

Variety and Charism in Consecrated Life

Charism or Spirit

A religious charism is a particular share in some aspect of the mystery of Christ. For Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity this mystery is Jesus' thirst as He expressed it from the cross. All baptized Christians have a participation in all the mysteries of Christ, and thus in the mystery of Jesus' thirst, but Mother and her Missionaries of Charity are given a particular share (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2; AAS 58 [1966]: 703 and Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops, Directives for Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church *Mutuae Relationes* [14 May 1978], 51; AAS 70 [1978], 500).

"In Christian discipleship and love for the person of Christ there are a number of points concerning the growth of holiness in the consecrated life which merit particular emphasis today.

"In the first place, there is the need for *fidelity to the founding charism* and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice. Fundamental to every charism is a threefold orientation. First, charisms lead to the Father, in the filial desire to seek his will through a process of unceasing conversion, wherein obedience is the source of true freedom, chastity expresses the yearning of a heart unsatisfied by any finite love, and poverty nourishes that hunger and thirst for justice which God has promised to satisfy (cf. Mt 5:6). Consequently the charism of each Institute will lead the consecrated person to belong wholly to God, to speak with God or about God, as is said of Saint Dominic, so that he or she can taste the goodness of the Lord (cf. Ps 34:8) in every situation. Secondly, the charisms of the consecrated life also lead to the Son, fostering an intimate and joyful communion of life with him, in the school of his generous service of God and neighbour. Thus the attitude of consecrated persons "is progressively conformed to Christ; they learn detachment from externals, from the tumult of the senses, from all that keeps man from that freedom which allows him to be grasped by the Spirit". As a result, consecrated persons are enabled to take up the mission of Christ, working and suffering with him in the spreading of his Kingdom. Finally, every charism leads to the Holy Spirit, insofar as it prepares individuals to let themselves be guided and sustained by him, both in their personal spiritual journeys and in their lives of communion and apostolic work, in order to embody that attitude of service which should inspire the true Christian's every choice. In fact it is this threefold relationship which emerges in every founding charism, though with the specific nuances of the various patterns of living. This is so because in every charism there predominates "a profound desire to be conformed to Christ to give witness to some aspect of his mystery". This specific aspect is meant to take shape and develop according to the most authentic tradition of the Institute, as present in its Rule, Constitutions and Statutes" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 36).

Various Forms of Consecrated Life

Today there are approximately 1,423 institutes of women religious of pontifical right and 1,550 of diocesan right. Among the religious institutes for men there are 250 of pontifical right and 242 of diocesan right. There are approximately 165 secular institutes of pontifical or diocesan right, including those of priests, clerics or groups of lay women and men. There are also 39 societies of apostolic life of pontifical right. To these we must add a growing number of consecrated virgins, of consecrated widows and widowers, hermits and hermitesses and other groups that have initiated the process of canonical recognition.

Monasticism

“From the first centuries of the Church, men and women have felt called to imitate the Incarnate Word who took on the condition of a servant. They have sought to follow him by living in a particularly radical way, through monastic profession, the demands flowing from baptismal participation in the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection. In this way, by becoming bearers of the Cross (*staurophoroi*), they have striven to become bearers of the Spirit (*pneumatophoroi*), authentically spiritual men and women, capable of endowing history with hidden fruitfulness by unceasing praise and intercession, by spiritual counsels and works of charity. In its desire to transfigure the world and life itself in expectation of the definitive vision of God's countenance, Eastern monasticism gives pride of place to conversion, self-renunciation and compunction of heart, the quest for *hesychia* or interior peace, ceaseless prayer, fasting and vigils, spiritual combat and silence, Paschal joy in the presence of the Lord and the expectation of his definitive coming, and the oblation of self and personal possessions, lived in the holy communion of the monastery or in the solitude of the hermitage. The West too from the first centuries of the Church has practiced the monastic life and has experienced a great variety of expressions of it, both cenobitic and eremitical. In its present form, inspired above all by Saint Benedict, Western monasticism is the heir of the great number of men and women who, leaving behind life in the world, sought God and dedicated themselves to him, “preferring nothing to the love of Christ”. The monks of today likewise strive to *create a harmonious balance between the interior life and work* in the evangelical commitment to conversion of life, obedience and stability, and in persevering dedication to meditation on God's word (*lectio divina*), the celebration of the Liturgy and prayer. In the heart of the Church and the world, monasteries have been and continue to be eloquent signs of communion, welcoming abodes for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of study, dialogue and culture for the building up of the life of the Church and of the earthly city itself, in expectation of the heavenly city” (*Vita Consecrata*, 6).

