

## **What kind of vocations for a renewed consecrated life?**

### **What kind of consecrated life for “new” vocations?**

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The double question in the title of this paper is certainly worthy of two separate lectures. However, the natural coincidence of the two questions justifies an attempt to put my thoughts together in a single treatment of the matter. One question cannot be answered without referring to the other, whilst together the two answers might lay the first stone in the process of refounding the consecrated life (vc) which, as last November's Assembly showed, cannot be delayed. It was against this background that the careful choice of papers for this Assembly was made.

I propose to begin with the second question. Vocations and the vc - if this does not sound too irreverent - have the same relationship as the chicken and the egg: which came first? It seems to me, at least from a logical standpoint, that it would be appropriate to start with an analysis of the vc at this present moment in history, i.e. from the point of view of its various innovations, rather than analyzing the vocational qualities and innovations. The latter should flow easily from the former, whilst at the same time being one of its pre-requisites, a condition not to be ignored: if renewal is taking place within the vc, everyone who today embraces and wants to live it must adapt to these innovations. Indeed, we can say that the vc will never be renewed if vocations are not made “new” by the innovations we are now trying to express and illustrate. On the other hand, these innovations are not simply a sociological fact, but a requirement of this transition period, of these times of exodus. Might it not be that the whole Church is opening up to the new evangelization? Does *Vita Consacrata* not continually repeat that we must “look to the future” to be “renewed by Christ on a daily basis”? Again on the subject of vocations, the concluding document of the European Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to the Consecrated Life bears the significant title, *New Vocations for a New Europe*.

Whatever we choose to call this renewal process (“refoundation” or the active force of a “creative fidelity”), one thing is certain - we can delay it no longer.

### **Part one**

#### **What kind of Consecrated Life for “New” Vocations?**

One of the causes of the vocational crisis experienced in the last decades, at least in the West, was without doubt a particular image of the vc, no longer as appealing as it once was, no longer an ideal option for young people just facing life, no longer able to understand a certain new sensitivity on the part of young believers.

I do not intend at the moment to present a historical analysis to prove the progressive separation between the world of young people and the vc; more simply, I would like to refer to a factor which I feel to be of strategic importance in this process and central to the related loss of appeal.

#### **1. The breakdown in relationships**

It seems to me that the vc is risking a gradual loss of the fundamental nature of its relationships. The phenomenon is probably not very recent and one could trace it back along a progressive line that developed over the years as a result of certain social and cultural influences; recently, though, the loss has made itself felt much more clearly. The Renaissance, then a certain radical humanism, the Enlightenment and neo-Enlightenment led to the ever-growing central importance of the individual and his various abilities, especially mental and intellectual, and an increasingly restricted place for mystery and the transcendent, for the person and personal relationships, for the principle of brotherhood and, therefore, also faith, objectivity and value judgments. The postmodern era has accented still further the process of narcissistic self-orientation which - in its turn - has in some way worsened the consequent process of shutting the individual inside himself, even if this takes place within a process of general enervation (see “weak thinking”).

The vc, and more generally, the attitude of believers, could not fail to be affected by the influence (which, of course, has also had positive side effects); and as often happens in such cases, they have uncritically absorbed some of the more negative consequences of this culture. I refer in particular to a certain straying, in the vc, from the dimension of relationship - a dimension, as we were saying, which is one of the vc's characteristic and constituent elements. It was in the years immediately after the Council that, for example, we began to talk of self-realization, of emotional integration, referring, in (quite legitimate) exoneration, to the earlier excessive emphasis on 'community'. There is no doubt, however, that the process had begun long before that, putting down quite substantial roots, both in individuals and in the collective way of thinking.. (...)

It is a fact that we religious have often done far more than others ever could, but we have rarely been able to transmit our own spiritual wealth, our charisms. Contacts within the religious community have also experienced a certain poverty in relationships. This was revealed in a frank and concerned manner by the document on fraternal life in community when it spoke of the "weakening of community" caused by a particular phenomenon, the "lack and poor quality of communication" and, to be more precise, the "poor quality of the fundamental communication of spiritual wealth". This is why - the document states with extreme clarity and truthfulness - in our fraternities, we "communicate about marginal matters and problems, but rarely share what is vital and central to the path of consecration". The results are painful: for example, the ever more individualistic connotation of spiritual experience, the ever more pervasive attitude of self-management (the myth of self-fulfillment), a lack of feeling towards others, a search for meaningful and compensatory relationships outside the community (for one's own so-called emotional integration). These are serious comments that raise a sore point. (...) The vc has become less communal, less expressive of the need for fraternity that exists inside humans, and still less expressive of the trinitarian communion which forms the basis of every worldly relationship and which the vc should echo and recall to us.

