

Consecrated Life and Pastoral Care for Young People Between Meaning and Relevance

1. Introduction

There can be no doubt that the subject of consecrated life in the contemporary world, in particular in the youth culture of the secularised societies of western Europe, is not easy to address and at times it is even difficult to discern. On the carpet there are very many keys by which to engage in a reading, interpretations from different points of view, and, without any doubt, also many interests. Before starting to talk about the question itself, I would like to emphasis two aspects that I believe are fundamental if we want to be able to contemplate this reality with the eyes of ‘good shepherds of young people’.

First of all, I believe that one cannot examine the question of religious life detached from the Christian life as such. This statement is not one that can be taken for granted because some analyses are based upon the *opposition* of these two aspects: many Christian young people certainly want to commit themselves in a generous way, but not within an institution that they see as obsolete, or at least one that conditions their generous dedication to their neighbour. To exaggerate, I would say (evoking phrases from the recent past) that their slogan is: *Christ, yes, commitment to the Kingdom as well; but Church, no, and consecrated life – out of the question!*

The second element is the way in which this question can be addressed. Personally, I think that it is not positive to begin with an axiological assessment of the contemporary situation which leads almost inevitably to pessimism and to affirm that today’s young people are ‘less good’ (not to say ‘worse’) than those of previous seasons. This is not a strategy of *‘captatio benevolentiae’* but something that arises from a belief of our faith: God has not abandoned His people; even less has He stopped seeing young people as ‘the most delicate and precious part’ of human society, as St. John Bosco said. To say that today’s youth is ‘better’ than other epochs (and I would have no lack of arguments on certain aspects of this) would be to fall into the same temptation. Let us say simply as a point of departure that this is a situation that is not only different but also above all *unprecedented*. Many contemporary factors have never existed before in our world. To cite some of these factors – taking up what I already said to the Superior Generals in a paper that I gave in 2006 – a human being, even if he always lives in the present (something that is obvious), is also an ‘animal of the future’ (E. Bloch, W. Pannenberg); he is placed by nature ‘in front’ of utopia, of what still does not ‘have a place’ in our world and history. This applies even more to the young generations who live this orientation towards the future starting with their own psychosomatic identity, which is written into the humblest of their cells.

Therefore, we find in the post-modern context a ‘tragic’ drama: the threat of the future which hangs over humanity, and above all over the young generations, offering an existential contradiction: on the one hand, with the irresistible request for a future horizon; and, on the other, with the lack of such a horizon. If we add the rejection of the past by the culture of today’s young people, we can conclude that the young generations are closed up in a small space that allows only present time, and all that remains is to try to ‘live the fleeting moment’.

During the course of my paper, I highlighted two fundamental and unprecedented elements: the possibility of a nuclear war, which for the first time in the history of humanity could destroy the planet, or at least human life on it (the possibility that cockroaches could survive was of little comfort!), and ecological imbalance. These are problems that reflect in a dramatic way the global character of humanity today: ‘we are all equal in front of the ozone hole’, observed J. Moltmann. This ‘suppression from without’ of the horizon of the future is a factor that is typical of our time and it is essential if we want to understand the obsessive fixation on the present and the search for immediate satisfactions that characterise the post-modern epoch.

This is not the ‘trying to live today’ with the prospect of a tomorrow that should be anchored in the present because there could not be a tomorrow...

Given this completely new character and complexity of the situation of young people, a text of the great Russian novelist F.M. Dostoevsky seems to be very illuminating. At the end of his novel *The Adolescent*, written in 1870, and thus almost 150 year ago, he wrote:

Youth is true solely because of the fact of being young. Perhaps the very early impulses of madness are only a thirst for order and a search for truth. Whose fault is it if some young people of our time look for this truth and this order in things that are so stupid and ridiculous that it is even difficult to believe that they could have believed in them? I will say on this point that once, in a time that is not really so distant, in the space of a single generation, one would have felt less displeasure at these interesting young people because with this stage of life finished, they would have come together successfully at a higher level than ours in a cultured society, forming a single conglomerate with it. If, for example, at the beginning of this journey, they had realised the disorder and the absurdity of the lack of nobility of their family environment, of the absence of traditions and fine forms, perhaps this would have been much better, given that they would then have consciously aspired to win what they did not have and for this reason they would have also learned to appreciate it. Today things are very different precisely because there is almost nothing to which they can hang on to. [1].

