

“THE YOUNG AND CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY”
Experiences and Reflections
on young people’s challenges and difficulties, with and in religious life
today

I’ve been given the topic “The young and consecrated life today, with a particular focus on the challenges and problems (and opportunities) of young people, with and in consecrated life today.”

I’m put before a very vast subject that requires real differentiation, given the variegated situations and circumstances in which young people live throughout the world. Speaking about young people in general and especially about young people of the 21st century without taking into account the great difference between Europeans, Americans, Asians and those from Oceania and Africa would inevitably mean succumbing to the temptation of Eurocentrism. On the other hand, what is happening to the religious life in Europe is already in progress elsewhere, for example in Latin America, and not only there.

This means that globalization is leading to a homogenization of peoples and especially of the young, flattening cultures and offering one single social model. Pope Francis repeats that this is not an epoch of changes but a real change in epochs, i.e. the emergence of a new humanism, of a man who is culturally new, of a society governed by diverging criteria and “values,” of a world increasingly controlled by economics and technology.

1. A New Humanism

With this in mind, we could say that the new secular humanism being configured—this so-called “planetary culture”—is transforming the world into a “global village,” in which all men and women live.

The influence of the extremely powerful means of social communication, the popularization of technology—although at different paces—, the unstoppable flow of migrants and refugees, the increasing exchange of intercultural relations, tourism, neoliberalism, and other forms of human relations are indeed producing a confluence towards common forms of a culture that is breaking the intergenerational communication (between the world of adult and that of the young) and the chain of transmission of a system of values, ideals, and feelings that were shared by the family, the Church, and the society.

This new culture also has some *more positive characteristics*: humanity's effort for continuous *integral progress* that makes it possible to live in a more human environment, at the service of all people and the world's nations; the *radical rejection* of all forms of *totalitarianism, dogmatism, and fanaticism* that obstruct people's access to democracy's political system; *respect for individual rights and the exercise of freedom*; *aggressiveness in the face of imperialism* and unjustified privileges for certain sectors or social classes; the *aspiration for a system of relationships* that is more just, egalitarian and supportive; the *esteem for pacifism and environmentalism*, which leads to valuing dialogue, peaceful coexistence and new ways of relating to nature.

Nevertheless, at the same time, it is clear that we are witnessing a *profound change of values* that is eroding not only the moral but also the natural principles. The man of the 21st century, having *lost hope in the utopias*—this is particularly visible in the young people of the Western world—is, consequently, unable to assume serious and long-lasting commitments; affected by pessimism and skepticism before the world's reality and its future he feels weary. So, he submerges himself into the *culture of the great void* that is characterized by the absence of values, the lack of ideals and ideologies, and causes *weak thought*. In turn, this creates ethics of pure coexistence and keen moral relativism; the collapse of stable values is an invitation to live life *au menu* and to make a dominant culture into an always fleeting *fashionable bondage*; after the erosion of the foundations of faith by reason, people are living with a great deal of confusion: this is the *culture of the fragment*, where the “grand narratives” have no meaning. Here, there is no other horizon than the immediate moment. As Pope Francis put it: this is the “closing into the immanent” that does not favor going out of ourselves towards others to live in solidarity and commit ourselves to building a better world.

This cultural context might make lead us to conclude that young people have lost not only the meaning of life, but don't try to find it and do the least they can to just live in the present, in the fleeting moment, without roots in which to found a faith and without a future that can anchor hope. In this way, they fall prey to the temptations of false havens, to the culture of fun and entertainment, filled with passion and without the strength to love. Moreover, in this context, we can easily understand that these young people, including those closest to us as leaders and collaborators, are not interested in consecrated life as a life-project. This could be explained in a secularized and even post-Christian Europe, where the young are few in number, enjoying a high living standard despite the economic crisis. But how can we understand this in a Latin America, teeming with adolescents, who are poor in spite of the undeniable economic growth,

religious and Catholic humus? The most significant fact is the low vocational stream, which in some parts is reaching zero.

Although many analysts says that this the *planet of the young*, as a Salesian, I have to say that I have a different vision of the young and of young consecrated people; I believe in the words of Don Bosco who said that young people are capable of great dreams and demanding enterprises, because even in the most wretched of the young there are points sensitive to what is good, and that the task of an educator with a vocation and competence consist precisely in bringing forth the extant good, however small it may be, in order to rebuild strong personalities. You must forgive me if I quote Don Bosco again, but I do this for the simple fact that I consider him more modern and timely than ever. Against all forms of elitism, for him, the goal is much more important than the starting point. The young must be accepted as they are, in the state in which they are found, and then helped to achieve the highest goals. I have reason to say that, even in the apparent insouciance in which they live today, young people have a sense of life or are seeking it. If it is true that many young people, for different reasons and circumstances, tend to reduce life to the simple biological cycle of birth, growth, reproduction, and death, it is also true that many young people discover life as a vocation, a mission, and a “dream;” and they strive to make it reality. In one of his last messages to young people gathered in Washington, Francis said: “A young man is naturally ‘nervous.’ And if he is not ‘nervous,’ he is already an old man.” It is important to know what makes him anxious because God has placed this concern in his heart and the only One who can satisfy it is God, who always deserves a chance because He never disappoints anyone.

The young may not speak about meaning, but what do they understand when seeking, even obsessively, happiness, love, success, and personal fulfillment? These things and others as well are their “concerns” that need to be named so that, in the end, they can sort them out, as in creation when chaos was transformed into the cosmos. With all these anxieties, young people go seeking harmony between themselves and the world and search for harmony between the world and themselves. Now, this is what we call “sense,” meaning. But where, then, are the problems, the challenges but also the opportunities of young people with regard to consecrated life?