Religious Institutes

Institutes completely devoted to contemplation

“Institutes completely devoted to contemplation, composed of either women or men, are for the Church a reason for pride and a source of heavenly graces. By their lives and mission, the members of these Institutes imitate Christ in his prayer on the mountain, bear witness to God's lordship over history and anticipate the glory which is to come.

In solitude and silence, by listening to the word of God, participating in divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification and the communion of fraternal love, they direct the whole of their lives and all their activities to the contemplation of God. In this way they offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church's love for her Lord, and they contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God. Thus there is good reason to hope that the different forms of contemplative life will experience *continued growth in the younger Churches* as an evident sign that the Gospel has taken firm root, especially in those areas of the world where other religions predominate. This will make it possible to bear witness to the vitality of the traditions of Christian asceticism and mysticism and will contribute to interreligious dialogue” (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 8).

Apostolic religious life

“The West has also known, down the centuries, a variety of other expressions of religious life, in which countless persons, renouncing the world, have consecrated themselves to God through the public profession of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life, *for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God*. Thus there arose the different families of Canons Regular, the Mendicant Orders, the Clerics Regular and in

general the Religious Congregations of men and women devoted to apostolic and missionary activity and to the many different works inspired by Christian charity.

This is a splendid and varied testimony, reflecting the multiplicity of gifts bestowed by God on founders and foundresses who, in openness to the working of the Holy Spirit, successfully interpreted the signs of the times and responded wisely to new needs. Following in their footsteps, many other people have sought by word and deed to embody the Gospel in their own lives, bringing anew to their own times the living presence of Jesus, the Consecrated One *par excellence*, the One sent by the Father. In every age consecrated men and women must continue to be images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cf. *Phil 2:5-11*), so that their whole lives may be penetrated by an apostolic spirit and their apostolic work with contemplation" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 9).

Secular Institutes

"The Holy Spirit, who wondrously fashions the variety of charisms, has given rise in our time to *new expressions of consecrated life*, which appear as a providential response to the new needs encountered by the Church today as she carries out her mission in the world.

"One thinks in the first place of members of *Secular Institutes* seeking to *live out their consecration to God in the world* through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities; they wish in this way to be a leaven of wisdom and a witness of grace within cultural, economic and political life. Through their own specific blending of presence in the world and consecration, they seek *to make present in society the newness and power of Christ's Kingdom*, striving to transfigure the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes. In this way, while they belong completely to God and are thus fully consecrated to his service, their activity in the ordinary life of the world contributes, by the power of the Spirit, to shedding the light of the Gospel on temporal realities. Secular Institutes, each in accordance with its specific nature, thus help to ensure that the Church has an effective presence in society. A valuable role is also played by *Clerical Secular Institutes*, in which priests who belong to the diocesan clergy, even when some of them are recognized as being incardinated in the Institute, consecrate themselves to Christ through the practice of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism. They discover in the spiritual riches of the Institute to which they belong great help for living more deeply the spirituality proper to the priesthood and thus they are enabled to be a leaven of communion and apostolic generosity among their fellow clergy" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 10).

Societies of Apostolic Life

"Also worthy of special mention are *Societies of Apostolic Life* or of common life, composed of men or women. These pursue, each in its own particular way, a specific apostolic or missionary end. In many of them an explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels is made through sacred bonds officially recognized by the Church. Even in this case, however, the specific nature of their consecration distinguishes them from Religious Institutes and Secular Institutes. The specific identity of this form of life is to be preserved and promoted; in recent centuries it has produced many fruits of holiness and of the apostolate, especially in the field of charity and in the spread of the Gospel in the Missions" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 11).