For this reason, I will try to describe some characteristics of the situation of young people and to explore them, in particular in relation to the subject of consecrated life. Obviously enough, without omitting necessary value judgements.

I would not like to cite in this introduction a factor that is typical of our time at an international level: the growth of *Islam*, which has arrived specifically in Europe to ‘break the rules of the game’ of the lay and often secular environment which was convinced that it would be able to live in peace.

I do not seek in any way to analyse this tremendously complex phenomenon, nor to justify many of its expressions. But I believe that the attractiveness that it has for some sectors of youth in Europe and the United States of America is significant. I believe that it came, at times brutally, to raise the question of the meaning of religion in the life of a believer. Perhaps we have forgotten too rapidly how – to use the famous phrase of Paul Tillich – ‘the ultimate concern’[2] is structured in the life of a human being, which implies essentially the radical character of a believer, even if in no way does this force the other to think in the same way as I do or even less to structure his life according to my beliefs. I believe, nonetheless, that we have affirmed too easily that religions are the source of mutual tolerance. Indeed, at least from this formal point of view that we are employing, this is not so obvious. History has demonstrated this frequently and painfully. My opinion on the matter is that the essence of Christianity, its ‘contents’, to express the point somehow, is love, and above all love for God; and in Him love for neighbour, for every human being, must always overcome the formal tendency to intolerance: love can only ‘win’ with the arms of love, otherwise it loses its identity.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that ‘religious tolerance’, as an expression of respect for the freedom of other people, when it is misunderstood becomes mere indifference towards what other people think or do, as long as they do not disturb me. One could apply the brilliant phrase of Nietzsche: ‘There are those who say: ‘Virtue is necessary’, but fundamentally they believe that only the police are necessary’.[3] What I want to emphasise in citing this characteristic of Islam is that the young people of today do not ignore or despise the value of a radical approach, even though they do not interpret it adequately. Its lack is, perhaps, one of the aspects that can most put us in contact with adult Christians and, *a fortiori*, with those who live the consecrated life.

2. The Christian Life: the Vocation to Holiness

The subject of the 'radical approach' is too large to be examined here. In a Christian key, it is called the dynamic towards perfection/holiness.^[4] As I have already said, if the contents of our faith is love – 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:35) – the only Christian perfection that can exist is love for God and love for neighbour (cf. Mk 12:28-34 and *passim*).

In the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* we find a statement of the greatest importance for our analysis. When referring to the Second Vatican Council (*LG*, n. 42), this document observes: 'In fact, all those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit's gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love' (*VC*, n. 30).

It may seem strange that in a context such as ours people want to speak about 'holiness' when it is said that what is needed, in the best of cases, is to limit oneself to living the Christian identity quite well. However, such is not the case. I believe that we must have the courage to propose to the young Christians of today the 'highest measurement' of holiness, as St. John Bosco himself did...to young people who lived in the street!

There is a very interesting text of S. Kierkegaard in his *Intimate Diary* where he writes: 'Imagine a remedy whose entire dose acts as a laxative and whose half dose acts as an astringent...This is what happens with Christianity...the half dose acts in a way that is diametrically the opposite of what a whole dose does.'^[5] The medicine that Kierkegaard imagined exists even though he did not know this: antibiotics behave in a diametrically opposite way if a whole dosage is taken or if a half dose is taken. In the latter case, medical doctors recommend that it would be better not to begin...the only thing that happens in that case is that the bacteria get stronger and become immune: 'what does not kill me makes me stronger', according to the aphorism of Nietzsche. In the Gospel we find a small example of this and it is really along the same lines: leaving a tower unfinished is worse than never having begun it (cf. Lk 14:28-30). This is the classic 'lukewarmness' which in the Apocalypse is defined with disgust as 'vomit' (cf. Ap 3:15-16). And yet distinguishing between *leaving a tower half built* and *arriving when a tower is half built* is a matter of justice. In this latter case this is never a failure, a source of mockery. Lukewarmness is not *arriving half way* through but of *being satisfied with half*.

It may seem 'out of place' to speak about holiness in this epoch. But I am convinced that young people do not want to be satisfied simply with living the Christian life 'half way' or even less with accepting guides who live their faith in a mediocre way. On the other hand, the Christian life is not always perceived as a realisation of love and as a consequence as a source of joy.