2. Young People and Religion

There is a study on the “difficult relationship between young people and faith,” signed by Fr. Armando Matteo, who knows the world of the young because he has been the national ecclesiastical assistant of FUCI for years. In his book *La prima*

generazione incredula (The first unbelieving generation),¹ he analyzes and makes a diagnosis showing that we are facing the first unbelieving generation because they have not experienced the religious socialization process that normally took place in the family until the 1950s and 1960s. There are many reasons for this, in particular the loss of the cultural horizon, already described above, where faith gave meaning and horizons for understanding and experiencing the world. The events that took place in 1968 mark the beginning and are an example of this change.

Further on, he mentions all the battles lost by the Church in the course of the past 400 years, from Galileo to the beginning of communism, to modernism, and so on; finally, he comes to the point stating that it is important to reverse the trend because there is not only a risk of breaking the link in the transmission of faith—and this, in fact, is already happening—but even a danger of Christianity disappearing from Europe.

The irony is that the Church presents itself as the place to “live and celebrate the faith” to people who do not believe yet and do not know who God is because that requires a reference to transcendence. We invite young people to say prayers, and they do not know how and do not have the need to pray. Therefore, the Church should first of all become the place where they learn to meet God in Christ, to experience His love, the place to learn to believe before being the place where faith is celebrated.

The Church says that She is worried about the young, but it is organized with rites and times for adults and old men: Masses, processions, words and catechesis with rigid schedules and for a constrained audience, while young people participate only if they feel attracted and their requirements are satisfied there.

The contributing cause of this break in the transmission of faith is found in a society in general that, on the one hand, celebrates youth and, on the other, looks with envy at the adults who steal their space and their resources; adults almost envious of their lost youth, adults who have given up being adults, i.e. those refusing to give their lives as a gift to other generations. Young people, for their part deprived of spaces and a future, will let themselves fall into the ephemeral, or deviance such as alcohol and drugs. And this is just one more sign of this general malaise.

¹ Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli 2010. We could also mention Giovanni Dalpiaz's book *Visti con occhi dei giovani* (Seen with the eyes of the young) Research has been done among young people in the north-east by the sociologists Alberto Melucci and Franco Garelli, specifically on youth and religion, as well as Umberto Galimberti on youth culture. In Spain, we have the sociological studies of the Santa Maria Foundation.

Pope Francis, consistent with his historical project for the Church and focusing this new phase of evangelization on the *kerygma*, wants a Church that gives time and space to young people and is ready to listen to them without ready-made answers and commits herself to accompanying them as traveling companions, revisiting structures, the distribution of staff, and schedules. This is a new kind of “geography of salvation.” The matter, as said before, is of primary importance for the survival of Christianity in Europe. We must essentialize the faith and the structures, devoting time to the first announcement, even before celebrating the rituals of the faith.

The new humanism needs a Christianity that discovers, with and for the young, the human and humanizing charge of Christianity. It needs people who have the courage to do with the young people what they proclaim: create alternative communities that live what they say, that renounce the idolatry of money and power, and experience the freedom of being loved by God and, so, have the capacity to love one another and others.

A Christianity that is no longer chronological, based on a set of rites of passage related to the stages of life, but *kairologic*. This involves inventing *kairoi*, i.e. “opportunities open to the full range of today’s believers: customized initiatives thanks to which each person can adjust his relationship with God before the doctrine, with the cause of the Kingdom before moral issues, and with the sense of proximity before church ritual.”²

A Christianity that cares more about the transmission of the grammar of the Christian life than about indicating a unique model of the declaration of its faith. Faith is not uniform: it is always an expression of the individual’s freedom, which, through hidden and often complex paths, is converted to love. Some communities such as Bose, Taizé, and the Camaldoli community have realized, according to the author, this essentialization of faith and a happy synthesis with the postmodern context.

It is obvious, then, that in an increasingly secularized and post-Christian society like that of Europe, religion has been weakened in the experience of young people and in their view of things. It is no wonder that the religious symbolic universe is becoming more and more alien to them; now this is not only a linguistic problem—although this is that too—but it resides in the difficulty of believing in everything that the faith proclaims, celebrates, and asks people to live. Just consider the questions of creation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, Heaven... These are all things that, in the light of reason, do not

² MATTEO, *oc*, 78.

seem to resist rational evidence and remain mere opinions, choices, and personal values, that are respectable but without influence in political and social life.

In addition, the spreading belief that there are many paths to religious truth, that all religions have a cultural link and, therefore, are all valid, but always as a personal choice, religion has stopped being the organizing principle of moral and social life.

The undeniable reality, before the eyes of all, is that young people are abandoning the Church and its structures as they are the oratory.

This diagnosis is confirmed by two recent sociological studies on young people and faith. I refer to the survey promoted by Giuseppe Toniolo and collected in the books authored by Rita Bichi "*Dio a modo mio*" *Giovani e fede in Italia*³ ("God my way" Youth and faith in Italy) and by Franco Garelli, under the scorching title *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio*⁴ (Small atheists are growing up. Truly a generation without God). The survey results tell us that the majority of the young believes in God, but knows little about Jesus, loves the Pope but wonders what good the Church is, and is struggling to understand the language, while thinking that it is beautiful to believe, but prays in its own way and does not go to Mass, and confuses faith with ethics. They talk about the encounter of faith as an "obligation," with the attendance to catechism, made "of rules and principles." It should be noted that the figure of the priest who follows the children is important for them, and that the places young people recall with joy are the parish and the oratory. The journey in faith begins thanks to the family, but after Confirmation in most cases they move away from the faith or religion. Towards age 25, they may return, often thanks to the encounter with a person or through an important event.

Garelli, on the one hand, recognizes that the new generations are increasingly represented as atheists, non-believers, or unbelievers because the negation of God and religious indifference are significantly increasing among young people, including through the spread of a "practical atheism" among those who maintain a tenuous link with Catholicism. However, in line with what has been said above, the question of meaning is intense. For many, religious sentiment is expressed in one's personal, inner life, and transferred from a vertical dimension (the gaze to transcendence) to a horizontal dimension (the personal search for harmony). Bearing in mind this profound change, the volume highlights the "new advances" on the religious level.

