

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

(Lecture delivered in Shanahan Hall, Onitsha, 23 August, 2014)

The life, example and teaching of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ have all along the centuries led numerous people to follow him. Indeed, the invitation of Jesus to his first disciples was “Follow me” (Jn 1:43). Christianity was in the earliest days called “the Way” (cf Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). One of the most radical ways of following Jesus is what has in the history of the Church been technically called the “consecrated life”. Pope Francis has declared next year, 2015, the Year of the Consecrated Life. It is therefore fitting that in this year’s Shanahan Lecture we consider the consecrated life in the particular form of *The Religious Life*.

We shall first ask ourselves what are the origins of the religious life, what it is and how the Church shows appreciation for it. Thereafter the three vows which all religious men and women take will be considered, together with the prophetic dimension of the religious life. Because some people have quite a problem in understanding the vocation of the religious brothers, we shall focus on this aspect. The religious life brings many blessings to Church and society and some of these need to be mentioned. We shall conclude with a listing of the responsibilities of the whole Church towards the religious life.

1. Origins of the Consecrated Life

Jesus Christ lived a life that was poor, obedient and chaste. His followers strive to follow him in various ways. The call to the Christian life is a call to holiness which is the perfection of charity. Jesus invited all his followers to be perfect, as their heavenly Father is perfect (cf Mt 5: 48). Therefore, the Second Vatican Council has no hesitation in declaring that all the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 40). In article 41 of this Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council goes into detail on how different people in the Church live this call to holiness: bishops, priests, other clerics, married people, labourers, the poor and the sick. Martyrs show a very special degree of holiness because they give their lives for love of God.

The Council then goes on to say that “the holiness of the Church is also fostered in a special way by the observance of the manifold counsels proposed in the Gospel by our Lord to his disciples” (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). The Council is speaking of people in the consecrated life who take the vows of chastity,

poverty and obedience, in order to follow Christ more closely. This is the way of life on which we are now to focus.

Life according to the three evangelical counsels just named is commended by the Apostles, by the Fathers of the Church and by other teachers and shepherds all along the corridors of Church history. Saint Anthony of Egypt (251-355) was the first who went to live a secluded life in the desert. Disciples began to join him. Saints Augustine, Bernard and Benedict are among the great founders of monastic traditions. Later in the Middle Ages there arose forms of the consecrated life lived, not in monastic enclosures, but in the midst of the people in the world. Some of these consecrated people engaged in teaching or medical care of the people, or other social services. Church authority followed and guided these developments in the following of Christ, to make sure that those who followed these ways were on the road to holiness of life.

Although the consecrated life was not directly established by Christ himself, it developed from his life and teaching. “The counsels”, says the Second Vatican Council, “are a divine gift which the Church has received from her Lord and which she ever preserves with the help of his grace” (*Lumen Gentium*, 43). “Although the religious state constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, nonetheless it belongs inseparably to her life and holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

2. Essentials and forms of the Consecrated State

In the strict sense, every baptized person is by that fact consecrated to God. In the Church, however, the term consecrated state is technically applied to that state of life which people enter by the profession of the three evangelical counsels or vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, in a group or community publicly approved by Church authority, as a way of following Christ more closely. “By a new and special title, they (i.e. the consecrated people) are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God’s Kingdom, for the honour of God, the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory” (*Code of Canon Law*, can 573).

As is to be expected, the consecrated life in the history of the Church has taken many forms. Common among them all is the profession of the three vows already mentioned. If the consecrated people live in monasteries, they are

called monks or nuns. If they are members of Religious Orders or Congregations in what is technically called “active life”, they are called brothers or sisters. It is normal for monks and nuns, brothers and sisters to have a distinctive religious habit or dress. Among all these forms of the consecrated life, community living is the norm. It is about these religious men and women that this paper is reflecting.

The Church also recognizes hermits or anchorites as consecrated people if, “in the hands of the diocesan Bishop, they publicly profess, by a vow or some other sacred bond, the three evangelical counsels, and then lead their particular form of life under the guidance of the diocesan Bishop” (C.I.C. can. 603 § 2). The eremitical life, also called anchoritism, has its roots in the third century with such desert fathers as Saint Paul (c. 234-342) and Saint Anthony of Egypt (251-356). This kind of life still exists today, but it is not very common. It is marked by withdrawal from the world, solitude, silence, praise of God and prayer and penance for the world. Hermits do not live in community. This paper is not on their life.

The Order of Virgins is also a form of the consecrated life (cf C.I.C. can. 604). These virgins are consecrated to God, mystically espoused to Christ and dedicated to the service of the Church, when the diocesan Bishop consecrates them according to the approved liturgical rite. Candidates for this way of life should be women who, by their age, prudence and universally approved character, give assurance of perseverance in a life of chastity dedicated to the service of God and their neighbour. Consecrated virgins “can be associated together to fulfil their pledge more faithfully” (C.I.C. can. 604 § 2). This paper is not about consecrated virgins.