I agree with what was said in a recent article on the 'New Evangelisation' in the review *Salesianum*. The author offers a paradigm of the fulfilment of a human being, according to the synergy of two perspectives: the 'objective' fulfilment, which is synonymous with perfection, fullness and holiness, and the 'subjective' fulfilment which is synonymous with happiness, joy, and even, in its authentic sense, pleasure. Within this paradigm, the diagnosis of the current situation of young people has diagnosed an accentuation of the subjective dimension which at times excludes (or seems to exclude) the objective dimension: 'I want to enjoy the present moment and nothing else interests me'. In the attempt to interpret this attitude, the author states that at least to a certain extent this is an 'oscillating reaction' compared to the previous situation, which had accentuated, equally in a unilateral way, the objective dimension, with few references to the subjective dimension (joy, happiness), given that this would be guaranteed, anyway...in eternal life. This way of thinking – and this is something that has to be recognised – was often prevalent in Christian theology and spirituality. It was stigmatised in a critical way by F. Nietzsche himself: 'He whom they call 'Redeemer', he has thrown into chains...They should sing me better songs so that I may learn to believe in their Redeemer; his disciples should appear to me to be more redeemed!'^[6]

This author concludes as follows: to the extent that this analysis is correct, it allows us to see the present moment at a deep level and peacefully, rather than complaining about the situation of young people, and it leads us not to look for a sterile and impossible return to the future but, rather, to look to the future with

a view to achieving a synthesis in which the two dimensions – the objective and the subjective – can be fully integrated. This synthesis can exist only in what at one and the same time makes us *holy and happy*, specifically because it makes us similar to God, who is Love.^[7]

3. Identity and Relevance: the Dialectical Tension in Consecrated Life

What is the meaning of consecrated life today, especially for the young people of our epoch? What is the use of consecrated life? Both of these questions appear to be almost equivalent; in reality, they are not equivalent at all. The first poses questions about *identity*, whereas the second poses questions about *relevance*. I imagine that this language evokes in many of us the reading of the extraordinary book by Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. This dialectical tension, which constitutes a paradigm by which to understand the situation of the Church in recent times (the author, obviously enough, does not refer to religious or consecrated life), runs the risk of neglecting one or two essential aspects, placing the accent on its opposite. Thus, when the Church seeks to protect her own identity at all costs she can become irrelevant. In contrary fashion, when you are in the first row, side to side with social movements and popular demands in different areas, one can ‘gain the whole world’ (in the best of hypotheses) but run the risk of ‘losing one’s soul’, or, at least, one’s own religious identity. As Pope Francis has emphasised on a number of occasions, one becomes reduced to being an NGO (or something similar, according to what one’s ‘charism’ is) that is, in varying degrees, qualified and efficient.

Indeed, Moltmann lays emphasis on the fact that this dialectic cannot be solved at the level of the Church. Instead one must seek unity at a deeper level, in the ‘God of Jesus Christ’, and more specifically in the cross of Jesus.

- When exploring this relationship between *identity and relevance*, specifically applied to consecrated life, the first thing that we can say is that the two terms are not at the same level. Even if they enrich each other they cannot be interchangeable. Identity is the foundation of relevance and not vice versa. To use a very simple example, a living being is not human because he can think, decide and speak: he can do all of this because he is a human being. From the depths of his ‘human’ identity he can perform all these actions. It is true that Jesus said ‘by their fruits will you know them’, but nobody thinks that a tree is an apple tree because it produces apples – rather the opposite. What happens is that I see first the fruits of that tree and from that I deduce the identity of the plant.

- On this point I think that it is necessary to make clear what we mean by ‘relevance’. A certain discernment is required because of its intrinsic ambiguity. Often one makes a distinction, almost playing with words, between *efficiency* and *efficacy*. The first (*efficiency*) is often considered in a functionalist and ‘horizontal’ sense, whereas the second (*efficacy*) reflects the authentically evangelical spirit from which the Christian identity itself is born. Without doubt, this distinction is a valid one, but the problem remains: where is the demarcation line? In addition, does it pass by way of the objectivity of actions or, rather, through the subjectivity of intentions, as was observed many years ago in a very critical but not always right way by Hans Urs von Balthasar?

- Personally, and especially during my service in the Congregation of Salesians as Major Rector, I have laid emphasis on evangelical subjectivity as a criterion for discernment in relation to this aspect. In order not to remain in the rhetoric of a simple change of word, I would like to explore the point at a deeper level.