³ RITA BICHI, *Dio a modo mio. Giovani e fede in Italia*. Ed. Vita e Pensiero, 2015

⁴ FRANCO GARELLI, *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio?* Il Mulino, 2016

3. The Young and Consecrated Life

At this point, the question is: What do the young think about consecrated life? In Spain, at the CONFER Assembly in October 2014, just before my intervention, a Sister presented the results of her research on the place of religious life in the imagination of young people. I was stunned to hear that they give it the last place among their preferences in choosing a lifestyle, with harsh expressions like: “what’s the sense of this time your life?”; “it’s a waste.” I think that, on the whole, they consider kindly the courageous decisions that religious life implies, but they no longer identify themselves with it, and it is not worth their consideration.

The clear fact is that even the leaders, those who are closer to us, more involved in the mission, enjoy being with us, and take part in many of our activities, but do not want to be religious. *Is it surprising that the WYD are full of enthusiastic young people, but the seminars and formation houses are empty?*

There may be many reasons, above all cultural ones, in the sense that, in a society where absolute freedom, the right to self-determination and self-realization, sexuality and pleasure, and wealth that makes life better a true objects of worship, it becomes very difficult for people to consider obedience, chastity, and poverty as values and, above all, as a lifestyle choice.

Yet, among the reasons, there is also a lack of knowledge of what constitutes the identity of consecrated persons, since they are often not identified for what they are but for what they do. Young people and our immediate collaborators admire our tireless work but fail to see the deeper reasons: the Absolute of God, the charm of Christ, commitment to His Kingdom. Now, this confusion between the “mission”—being witnesses and bearers of God—and “services” in the fields of education, health, welfare... has led to the fact that young people progressively see fewer religious in the works. And this results from the reduction of the personnel. Moreover, they find them working in social services that can be done by laypeople. Indeed, in practice, they are the ones run them, and people are generally more interested in the work for the service it provides than in the continued presence of the consecrated persons and their charism!

The views of reality are also very different. With respect to the ethics, “how can the Christian idea of sin as transgression be reconciled with the mentality of young people who see freedom only in transgression?” Moreover, with regard to thought, “while religious life stands in reference to historical, philosophical, and

humanistic culture, young people belong to the technological culture,” which is a true view of reality and a philosophy of life.⁵

Now, let me repeat this, it's not only a matter of language or the mode of communication but of the importance given to the structural requirements of religious life, which are so far from the sensibilities of today's young people: “religious life implies the unique choice of a particular commitment, while the young are always ready to go from one thing to another, with social and ideal mobility unknown in the past,”—in other words, “the right to reversibility that postulates the provisional nature of the choice.” Moreover, the concept of the time of life is different. The religious come from a culture that sees history as a design directed to an end and for which the present only has the value of an instrumental passage point. For the young, rather paradoxically, the present is priceless. It matters little that history is oriented to the ultimate ends; today is what matters... so commitment to a choice that lasts a lifetime... is a model that goes beyond their horizon.”

Last but not least, we find among the reasons—and these are not unimportant—those within religious life itself; and, consequently, one cannot attribute the loss of fascination for religious life exclusively to external factors, such as the prevailing culture. In fact, there is no doubt that the misleading attitudes and behavior of members of Orders, Congregations and Institutes—such as sexual abuse against minors and their management by the competent authority, mediocrity, bourgeoisification, individualism, the decline spiritual life, the lack of missionary zeal, and so on—have deprived our consecrated life of its charm within the institutions and of its credibility outside of them. Their charm and credibility come from the beauty and the radicalism of the experience of God in Christ that fills our hearts with happiness, from the joy that fraternity brings, and from the fullness that comes from total giving to others.

How then can we tell today's youth about the beauty and the good of consecrated life?

I think that Pope Francis' verbal and gestural language puts us on the right track: by empathic listening, immense sympathy, unconditional acceptance, true friendliness, open-mindedness, renunciation of any kind of dogmatism and rigidity, truth wrapped in charity, a clear choice for the suffering, with Jesus' merciful attitude, and bearing the joy of the Gospel.

The only vocation campaign that wants to be visible, credible and fruitful will be the life of consecrated persons, their witness of a good, beautiful, and happy

⁵ Rino COZZA, “Nella società dell'informazione. Come parlare ai giovani di vita consacrata?”, in Testimoni, 7/2010, 9-11

life, that shows people fully realized in Christ living in communities that are real homes, not hotels, bearers of a charism and not mere service agents, going out to the world's existential peripheries, always attentive to people's needs and letting themselves be guided by the Spirit.

Moreover, the privileged mediation cannot be other than accompanying young people in their discovery of life's meaning and the formulation of life projects, sharing with them the art of teaching to live, teaching to live together, teaching to seek the truth, and teaching them to be happy. I would now like to offer some tentative indications.

Before all else, we must be aware that today our works do not speak with the same eloquence as in the past. The message we want to transmit is not understood or grasped by young people, and that explains its inevitable loss of social relevance. Today, ***the significant presences are those that raise questions about the meaning of life and the different forms of poverty.***

Likewise, we must recall that our significance in the lives of young people depends on three factors: the credibility of the offer in relation to the situation in which they live; the authority of the witness; and the capacity to communicate.

There is, therefore, a wager for us: that of expressing an orientation and a proposal, without shunning the complexity and the demand of subjectivity, and without being homogenized. This implies an openness to what is positive, being firmly anchored to the points from which human life takes its meaning, and the capacity for discernment. These are three aspects that, together with strong experiences in which each one should be experienced, we as institutions care for in a special way.

All in all, we should be concerned less about looking for vocations—as if that were “the” mission—than about gathering the vocations that are the fruit of our mission. This will be possible if we help young people, through our word and witness, to discover the meaning of life, i.e., life as a gift lived in their own self-giving.

This will be possible if they discover that God is not a threat to their happiness, but that He alone can satisfy their deepest longings, fill their lives with energy, and give them the capacity to be happy and good. This will be possible if they feel motivated to dream big, not to waste their youth, to commit themselves in their personal formation and in the transformation of society, to have life plans, and become people for others, because only through Love can a man reach his full stature and overcome death.