Secular Institutes are another form of the consecrated life by which Christ’s faithful who live in the world take the three vows, and strive for the perfection of charity and to contribute to the sanctification of the world especially from within (cf C.I.C. can 710-730). Secular Institutes are rather recent in Church history. They were formally set up by Pope Pius XII in 1947. Members can be lay people or clerics. “Lay members participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church in the world and from within the world. They do this by their witness of Christian life and of fidelity to their consecration, and by the assistance they give in directing temporal affairs to God and in animating the world by the power of the Gospel. They also offer their cooperation to serve the ecclesial community in accordance with the secular manner of life proper to them. Clerical members, by the witness of their

consecrated life, especially in the *presbyterium*, support their colleagues by a distinctive apostolic charity, and in the people of God they further the sanctification of the world by their sacred ministry” (C.I.C. can. 713 § 2 and 3). We are not discussing the Secular Institutes in this paper.

There are also in the Church Societies of Apostolic Life. They are of many types. They pursue specific apostolic or missionary ends. Some of them make an explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels. But they are not Religious Institutes nor are they Secular Institutes (cf John Paul II: *Vita Consecrata*, 11). These societies are not under consideration here.

It is therefore on the religious that we are concentrating, that is, on the monks and nuns, brothers and sisters. Their religious families are called Orders, or Congregations or Institutes. In the rest of this paper, when we say religious, we are referring to them.

“From the very beginning of the Church there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely by the practice of the evangelical counsels” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1). This radical way of living the Gospel on this earth is a “particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ’s mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth” (*Vita Consecrata*, 18). It is also a powerful message to all other members of the Church and to society as a whole, because a religious sacrifice the three best things on earth, marriage, possessions and doing one’s own will, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. As the Second Vatican Council puts it, “the profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfilment of the duties of their Christian vocation.... The religious state reveals in a unique way that the kingdom of God and its overmastering necessities are superior to all earthly considerations” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

When Pope Francis met with the members of the executive council of the Union of Superiors General of religious men on 29 November, 2013, he observed that a radical life is required of all Christians, but that the religious are called to follow the Lord in a special way. “They are the men and women who awaken the world. The consecrated life is a prophecy. God asks us to leave the nest that enfolds us so as to be sent to the edges of the world, avoiding the temptation to domesticate them. This is the most effective way to imitate the Lord” (in *L’Osserv. Romano*, weekly Eng. ed. 6/12/2013, p.7).

The professional work that a religious carries out, like teaching, or nursing, or doing other social work, is secondary to who the religious man or

woman is. A teacher, a catechist, a nurse or a social worker could carry out some of those practical works. But for a religious the life of consecration has priority and is the apostolic and spiritual basis and fount of those external works. The religious life is about union with God, service of God, knowledge of God, having God as the absolute in one's life and living for God. The religious gives God everything. In that life of total consecration, service of neighbour has its place. External works become a manifestation of that love of God. As we proceed in this reflection, it will become clearer and clearer that, as Saint John Paul II puts it, "the profession of the evangelical counsels is an integral part of the Church's life and a much-needed incentive towards ever greater fidelity to the Gospel" (*Vita Consecrata*, 3)

3. Religious in numbers

Numbers tend to be dry. They do not say everything, nor even what is most primary in the life of the Church, which is holiness. Moreover, when we speak of Church personnel, one should not think only of clerics and religious. There are also members of Secular Institutes, consecrated virgins, members of Societies of Apostolic Life, permanent deacons, catechists, lay missionaries and others. And we must not forget ecclesial movements and associations which the Holy Spirit raises to answer to various needs of the mission of the Church. This paper is focusing only on religious.

It is also to be noted that the religious state is not a third state between the clerics and the laity. Rather religious are clerics or lay people who are consecrated in an institute with the three evangelical counsels as base. A religious institute is clerical if "by reason of the end or purpose intended by the founder, or by reason of lawful tradition, it is under the governance of clerics, presupposes the exercise of sacred orders, and is recognized as such by ecclesiastical authority. A lay institute is one which is recognized as such by ecclesiastical authority because, by its nature, character and purpose, its proper role, defined by its founder or by lawful tradition, does not include the exercise of sacred orders" (C.I.C. can 588). In simple language, this means that all religious men are brothers, but some are also priests.

The following figures from the *Statistics Yearbook of the Church 2011* give an idea of how many religious we have in the Church, in comparison with all other Church personnel. The figures refer to the situation on 31 December 2011:

World population	6,933,310,000
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Catholics	1,213,591,000
Bishops	5,132
Diocesan Priests	281,346
Religious Priests	132,072
All Priests in the Church	413,418
Religious Men (Brothers)	55,085
Religious Women	713,206
Secular Institute Members	25,277.

If anyone is interested in knowing which are the seven Religious Orders or Congregations with the highest number of members in December 2011, here they are:

Jesuits	17,287
Salesians	15,573
Franciscans Minor	14,123
Franciscans Capuchins	10,786
Franciscans Conventuals	4,289
Redemptorists	5,338
Dominicans	4,459

We can also remark that the religious brothers who are not priests were 75,802 in 1978, but their number went down to 55,085 in 2011, while the religious women went down in numbers from 990,000 in 1978 to 713,206 in 2011. In both cases the numbers went down in Europe, America and Oceania and went up in Africa and Asia. Further in this paper we shall ask ourselves why the number of religious brothers is low in all the continents. As we proceed, we should bear in mind that holiness is not measured by statistics.