- a) ‘*Significatività*’ (‘significance’) has as its verbal root a reference to ‘*segno*’ (‘sign’) and this immediately refers to *sacrament* because (as our fathers taught us) this is a ‘real and effective sign of Grace’. However, we should remember that this notion of tradition has been enriched by the Magisterium of the Church and by theology starting with its original source, Jesus Christ, a sacrament to the utmost,^[8] and with the *Church*, the sacrament of salvation, which is the central theme of the Second Vatican Council.

- b) As regards what has been said above, one of the essential characteristics of a sign is its ‘perceptibility’ (which is not only ‘visible’: one need only remember the beginning of the first letter of St. John: ‘what we have *seen*, what we have *heard*, what our hands have *touched*...’) for an ‘imperceptible sign is useless’. The Church is useful to God and humanity because she is visible, because she expresses the love of God, thereby continuing the mission of Jesus: ‘Whoever sees me, sees the Father’.
- c) On the other hand, it should be remembered that a sign does not concentrate on itself; as a sign, it communicates another reality. Smoke is not the sign of smoke – it is the sign of fire. Jesus, as a sign, refers to the invisible Father (‘no one has seen the Father’, St. John stresses twice); the Church cannot be an end in herself – she is a sign of the Love of God, and she is for the world not for herself. Something similar should be said – and with greater justification – about consecrated life as well: it is not a ‘sacrament’ in the real sense but it is in itself a sacrament in the broadest sense.
- d) Lastly – and with a view to being adopted as a criterion for the assessment of consecrated life and its activity – I would like to explore a linguistic detail. When a reality loses its character of being a sign, it becomes *insignificant*. However, the semantics of this world clash with this explanation because the insignificant is usually identified with what is little, with what can only just be perceived by our senses.

We can go deeper into this etymology by using an example. A small apostolic work with a group of consecrated men/women as its animating core, cooperating with Christian laity, in an area where it is possible to engage in a pastoral mission in the line with the charism, and where that work is in direct contact with its target group, is evangelically *significant*. Let us suppose that the consecrated men/women involved in this work decrease in number, the contact with the target group then becomes practically impossible because the religious are only just sufficient in number to lead and manage the work/institution, which, in the meantime, has grown disproportionately. Paradoxically, the work has become...*insignificant*, even though it is very large!

And one of the most deleterious effects that this situation produces is the loss of quality in fraternal life and in interpersonal relationships. A community that sacrifices its own identity in order to support a supposed relevance loses its ‘soul’. And naturally enough it becomes infertile, unable to provoke enthusiasm in young people and, with this, new ‘vocations’ as well. In this significance, I am convinced, the future of our Congregation and consecrated life in general, is at stake. This is one of the safest criteria by which to discern what is *evangelical efficacy* and what is *functionalist efficiency*.

4. What Kind of Consecrated Life for Young People Today?

This question is an interesting one, even if it brings ambiguities with it. It is not a matter of ‘adapting’ religious life to the needs of youth culture or of even forgoing in the face of an inherent radical approach not only consecrated life but Christian life itself.

On the other hand, we have to recognise that the young people who knock at the doors of our houses and works are the *young people of today*. At times it seems that some Congregations are looking for candidates from the Middle Ages or the Christianity of Constantine.

I believe that the magnificent analysis of the document on formation in religious institutes, *Potissimum Institutioni*, continues to be valid as regards its general guidelines, even if evidently there are many elements that in the 1990s, when it was published, did not exist or at least were not relevant as they are today:

"The sensitivity of young people profoundly affects their perception of the values of justice, non-violence, and peace. Their hearts are disposed to fellowship, friendship, and solidarity. They are greatly moved by causes that relate to the quality of life and the conservation of nature." Likewise, they have a thirst for freedom and authenticity. Generally, and at times ardently, they aspire toward a better world; there is no lack of those who are engaged in political, social, cultural, and charitable associations in order to contribute to the betterment of humanity. If they

have not been corrupted by totalitarian ideologies, they are for the most part keenly interested in the liberation of humanity from racism, underdevelopment, war, and injustices. This attitude is not always -- at times is far from being -- motivated by religious, philosophical, or political principles, but the sincerity of these youth and the depth of their generosity cannot be denied. Among youth may be found some who are marked by profound religious sentiment, but this sentiment itself needs to be evangelized. Finally, there are some, and these are not necessarily in the minority, who lead a sufficiently exemplary Christian life and are courageously engaged in the apostolate, already experiencing what it means to "follow Jesus Christ more closely." (*Potissimum Institutioni*, n. 87).

