

A Dare From the Holy Father

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Sometimes the official documents presented from the Vatican are difficult to read and apply to one's situation. Here is an introduction to "VITA CONSECRATA" that might help in understanding its relevance to religious life today.

The Apostolic exhortation, "Vita Consecrata" by Pope John Paul II was recently published in *Origins*. This is the document from the Synod on Consecrated Life held in October 1994. In this document the Pope presents a challenging "dare" to young people:

"To you young people, I say: If you hear the Lord's call, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movement of holiness which renowned saints have launched in their following of Christ...readily accept God's plan for you if he invites you to seek holiness in the consecrated life." #106

That's quite a dare! But come to think of it I have met some very gutsy priests and religious who have embraced some daring challenges in their lives. Here's one such sister!

At a gathering of women considering religious life, I invited Sr. Agness Chiletti to come and speak. Sr. Agness was one of the five Xaverian sisters kidnapped and held captive for several weeks in a rebel camp in Sierra Leone. Sister's story was very powerful and moving, not only for the women discerning a vocation, but for me as a religious woman. One of the most striking parts of her story was the sisters' inability to do anything for their people while held hostage. They were kept in one area of the camp and watched their people leave each day for training and return. They met their eyes coming and going. However Sr. Agness said that the people knew the sisters were there praying for them, their presence was support and a gift.

For many of us who work hard and do too much, it is a great reminder that religious life is an invaluable gift to our Church because of the presence it enables us to be for others. We can be there for people, a sign of prayerful support and solidarity even in those moments when we can't do anything.

Becoming holy, or a whole person, is often more a project of "being" than "doing." This document on religious life asks us to examine how our lifestyle promotes this holiness or union with God. This journey towards God keeps us moving and letting go of anything that stands in God's way. This movement deepens the sense of how much we need to depend on God for the strength to keep going and the freedom to let go!

As a sister vocation director, my present ministry involves helping people to discern their vocation. At times I also do spiritual direction. Sometimes during spiritual direction I feel powerless to help another person. I feel on "empty" and have no words to say

and no specific suggestion to make. I listen with an “inner ear” to see what the Holy Spirit might suggest. I try to hold myself in God’s presence as I listen to the other’s story. It is often a few weeks or months later that the same person tells me how I was a vehicle of God’s grace for them. It was in my presence to them, my prayers for them, or who I am for them as a religious woman that supported them in that particular circumstance or crisis. Ironically it is when I feel most powerless and poor, that God works through me, not because of something I have done or said but because of who I am. I still get surprised, and rightfully so, because I know how poor I am and how inadequate I have felt. The miracle of God’s grace is what keeps me going!

The vow of poverty that religious take is a commitment to sharing, not only possessions, but time, talents and presence. This vow of poverty teaches us to trust in Divine Providence. As Sister Barbara Fiand teaches, poverty is a movement into God as opposed to a movement to ego enhancement; “poverty is not something we do or practice but something we are.” In our dependence on God we learn the rich inheritance that is ours, whether it be an experience in ministry where God needs us, in the celibate relationships that gift us with intimacy and joy, or in being re-fueled through times of prayer. “Its primary meaning (referring to Evangelical poverty), in fact, is to attest that God is the true wealth of the human heart.” #90 *Vita Consecrate*, Apostolic Exhortation by John Paul II.

In *Vita Consecrata* John Paul II examines religious life and its future.* All of his discussion of religious life is set in the context of the icon of the Transfigured Christ. The Holy Father invites us to focus on Christ’s radiant face in the transfiguration, as an invitation to hold on to the transfigured face of Christ knowing the cross lies ahead. We, too, like Jesus, hear the words, “You are my Beloved” and respond by making God the center of our lives. “By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives, but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world.” This means that just as the Word became flesh and had to let go and “emptied himself,” so we are invited to let go of status, possessions, our agenda and biases to do God’s work. Poverty calls me to an accountability that includes my attitudes and the place I give God in my life and those places that I keep for myself. Letting go or being “emptied” is an ongoing conversion. We are being transformed by God’s grace and learn how to “grow into” the vow of poverty in the process of becoming holy.