4. Church appreciation of the Religious Life

In many ways our holy mother, the Church, shows appreciation of the religious life. It is Church authority which, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, interprets the three evangelical counsels, regulates their practice and establishes stable norms of living according to them. The same Church authority approves the constitutions and rules proposed by the various founders, together with any eventual modifications, and thus guarantees the members a proven way to follow Christ more closely. It supervises and protects the religious families “so that they can grow and flourish in accord with the spirit of their founders” (*Lumen Gentium*, 45; cf also C.I.C. can 576).

A major area of Church responsibility is the examination and approval of new expressions of the consecrated life, to see how authentic they are and, if they are mere repetitions of existing forms, to “prevent the proliferation of institutions similar to one another, with the consequent risk of a harmful fragmentation into excessive small groups” (*Vita Consecrata*, 12). The *Code of Canon Law* is very attentive to various aspects of the religious life such as establishment and suppression, governance, temporal goods, admission and formation of candidates, obligations and rights, apostolate, separation of members and Conferences of Major Superiors. 158 canons (C.I.C. can 573-730) are dedicated to religious institutes.

The special link between the religious and the Church needs to be appreciated. The Second Vatican Council is very explicit: “By her approval the Church not only raises the religious profession to the dignity of a canonical state. By the liturgical setting of that profession she also manifests that it is a state consecrated to God. The Church herself, by the authority given to her by God, accepts the vows of those professing them. By her public prayer she begs aid and grace from God for them. She commends them to God, imparts a spiritual blessing to them, and accompanies their self-offering with the Eucharistic sacrifice” (*Lumen Gentium*, 45). Although a priest can preside over the rite of Religious Profession, with the Mass that goes with it, it is clear that the ecclesial nature of the event becomes more manifest when it is the Bishop, the head of the particular Church or diocese, that presides.

This is why the Second Vatican Council says that “all communities should participate in the life of the Church. According to its individual character, each should make its own and foster in every possible way the enterprises and objectives of the Church in such fields as these: the scriptural, liturgical, doctrinal, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). “Inasmuch as their self-dedication has been accepted by the Church, they should realize that they are committed to her service as well” (*op. cit.*, 5). Considering that as religious they have been joined to the Church and her mystery in a special way, members of religious institutes should work to implement and strengthen the kingdom of Christ in souls and to extend that kingdom according to their charism and approved constitutions and rules.

“Each Institute”, says Saint John Paul II, “is recognized as having a rightful autonomy, enabling it to follow its own discipline and to keep intact its spiritual and apostolic patrimony. It is the responsibility of local Ordinaries to preserve and safeguard this autonomy” (*Vita Consecrata*, 48; cf also C.I.C. can

586). It is obvious that constant dialogue between bishops and major religious superiors is most valuable in order to promote mutual understanding which is a necessary precondition for effective cooperation, especially in pastoral matters (cf *Vita Consecrata*, 50). Pope Francis, speaking to the Union of Major Superiors said that he knew from experience the possible dilemmas, but added that “we bishops must understand that consecrated people are not useful materials, but are gifts that enrich the dioceses” (in *L’Osserv. Romano*, weekly Eng. ed. 6/12/2013, p.7).

Saint John Paul II considers the special value of the consecrated life. He states that the roles of the lay faithful and those of bishops and priests are of course indispensable. But he then adds significantly that “as a way of showing forth the Church’s holiness, *it is to be recognized that the consecrated life* (italics in the original), which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, *has an objective superiority*. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church’s purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity. The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved” (*Vita Consecrata*, 32).

The people of God show appreciation for the religious life in many ways. They come to religious profession ceremonies sometimes over long distances. They surround with prayer their relatives or friends who are pronouncing their vows. They bring gifts. Photographs are taken to immortalize the occasion. Those who cannot be physically present send supporting letters, telephone calls and emails. Sometimes the Parish Council, under the leadership of the parish priest, arranges a Mass of Thanksgiving and a solemn reception for the professed or the jubilarian. In one Religious Congregation the other sisters write their messages of congratulations to the member celebrating her Silver or Golden Jubilee and these messages are bound together and given to the jubilarian. The bishops make every effort to preside over the ceremony. The diocesan newspaper gives an inspiring report with fitting photographs.

The people at various levels, like family, village or parish, sometimes put in writing their good wishes, expectations and prayers. Here is what the family members wrote of one sister who was celebrating her First Profession Silver Jubilee: “The challenge was as daunting as any difficulty could possibly be, but sister had the heart of a lioness and the will power of an elephant, with the

defiant can-do attitude in which nothing appeared impossible to her. Her determination was as strong as steel and her zealous courage legendary”.

Another extended family encouraged their sister jubilant in rather clear terms: “The fact that you are celebrating your Silver Jubilee of Religious Profession does not mean that you have reached the end of the journey. In fact, you have just begun and so do not relax; there is need for you to now rekindle your zeal. You should never allow your health condition to discourage you. One thing you should realize is that sick people are very close to the Lord. So instead of being unhappy with your condition, see yourself as privileged and continue to love the Lord with all your being”. We must admit that this is not a bad sermon for the relatives to make!

5. The three Evangelical Counsels

The reason for taking the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience is to follow Christ more closely. Saint John the Evangelist already warned us not to place our love on the world and what it has to offer: “If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever” (1 Jn 2: 15-17). Pleasure, possessions and power are not bad in themselves and can enhance human life. But when they are chased without moderation, they lead to evil. Indeed, every evil which people are capable of committing can be traced to one of these “lusts”. The three evangelical counsels seek to root out these lusts so that the human soul is freer in seeking God. They are free sacrifices of the three best things on earth, marriage, possessions and doing one’s own will, in order to follow Christ more closely, according to the example of his own life on earth. A word on each of these vows will make this point clearer.

