Church as such, thus placing it in the «modern world», in intimate solidarity with «mankind and its history» (GS 1), and therefore, declaring that the Church «has always had the

²¹ E. BIANCHI, *Non siamo migliori. La vita religiosa nella chiesa, tra gli uomini*, Qiqajon, Magnano 2002.

²² F. DOSTOYEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book IV, Chap. I.

²³ EVAGRIO PONTICO, *De oratione*, cc. 121-125.

²⁴ In this regard the words of Pope Francis to the USG, at the audience of November 29, 2013, are particularly meaningful: «You should be real witnesses of a way of doing and acting differently. But in life it is difficult for everything to be clear, precise, outlined neatly. Life is complicated; it consists of grace and sin. He who does not sin is not human. We all make mistakes and we all need to recognize our weakness. A religious who recognizes himself as weak and a sinner does not negate the witness that he is called to give, rather he reinforces it, and this is good for everyone.» (A. SPADARO, «Wake up the world!» *Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life*, in «Civiltà Cattolica» 3925, January 4, 2014, p. 5).

duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel [...] We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.» (GS 4)

The doubts that may arise concerning the application of this model to religious life and to its prophetic character come mainly from the interpretation of the expression «signs of the times»²⁵. It undoubtedly became very popular with the Second Vatican Council; however, the meaning that is commonly attributed to it is above all historical and sociological. In other words, the signs of the times are, broadly speaking, the most typical feature of the historical period we live in that demonstrates the existential, moral and spiritual conditions of our times. Such awareness is essential for an effective ecclesial pastoral action of the Church, which does not live outside of history or oppose it, rather it is deeply inserted in the world that surrounds the Church. In this sense, in order to avoid a self-referential shutdown, it is necessary to maintain the separation between the historical and sociological awareness of the so-called signs of the times and an interpretation of the same from a theological or pastoral point of view.

When speaking of the signs of the times, if we mainly refer to the knowledge of the historical, sociological and cultural changes taking place around us, I am not at all sure whether the religious are the most capable and best prepared people to carry out this task within the Church, given their vocation, the cultural formation they received and the activities that they normally carry out. We must admit that, when dealing with today's society, we need to turn to experts and specialists, who are generally lay people, so that they may enlighten us regarding the events we are witnessing, and whose meaning and complications we are generally not capable of fully understanding. I would say that in this area we have much more to learn than we do to teach.

The prophetic interpretation of the signs of times should be the step that follows, which consists of grasping the pleas of the Spirit within the new situations of today's world in order to «translate [them] courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation» (VC 73). In this case as well, it seems to me that religious life is not particularly lucid or lively. Our structures, both intellectual and material, continuously choke and smother the desire for renewal and insight on new experiences from the start. Today, we are no longer the «Church's light cavalry» in the words of Pope Francis, and instead we suffer from hoarding: «Accumulating goods only burdens and inexorably slows down the journey!»²⁶. It seems that lay people, ecclesial movements and new communities are at present much more

²⁵ Cf. A. TONIOLO, *Vaticano II, pastorale, segni dei tempi: problemi ermeneutici e opportunità ecclesiali*, «Archivio Teologico Torinese» 20 (2014), pp. 19-34; A. STECCANELLA, *Alla scuola del Concilio per leggere i «segni dei tempi». L'interpretazione conciliare dei Signa temporum e la sua recezione ed eredità nel metodo della teologia pratica*, EMP – FTTR, Padova 2014.

²⁶ *Address of Pope Francis to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2014.

equipped than traditional religious orders in order to carry out this task of communicating with the world, which enables the Church to elaborate and put «*new initiatives of evangelization for present-day situations*» (VC 73) into effect.

So now we get to the third model, in which the prophetic character of consecrated life is rooted into its eschatological force. In my opinion, this model puts the element most typical of religious life at the heart of the matter, that is, at the same time, its strongest trait for an *ad intra* and *ad extra* renewal. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that, within the ambit of the documents and literature on consecrated life, the study of this issue is far from making the most of the rich historical, exegetical and theological reflection of the XXth century on eschatology, no longer considered merely as a *de novissimis* issue, rather as an essential dimension of Christian faith.

It is basically a matter of leading faith back to its divine and transcendent origin, and therefore to recognising the primacy of God's action throughout history. The true Christian *eschaton* is the Risen Christ, the Living One, he who is present in His absence because he is the Comer. For this reason, faith in the Risen Christ is expressed in its most original form of waiting for His return (cf. *Lk* 18:8). A Christian eschatology is possible if is rooted in «this Jesus» (Acts 2:32), who is seated at the right hand of the Father, who effuses the Spirit through Him. This eschatology is simply a theology of time and history, encompassed in the tension between believing and bearing witness to a fact that is a promise and waiting for and announcing its accomplishment. *Eschatos* turns human history into a mystery that extends the world reality to the dimensions of divine possibilities.