“Becoming holy, spiritual, is not nearly so much a question of running up a steep hill, carrying heavy weights and puffing deeply, as it is a letting go of the weights, letting go of the climb, and falling backward in trust, believing that we will be caught up in loving protective arms. It is not trying harder, but letting go.” (Inviting the Mystic. Supporting the Prophet. Katherine M. Dyckman and Patrick Carroll.)

The synod on consecrated life also reflected on the life of the Trinity as the model for religious life. How is it possible for us human beings, in a certain place and time, with the stresses of daily living to reflect the Trinity? This exhortation reminds us that

we are called to reflect in our lives and relationships the loving bond between the persons of the Trinity. Living the evangelical counsels is one way of loving. It enables us to embrace both the realities of Tabor as well as those of Calvary in daily life. We experience the joy of living in community-as well as the cross and suffering that it also brings. Religious delight in doing God's will as well as struggle with their own agenda for God! At times religious revel in loving intimacy with God and other times face sexual tensions and loneliness. Being called "Beloved" we share in Jesus' Mission, but we also face the poverty of our limits to be sons and daughters of God. In each aspect of the vowed life appear both the face of Christ at Tabor and the struggle of Calvary.

Another challenge, or dare, in this document on religious life is to creative fidelity. Pope John Paul II dares religious to courageously imagine new ways of becoming holy in this day and age but in the spirit of their founders and foundresses. "Institutes of consecrated life are thus invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world" (#37).

Some of the men and women in discernment worry about the future of religious life. There have been so many changes. What will religious life look like twenty years from now? How many members will be left? What will the median age be? This is the negative perspective. The exciting challenge for those entering religious life today is to be part of the re-founding, re-designing, re-animation of religious life. Perhaps it will not look like anything which we know now. If we take the Pope's invitation seriously we will need to use our imaginations to envisage a religious life that is responding to the signs of the times and the needs of today's and tomorrow's world. Becoming holy is messy, difficult, uncomfortable business. Finding comfort in the status quo or an existing structure is much easier. Taking initiative, creatively imagining new possibilities and finding ways to be holy in today's world is demanding but much more rewarding.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus, Mary learned as in the rabbinical tradition. Sitting in God's presence and listening in quiet prayer, the imagination can be stimulated by the Spirit into this dare to be creative. What does it mean to be faithful as a priest, sister or brother in this day and age? The answer often comes in those moments of intimacy with God and often those answers are surprises.

I used to think that conversion, the daily effort to become the person God created me to be, involved intense will power. After struggling and realizing how dependent I am on God, I realize that it is not my attempts at steeling my will, clenching my fists, grinning and bearing it, that move me into union with God. My favorite definition of conversion is that of Paul Ricoeur: "We too often and too quickly think of a will that submits and not enough of an imagination that opens itself." In order to grow into holiness, what we really need is to exercise our imagination and, as the Holy Father invites us, to be creative about how we can be faithful. For example, life today is very fast paced. We move from phone to fax, from pager to computer, from one meeting to the next. As I rush on to the freeway for the next meeting, I can recall St. Catherine of

Siena who was also a very busy woman. As a young woman she used her imagination in order to find ways to communicate with God when overwhelmed by her family's demands for work. They tried to keep her from prayer and from her "cell" (a small room in which she prayed). St. Catherine imagined an inner cell where she could meet God at any time. Her creative fidelity in her busy life inspires me to imagine new possibilities for being faithful in the 90's.

For those who may feel intimidated by the implications of using the imagination, of daring to live a holy life, the Pope brings us back to the Scripture story of the Transfiguration. Jesus said, "Rise and have no fear." Can we rise to the invitation in this document and move forward courageously to bring religious life into the next millennium? Are you willing to be part of this enterprise? Can you accept this dare from the Holy Father?

* "*Vita Consecrate*" is a lengthy document and this article is by no means a summary but merely a reflection on some points that may be relevant to a person in discernment. *Origins* Volume 25: No. 41, April 4, 1996.

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