Chastity as a vow is sacrifice of marriage and all that it entails for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf Mt 19:12). It liberates the human heart in a unique way and causes it to burn with greater love for God and mankind (cf 1 Cor 7:32-35). For the religious, it is an image of the mystical union between Christ and his Church. “The joyful living of perfect chastity is a witness to the power of God’s love manifested in the weakness of the human condition” (*Vita Consecrata*, 88).

For all this to be realized in the life of every religious, the consecrated person should be equipped with the needed discipline together with emotional and psychological maturity. He or she should not ignore those mortifications and ascetical helps which history and the examples of the Saints have proved useful or even necessary. The Second Vatican Council draws attention to the fact “that chastity has stronger safeguards in a community when true fraternal love thrives among its members” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 12).

An unbiased observer sees the great good which the noble living of this vow has brought to Church and humanity. “The consecrated life must present to today’s world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective maturity” (*Vita Consecrata*, 88). Think of Saints Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Claire of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, John Bosco and Thérèse of Lisieux and of Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. These Saints had no doubt many qualities which made them great and enabled them to accomplish much for Church and society. Their singleness of purpose can be considered as connected to their vowed celibate state. The flaming examples of these holy religious are priceless incentives to everyone else to live that chastity which corresponds to that person’s state of life.

The vow of **poverty** is taken by religious in imitation of Jesus who lived poor and who advised a would-be follower to sell all he had, distribute to the poor and then come and follow him. He added: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). The religious entrusts self to Divine Providence and strives to avoid undue worry for the future (cf Mt 6:25). Each religious institute is expected to give corporate witness to poverty and to show love for the poor and the needy (cf Mt 19:21; 25:34-46; Jas 2:15-16; 1 Jn 3:17).

By the vow of poverty, religious attest that God is the true wealth of the human heart. They challenge the idolatry of money and encourage active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity and in preferential option for the poor. They also help to train young people and future leaders to seek to eliminate the structures of oppression and help the poor to get out of situations of poverty. Aware of the universal destination of earthly goods by God the Creator (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 69), they ask themselves what they can do to promote a fairer distribution of international aid and of the goods of the earth.

Because of some delicate demands in the practice of the vow of poverty, we shall come back to give more attention to this aspect of the religious life.

Obedience is the vow by which religious sacrifice their own wills in order to unite themselves with greater steadiness and security to the saving will of God. In this, they strive to follow Christ who came to do, not his own will, but the will of the Father who sent him (cf Jn 4:34; 5:30; Heb 10:7; Ps 39:9; Phil 2:7). Obedience is founded on faith and love, in the effort to follow Christ who gave his life as a ransom for many (cf Mt 20:28; Jn 10:14-18).

Religious obedience, if properly practised, does not diminish the dignity of the human person but rather leads it to maturity. Dialogue is of great help so that members of a community carry out the duties assigned to them with all their gifts of nature and grace. Dialogue, however, does not remove the responsibility of the religious superior to decide what has to be done (cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). “The lovers of your law”, says the Psalmist, “have great peace; they never stumble” (Ps 118:165).

Genuine religious obedience shows that there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom (cf *Vita Consecrata*, 91). It is a shining example to society that people in positions of authority have to carry out their duties with a high sense of responsibility and service, and that everyone has something to contribute for harmony and the attainment of the goals of society.

6. Focus on the Vow of Poverty

There are acceptable differences in the way the vow of poverty is lived in the various Religious Orders and Congregations around the world, taking into consideration cultural practices, work demands and approved customs. For example, a nun in a Cistercian monastery does not need to have some pocket money which a medical sister is expected to have. A religious who is a student needs to be able to pay for books, transport, lodging and similar needs. Every religious institute works out how the vow of poverty is to be practised by its members. Given this observation, we can now go into some general remarks on the practice of poverty.

Many people habitually find their identity secured by their material possessions and social standing. The vow of poverty challenges this and asks for sacrifice. The new religious has to learn, even if gradually, to find his or her religious identity in personal relationship with Jesus Christ and in spiritual realities that go beyond material possessions. When the professed religious is

fully engaged in some practical apostolate, he or she should be on the watch because this desire to seek security through material things may reappear with respect to the new areas of work.

The vow of poverty includes the sacrifice of becoming prominent. In the world people seek full self expression and exposure to the public. Is the religious content to have his or her life hidden with Christ in God? (cf Col 3:3). Jesus tells us that unless we be converted and become as children, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (cf Mt 18:3). He prays: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to infants" (Mt 11:25). Does the religious see himself or herself among the little ones? It is not so much the lack of material goods that makes such a religious happy, but rather the spirit of seeing oneself as small, as not self-sufficient, as not depending on self or personal resources, but on God.

Real poverty in the religious community is a sacrifice. This can refer to food, to lodging arrangements, to availability of means of travel, to medical attention and to provisions in old age. The pain can get increased when some religious seem to get what they need from the superior, while others do not, or at least there is the perception of lack of parity of treatment. Superiors have to be careful to be fair and considerate and to be seen to be such. Sometimes it may help that the financial position of the religious house is discussed in community meetings. It is not altogether theoretical that some religious can work themselves up to believe that their Congregation is rich and that they should be flown overseas for their present ailments, irrespective of the implications!