Virgins, Hermits and Widows

"The Order of virgins, hermits and widows: It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of the ancient Order of Virgins, known in Christian communities ever since apostolic times. Consecrated by the diocesan Bishop, these women acquire a particular link with the Church, which they are committed to serve while remaining in the world. Either alone or in association with others, they constitute a special eschatological image of the Heavenly Bride and of the life to come, when the Church will at last fully live her love for Christ the Bridegroom."

"Men and women hermits, belonging to ancient Orders or new Institutes, or being directly dependent on the Bishop, bear witness to the passing nature of the present age by their inward and outward separation from the world. By fasting and penance, they show that man does not live by bread alone but by the word of God (cf. Mt 4:4). Such a life 'in the desert' is an invitation to their contemporaries and to the ecclesial community itself never to lose sight of the supreme vocation, which is to be always with the Lord.

"Again being practiced today is the consecration of widows, known since apostolic times (cf. 1 Tim 5:5,9-10; 1 Cor 7:8), as well as the consecration of widowers. These women and men, through a vow of perpetual chastity as a sign of the Kingdom of God, consecrate their state of life in order to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Church." (Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, No. 7.)

In the Old Testament, there appear to be consecrated widows, such as Anna the Prophetess in the Gospel of Luke, "who departed not from the temple by fastings and prayers serving night and day" (Luke ii, 37). (N.B. The rite for the consecration of widows was revised and is utilized in the Eastern Church, but it has not been done in the West as of yet. There is the practice currently of widows who desire to offer their perpetual chastity to obtain spiritual direction and make a private vow of perpetual chastity. There is a movement to have the public rite of consecration of widows revised and reinstated).

Pope Paul VI testifies to the heroic confession of the martyrs, hermits, anchorites and virgins:

"From the first centuries, the Holy Spirit has stirred up, side by side with the heroic confession of the martyrs, the wonderful strength of disciples and virgins, of hermits and anchorites. Religious life already existed in germ, and progressively it felt the growing need of developing and of taking on different forms of community or solitary life, in order to respond to the pressing invitation of Christ: "There is no one who has left house, wife, brothers, parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not be given repayment many times over in this present time, and, in the world to come, eternal life.[4] Who would venture to hold that such a calling today no longer has the same value and vigor? That the Church could do without these exceptional witnesses of the transcendence of the love of Christ? Or that the world without damage to itself could allow these lights to go out? They are lights which announce the kingdom of God with a liberty which knows no obstacles and is daily lived by thousands of sons and daughters of the Church. "

(Evangelica Testificatio, Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life, June 29, 1971, No. 3)

Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*, speaks of the importance of the state of virginity and widowhood in the early Christian community:

"Indeed, right from Apostolic times this virtue has been thriving and flourishing in the garden of the Church. When the Acts of the Apostles (Acts, 12:9) say that Philip the deacon was the father of four virgins, the word certainly refers to their state of life rather than to their age. And not much later Ignatius of Antioch salutes the virgins, who together with the widows, formed a not insignificant part of the Christian community of Smyrna.

"I salute the families of my brethren, with their wives and children, and the virgins who are called widows." The Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans, In the second century, as St. Justin testifies:

"And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years; and I boast that I could produce such from every race of men. For what shall I say, too, of the countless multitudes of those who have reformed intemperate habits, and learned these things? (First Apology of St. Justin Martyr, Chapter XV: What Christ Himself Taught).

Consecrated Virginity

“The rite for consecration of virgins at present found in the Roman Pontifical is to be revised” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 80).

“Those who consecrate their chastity under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit do so for the sake of a more fervent love of Christ and of greater freedom in the service of their brothers and sisters.

“They are to spend their time in works of penance and of mercy, in apostolic activity, and in prayer, according to their state of life and spiritual gifts.

“To fulfill their duty of prayer they are strongly advised to recite the liturgy of the hours each day, especially morning prayer and evening prayer. In this way, by joining their voice to those of Christ the High Priest and of his Church, they will offer unending praise to their heavenly Father and pray for the salvation of the whole world” (*Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity for Women Living in the World*, no. 2)(5/31/1970).

“Similar to these forms of consecrated life is the order of virgins, who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church” (*CIC* 604.1).

“In order to observe their commitment more faithfully and to perform by mutual support service to the Church which is in harmony with their state these virgins can form themselves into associations” (*CIC* 604.2).