Perhaps it is unfair to speak of a precise responsibility, comprised of omissions and inadequacies on the part of the vc itself; in fact, as mentioned earlier, a cultural influence was at the bottom of it all. On the other hand, this neither justifies or absolves us, but at least it enables us to understand that this is no longer the cultural model today and that we are moving more and more towards a model of man deeply marked by relationships, by "being with", by the memory of a relationship that gave life to man and which man leans toward, the nostalgia for a meeting which no one can ever erase from the human heart. "The anthropological view acceptable today does not see relationships as accidental, as a kind of accessory to man. Nor can one reduce relational nature to the psychological or sociological fields; one must situate it in the theological world which is proper to it, a world that is more ontological than moral".

Either the vc will understand this cultural period of transit and once more adopt a deeply relational and communal approach, or it will risk placing itself outside the meaningful human context, no longer meeting any demand or any aspect, any expectation held by men and women today, and, therefore, having nothing more to say, no image to present, no appeal.

## **2. Getting back relationships**

My working hypothesis is that the new image of the vc should first and foremost be that of relationship. "Relationship" in its widest and most essential meaning, precisely because relationships are at the basis of human life. Man is a creature of dialogue; through sin, however, he risks "falling in love with his own voice", forgetting the Word that created him and continues to call him and speak to him, to provoke and trouble him, to console and encourage him... The vc is the echo, or image, of that Word, and the religious is an interlocutor who speaks aloud for Him whom the world does not see or hear, but Who wants to enter into a relationship with this world, even with our modern and postmodern world.

How is this renewed image of the vc expressed?

## 2.1 “Decentralized” Consecrated Life

The implications of the relational model are legion and we certainly cannot presume to describe them all here and now. The concept of decentralization would seem to express a series of “negative” implications. It should be said that a vc which does not trespass upon the central role - which does not belong to it because it is God’s - is therefore less preoccupied with itself and its resources (of various kinds, not just financial). In concrete terms this means those institutions less preoccupied with themselves and their own survival, less troubled (to maintain certain levels of presence and works) and less affected by fear (of counting less and of not being successful), a fear which, the document on vocations states, always “gives very bad advice” and is not open to any kind of future. In this sense, we really must say that the vocational crisis, amongst other things, has had the effect on us of a very healthy slimming diet, freeing us from unwanted fats and harmful toxins, that is to say from the burdensome and self-centered pretensions which put us at the center of things.

Nowadays, it is true, we are no longer in an age of religious grandeur; the diet has undoubtedly had some results, but there is still a lurking temptation to reassume the role we were happy with for so long. The following may be some of the habitual signs of such temptation: preoccupation with numbers (cf. the sin of David’s census) that too often leads us to place less importance on the quality of new vocations; the cult of efficiency that makes us ignore the rules of evangelical conduct, which often bear no relation to the rules of progress or human success; idolization of our own achievements (what we manage and own) - better still when these are visible, if not out and out imposing - that gradually makes us incapable of co-operation amongst our various institutions or with other bodies, lay and ecclesial, of just giving a hand, and sometimes gives rise to the desire to ‘have children’ who will, of course, bear our name. A worrying sign of this... fall into temptation is the barely hidden depression we suffer when these dreams do not come true.

There is an ecclesial and lay sense, which still does not seem to be a definite part of our deeper sensitivities, but which could in fact be a fruit of this decentralization. As Rahner said, we are all still somewhat individualistic, having been formed in individualistic structures. The demon of self-centered individualism takes a long time to die, because it can transform itself into shapes that are pleasing to the eye (e.g. the equivocal concept of private saintliness).

## 2.2 “Extroverted” Consecrated Life

This is the positive aspect of the discussion about relationships. The vc must not take any central place, not only because the center is God, but because the very function of the vc itself, in this pilgrimage through time, is to point out the center, the reason for following the pathway, i.e. the centrality of the Eternal.