For some religious, the bigger sacrifice is to have to ask permission to go to a place or to obtain the money they need, or think they need, for a particular matter. Superiors cannot altogether remove this temptation, but their manner of looking after the needs of their colleagues can reduce the pinch of this humiliation. It is not proper that a religious be tempted to begin to go against the rules by not declaring some of the gifts received.

Some religious unnecessarily compare themselves to diocesan priests. They ask why a diocesan priest can keep the car he received at ordination, while the religious has to declare all gifts and hand them over to the superior. The answer is to ask such a religious whether the vow of poverty was explained to him or her during the novitiate. Moreover, every Religious Congregation can

discuss and develop its own customs on how to handle little gifts and how much pocket money a religious need.

The whole area of relationships with parents, brothers and sisters, cousins and other members of the biological family needs careful attention. One can imagine the pain which a religious brother or sister feels when the mother is very poor and is living in a shackle. While the poor mother did not take the vow of poverty, the religious brother or sister has no personal money to help the mother. In some extreme cases, the Religious Congregation has come in to help. Many congregations are already doing this. What, however, is not acceptable is that relatives should pressurize their son or daughter in the consecrated state to bring Church money for their use. Relatives should give up the idea that they have a right to Church or Religious Congregation funds just because their daughter or son is a religious. Someone should explain to them the meaning of the vow of poverty which they heard their relative pronounce on the profession day. A religious cannot be blamed for mentioning the precarious financial position of his or her mother to one or two people who can help. But it becomes an abuse if the religious has the habit of begging all around the place for money for relatives.

We can also mention the possibility of some people interfering with the internal running of a Religious Congregation by pressurizing the Superior General to send a particular sister or brother to this or that university, or overseas and promising that the relatives are ready to pay. It does not always work out smoothly. The relatives may later discover that their funds no longer permit them to pay. Other religious may get tempted to begin to look for their relatives also to urge their superiors to post them where they would love to go. Moreover, parents or relatives who donate considerable sums of money to a Religious Congregation should not have the hidden desire that their member in the congregation should receive preferential treatment. The vow of poverty also includes the detachment needed in all such matters. Religious, says the Second Vatican Council, “should brush aside all undue concern and entrust themselves to the providence of the heavenly Father (cf Mt 6:25)” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 13).

7. The Prophetic Dimension of the Religious Life

In the Old Testament, God called the people of Israel to be his own (cf Exod 5:1-3). In the New Testament the people gathered by Christ, the Church, are consecrated, covenanted. These people are to walk in the ways of the Lord.

In the Old Testament, the prophets served, not only to foretell the future but also to alert people to the duties of their covenant with God. Elijah the prophet was a courageous prophet and friend of God. He lived in God's presence. He interceded for the people. He boldly announced God's will. He defended God's sovereignty and came to the defence of the poor against the powerful of the world (cf 1 Kg 18-19). Some Fathers of the Church have regarded him as a model of the monastic religious life.

In the New Testament the consecrated religious act as leaven, as prophets to radically call our attention to the importance of following Christ. We are disciples of Christ. The religious keep reminding us of this fact, like the prophets of the Old Testament. The religious life has a prophetic dimension because it is a living eschatological sign. The religious brother, the religious sister and their religious communities are called to be living witnesses of the kingdom of heaven by their faith, hope and charity. They point others in the Church towards a communal future in union with the Blessed Trinity and the Saints through their witness.

All this presumes that the religious live their lives authentically. Their lives should be shining pointers to God and his will, reminders to people of eternal life and eloquent proof that it is possible to live the Gospel without discount. Therefore, their lives can also become an embarrassment or even a source of anger to people who are lukewarm, to careless people who do not want to be disturbed, and to people in authority who are oppressive of their subjects. That is why Ahab feared the prophet Elijah and Herod did not like John the Baptist.

Authentic living of the three evangelical counsels goes against the current of life in the world and is therefore prophetic because it is counter-cultural. It is very demanding on the part of the religious. "Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom" (*Vita Consecrata*, 84).

It follows that if religious do not live their calling authentically, they become a problem for the Church. They will look like caricatures. Whereas if they are genuine in their consecrated state, they will plead for the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized and people will tend to give them what they ask for, because their lives are regarded as being in line with their request. They live

what they preach. They reflect God who is justice, love and compassion. In that sense, Archbishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. said of the Immaculate Heart Sisters: “If they are humble, living simple lives and doing duties of charity to themselves and their people, they will be a tower of strength in the complete conversion of their people”.

To say that religious should be prophetic does not mean that they are out on purpose to oppose other members of the Church. But by their lives, and sometimes words, they can make others uncomfortable and give indications and suggestions about changes needed in Church structures and vocations in the world. Although the prophetic function and the hierarchical structure of the Church do not coincide, they are both at the service of the Bride of Christ. “Being prophets may sometimes imply making waves”, says Pope Francis. “Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say ‘a mess’. But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel” (interview in *America*, Sept. 30 2013, p.28).

It can also be added that religious do not suggest that they have a monopoly of the prophetic role in Church or in society. God can manifest himself through anyone, cleric, religious or lay person.