From the theological point of view, it is precisely in the space/time opened by the invocation and proclamation of faith «Marana tha» (*1Cor* 16:22: «Come, our Lord!», but also «our Lord is coming») that the religious life status finds its meaning. It is by nature absolutely free, unconnected to the functioning of the ecclesial structure, or to worldly changes. It has a doxological value in itself and now even prophetic, in the sense indicated by the above-mentioned passage by Saint Bernard: the religious person does not live for a presence rather for an absence. He roots his life not on what is visible, but rather on what is invisible. His life is as described by Saint John of the Cross as²⁷, «sin arrimo y con arrimo [...] sólo en su Dios arrimada». This expression was perfectly translated by Thérèse of the Child Jesus: «*Appuyée sans aucun appui*»²⁸. In the end, there is a tendency to not see and to not know, which makes up the way of being-in-the-world that is typical of the religious person. The prophetic character of religious life, which is certainly not the only one in the Church, can indeed flourish on this poverty. It is the prophetic feature of he, who is «*scienter nescius, et sapienter*

²⁷ JUAN DE LA CRUZ, *Glosa a lo divino* XI (ed. EDE)

²⁸ THERESE DE L'ENFANT-JESUS, *Poésies*, 30 (ed. Cerf).

indoctus»²⁹, in the words of Gregory the Great about Saint Benedict. As can be seen by these few examples alone, the linguistic image of this condition life is paradox, oxymoron, and it must be preserved at all costs, if we do not want for the salt to lose its taste.

This attitude does not imply that earthly realities be overlooked, rather it entails that they be brought into focus, given that they are being considered from a perspective that goes beyond them, and that aims towards broader horizons. In this sense, the prophetic character entails looking forward, beyond earthly realities towards what is possible, promised and hoped. This does not imply indifference nor disdain for the world, rather freedom towards earthly schemes (*scheme* is the word used by Saint Paul in *1 Cor 7:31*). It is basically the attitude that Saint Teresa of Avila expresses in the famous passage she always carried with her, in her breviary: «Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you, All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.»

If we were to define this third model according to its connection with history, we could precisely use the term of Saint Teresa “patience”, that does not mean resignation, rather accepting reality, waiting and hoping for God’s intervention. It is a word corresponding to the evangelical expression *hypomoné*, that is often translated with the term “perseverance”, but whose etymological meaning means “to stay under”, that is to say, bearing the weight of a reality in which we are called to live, but waiting for a change and deliverance by God. This is the reason why *hypomoné* and *elpís* are often connected in the New Testament language, especially in Paul (cf. for example *1 Ts, 1:3*).

The relationship between prophecy and history can therefore be defined as “staying patiently under the burden” as an expression of love and hope for it. Giuseppe Ruggieri writes:

Those who hope in the future of their burden do not throw it away or abandon it but they bear it. *Hypomoné* is the attitude of the Christian who nurtures hope for all the men and women he meets and for all things he can experiment, the peace, glory and beauty of the transfigured creation. He therefore accepts to bear their difference with respect to the Kingdom, in a loving agony that keeps Christ company, as Pascal had it “until the end of the world”³⁰.

In taking a closer look, the eschatological tension that is present in religious life is a form of radical love for the world and history. In Christ’s image, the religious person embraces them, takes them upon himself and carries them with him in the effort and hope of reaching the Kingdom of God together. In this way, he embraces himself, his frailty and weakness, the history of his family, of his religious community, of his people, including in all this the spark of a desire for transfiguration and salvation, which is nourished through in the face of Jesus Christ.

²⁹ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogi*, II, Prolegomena (PL 66, 126). Gregory’s expression entered in the feast liturgy in the following way: «knowingly unacquainted with its ways and wisely unlearned in its wisdom.»

³⁰ G. RUGGIERI, *La verità crocifissa. Il pensiero cristiano di fronte all’alterità*, Carocci, Rome 2007, p. 13.

The religious person, in fact, brings into his life a diversity that does not imply separation from the other, nor assimilation to the other, rather it entails taking on the burden, putting the other on one's shoulders with the love of the Good Samaritan or the Shepherd. If we were to take away diversity or relationships, we would deprive consecrated life of its vital core, its prophetic strength. Keeping them both in a state of difference without contrast and in a relationship deprived of assimilation, means accepting the most difficult or radical aspect, that is to say passivity, the suffering of Christian love.