Here then, various prospects and renewal scenarios are opening up. We will quickly indicate only a few regarding both the internal aspect, the vc’s way of thinking, and the external, apostolic side of the question.

### ***The religious principle***

At the heart of the vc, of its culture and witness, is the so-called *religious principle*, which consists of the essential recognition of the Other and its unconditional existence, in radical orientation towards the Other as such. The Other as God, above all, but also as our neighbor, the person standing next to us. Yet all this is not just the principle at the origin and heart of the vc, it is behind every living reality; we have already noted that man is a creature of dialogue, who discovers his “I” only by means of a “you”; only when he feels called by a “you” does he come to life, because a call has been made to his foundations. This primordial fact is indelibly impressed on his make-up, making him “responsorial”, permanently involved in dialogue.

That is why man is a religious being, including in the etymological sense of the word, because in the depths of his being there is a relationship and he is called to live that relationship, he is made in the image of the Trinity and profoundly marked by the trinitarian dimension, which is the ultimate celebration of relationship, as a recognition of otherness.

For this reason, St. Basil sees the meaning not only of monasticism, but of man himself, in community life, and the cenobium as a place of brotherly love, of purification of all relationships and of the fulfillment of charity, as an environment for achieving the perfection of man. This is a very important statement because, if this is true then the vc has the sacred duty to show that it is also actually possible and can be physically translated into the realities of life and everyday relationships, within the dynamics of community.

This cannot happen if the vc does not finally decide to really assume a new face, no longer to think of itself in terms of how it fulfils its rules and achieves its private perfection, but to see itself at the service of God's people, with whom and amongst whom it is making its way to the land promised to everyone. So, let us say, firstly, that the vc must have an image, it cannot do without its own expressive and communicative visibility, it cannot be anonymous or prefer to hide ambiguously (false humility); it has the duty to express to itself the reasons for its hope and confess them to the world and the Church. Secondly, it must have a new image - new, mind - not only and not primarily because it will increase the attractiveness of the vc itself, of its audience that raises support amongst the lay and religious public, but because in a certain sense relationship is and is destined to become ever more refined and more methodical, because relationship means love, in the final analysis, with all its associated implications.

### ***Relationship as exegesis and test of the vc***

If the religious principle is also the principle of faith, then it is also the principle of the vc. Which means to say that communication is the most important value. "Indeed, it is the value from which all other values originate in one way or another. In the evangelical sense this is the value to which all other values are subjugated, because the greatest of all is love (1 Cor. 13,13) which, in the form of a luminous spirit, leads us to renounce ourselves as long as the relationship lasts". (...)

## **Part two**

### **What kind of vocations for a renewed consecrated life?**

From what we have just seen, it might seem that we could totally omit or deal only briefly with the second part of our theme in the light of this principle: the vocations which can today contribute towards the renewal of the vc must be able to realize and interpret the model now put forward. Therefore, the model of relationship should constitute the fundamental criterion for judging vocations to the vc, and then for formation (initial and continuing). In other words, the young entrant to the consecrated life must know he is "a relational person". Today as yesterday, today more than yesterday.

In that case the plans for renewal could really be achieved in time. Otherwise, if the vocations are not made "new" by the innovations which relationships - every relationship - carry with them, the vc will never renew itself, will remain some kind of prisoner of itself, or will increasingly lose its relationships, its image, its identity.

It might, however, be useful to amplify the discussion a little and try in some way to define the concept of relationship in order to be able to identify, as concretely as possible, the criteria for judging vocations. It is in fact in this area that the possibility of renewal will be measured. If we do not have the criteria to judge everything will come to nothing and the old ways will continue. On the other hand, it would be naïve to imagine that those requesting entry today already have the requisite qualities to further the renewal process because they are sons and daughters of the present culture. The renewal process results from conversion, not from inertia; it requires both heart and mind to work hard; it is not something that will happen, no matter what; it is controlled by the Spirit, not by the sociological laws of the recurrent paths of history. That is to say, many young people entering our structures today have not the slightest intention of renewal and are already "older" than their predecessors.