Though this is so, their doctrinal and ethical frames of reference tend to be relative, and to such an extent that they do not always know very well if there are solid points of reference for attaining the truth about humanity, the world, and things. The lack of the teaching of philosophy in schools is frequently a reason for this. Young people hesitate to say who they are and what they are called to become. If they have some conviction about the existence of good and evil, the meaning of these words seems to be at odds with respect to what it was for preceding generations. There is frequently a gap between the level of their secular knowledge, which can be highly specialized at times, and that of their psychological growth and their Christian life. Not all have had a happy experience within their family, considering the crises which have afflicted this institution, either where the culture has not been deeply influenced by Christianity, where the culture is of a post-Christian type where there is an urgent need of a new evangelization, or even where the culture has long been evangelized. They learn much through images, and the present system of education encourages this at times, but they read less. It thus happens that their culture is characterized by a nearly total absence of an historical dimension, as if our world began today. They have not been spared by consumerism, with the deceptions which it begets. Succeeding, at times with difficulty, in finding their place in the world, some let themselves be seduced by violence, drugs, and eroticism. It is becoming less and less rare to find young people among the candidates for religious life who have had unhappy experiences in this last domain (*Potissimum Institutioni*, n. 88).

A question that arises spontaneously in many milieus of consecrated life is the following: why is it that there are increasingly fewer vocations in that milieu whereas vocations come for other socio-charismatic works or works of other kinds? It is impossible to answer this question, as it has been posed, in a few words -- such is not always the case. One of the first factors is the *family*, and this is much more so now than in other epochs. Another factor, which I find very interesting, is the increasing 'charismatic' identity linked to the greater age of a person when these decisions are taken. To engage in a very generic assessment: in other epochs a teenager who wanted to become a priest saw this ideal as his priority, and membership of a Congregation or Institute was a choice linked to certain special moments: the young person went to a school, a church or a youth group linked to and/or animated by one religious Institute rather than by another. Today, instead, in many cases the priority is given to membership of this or that Institute. Expressed in a very simple way: once there was *the priest who was a Salesian* (or a Franciscan, Jesuit or Claretian); today there is the *Salesian who is a priest*.

Despite all of this, we cannot ignore the fact that in many cases our style of life does not *enthuse* them (etymologically: it does not fill them with God) for two principal reasons (amongst others): because they do not find in our communities *real homes, units of fraternal communion*, even though there are some members of the community who convince them through the exemplariness. And then because we religious are perceived, far too often, as 'charism bureaucrats', to use the famous, but in large part unfair, phrase of E. Drewermann. It is not worthwhile to accept the undeniable renunciations that consecrated life involves only to live that life in a mediocre way. Even though this is strange and paradoxical, the young people who come from a high socio-economic and cultural background do not only look for consistency and conformity -- they

also look for a radical approach and – why should this not be said? – for heroism, always lived in total giving of love to God and to our brothers and sisters. On the other hand, one can run the risk of being converted into *Taleban*, unable to understand and accept others.

On the other hand, I do not manage to see the ‘fight of the generations’ as a priority problem, as long as one can meet older fellow religious, indeed very old fellow religious, who are happy with their vocation, and we seek to accept them as they are, even though it is difficult to understand them. Time treats us like wine: good is always increased; evil becomes like vinegar and is increasingly acidic. One of the providers of formation whom I remember with greatest affection, a good musician, once said to me when speaking about modern music: ‘I do not understand it but I imagine and believe that it is beautiful’. Young consecrated people do not want elderly consecrated people who ‘want to appear like them’, but fathers, at times ‘grandparents’, who are authentic and understanding.

How beautiful it would be if we could fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah in our Christian and consecrated lives: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: in those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’ (Zac 8:23)!

5. A Cancer of Contemporary Religious Life: an Individualistic Living in the Virtual World

It may appear strange and out of place to speak here about an aspect that is apparently secondary, or even worse, to demonise it by defining it as a ‘cancer’ when, in reality, it is one of the characteristics of today’s world, above all for young people and constitutes one of the most revolutionary creations of humanity. All of this is very true but this is a planetary phenomenon that is tremendously ambivalent. Paradoxically, I will try to avoid a ‘moralising’ judgement on its manifestations, in line with what has already been said in this paper, avoiding at the same time ‘sectorialising it’ (contextualising it, which would mean, instead, ignoring the scale of the problem).

