

Consecration: the concept and the life

by Lorenzo Prezzi

On 1-3 March 2018 at the *Antonianum* University (Rome) a conference on the subject '*Consecratio et consecratio per evangelica consilia*' took place that had been organised by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CIVCSVA). About a hundred theologians were present, some of the most known in the field of consecrated life: from F. Ciardi to N. Hausman, from G. Ghilanda to J. García Paredes, from M. Sedano Sierra to G. Rocca, from B. Secondin to R. Zas Friz De Col, and from M. Schlosser to X. Larrañaga. The papers and the debates of this international seminar were in four languages and the speakers came from all over the world. The subject of debate and dialogue was the term 'consecration' or, to put it better, how much this term is able to identify in the Church the vast world of men and women religious (there are about one and a half million of such people, and over 70% of them are women, and there are the same number who belong not to pontifical but to diocesan institutes), to define its ecclesial identities, and to cover the many forms and innumerable charisms that inhabit this world. One can perhaps translate the research into these questions in the following way: what is the identity of the religious in the Church, given that they are no longer a 'state of perfection' and the call to holiness is for everyone? Is the term that would like to cover all of them ('consecration') really able to do so? Where is the explosion of new charismatic forms (movements, communities, new foundations) to be located as regards the religious who often take on many of their characteristics? And all of this in preparation for a larger conference that will take place in Rome in a few months' time.

Outside the world?

On the one hand, we have theological research into the identity of religious today and, on the other, a practical need to govern a phenomenon that is not without its possible ambiguities and contradictions. Could the scandals linked to some of the new foundations have been avoided? And avoided by whom?

It is indicative that at the end of these three days Msgr. Carballo informed the assembly of imminent change to some juridical rules. The new diocesan foundations, which are very numerous in Africa, and not only in Africa, will have to have a prior obligatory expressed view from the Congregation. The suggestion to tie bishops to certain criteria, instead, was not passed, and this was done in order not to place limits on their authority. As regards traditional institutes, the possibility is envisaged of dismissing a man religious or a woman religious who has abandoned their community for a year without providing a justification for this to their superiors.

The scholarly profile of the eight papers (and the same number of papers in response), the diversity of the approaches (canonical, Biblical, historical, anthropological theological and ecclesiological), and the ample space given to debate, imploded in the search for a term of identification, giving a (mistaken) impression of extraneousness to the cultural and civil contexts.

If in the underground or in streets someone were asked about the meaning of community, the answer would be therapeutic communities or social media *communities*; the '*voti*' (vows, marks) would be those at school; consecration that of XFactor or Olympic medals; and mission the mission of commercial companies. This enormous linguistic distance is a sign of the difficulties that exist in communicating what consecrated life is.

The discussions could also appear distant from the real life experience of men religious and women religious: ageing, a lack of vocations in the West, a movement to the South, the inculturation of charisms, scandals, new frontiers, etc. In reality, the references to contextualisation and personal relationships, and the scenarios evoked by the analyses, were very aware of the practical dimensions of what is experienced by consecrated life.

Happy rules

Recognising an identity and building around it a suitable juridical structure are fundamental pre-conditions for the future. One can have resort to one word or a set of terms, but the important thing is for the efflorescence of collective charisms not to be dispersed because of a lack of discernment or suffocated by the incapacity of law.

Associations, groups, communities, movements: 'it is clear that today there does not exist a definition of this ecclesial phenomenon of associations by the legislator, or one that is accepted by the various authors who investigate the subject, because of the novelty and the wealth of their various manifestations' (R. Pérez Sanjuán).

'The constant resort to the analogy of institutes of consecrated life when they were erected as associations of the faithful with specific characteristics indicates the insufficiency of the current universal rules'. But, as A. Pedretti observes in *Commentarium pro religiosus* (n. 98, 2017, p. 331), 'If it is possible to live canonically and theologically as consecrated people outside the tract of can. 573, the risk is that of there being two orders of consecrated people. Thus, those who forgo canonical protection and remain amongst the associations enjoy a necessary charismatic freedom with the consequence for the Church of her not being able to verify in all of its force the charism of reference'.

Faithful to the Second Vatican Council

The framework of the Second Vatican Council emerges as completely confirmed: from the universal call to holiness to ecclesial placement, from the centrality of the charism to the relationship with ministry, and from service to the world to personal and community witness. And also by what was achieved by the subsequent magisterium, as summed up in the following way by B. Secondin: 'the central role of God who consecrates; the gradualness of consecration; the relationship between consecration and the charismatic inspiration of the founder/charism of an institute; the sacramental nature of consecrated life; the clearly nuptial nature of consecration; the dialectic of call and answer; the structured expression of the apostolic and prophetic dimension; the relationship of evangelical counsels and radicalism; the relationship with the mystery of the redemption and the cultural context; the practical expression in different existential pathways of the same single fundamental experience; the role of representation of the bride-Church in relation to the groom-Jesus etc.'. Yet with care not make re-emerge in the 'more' of religious consecration old forms of elitism, of sacredness, and of reserved lanes.