8. Religious Institutes of Brothers

Religious brothers and religious sisters take the same vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. But because quite a number of people do not understand the vocation of the religious brother, it is useful that we now say a word on brothers.

As explained earlier in this paper, the consecrated life is by its nature neither lay nor clerical. Both clerics and lay men and women can become religious. The religious state as the “profession of the evangelical counsels is complete in itself. Consequently, both for the individual and for the Church, it is a value in itself, apart from the sacred ministry” (*Vita Consecrata*, 60). All religious, whether monks or nuns, brothers or sisters, take the same basic three vows. Religious institutes of brothers are congregations of men who live the three vows as brothers of Jesus Christ, brothers of one another and brothers to everyone that they serve.

A religious brother is a mature man who feels called to the consecrated life, a life which closely imitates Jesus’ way of life while on earth. The brother wants to follow Christ who was chaste, poor and obedient. He embraces this form of life in community, that is, in the company of like-minded brothers. He

is given formation and training in the apostolate which will enable him to exercise his gifts in the service of God's people. He accepts the Cross of Jesus in his life and work and is happy and contented. He has not undertaken this way of life for any material advantage for himself or his relatives. He is happy to be a friend of Jesus and a child of Mary. He calmly awaits his eternal reward.

The religious brother is aware that in the Church bishops and priests are representatives of Christ as Head and Shepherd, as Spouse of the Church, as leaders of the people of God. The brother realizes that this is not his vocation. He just wants to follow Christ with a radical living of the Gospel. Therefore, the brother does not want people to regard him as a priest, or a bishop, or to be contrasted with them. He is not disappointed when he is not given the honours in society which some people associate with priests and bishops.

The brother is also aware that many people do not understand him or his way of life. He is not angry to have to receive some humiliation from people who do not understand. He is happy that he has found the kingdom of heaven like a treasure and that he has sold all that he has to buy it (cf Mt 13:44). Jesus was aware that most of the people of Nazareth and elsewhere in the Holy Land did not know who he really was. The brother is calm when some people do not know his identity. More important is that the brother has a clear image of his identity and does not allow anyone to sell to him some doubt about his vocation. The Church absolutely needs men, and not only women, who will witness to Jesus in the radical and counter-cultural way in which genuine religious do.

When I asked some people what their desirable image of a religious brother would look like, they replied in the following ways. A brother is a man who is dedicated, committed, humble and happy in his life of consecration to God. His life convinces people of the greatness of God and of the passing nature of the things of this world. He is near to the poor, the down-trodden, the dejected, the orphan and the widow. He is a role model in training children in schools and catechism classes. He does not occupy a high seat in church and he shows people what genuine religion is all about. He is well educated, efficient in his special area and a good educator of young people. He diffuses calm and joy and people are not afraid to approach him. In all these ways, he leads many people to God.

It is very welcome that there are many people who appreciate the vocation of religious brothers. They see in them an inspiration to follow Jesus Christ and to strive to be detached from things of this world, each person

according to his or her vocation. Some people who are somewhat overawed by bishops or priests may feel more at ease with religious brothers.

Why then do many people not understand the vocation of the religious brothers and why do they find it unattractive? That will be our next consideration.

9. Why some people do not understand the vocation of Religious Brothers

Some people have a difficulty in understanding the vocation of religious brothers. This manifests itself in several ways. There are reasons for it. And there is a solution. Let us examine some of them.

Religious brothers get forgotten often in many Church celebrations. For example, a priest preaches a beautiful homily on vocations to the priesthood and to the sisterhood, but he forgets to mention the brotherhood. For him, then, it would seem that the priesthood is the only ecclesiastical vocation for men, while for women there is the sisterhood.

In a big parish celebration, the bishop is visiting. The parish priest at the end of a wonderful day thanks everybody: the reverend sisters, the seminarians, the catechist, the altar boys, the choir and the members of the Parish Council. He does not mention the brothers, although they live and work in his parish and two of them assisted him in distributing Holy Communion that very day!

Some people consider the brother's vocation a waste. It has even happened that a religious sister said to a brother: "You are good material for the priesthood. You studied philosophy and theology in Rome. Why not become a priest?" Even a priest said to one of his relatives: "I will never allow you to become a brother. If you want a Church vocation, go to the seminary".

Some parish priests want just one brother to be assigned to their parish, and they see no need for a separate house for brothers because they consider that any room downstairs in the Fathers' house is good enough. They see no need for a community of two or three brothers because in their subconscious they do not see the brother as a member of a religious community but primarily as an honest and useful ecclesiastical worker.

I learned that a National Association of Religious Brothers was set up in Nigeria after the papal visit of 1982, and that in one of their conventions the brothers lamented that their vocation is not understood, that brothers are looked-down upon by priests and even by some bishops, religious sisters and

lay people, and that consequently young people are not encouraged to become brothers. A Little Brother of Jesus was said to have been refused accommodation in a hostel for priests and religious because he was not recognized as a religious.

The above observations are not to be generalized to apply to all parts of the world, nor to all religious families of brothers. Worthy of special mention are religious brothers who are Benedictine or Cistercian monks, or those who are Capuchin or Dominican friars. There are also many brothers in big Religious Congregations, like the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Marist Brothers of the Schools, the Brothers of the Holy Cross and the Congregation of Christian Brothers. These congregations of brothers have for centuries made their mark in Church life, service and the education of children, or even in the medical apostolate, like the Fatebenefratelli who run the Saint Bartholomew Hospital in Rome. Church history and society have given such religious brothers a clear identity.