Obviously enough, this is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to religious life. It is beginning to manifest itself, however, in the sphere of religious poverty as well. One is not dealing, obviously, with indicating in our formation handbooks what model of iPhone is allowed, or whether it is advisable or not to place filters on internet, etc....(in brackets: it is not so evident, differently to what one might think, that the problem increases or diminishes according to the socio-economic situation of countries and continents – at times the consecrated people of the ‘richest’ nations are characterised by greater austerity in this area).

I prefer to start from the essential of consecrated life, total self-giving to God and to other people, out of love. This involves, naturally, according to the ‘charismatic identity’, a full relationship with people, above all with those people who live in the ‘existential’ fringes. The virtual world directly threatens this direct and interpersonal context, privileging the group and even the communities of Facebook. To express the point in poor words, one runs the risk of no longer being a concrete expression of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, but of becoming ‘specialists in pastoralism’, perhaps obtaining information on Wikipedia.

I will also try to analyse, from this point of view, a phenomenon strictly connected to the ‘bad’ use of internet – pornography. In this area we would be ‘disorientated’ if we sought to start from a moral outlook in order to apply our anathema to it. The young people of today, including young religious, would not be so far from the truth if they accused us of having a Manichean and pessimistic vision of human reality as a whole, including the human body, that masterpiece of God, and sexuality. Adults must be aware that here the paradigm has changed and if this is not taken into account we will be involved in a ‘dialogue of the deaf’.

This is certainly not a completely new phenomenon. It is new, however, in terms of its range and aggressiveness. More than fifty years ago, a famous American psychologist, when citing Josef Pieper, declared in his book *Love*: ‘Pornography (in this case he was referring to *Playboy*) has not removed the fig leaf from the body of women; the only thing that it has done is to change its location: now the leaf covers the

face'. It seems to me to be impossible to express more precisely and incisively what we mean: the depersonalisation of the human being.

To use a simple comparison, we can say that what is most like an authentic hundred euro banknote...is a counterfeit hundred euro banknote. This is exactly what happens with pornography: it seeks to present reality as it is in human terms but in reality this last is falsified in its entirety: a counterfeit banknote is worth neither a hundred euros nor one euro...But it can only be true if it is as close as possible to the real.

I am fully aware that this is only one aspect of the phenomenon of pornography. But seen in this way, not in dramatic terms, its deepest danger is revealed: it makes the person increasingly unable to love and be loved; and even more: incapable of forming a relationship with the other as a person. In addition, with this paradigm, we can respond to those people, whether young consecrated people or otherwise, who spend the whole of their day surfing virtually (but not virtuously) on internet and say to us: 'what's wrong with that? I don't see anything 'wrong' (meaning by 'wrong' pornography). In this case, as well, the underlying problem is the same: those who speak are becoming increasingly 'depersonalised'. In this way, in the end, they will find themselves alone...and with their 'ghosts'.

When Pope Francis exhorted bishops to 'have the odour of sheep' he was not referring principally to austerity and poverty, and even less to neglecting personal hygiene. In this case I can imagine how the air of the assembly of the Bishops' Conference was unbreathable! What he wanted to emphasise was the immediate and personal contact of the Good Shepherd with his sheep, calling them by their name, trying with real physical hard work to find the lost sheep, and above all offering his life for them...

6. Is Religious Life 'Useful'? A Parable for the Future and Hope

At first sight, it would seem that this question is merely rhetorical and formulated only to provoke an answer that is completely in the affirmative. But things are not that simple. At the end of *Vita Consecrata* Pope John Paul II writes:

Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life? Is the consecrated life not a kind of "waste" of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good, for the benefit of humanity and the Church? These questions are asked more frequently in our day, as a consequence of a utilitarian and technocratic culture which is inclined to assess the importance of things and even of people in relation to their immediate "usefulness". But such questions have always existed, as is eloquently demonstrated by the Gospel episode of the anointing at Bethany: "Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment" (*Jn* 12:3). When Judas, using the needs of the poor as an excuse, complained about such waste, Jesus replied: "Let her alone!" (*Jn* 12:7). This is the perennially valid response to the question which many people, even in good faith, are asking about the relevance of the consecrated life: Could one not invest one's life in a more efficient and reasonable way for the betterment of society? This is how Jesus replies: "Let her alone!" Those who have been given the priceless gift of following the Lord Jesus more closely consider it obvious that he can and must be loved with an undivided heart, that one can devote to him one's whole life, and not merely certain actions or occasional moments or activities. The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all "utilitarian" considerations, is a sign of *unbounded generosity*, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 104).