5. Some practical conclusions

During this study on prophecy in consecrated life, it clearly emerged that this is not a minor issue rather that it affects the deepest identity of our vocation. This leads us to the first conclusion: **it is necessary to deepen the theological reflection about our identity as religious.** Without an appropriate understanding of the theological meaning of our presence in the Church and in the world, it is impossible to make any effective progress in other areas. We rightly say that we need a renewal, yet what renewal is possible if we do not possibly have at least an idea first – I do not expect it to be clear and distinct in the Cartesian way – but at least plausible – of our own identity?

The lack of a radical nature and rigor in our thinking is probably one of the truest and deepest causes of a similar shortcoming in our practice. A good theology has a way of “brightening up”, in every sense, while a bad theology may instead lead to a shutdown. The first helps to see the path ahead and to make plans with eyes wide open, while the second instead, leaves us with empty concepts and blind intuitions, to use Kant's words. We often say that we need to make courageous decisions, but instead of courage, I would rather say that we need logical coherence, which requires clear thinking rather than a bold will.

In fact, we have religious men and women doing a little bit of everything. We are aware that this situation is neither prophetic nor bearable. Religious life is therefore doomed sooner or later to pass, that is to say, to naturally fade away or be transformed. What religious life seems more committed to nowadays are conservation strategies, which, generally speaking, only helps to delay the final outcome. **We should replace conservation strategies with formation strategies, enabling religious persons, or at least the most capable and healthy among them, to question themselves about the meaning of their vocation, in order to carry out a serious discernment and to implement practical life choices.** If this kind of strategy that is almost always recommended in official documents and exhortations prove to be ineffective, it is because they are not based on clear principles and aims. To which religious life do we want to form our brothers and sisters? Which place do we think we have in the Church and in society? What should we be aiming at? What are our

priorities? Surprisingly we hear people say that our priorities are new vocations or rethinking our presence: that is to say, to increase and reduce. We are considering only quantity: we look for vocations, and we decrease or increase (depending on the request) the number of houses. But the real problems are never linked to quantity, rather to quality. In the words of the *Evangelii Gaudium*, I would say that we need to give priority to time rather than to space:

Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illuminates them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of turning back. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity. (EG 223)

Our concern for maintaining the present entails overlooking what is practically more important, that is to say, fostering a process of growth and maturation of our religious identity, the only way from which innovations capable of transforming our spaces will stem. I know that it is easier to try to fix spaces, but I know that we need to resist the temptation of what is easier and obvious. Of course, Pope Francis reminds us that in order to spur the historical processes capable of bearing fruits through historical events, «clear convictions and tenacity» are required. Do we have them? Which are they? Are they already written somewhere? And even if they were, shouldn't we re-read them in order to apply them in our times, for ourselves, in today's situations?

As I tried to demonstrate above, I believe that today, consecrated life must find its eschatological character. I explained that the way of talking about the eschatological dimension of consecrated life requires a deep rethinking and updating. I would say that **we need to work on a theology and a spirituality based on the expectation of the coming**. At least for some time, we should mentally disengage ourselves from our being subjects of works, as priests, intellectuals, social workers or whatever, and go back to our being religious as such. What remains after we have practiced *epoché* of all the rest? Honestly and sincerely speaking, I would say that what is left is precisely the already-mentioned *hypomoné*, that is to say the ability to remain in history, without escaping from it but also without being absorbed by it, bearing its suffering and its unanswered questions.

When stressing the eschatological dimension of religious life, I would like to highlight that it is no longer possible to foster a logic and a rhetoric of continuity (institutional and clerical continuity), when all around us everything expresses discontinuity and wreckage. If we are afraid to speak of this issue, if we prefer to limit ourselves to making politically-correct speeches, we will be uselessly looking for the object of our reflection on the prophetic character of religious life. Such character passes through that “darkest valley” (*Psalms* 23:4), exile, path in the desert, that are overflowing with God's promise, in so far as they are emptied of human plans. We need to stop and reflect, we need a break, because we need to “to destroy and to demolish” and “to build and to plant” (*Jer* 1:10).

However, we still do not know how, where and when to do it. Discontinuity and breaches lie within facts, within history. It is up to us to choose to be dragged adrift by them or to anchor ourselves down in order to have the possibility of rethinking our course. There is a passage in Isaiah, in Chapter 29, with which I would like to conclude: «Be irresolute, stupefied, blind yourselves and stay blind! For the Lord [...] has shut your eyes, (the prophets) and covered your heads (the seers). For you the revelation of all this has become like the words of a sealed scroll. When it is handed to one who can read with the request, “Read this”, he replies, “I cannot, it is sealed”. When it is handed to one who cannot read with the request, “Read this”, he replies, “I cannot read”» (*Is* 29:9-12).

There are times in which the only possible form of prophecy is to be irresolute and astonished, realising that the book is sealed or written in a language we still have not learned. It is time to be patient, to “stay under” the load, thus waiting to become radical in prophecy, as in the slogan of this meeting.

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