Defining the subject of relationships means breaking it down into its components. Here we give only a few: truth, fraternity and freedom. In concrete terms, we will look at the meaning of the vc as a call to truth, to fraternity and to freedom, then, for each of these, we will try to indicate a number of criteria for judging vocations.

## **1. Relationship as truth**

I am more and more surprised by the extreme simplicity of life, of its meaning and, at the same time, of the mysterious play of relationships which surrounds it from start to finish. And I am ever more convinced that true vocational promotion (vp) is fully steeped in that sense of mystery and relationship with mystery. vp is carried out to the extent that this attitude is adopted, to the extent to which we show young people this life as Moses' burning bush that flames with a mysterious fire which does not consume it. Yes, because only the relational attitude - like that taken by Moses, who adored from the right distance and did not claim to understand everything straight away - allows us gradually to enter into the reasons for life, into its truth which is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3, 3). And to discover the supreme logic of the existential mystery and of the choice of the vc.

### ***Relationship, the meaning of life***

The whole mysterious and true reason for existence lies in relationship. Not in general or abstract terms, but in a precise internal relationship between life and death, or in the following relational concept of the human-being: we live and we die for the same reason, because the good received (= life) naturally becomes a good given (= death), because the meaning of life is indivisibly linked to the meaning of death, and it is precisely in vocation, in the idea of Christian vocation and then in the choice of religious vocation that this connection becomes explicit, is carried to its extreme consequences and ratified by the subject as the key to his own existence. Hence, relationship at once appears as the truth of life; it is at the origin and at the end of existence, keeping it true and fresh every step of the way, as regards content (life and death both seen as a gift) and dynamics (the passage from life to death).

This already suggests an approach to teaching vp: (...) this elementary grammar of human life must be the basis for every vocational pastoral. The European Congress document states it explicitly: "If, at the start of man's existence, there is a gift that creates him, then life's pathway is signposted: if there is a gift then man will only be fully himself if he fulfils himself by giving himself; he will be happy as long as he respects this, his nature. He can make whatever choice he likes, as long as it is within the logic of giving, otherwise he will become a creature at odds with himself, a "monster"; he will be free to decide his specific direction, but he will not be free to consider himself beyond the logic of giving".

Yet if this same truth, the truth of life, is at the basis of every vocational choice, then it is even more at the basis of a radical choice like the choice of religious consecration, with its decision to give oneself totally to God. (...)

The vocational promoter (that is to say, every consecrated person) must aim decisively at this type of promotion and try to slowly mature in the young person the internal attitudes necessary to adopt this relational sense of life (and death); the young person must be helped to let himself be moved by this truth, to promote this culture (culture of life and true vocational culture) in a period like our own, in which the culture of death or non-relationships (the same thing) maintains that every existence "is born for no reason, continues because of its weakness, and dies by chance". (...)

### ***Relationship, a criterion for vocation***

Let us look at a few of these relational measures or vocational criteria.

#### ***Gratitude***

"Vocation is born from 'recognition'. It grows from the fertile ground of gratitude, because in vocation the individual supplies the response, he does not take the first step: it is being chosen, not choosing. (...) We must be very careful, because today gratitude is certainly not a virtue "much

quoted on the stock market”; it has almost become simply a question of politeness, of good and conventional manners. For many young people everything has had to be and must be perfect. We live in an age of ingratitude, because relationships are weak and have become less and less important! Gratitude is the first relational virtue and the first vocational attitude.

### ***Generosity***

(...) True relationship is stretched between the two poles of gratitude (the moment of receiving) and generosity (the moment of giving). (...) Let us be wary, therefore, of those who do not have a clear enough idea of vocation in terms of unstinting generosity, of the free and unbiased gift of self, and those who claim that what they give out always returns to them, probably with interest. Let us also be wary of vocations whose presumed generosity does not grow from the ground of gratitude, because generosity does not last if it does not have proper roots. Let us be wary of heroes, because very often today’s heroes are tomorrow’s victims. Let us be wary of all who are not sufficiently reconciled to their past and grateful for their history, because sooner or later they will present their bill and want someone to pay it, and dearly at that; let us be wary of those who have not learned to say “thank you”, because he who has no one to thank is a savage and a primitive human-being, has an unjust and false attitude towards life and would not even know how to say “I love you”.