Among the reasons for a low consideration of brothers, the primary explanation seems to be that the brother is contrasted with the priest and is considered inferior. The priest is appreciated because in Church celebrations he occupies a prominent place. He celebrates Mass, hears confessions, blesses houses, conducts marriages and funerals, preaches and blesses. So, people ask themselves why a brother, a mature man, does not go the whole way. Why should he stop half-way, since he is already entering Church ministry? Could it be that he did not pass enough examinations to qualify for the priesthood, and possibly later for the episcopate?

People fail to see that the religious brother takes the same vows as the religious sister and that therefore both are consecrated religious on an equal footing. Since women cannot be ordained priests, people reason that the brother should not be prevented from going the whole way. This is wrong theology. It manifests ignorance of the essence of the religious life.

Other people are more finance-minded in their reasoning. They see that a diocesan priest can own property, can keep the car he received at ordination or jubilee, can receive money which is given him on a personal title as different from parish money, can thus give money to his relatives and friends and can even save enough money to go overseas on holidays! A brother, on the other hand, has the vow of poverty, has to hand over to his superiors' money and other gifts which he receives, and is thus not in a position to benefit his relatives

from the financial point of view. Such people find the brother's vocation unattractive.

A necessary conclusion is that many people do not understand the vocation of the religious brother. They do not know, and often they do not know that they do not know. Their fundamental error is that they are contrasting the brother with the priest. The religious vocation is a call to a radical following of Christ by the profession of the three vows. The vocation of the priest is different. It is to preach, to celebrate the sacred mysteries and to gather the people of God together under the leadership of the bishop. The Church needs both vocations, but they are not the same. The brother is not a minor edition of the priest!

Another reason for misunderstanding is considering Church service as opportunity for social uplift, power exercise and acquisition of money and other property which will benefit also the relatives. Status seeking and desire for riches are natural attractions for the human heart. But a careful reading of the Gospel shows us that our Lord Jesus made quite a different proposal to his followers.

It can thus be seen that the solution lies in an effort to understand what religion is all about. It is about attention to God, union with God, knowledge of God, living for God and having him as the absolute in one's life. Service of our neighbour is a necessary manifestation. The priesthood itself is not about power, or high position or money. It is about service of God and his people. Neither priests, nor sisters nor brothers should be striving to acquire a high position and a prominent seat in the Church. Jesus is our model: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10: 43-45).

10. Blessings which the Religious Life brings to Church and Society

From many considerations, we can see that the religious life brings many blessings to Church and society.

The religious life announces without words that nothing is too precious to offer to God. People who do not understand ask if it is not a "waste of human energies which might be used more efficiently for a greater good for the benefit of humanity and the Church?" (*Vita Consecrata*, 104). Others ask what work religious carry out, to justify their vocation. We answer with Saint John Paul II that such objections are "a consequence of a utilitarian and technocratic culture

which is inclined to assess the importance of things and even of people in relation to their immediate ‘usefulness’” (*loc. cit.*). We recall that Mary Magdalen poured on the feet of Jesus a costly ointment of pure nard (cf Jn 12: 3). What the Magdalen did was an act of love that goes beyond all utilitarian considerations. “From such a life ‘poured out’ without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house” (*Vita Consecrata*, 104).

The human heart is attracted by the desire to dominate, to be at the head and to have power to command others and tell them what to do. This applies in both political and inner Church structures. The vows of obedience and poverty, when authentically lived, deliver a salutary message: readiness to serve, authority seen as service and not domination, and readiness to contribute to harmony in society. This says something very useful to those politicians who regard political elections as a matter of do or die, to those candidates who never admit defeat at elections, and to those winners who overcelebrate their victory and who proceed to reward their “friends” and punish their “enemies” in the society where they are elected to serve all the people.

Showmanship and flamboyance by the high and mighty are temptations which many people find difficult to resist. The religious life swims against this current. It encourages moderation, self-sacrifice and acceptance of other people as brothers and sisters in the pilgrimage that is life on earth.

Dishonesty in the administration of public funds, embezzlement and corrosive corruption have done much damage to many societies and retarded development. Some people reap where they did not sow. They are not satisfied with their official salaries. The common man and woman who should receive what is due to them cannot hope to get it unless they know somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody. The religious vows teach people to be content with what is possible, not to get attached to creature comforts and to respect the right of others. It is a happy thing that the Causes of Beatification of President Nyerere of Tanzania and of La Pira, Mayor of Florence, are being promoted.

Many societies suffer from various offences against marriage and the family. Sexual relations outside marriage and exploitation of people are sad realities as the newspapers testify. Religious who live the vow of chastity are a silent witness that, with God’s grace, self-control is possible and is a necessary road to maturity, self-respect, reverence for other people, and joy. If people allow themselves to be inspired by such good example, one source of suffering and tension in society would have been removed.