4. Profile of Today's Young Religious

The theme of the Young Religious has been repeatedly addressed, although under different titles, by the Union of Superiors General, especially since the Congress of Young Religious. The Assembly in November 1997, whose theme was “*Looking to the future with the young religious - Accepting the challenges proposals and hopes,*” sought to understand the reality of the new generation of religious better. The reflection continued after the International Congress on Religious Life organized by the two unions USG and UISG in November 2004 on the theme “*Passion for God, Passion for Humanity.*”

Subsequently, a series of USG Assemblies dealt with the following topics: “*What is Sprouting*” (May 2005); “*Faithfulness and Abandonment in Consecrated Life*” (November 2005); “*For a Faithful Consecrated Life*” (May 2006). Finally, in November 2010, a sequence of reflections not exclusively dedicated to young religious concluded with the topic “*Consecrated life in Europe: Commitment... the engagement to evangelical prophecy.*” As we can see, the USG has made great efforts to better understand and accompany the newness that consecrated life in general is experiencing and that is, in particular, incarnated by the young religious.

Now, before considering the *value* of this reflection, I think that we need to ask ourselves: Is the *situation* of the young religious a *problematic* and even dangerous one, that has to be confronted, or is it rather a *kairos* that, in addition to being inevitable, represents a fascinating challenge for consecrated life and for our creative fidelity to God, to the Church and humanity?

I believe that, in spite of the serious approach that the situation requires, the latter is preferable: this situation in fact shows us that the Holy Spirit is still present and active in our Institutes, Congregations, and Orders, in our Church and in the world. Moreover, here, as in many other domains, the “law of the pendulum” is appearing: our time gives importance things that, in an unjust but explicable form, were abandoned in the past. It now depends on us, with the help of the same Spirit, to find their correct balance.

I would like to summarize in three sections the main reasons that, with different accents, push young people to seek consecrated life and, consequently, the reasons of the young religious: *a search for the deep experience of God*, not always united with a life of prayer; *a desire for communion*, not always accompanied by demands for community; *dedication to the cause of the poor and marginalized*, not always lived with an institutional sense.

These factors are often combined with psychological frailty, vocational inconsistency, and a marked subjectivism.⁶

⁶ Cf., in this respect, chapter IV: “Los jóvenes religiosos, problemas y retos” in Gabino Uribarri Bilbao, *Portar las marcas de Jesús. Teología y espiritualidad de la vida consagrada*, Madrid, 2001, 109–29. In the Italian context, cf. Rino Fisichella, *Identità dissolta. Il cristianesimo lingua madre dell'Europa*, Mondadori, Milano 2009, 115–32; Id.,

The USG's working groups and its Assembly in May of 2006 added others characteristic of young religious to the list of these three elements: *historicity*, *freedom*, *experience* and *renunciation* as well as anthropological aspects that considered indispensable in every consecrated life that wants to be fully human and, so, credible. The participants also mentioned *authenticity*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *affectivity*, *postmodernism* and *multiculturalism*.

There is one aspect that at the time—10 years ago—didn't appear at all but that it would be unwise to take for granted today, because it has become important to the point of being considered a mega-trend in our world and especially in that of young people: *virtuality*. This is less a problem with the increasingly sophisticated “media” than with *communication*, that is the personal and interpersonal encounters evermore present in two major areas religious life: the *community* and the *apostolate*. Yet, this new reality is so complex, ambivalent, and above all open to the future that we cannot yet assess it critically. Let us just recall that at the time of the USG Assembly in May 2006, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat... practically did not exist.

Of course, like other anthropological aspects, “virtuality” in communication—this totally new reality omnipresent among young people today⁷—presents original challenges and opportunities in the routine of consecrated life. Putting it a bit ironically: maybe the renunciation of religious life (obedience, chastity, poverty, etc.) is not as great a young man of our day as having to give up his “tablet,” his cell phone, “Facebook,” “Twitter,” or “Whatsapp.”⁸

This anthropological context is present in all the Institutes, those newly established and the older Congregations, and even in hermit and monastic Orders. Furthermore, even if we are interested above all in the younger generation, it's clear that they are really not the only ones this concerns: poorly identifying with the vocation to follow Jesus radically is a risk not just for one group—i.e. the young religious—but for all consecrated persons.

We find ourselves facing questions and challenges—fruits of experience in our own Institutes—that require reflection, stimulus, and some tentative responses.

This reminds me of the myth of Ulysses, who somehow represents the desire for adventure and the discovery of humanity, every person's attempt to find out what lies behind the many mysteries that surround us. The story goes that the

“Mi fido..., dunque decido. Educare alla fiducia nelle scelte vocazionali, Milano 2009, 82–93. A. Cencini, “Fragili e incerti per decidere,” Consacrazione e Servizio 62 (2013), 48; and his recent lecture on “La radicalità evangelica nell'epoca delle radici fragili.” P. Chávez, “¿Qué vida religiosa reflejan los jóvenes religiosos del siglo XXI?,” Conferencia en el Instituto de Vida Religiosa, Madrid, 2014.

⁷ Cf. Rino Cozza, “Nella società dell'informazione. Come parlare ai giovani di VC?”. *Testimoni* 7/2010, 9-11.

⁸ In this regard, I would like to refer to the masterful and enlightening *lectio* entitled “*Comunicazione*”, given by the well known semiotician Umberto Eco at the Communication Festival in Camogli, on 13 September 2014. In his presentation, Eco spoke about “soft” and “hard” communication, in a network where it is difficult to separate one from the other. Then, quoting Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian sociologist famous for his thesis “the *medium* is the message,” Eco said that “using paradoxes – McLuhan had focused his interest on the *medium* – he had already made it clear how *the user is dependent on the medium.*”

Sirens, fascinating and demonic female inhabitants of an island to the west of the great waters, half women and half birds, cast a spell with their song, irresistibly seducing sailors who passed through the narrow strait. They made them all perish on the rocks. On his journey home, Ulysses put wax into the ears of his companions, lest they hear and be seduced. As for himself, he was firmly tied to the mast, so that he could hear their voices without suffering disastrous consequences. However, Orpheus sang a melodious song that enchanted the Sirens, leaving them mute and stunned.