Leaving to one side certain phrases which it would be necessary to qualify, one has to recognise that consecrated life will be of increasingly less ‘use’ to society because society itself cannot take responsibility for activities and works that in other epochs only the Church, and within the Church consecrated life, performed. For example, the field of education, advancing human welfare, health care...

However, all of this does not eliminate in an absolute sense the evangelical efficacy of consecrated life, its ‘significance’, which is expressed in activities involving education, promotion and assistance, without, however, ever limiting itself to these.

I would like to end this paper on consecrated life by locating that life in a much more important context and through a parable, basing myself in my thinking and also in the use of some phrases on the experience of the Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Because the characteristic of being a ‘sign’ is specific to consecrated life, the question of God is referred to: what is the ‘use’ of God?

To this question the history of the Church and of human thought has given various and different answers. Perhaps at a deep level they are inadequate: to think that God ‘is useful to us for something’ means not seeing God in a serious way but reducing Him to a mere means with a view to an end that is different from Him.

It seems to me that the history of humanity is like the history of a human person, which takes place from his infancy to his full human maturity. A child ‘needs’ his parents because he is not able to defend himself on his own: his physical survival, his food, his upbringing...His parents are ‘useful’ in all of this and he ‘needs’ them.

Then the time of adolescence and youth comes, during which we know that the approach of the child will change radically: ‘I do not need you!’ Then he gets by on his own and continues with his life, his studies and his relationships. In addition, where he does need his parents this is simply because his childhood and youth have been extended – home, money, a car.

However, the relationship does not finish like that. When adulthood comes, he no longer needs his parents. Is that really the case? Is not, rather, that moment of maturity the moment when he begins to understand in its real sense the ‘need’ that he has for his parents, especially when they are no longer in this world? His parents were needed not to solve problems or to help him perform those tasks that he could not perform on his own: he could have done all of that on his own! His parents were needed because their presence and their support were a precious and irreplaceable treasure for him.

If we adopt this parable, which reflects a ‘mega-tendency’ of humanity, we can understand that until a few centuries ago God was ‘needed’ to solve my problems and the problems of the whole of humanity. In our ‘adolescent’ epoch we no longer feel *the need for God*. In addition, in some spheres, it is necessary for God not to exist because He could be perceived as one who blocks and impedes our human fulfilment, in a similar way to what is taught by psychology and pedagogy as regards a child’s rejection of his parents. If such is the case, bearing the ‘burden of history’ now, can we imagine at what level of humanity we are preparing for a future stage, when we will be able to rediscover in a totally new way the authentic need that we have for God? This step, without doubt, will not be ‘automatic’, and I believe that this will help consecrated life in an optimal way in the future.

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[1] F.M. Dostoevskij, ‘Adolescente’, in *Opere II* (Madrid, Aguilar, 1977), pp. 5, 1919.

[2] Vedere P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1972, p. 278 passim.

[3] F. Nietzsche, *Così parlò Zarathustra* (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2013), p. 169.

[4] In my opening speech to the twenty-seventh General Chapter of the Salesians I addressed this problem with reference to its etymology: putting down roots, having solid bases. In the same speech I made a distinction between the ‘radical approach’ and ‘perfection’. A small plant is not asked to produce abundant fruit: it is asked to have good roots.

- [5] S. Kierkegaard, *Diario intimo* (Buenos Aires, Santiago Rueda, 1955), p. 448.
- [6] F. Nietzsche, *Così parlò Zarathustra* (Madrid, Alianza Editorial), pp. 162-164.
- [7] J.L. Plascencia, 'La validità fondamentale della gioia', in *Salesianum* 75 (2013) 149-151, 155.
- [8] One need only remember the 'pre-conciliar' (in the temporal and causal sense) work of E. Schillebeeckx, *Cristo, sacramento dell'incontro con Dio*.