### ***Simplicity and sense of humor***

(...) The consecrated life succeeds in holding together two poles opposed in themselves: the seriousness of the essential gift and the joyous humor of choosing God (as confirmed, from this point of view, by its truly rich history, from Francis, who was “God’s jester”. to Filippo Neri, the saint with the contagious sense of humor). Beware, then, of those who are too serious and do not know how to see the funny side of things, because they poison the air which everyone must breathe. Beware of those who put on a show of unbreakable security, because inside they are very fragile. Beware of those who do not know what humility is, because probably they do not know what faith and self-abandonment are either. Beware of those who take themselves too seriously, because their egos will be so invasive that they will want all the space and attention for themselves.

## **2. Relationship as fraternity**

Here relationship is still more evident, though the way of experiencing fraternity is not always obvious and crystal-clear from the point of view of new vocations. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the mysterious fascination of this classic value of the vc. Yet at the same time that it attracts, it is by no means a value that is easy and simple to live with; in fact, if it is true that some people find it attractive, it is also true that it arouses fear in others. Nor is it a fact that those who find it powerfully attractive possess the ability and freedom to live out such a value. Today’s youth, notoriously less emotionally stable due to their lack experience of family relationships, often present an ambivalent attitude towards relationships in general, an attitude to which a certain amount of attention should be paid, both when it is enthusiastic towards relationships and fraternity and when it shows fear in their regard.

### ***The fraternal condition***

(...) The charism, any charism, by its nature creates fraternity, constantly recalls relationship, and tells of a vocation to live with others; no one can understand it if they shut themselves inside themselves. Far less put it into practice. Hence it is not enough to confirm that there is a general willingness to live out relationships; rather, it is indispensable to evaluate the ability to live out the fraternal condition as the condition typical of those in the consecrated life, their specific way of being, the shape and standard of their life, its essential character linked to the possibility of fully understanding the gift of the Eternal.

### ***Fraternity as a criterion for vocation***

Fraternity, therefore, is not simply and exclusively a problem of charity, of learning the difficult art of living with those different from oneself, but a constituent dimension of the religious charism (...)

Each of these dimensions has its corresponding series of criteria for making judgments.

### ***Identity and belonging***

This is the ability to feel oneself part of a group of people with whom one shares the same roots, the same values, the identical idea of the Father, with the result that those people become brothers and sisters, and the group becomes one's own family. (...) Anyone who asks to enter a religious institution must demonstrate this internal freedom that opens one up to fraternity and friendship. (...) "He who trusts everyone shows he has little judgment; but he who trusts no one shows he has even less" (A. Graf). Or, at a higher level, "he who does not trust his neighbor usually has no trust in God" (C. Chapman) and is certainly not a relational person. (...) One day these people will become a burden for everyone in the community, because they do not belong to anyone.

### ***Otherness and difference***

One belongs to the group in which one recognizes one's own identity, but without putting one's brain on hold and without denying one's own originality and that of others. (...) Beware, therefore, of those who dream of the "observant community", where everyone must sing in chorus and everything ends up being dull and the same, where the idea of being together hides interests and claims for emotional gratification, and perhaps even the fear of solitude or of a too intimate relationship with a "different" person. (...)

### ***Responsibility and necessity***

As we know, there are community users and community builders: the first simply set out to get everything they can out of fraternity and complain about what they find wrong with it, the second help to put things right and support the community, but in any case they know quite clearly that fraternity is what they themselves make it. A sense of responsibility does not just mean taking on others' loads, but feeling the need for their presence, appreciating the personality of those around you, seeing your brothers/sisters as a place where God is waiting for you and through whom He speaks to you. (...) Anyone with an Atlas complex (who thinks he has to carry the weight of the whole world on his shoulders) or, conversely, anyone who prefers passing the buck, are both very dubious bets from the vocational point of view. Once again, they are people who are not good at relationships (...)