Now, this is the first point to be reflected on: if we want to successfully deal with the challenges coming from the lack of vocations or the lives of our young religious, “plugging their ears” or “tying ourselves to the mast” with external or disciplinary measures, instead of helping to make consecrated life beautiful and ensuring greater identity and identification with the confreres, will cause quite the reverse, i.e. an intensification of the psychological tension, a kind of imbalance provoked from without. We need to help one another and them to find the right melody in our hearts, the strongest motivations, so that we may have the courage to make tough decisions and live the consecrated life with great vocational energy.

The Charismatic Identity and the Identification of the Young Religious

In our reflection, we are looking primarily at the Western European context. Although the young religious are few in number, their importance for the future of religious life is decisive. Consequently, it is understandable that in this context one of the major concerns of religious Congregations is the anguish—this is a real disease of the faith—about the future.

This situation concerns almost all consecrated life in the West; therefore, it can't be attributed only to the difficulties of some Institutes. The trials and challenges of consecrated life are a call from God: “The difficulties and the questioning which religious life is experiencing today can give rise to a new *kairos*, a time of grace. In these challenges lies hidden an authentic call of the Holy Spirit to rediscover the wealth and potentialities of this form of life.”⁹ “In an atmosphere poisoned by secularism and dominated by consumerism, consecrated life, as a gift of the Spirit to the Church and for the Church, becomes an ever greater sign of hope to the extent that it testifies to life's transcendent dimension.”¹⁰

Of course, the situations vary a lot from one Congregation to the next, but there are some common traits that seem to characterize the physiognomy of the new generation of consecrated persons.

⁹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies' of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh From Christ. A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, Rome, 2002, no. 13. Along this same line, cf. Pope Francis, *Letter to All Consecrated People*.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa on Jesus Christ, alive in his Church, the source of hope for Europe* (28 June 2003), no. 38.

Here, we will discuss the three main “living environments” that have a major impact on the identity and the vocational development of young religious in Western Europe. These are realities that characterize them and concern their essential sense of belonging: the society, the congregation, and their own generation.¹¹

➤ **The Society**

- *The General Atmosphere*

The young European religious—at least most of them—are used to living in a social environment where the Christian faith is no longer a majority option and sometimes not even socially appreciated. I would venture to say that, for them, the fact is more natural—and therefore less distressing than for us—simply because they have not known another cultural context. In consequence, it is neither pleasant nor good for them to be told about a world or about the moments of grandeur of our institutions—the many members and the social significance of the works—that are past and gone.

Although the choice to enter religious life is usually respected—our society is indeed very tolerant and all can do what they want with their lives—, it’s hardly considered valuable and, so, will rarely be esteemed; it provokes neither admiration nor envy. On the contrary!

All this means that this kind of choice is made in silence, secretly, with great discretion, almost in solitude; and once the decision is matured, the environment continues being indifferent, alien, and sometimes even hostile. Interestingly, while a person can talk in public about his project of getting married or choosing to be a volunteer, the choice of religious life becomes more a private matter that arouses incomprehension and sparks a cultural clash.

- *Family and Friends*

If the social environment is not favorable, the situation with family and friends is not very different. Family support is no longer guaranteed; often, in fact, the greatest opposition comes from their families—even from those who consider themselves Christian—, there is emotional blackmail and exaggerated extortion to put them to shame.

It may also happen that their own Christian communities, or the group to which they belong, refuse to support their choice or even question it: “But what are you going to do as a religious? You can do a lot more here, without so many constraints or changing where you work.”

¹¹ Cf. G. Uribarri, *op. cit.*, which I am using freely.

Finally, among friends, it will be difficult to find acceptance and understanding for a life-project that is the result of being “seduced by God”—like Jeremiah (Jer 20:7), who ended up feeling lonely without the company of merry-makers (15:17).

- *Effects on Self-understanding, Identity and Growth*

Undoubtedly, beginning the journey of religious life in a social environment that is not conducive, and often adverse, means that they have to live alone and go against the current, driven almost only by the grace of God that makes them hear His call and makes us understand this vocation as a blessing.

With such an inharmonious panorama, the young religious must face two facts: on the one hand, the lack of understanding and social opposition and, on the other, the joy and charm of the call. These two elements are essential components of their experience and factors simultaneously present in their self-understanding: they feel at once like strangers in their environment and close to God. This contradiction, although it is always experienced, is unfortunately not always fully apprehended and dealt with; and, not infrequently, it leads our young confreres to develop a motivation that, after all, is nothing but simple self-assertion against their loved ones. It is clear that for these reasons they end up listening to the singing of the Sirens!

In his vocational growth, the young brother must not seek primarily self-fulfillment or self-acceptance; the aim is not purely to focus on individual potential or self-esteem; this process is entirely centered on the ego, while the challenges are coming from outside. He will have to try to integrate the twofold contrasting experience of incomprehension and social pressure with the joy and attraction of his vocation. Now, this is only possible if he can develop his own melody in his heart.

Here, we are faced with one of those “keywords” that currently has a citizenship card in consecrated life too: the quest for *personal realization*. While this aspect cannot be ignored, it is, however, a source of misunderstanding and even of frustration, especially among the young confreres.

Is it not true that the triple essential and inseparable motivation of religious and consecrated life—*the absolute of God / the following and imitation of Christ / the salvation of the world*¹²—currently so strongly emphasized, at least implicitly, is accompanied by the concern for *personal realization*? It may be easy to ignore and even to want to exclude this aspect as egoistic individualism and unhealthy individualistic “psychologism.” However, if we read the Gospel carefully, we never find Jesus rejecting this claim. Jesus *shows the path* to this realization. Is it not significant that we often forget that the Beatitudes are not religious or moral norms but *promises of happiness*?