Another confirmation, which was established by the apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, is the belonging of religious life to the life and the holiness of the Church as an indispensable and defining element of her nature. Not, therefore, a simple structure *in the* Church but a structure *of the* Church (G. Ghirlanda). To achieve simplicity in providing an account of the analyses of the seminar, and in remembering them, they may be arranged on two fronts.

On the first, the term 'consecration' gives space to a conception of consecrated life of a systematic, normative, theologically structured and excluding kind. To sum up, a consecration that functions as a 'hat' for many heads (the image of Ciardi).

On the second, consecration and religious identity acquire a narrative, charismatic, vital-pneumatological, philokalic and including aspect. To sum up, 'without a hat'.

On the first, the canonical-institutional line is highlighted; on the second, the historical-charismatic line. Often the two lines overlies each other in the same author.

The two lines

Where the synod of 1994 progressively emphasised the expression 'consecration', defining it as special, more perfect, of a special character, and able to express total consecration to God and by God, celebrated in a liturgical act where vows are made in the Church, the subsequent apostolic exhortation authoritatively confirmed this orientation.

One is dealing with a special and distinct vocation, a deepening of the baptismal vocation but one with a further peculiarity: the fruit of a gift of the Spirit (G. Ghirlanda). ‘Current theological thought seems to be directed towards this conviction: consecration as a constitutive element or fundamental theological category by which to understand rightly’ consecrated life (Msgr. Carballo).

Religious life has been present in the Church since the early centuries and was regularly addressed with the need for some form of institutionalisation. As early as Basil of Caesarea (the fourth century), the profession of virginity was proposed in the *Great Rules*. In previous monastic life this had already been in force but Basil felt the need for a real promise made in front of witnesses (M. Sedano).

Progressively, but never in an exclusive sense, the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience emerged as an identification and on these Thomas conferred the sign of being perennial and stability. The Council of Trent and the subsequent magisterium confirmed them.

Vows are located at the confluence of the Eastern and Western traditions, of the character of offering and of oblation, on the one hand, and of that of the promise and the contract, on the other. Still today, the liturgy conserves an oblativ and worship element, and rules contain the element of the promise that has been made. For a millennium they did not have the centrality that they have today, even if in an exclusive form. It was Thomas Aquinas who gave them an overall arrangement, presenting them as candidates to interpret basic anthropological dimensions in an excellent way. But not only this. As N. Hausman observed, the trinitarian vision of *consecrated life* makes them a way of reading God Himself: the love that unites the Persons, their infinite riches (poverty), the luminous paternity of God (chastity) and the mutual correspondence of the Three (obedience).

Consecration and Beauty

But the vows were often not at the origins of the charismatic intuitions of the founders.

Ciardi observed that they came afterwards. ‘It is not the profession of the three vows that in a historical sense created consecrated life. The inspiring and original motives that were at its roots were others: the desire for ceaseless praise, the search for God, prayer of intercession, service to the poor and the sick, the proclaiming of conversion and the kingdom of God, the catechesis and the formation of young people...’. Tales rather than concepts seemed able to conserve the spiritual gift of each family.

For that matter, declared M. Sessa, the impossibility of a verbal anchorage in Scripture suggests the ‘overcoming of a Christological model that was crystallised and presented as a point of immediate departure, but as a journey, as a structural dynamic that from ancient and New Testament figures came to contemplate the Completion’, that is to say Christ.

The reference to consecrated life as being chosen – already suggested by the CLAR (the religious of Latin America) – tends not to file down inequalities but to exalt differences. The chosen person is the subject of blessing in an absolutely gratuitous way and becomes the bearer of a blessing intended for everyone. Recognising his inadequacy, everyone can identify with him and also discover that they are chosen and blessed. ‘One can then understand poverty to the full starting from the blessing of riches, the chastity of the blessing of fertile nuptiality, and the obedience of listening to blessing, as discernment between true and false prophecy’ (M. Sessa).

‘This seems to me to privilege a theological elaboration of consecrated life that starts from historical facts and interprets them...it has as its subject a historical reality by nature, an experience, a multiplicity of experiences that have to be constantly borne in mind’(F. Ciardi).

Monasticism, including contemporary monasticism, encounters difficulty in fully recognising itself in ‘consecration’ and in vows (G. Dossetti).

And the flowering of innovations, from neo-monasticism to ecclesial movements, from ecumenical communities to ecclesial families, presses against normative boundaries that no longer seem to be adequate (M. Bevilacqua).

García Paredes suggested placing consecration in the category of covenant, of a God who looks for man and a man who looks for God. The counsels become the sign of faithfulness in the face of the

dangers of idolatry (power, sex, money), knowing that charismatic consecration is connected to, and is nourished by, *consecratio continua* in the sacraments and the infinite variety of charisms raised up by the Spirit. More than dealing with concepts, one opens up to a constant creation with a narrative spirituality that does not identify the Spirit with a single demand. 'Consecration is the shining forth of the divine Beauty inside us. Beauty unifies variety; it does not eliminate it'. It is difficult to think that the seminar ferried rules and theologies in a decisive way beyond 'consecration' but it bore witness to the enormous wealth of life and thought that this word, with some difficulty, contains.