## **3. Relationship as freedom**

(...) Like fraternity, freedom is another subject and ideal that is capable of stirring every human-being (...) Let me also say that freedom of the individual begins to become a problem, at least in today's society, when it comes into contact with the freedom of others - in other words, when relationships come on the scene. But it should not be like that. The formula, much loved by liberals, which states that one person's freedom ends where other people's freedom begins, expresses a logic that is purely defensive, that cannot be understood as the ultimate rule for social relationships, because it stops at a perspective whereby one person's growth is inversely proportional to that of the rest. "In reality, one grows only with and thanks to others. Therefore it should perhaps rather be said that one person's freedom begins where that of others begins, and ends when it is diminished or denied. Either we are free together, or no one is free. And for the individual, that means carrying the weight of destiny of other human-beings, especially the weakest". Relationship, therefore, is the place where freedom of the individual is born and expressed, for the very reason that it can never be separated from the next person's freedom. (...) Perhaps it is worth clarifying the terms.

### ***Truth, freedom and affective freedom***

First of all, there is a great freedom that pours forth from what we earlier called the truth of life, as the fundamental relational truth (life is a good received that, by its nature, tends to become a good given); everyone who discovers the invincible logic of this definition, who accepts the inevitability of the connection between good received and good given, gains access to a freedom in terms of belief and on the human plane that to some extent constitutes the fundamental basis, the load-bearing structural component of a real vocational choice of the consecrated life. (...)

### ***Signs of a free person***

It is good to think of religious vocation as a great sign of freedom in a world (even of young people) which possesses the culture of freedom yet continually risks losing sight of what it means.

I therefore believe that the fundamental symbols of the consecrated life, both as they are and as they ought to be stated (in vocational promotion), witnessed to (by the religious community) and recognized (in judging vocations), are symbols of freedom.

#### ***The vows as an option for freedom***

A young person who wants to join [the vc] certainly cannot have the experience or depth of judgment of a mature religious, but he can and should already have an overview that directs him in a precise manner in his choice and motivation. (...) Anyone who sees and interprets the step of consecration as nothing more than an onerous and difficult renunciation shows that he is not really prepared; he does not transmit the attraction of God's gift. Beware therefore of "sad observants", wet blankets who seem impervious to joy and end up making those around them sad too, negating the value of any vocational promotion.

#### ***The mission as daring to take risks***

Another very useful factor in judging [vocation] is to consider the relationship between the present self (= what the individual is and what he knows he can do now) and the ideal self (= what he himself would like to be, but is not yet able to achieve); genuine vocation to the consecrated life is a decision based on a certain disproportion between the two structural elements of self. Therefore, you would do well to choose not the person who measures the ideal against his current capacities, taking care not to opt for something that demands more than what is possible for him, but the person who - on the contrary - displays a certain amount of detachment in thinking about his future, able to choose something he is not absolutely sure he can do, something that is bigger and higher, divine not just human, something he would never have chosen if he himself had not been chosen by the Eternal, something impossible for his strength alone. In short, a person called to consecration does not go to the psychologist for attitude testing, does not ask for watertight guarantees, does not bet on the safe side, is not afraid to stride out, does not demand every assurance... there is an element of healthy insanity in this choice. In today's culture of efficiency and forward planning (where everything must be calculated, prepared, predicted... and everyone must have the right abilities and be in the right place), this touch of madness is becoming increasingly rare. Instead, it is replaced by an excessive and unnecessary "wisdom" or the blindness of those who think only of themselves and their own financial situation. And yet it is the guarantee not only of a healthy vocation, but also of the renewal of our religious institutions...

#### ***The sequela as an expression of love's imagination***

In our present technological society, every choice seems to proceed from cold calculation, from foreseeing that an account will bring interest, from the realization of one's abilities, from gaining one's own interests. (...) Let us be clear, there is a whole transformation underlying this freedom, which is quite different from emotive spontaneity and natural instinct, but it is in any case indispensable that the young person should show this freedom to act because he is impelled within himself by the fascination of something or someone that is making itself more and more central to his life. He may not at once be able to recognize his feelings or understand what they mean or why he has them, but that is love, it is the gift of the Spirit. And just as the Spirit is the most fantastic and most tranquil imagining of God, so the love which comes from Him or that He has instilled in the heart of the young person becomes an expression of the imagination, the courage to follow Christ along unknown roads, to obey a rule that fixes the destination and sets the pace for his fellow travelers, and at the same time it becomes the exuberance of a heart that is learning to beat in time with the Eternal.

It is these vocations and this expression of love's imagination that are needed by the consecrated life today.