¹² Cf. F. Wulf, “Fenomenología teológica de la Vida Religiosa,” in: *Mysterium Salutis* IV/2, Madrid, Ed. Sígueme, 2nd ed., 1984, p. 454.

Instead of rejecting or decrying, we need to discern and clarify: the quest for self-realization in consecrated life is valid and fulfilling only if it coincides with the person's *realization in Christ*, inseparably united with the three essential aspects of the phenomenology of religious life already mentioned. Apparently, here, a decisive role is played by the understanding and the practice of the concept of *vocational suitability*, which helps to integrate both the objective and subjective dimensions.

When we contemplate the great saints one of the most fascinating things is seeing them as *realized and happy* people. If we are called to be—as *Vita Consecrata* says—a spiritual “therapy” for today’s world, and if we want to deepen the “anthropological meaning” of the evangelical counsels, we cannot ignore this dimension. It is not enough to live chastity, poverty, and obedience radically and fully. They must also, even on a human level, be radiant and attractive attitudes, the expression of maturity and plenitude that can give beauty and charm to consecrated life (cf. VC 87-91).

➤ **The Congregation**

Once the journey of consecrated life has begun, the environment inside the Congregation has a stronger influence on the lives of the young religious and is the source of their joys and concerns. Sometimes they are asked to assume what their older confreres have lived and realized before them. Besides the fact that is unjust, to get a sense of reciprocity we should also ask the elders to try to get into the skin of young people.

- *The weight of the structures and the works*

One of the realities that produce the greatest discomfort in religious youth is the feeling that the burden of complex works to be continued has been thrown on them, with little regard to evangelization, little room for a response to the new pastoral needs, and insufficient effort to meet the current challenges. It is not that young people are anti-institutional; they simply put their finger on the wound.

This overriding concern for the organization of works can, unfortunately, lead to the loss of the true heritage transmitted and received; this legacy cannot be reduced to a capital to be preserved, but rather it is a charism to be accepted, a spirituality to be lived, a spirit to be expressed, a mission to accomplish. One experiences the lack of hope and the loss of vitality because the management of the works is felt to be oppressive.

- *The Age Pyramid*

Another troubling fact is the age pyramid of one’s congregation, which is almost always reversed; this makes young people feel that they are few and take upon themselves the difficulties of aging. All this makes it hard even to understand how a young religious can be and live.

Without a new way of managing the works, without redesigning the presence, and without redimensioning the fronts of the commitment, there is no perspective of the future, no room for what is new, no opportunity to assume the mission responsibly; and there is no hope for young religious. It is not so much this seemingly unending transition that is a burden for them as the stagnation incapable of finding a strategy to overcome these problems, which in the meantime create pessimism.

- *The Institutional Face of Personal Frailty*

The young religious are few and they must carry the seemingly unbearable weight of the institution. In addition, they often have to contend with their own frailty, which becomes apparent in departures—not rarely unpredictable and often sensational—and the growing need for psychotherapy.

Departures are no more frequent than in bygone years, because the numbers do not permit this; yet, despite their rarity, they do cause a real earthquake. The departures of friends raise once again the radical question about life. Some departures are foreseen; others, on the contrary, are unexpected: they are decided while the formators or directors are unaware, without any accompaniment or discernment, and so cause a malaise in the community.

These departures seem to awaken, once again, all of society's uncertainty with regard to consecrated life: What is the sense of this life? What future does it have? Where can one find the joy to live it?

These departures must be added to the situations of other young religious who are doing psychotherapy and lead to think about one's own "normality," especially in some cases where they are accompanied by "temporary dispensation from the vows."

It is natural that these elements reinforce a sense of weakness and fragility in young religious, who need closeness, understanding, affection, but also clarity, counseling, explicit proposals and specific targets to be achieved on the personal path, indicated by the formators and the superiors.

- *The Congregation's Expectations*

In turn, the Congregation, wanting to design its future with clarity and certainty, is tempted to make people understand that everything is a priority. Now, one of the signs indicating the priority of a choice is precisely to assign young staff to support the choice made. Therefore, they want the young religious to participate in all kinds of gatherings and events.

Moreover, when facing the decisive choices and issues for the future—e.g., the situation of vocations, poverty, the peripheries, re-foundation or community life—, most of the religious are not inclined to engage themselves and say that these things concern the young.

At other times, without knowing the young religious, one puts all one's confidence in them, without knowing their preparation, their identity, their history, their endurance capacity; or, quite on the contrary, one does not really have confidence in them.

This is certainly not the best way to integrate those who have just arrived into the body of the Congregation. The young religious want to learn how to follow Christ in the Congregation, with the accompaniment of their elders, and they want to be taken into account when decisions concerning their future are made.

➤ **Their own Generation**

We must begin by asking if, in the context of Western Europe, Congregations really have a "generation" of young religious. Truthfully, it is not easy to speak of a "generation," when the numbers of new religious are so low and the differences in age, culture, and family and religious "background" are often so large that very diversified formation itineraries are necessary. Yet, a generation of young religious does exist, and it is important to be aware of that fact.

- *Closeness to the important values in society*

As religious, we all share—more than we imagine or are willing to admit—values, lifestyles, attitudes, and ways of feeling about the consumer society to which we belong. Among young people, this awareness is clearer. The Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ* says this: "In addition to the life-giving thrust, capable of witness and self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom, consecrated life also experiences the insidiousness of mediocrity in the spiritual life, of the progressive taking on of middle-class values and a consumer mentality. The complex management of works, while required by new social demands and norms of the State, together with the temptations presented by efficiency and activism, run the risk of obscuring Gospel originality and of weakening spiritual motivations. The prevalence of personal projects over community endeavors can deeply corrode the communion of brotherly and sisterly love."¹³

There is a form of following Christ that is a reflection of the Western lifestyle. In saying this, I am not referring to the search for comfort, but to a concept of consecrated life closely attached to the values of this consumer society: their realization, being emotionally satisfied, being happy, immediate success, the realization of one's desires and projects.