“From apostolic times Christian virgins and widows, called by the Lord to cling only to him with greater freedom of heart, body, and spirit, have decided with the Church’s approval to live in the respective states of virginity or perpetual chastity ‘for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven’” (*CCC* 922).

“...By this solemn rite (*Consecratio Virginum*), the virgin is ‘constituted...a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the Church’s love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come’” (*CCC* 923).

“As with other forms of consecrated life, the order of virgins establishes the woman living in the world (or the nun) in prayer, penance, service of her brethren, and apostolic activity, according to the state of life and spiritual gifts given to her...(*CCC* 924).

In the World there are over 3000 consecrated virgins in 21 countries. In the USA there are over 150 consecrated virgins in 29 states. For further information on consecrated virginity, see www.consecratedvirgins.org

New Forms of Consecrated Life

“The perennial youth of the Church continues to be evident even today. In recent years, following the Second Vatican Council, *new or renewed forms of the consecrated life* have arisen. In many cases, these are Institutes similar to those already existing, but inspired by new spiritual and apostolic impulses. Their vitality must be judged by the authority of the Church, which has the responsibility of examining them in order to discern the authenticity of the purpose for their foundation and to prevent the proliferation of institutions similar to one another, with the consequent risk of a harmful fragmentation into excessively small groups. In other cases it is a question of new experiments which are seeking an identity of their own in the Church and awaiting official recognition from the Apostolic See, which alone has final judgment in these matters. These new forms of consecrated life now taking their place alongside the older ones bear witness to the constant attraction which the total gift of self to the Lord, the ideal of the

apostolic community and the founding charisms continue to exert, even on the present generation. They also show how the gifts of the Holy Spirit complement one another. In this newness however the Spirit does not contradict himself. Proof of this is the fact that the new forms of consecrated life have not supplanted the earlier ones. Amid such wide variety the underlying unity has been successfully preserved, thanks to the one call to follow Jesus — chaste, poor and obedient — in the pursuit of perfect charity. This call, which is found in all the existing forms of consecrated life, must also mark those which present themselves as new" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 12).

Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States

A recent CARA report on emerging communities of consecrated life in the U.S. indicates that there are 165 emerging communities founded since 1965, being in good standing with their diocese, and having at least 3 or 4 members. Twenty-four communities included in the report of 1999 have since disbanded. About 50 of the 165 new communities are either religious institutes or are seeking canonical status as religious institutes. Six communities are either secular institutes or are seeking canonical status as a secular institute. About 12 communities are listed as societies of apostolic life or are seeking canonical status as such. About half the emerging communities are associations of the faithful, about evenly divided between private and public associations.

Exhortation and Prayer of the Servant of God John Paul II

"To you, young people, I say: if you hear the Lord's call, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movements of holiness which renowned saints have launched in their following of Christ. Cultivate the ideals proper to your age, but readily accept God's plan for you if he invites you to seek holiness in the consecrated life. Admire all God's works in the world, but be ready to fix your eyes on the things destined never to pass away.

"The Third Millennium awaits the contribution of the faith and creativity of great numbers of young consecrated persons, that the world may be made more peaceful and able to welcome God and, in him, all his sons and daughters" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 106).

"Mary, image of the Church, the Bride without spot or wrinkle, which by imitating you "preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity", sustain consecrated persons on their journey towards the sole and eternal Blessedness.

"To you, Virgin of the Visitation, do we entrust them, that they may go forth to meet human needs, to bring help, but above all to bring Jesus. Teach them to proclaim the mighty things which the Lord accomplishes in the world, that all peoples may extol the greatness of his name. Support them in their work for the poor, the hungry, those without hope, the little ones and all who seek your Son with a sincere heart. To you, our Mother, who desire the spiritual and apostolic renewal of your sons and daughters in a response of love and complete dedication to Christ, we address our confident prayer. You who did the will of the Father, ever ready in obedience, courageous in poverty and receptive in fruitful virginity, obtain from your divine Son that all who have received the gift of following him in the consecrated life may be enabled to bear witness to that gift by their transfigured lives, as they joyfully make their way with all their brothers and sisters towards our heavenly homeland and the light which will never grow dim. We ask you this, that in everyone and in everything glory, adoration and love may be given to the Most High Lord of all things, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 112).