In particular, the consecrated woman is a tribute to humanity and to God's grace. When a young girl enters the convent, some people may wonder whether she has had a sad or disappointing love relationship. No. It is the opposite. She is in love with God who is love itself (1 Jn 4:16). She gives herself totally to God. The feminine soul has a characteristic, the power to love, to give life, to look after life and to defend life. A genuine woman is mother, giving birth to natural life or spiritual life. By special divine intervention, the Blessed Virgin Mary combines virginity and maternity. She is "our tainted nature's solitary boast", as the poet William Wordsworth has called her (in his poem, *The Virgin*, in 1798, in *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*). In a special way she is a model of the consecrated woman. The dignity of women has often been misunderstood, misinterpreted and maligned. The consecrated woman helps to redeem this treasure. She is also a mystical bride of Christ. And the whole Church is the Spouse of Christ, from whom she receives every good thing. "This spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord" (*Vita Consecrata*, 34).

Religious offer good example to young people how to work with their hands. A typical Nigerian young person wants to study, pass examinations and get a white-collar job. This is good. Society needs academicians and administrators. But our country should also have technicians, electricians, radio and computer repairers, cabinet workers, master builders, engineers, vulcanizers, tailors and world class hotel managers. It is not enough to have importers and exporters. We also need producers. Religious, and especially monastic communities, give example of how to do manual work, beginning with agriculture.

Parochialism, extreme ethnicism and tribalism are obstacles on the road to national harmony. Religious Congregations take candidates from many different backgrounds and language groups and teach them to accept one another and to live and work as a religious family. The 1994 African Synod of Bishops showed appreciation for the ability of Religious Congregations to contribute an answer to tribalism in Africa.

Planning, execution and continuity are needed if projects are to arise and continue. Think of the building and running of a school, a college, a hospital or a centre for social assistance of disadvantaged citizens. While individuals can generate funds and start projects, Religious Congregations offer greater

assurance of continuity because of the corporate responsibility which they bring. History has proved that this is the case.

We can conclude this listing of the blessings which the religious life can bring by saying with Saint John Paul II: “Look at these people seized by Christ, who show that in self-mastery, sustained by grace and God’s love, lies the remedy for the craving to possess, to seek pleasure, to dominate...Does not this world of ours need joyful witnesses and prophets of the beneficent power of God’s love?” (*Vita Consecrata*, 108).

11. Responsibilities of the Church towards the Religious Life

Let us conclude these reflections by asking ourselves what is expected of various people in the Church so that the religious life can be promoted.

A first requirement is to spread knowledge of the religious life in the Church. One cannot love and esteem what one does not understand. The role of priests and bishops in this information ministry is very important. It is they who preach to the people. It is they who are spiritual directors to help people to discern their vocations. Therefore, the theology and canon law on the religious life should be carefully taught in seminaries and should receive continued attention in seminars for on-going formation for priests. It is not to be presumed that every priest understands. Experience has proved that many priests do not understand the vocation of the religious brothers.

In religious and social occasions, people are not to forget the religious brothers. Their witness and presence are important for the life of the Church. People should be shown that it is a mistake to contrast brothers with priests. Those who preach priestly and religious vocations have a big responsibility. Homilies are to have theological and scriptural solidity and attraction and to be inclusive of the various vocations in the Church.

All religious need the supporting prayers of other members of the Church. While people are right to request religious to pray for them, they in their turn should not forget that the religious also need their prayers.

Religious brothers and sisters are to be encouraged and supported in such ways as provision of land for their houses and projects, help from lawyers and architects, donation of money and goods, advice and other signs of appreciation and esteem.

Relatives are right to expect from their children who become religious, prayers for their biological family, visits when possible, spiritual advice, telephone call and emails according to local possibilities and edification by lives

of holiness. The relatives said to a professed sister: “Live your new life well. Do not disgrace us. You chose this life. Nobody forced you to it”. Relatives are not to expect money from their member who is now a religious. They are not to pressurize the religious superiors to post their relative to this or that place. And they are not to expect privileges in employment opportunities. Gradually, they will realize that not only their professed member should make sacrifices, but they also are called to carry the cross, big or small as it may be. Here we must pay tribute to families that have offered their sons or daughters to the religious life. May God bless them all with joy, peace and grace.

It can be added that religious should not always expect to be at the receiving end. Sometimes they have some of the best things! The temptation to group selfishness can be real. Religious congregations are to be encouraged to give from the little that they have, especially to the poor. The widow’s mite did not come from abundance. The widow “out of her poverty put in all the living that she had” (Lk 21:4).

Religious Congregations are to set great value on the formation of their members in matters spiritual, intellectual, communal and apostolic. Frank and open dialogue on the various aspects of the religious life is necessary. “Formation is craftsmanship, not enforcement”, said Pope Francis, “and the goal is to train religious who have a heart that is tender, not sour like vinegar. We are all sinners, but we are not corrupt. We accept sinners, but not the corrupt” (Papal address to Union of Major Superiors, in *L’Osserv. Romano*, weekly Eng. ed. 6/12/2013, p.7). On-going formation should deal with such issues as the challenges of human nature like middle age crises, possibility of loneliness, frustration, fear, and expressions of love which may not have been sufficiently covered during the initial formation in the novitiate.

The best preacher of the religious life is the consecrated brother or sister, monk or nun, who is calm, holy, happy, efficient and marked by psychological balance. Such a religious is a spiritual magnet.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, let us thank God for the gift of the religious life. By the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, may the consecrated life be ever better understood among us, loved, lived and encouraged, for the glory of God and the sanctification of the people of God.

+ Francis Card. Arinze.
23 August, 2014.