Many young religious have this framework of values as a reference criterion for vocational discernment. Indeed, it often seems that they are in consecrated life because they think it is the best way to achieve them. For them, there is no substantial change of life nor identification with the ultimate values, the ones concerning the Lord Jesus and his Gospel; these values simply do not exist as

¹³ *Starting Afresh From Christ*, no. 12.

such, but rather there is simply a way of life that becomes a reason to talk about them.

This explains their difficulty in accepting the cross—which, sooner or later, will be present in the disciple's life. Hence, the almost visceral devaluation and rejection of all that refers to renunciation and mortification. Accordingly, a rewarding ministry is sought; study is not seen as preparation for the mission but rather as a means of personal success; and any activity that has to do with the humble, hidden life or with the routine and effort is rejected.

- *Formation to Renunciation*

That is why we must speak today of a reality that in our time, more than any other, implies “rowing against the tide:” *the formation to renunciation*. Paradoxically, we must promote *the experience of renunciation*. This is not regression to the past, where the exercise paradoxically had an entirely formal nature: the important thing was to learn to give up, to “temper the will.” On the contrary, it is essential to rediscover the human and Christian value of authentic renunciation, in order to live it as an enriching experience, so that it may be practiced in a positive way and does not lead to frustration and neurosis.

In the small evangelical parable of the merchant in search of fine pearls (Mt 13:45–46), we find some valuable elements that allow us to describe the “phenomenology of renunciation:”

He gives up his precious pearls (“the merchant went and sold what he had”) *not because they are false*: they are real, and have so far been the merchant’s wealth.

He gives up these real pearls, with pain and yet with joy, because *he has found “the” ultimate pearl*, the one that caught the merchant’s eye and heart, and he understands that he cannot acquire it without selling the others. If our consecrated life, centered on following and imitation of Jesus, is not fascinating, the request for renunciation is unjust and dehumanizing.

The joy of possessing the “precious pearl” does not wholly eliminate the fear that is not authentic: if they are false, my decision was wrong, and I’ve ruined my life. This “risk” in Christian life, and even more in consecrated life, is a direct consequence of faith: only in faith do our lives have meaning: if what we believe in is not true, “we are more unfortunate than any men,” to paraphrase St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15:19). The day when one can say with regard to every aspect of consecrated life: “my life is fully satisfactory, even if what I believe in is not true,” we are making our charism into an NGO, with the aggravating fact that it entails incomprehensible requirements for its members.

➤ **The Treasure of Your Heart**

Speaking in evangelical terms, we might ask the following question: “*Where is your heart?*” Where is the treasure? (Cf. Lk 12:34).

- The bond with companions and with the Lord in the Congregation

The affective and effective bond with the Lord Jesus in the Congregation is in difficulty today among the young religious; it is not maturing to the point of becoming the heart's center. One gets the impression that the relationship with companions in the Congregation or with classmates in formation is stronger than that with the Lord Jesus and with the Congregation itself.

There are some reasons for this kind of bond, among others: childishness, emotional fragility, and the sense of a group of friends.

- Childishness, as the fruit of a certain formation in religious life, leads us to believe that the Congregation's problems have nothing to do with the person; consequently, a strong sense of belonging and responsibility is not created.
- The young religious are part of a culture where emotional fragility seems to be one of the characteristics, as is shown by the ease with which matrimonial bonds are broken.
- It is not uncommon for them to form groups of friends, in which they mature and take decisions together; consequently, the bond with friends or companions becomes stronger than the bond with the Congregation.

- The bond with the Congregation as a path toward God

Although it is true that a vocation is a call with others, a vocation is above all a personal, non-transferable act, that cannot be conditioned by what other people can or want to do. We are invited to follow Jesus just like Peter, without regard for the Beloved Disciple's fate (cf. Jn. 21:20-22).

The essential question is rooted precisely in discovering little by little one's personal itinerary while sharing the same vocation that the Congregation presents to us as the path to God and the way to respond.

On the other hand, we are tied primarily and theologically to the disciples in the Congregation's discipleship by the Lord Jesus. We have not chosen the companions in our community. The communion that is generated between us, beyond affinities, is the result of our relationship with the Lord Jesus. In order to be real, this relationship must reach the institution and, therefore, the Congregation's government.

- ***"I Choose Everything...!"***

The scenario described above reflects very well the current context of post-modernity, which must be seen not only as a stage but as the companion of our lives, of our faith, and of our vocation as consecrated persons. From this

perspective, I invite you to reflect on the present and the immediate future of consecrated life, not so much with general concepts, but by contemplating a very timely figure of holiness in the Church: Saint Teresa of Lisieux.

Among the many memories of her childhood, one is particularly significant, although apparently trivial. One day her sister Leonia, feeling bigger, decided to get rid of all she used to play with her dolls; she brought a basket full of things so that each of her sisters could choose what they wanted. Little Teresa's turn came, and she relates: "I put out my hand saying: '*I choose everything,*' and I carried off both doll and basket without more ado."¹⁴ We could say that this is a typical "post-modern" attitude of someone who does not want to give up anything.

But in her this was not a childish outburst of selfishness: I think rather that it was the expression of a deep trait of her personality. So much that many years later, in one of the most important moments of her spiritual discernment, this desire reemerges in the pages that have become classic in Christian spirituality:

"I feel within me other vocations: I feel called to the Priesthood and to the Apostolate; I would be a Martyr, a Doctor of the Church ... I should like to accomplish the most heroic deeds... the spirit of the Crusader burns within me, and I long to die on the field of battle in defence of Holy Church. (...) How can these opposite tendencies be reconciled? Is there on the face of this earth a soul more feeble than mine? (...) These aspirations becoming a true martyrdom, I opened, one day, the Epistles of St. Paul to seek relief in my sufferings. (...) I read that all cannot become Apostles, Prophets, and Doctors; that the Church is composed of different members; that the eye cannot also be the hand (...) The answer was clear, but it did not fulfill my desires, or give to me the peace I sought. (...) Without being discouraged I read on, and found comfort in this counsel: "Be zealous for the better gifts. And I show unto you a yet more excellent way." The Apostle then explains how all perfect gifts are nothing without Love. At last I had found rest. (...) Charity provided me with the key to my vocation. I understood that love alone gives life to its members. I knew that if this love were extinguished, the Apostles would no longer preach the Gospel, and the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood... I understood that love embraces all vocations, that it is all things, and that it reaches out through all the ages, and to the uttermost limits of the earth... In a word that love is eternal! Then, beside myself with joy, I cried out: "O Jesus, my Love, at last I have found my vocation. My vocation is love!"¹⁵

Only to the extent that we center our whole being in the love for God and our neighbor, and direct all formation, throughout life, toward this clear goal, will we achieve what seemed impossible: obtaining everything in the fragment, we can realize, in small things, in routine and in the "uniqueness" of our life, the totality of the Christian vocation: we will understand that, in love, the extraordinary paradox of being able to give up everything is accomplished and, at the same time and for this reason, we are not giving up, in essence, *anything* that allows us to reach our full potential, as the little saint of Carmel has understood and lived it.

¹⁴ Teresa of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, manuscript A, 10 recto.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, manuscript B, 2 recto.

3. Conclusion

I can't conclude without recalling the eloquent text of the First Letter to the Corinthians in which Paul says that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1:27). The secret of consecrated life has never been the strength according to the world's criteria, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Most of the young religious come to us moved by faith or eager for a profound experience of God; without looking for prestige or power or any other type of privilege. They come after a strong experience of God, which is the source of every form of the future. They have had to overcome much resistance in society, in the ambient culture, and from their family. They know that they will be a poor generation, asked to keep alive the flame of following Christ; and by the grace of God, they will do that.

They are aware that their journey will initially consist in progressive identification with the gift of the calling they have received and then gradually become a faithful and creative response to that call.

They always continue to feel the tension between the power of God's gift and the weakness of their own response: "*We carry this treasure in earthen vessels*" (2 Cor. 4:7). That is why they experience, at all times, a process of integration that brings into play their fragile freedom and, simultaneously, they let themselves be surprised by the power of God's grace. Integration is a complex, both psychological and theological, process; it requires multiple operations: completion, attraction, creation of unity, collection, and correction, but also enlightenment, signification, warmth, strengthening and reconciliation.

Young people are driven by a great desire to live in authenticity and to learn the genuineness of the Congregation's charism, of consecrated life, and of the essence of the Gospel and the Church. They shall not always be consistent, but they have within the will to always get going again.¹⁶

¹⁶ I would like to mention to an interesting reflection made by Javier de la Torre Díaz, professor of moral theology and bioethics at the Pontifical University of Comillas in Madrid, and published by Sal Terrae. After an experience in the academic field and six years of contact and cooperation with over 300 religious men and women of different Orders and Congregations, he offered a "radiography (of young religious) written from the heart," as he calls it, in an article entitled "*Religiosos Jóvenes Hoy, el corazón palpitante de la Iglesia.*" In this article, Javier relativized many of the questions concerning religious life, which he believes are "more ideology than reality," convinced that "*the religious entering in many congregations today are the best generation we have and constitute to a great extent the heart of the Church.*" It is true that he acknowledges that they "are not all of religious life," and it is also true—I might add—that he knows these religious "from outside," not in everyday life, in their prayer life, and in the concrete relationship within their communities and the mission. The author makes a positive evaluation of some aspects and that is fine; but he leaves some aside, including essential ones, such as the theme of obedience, and, above all, there is no structural verification that would avoid giving the same value to all. One is surprised, for example, that he does not express any criticism about today's religious life, and makes no distinction between male and female religious life. The best is that he highlights some characteristics of religious life that are not always emphasized, and his outlook is positive and not catastrophic! Here are the sections of the profile that he traces of these new religious: 1. "*They are not secularized. They live in our twenty-first century.*" 2. "*They do not let themselves be absorbed by the institutions. They live the charism everywhere.*" 3. "*They do not live in a parallel Church. They live in a Church with wider borders.*" 4. "*They do not live spiritless activism. Their spirituality is more integrated with their action.*" 5. "*There is no lack of vocations. Thank God for those He sends.*" 6. "*There is no lack of formation. Their formation puts reason in its place in a post-*

So, instead of complaining about today's situation, let us accept the challenge presented to us, with confidence in the Lord: only through the strong faith that nurtures a "living hope" and is manifested in a real and unconditional love for God and for our brothers and sisters, in whom we recognize the face of the Lord Jesus, can our consecrated life be relevant today. Only a present true to its past and open to the future will be meaningful and fruitful in the continuous present of the loving service to God and to the world.

A tree is healthy and vigorous when its roots sink into the dark depths of the soil; when its trunk reaches toward the sky, while it receives the sap that the roots offer it and pump into its branches, nurturing the blossoming and maturation of its fruits. Without the roots of faith that remind us of a concrete and real historical past, without the trunk of hope that launches us into the future, and without ever present fruits of love, we will be a dry tree—and it would be better to cut it down and use it as wood, or simply let it rot.

Let us ask the Spirit of the Lord, with the motherly assistance of Mary, to vitalize our Institutes, so that each of them constitutes to be a forest that offers cool shade, purifies the polluted air that we breathe in our world, and produces abundant fruits of salvation for all our brothers and sisters to whom the Lord sends us!

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enlightened world." 7. *"They are not bourgeoisified. They live poverty in a comfortable society."* 8. *"They are not repressed people. They live the celibate life and so give their lives for God's Kingdom."* 9. *"They do not renounce their families. They live in a large family of brothers and sisters in the Lord."* 10. *"They live 'old religious orders' where the novelty of the Kingdom is flourishing"*. Javier de la Torre Díaz, *Sal Terrae* 100 (2012) 25-38. My italics.