

## “The Consecrated Life: Witness to Destiny”

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The consecrated life is a living treasure, a treasure of the heart; a treasure of God’s Reign. As such it always maintains its essential character throughout the ages yet it adapts and renews in tumultuous periods of Church history so as to remain a vibrant sign of God’s Kingdom.

In *Vita Consecrata* Pope John Paul II expressed clearly the essential character of the consecrated life in its primary role in service to the Church.

*“It is the duty of the consecrated life to show that the incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal toward which all things tend, the splendor before which every other light pales and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart. In the consecrated life, then, it is not only a matter of following Christ with one’s whole heart, ...but of living and expressing this by conforming one’s whole existence to Christ in an all encompassing commitment which foreshadows the eschatological perfection to the extent that this is possible in time...”<sup>1</sup>*

It seems evident that our present epoch is a tumultuous moment in the long tradition of the Christian community. This time, however, has the potential of seeing a vibrant renewal of the consecrated life through the transforming grace inherent in periods of crisis. It is our responsibility to assure the core identity and role of the consecrated life within the Church while adapting itself to the particular needs of these times.

These present times are in large measure born of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Age of Enlightenment. Ours has become a highly secular epoch. Some historians have characterized the French Revolution as a struggle for the life and death of Christianity exalting freedom and reason over

and against a belief in the very existence of God and the ethic of Divine Love.

The essence of the consecrated life's meaning remains. We religious are the Church's countersign to the secular tenet that human life's final and ultimate end is nothing more and nothing less than death itself. Today the consecrated life stands in contradiction to the current scientific judgment that social and biological determinism represent the ultimate laws of existence. We are matter but we are more than matter; we are spirit as well.

Christian faith denies death's finality. We believe in the Providence of God's love, a love that is eternal. We believe that we are made in the image and likeness of God's love; this truth is revealed through Old Testament Scriptures, the incarnate Christ and in the endless restlessness of our hearts.

The impact of this secular age is wide and far, strong and pervasive. A prophetic countersign is required to challenge its assertions. The consecrated life is one such witness.

In this secular epoch we religious have embarked on a renewal to strengthen our voice and the influence of our lives so as to stand in contradiction to the culture of death and proclaim the truth of God's reign of love in which we live and move and have our very being. Our vocation is a treasure of the Church.

The sources of this treasure's renewal in our time are numerous, beginning with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's great documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Pope John Paul II's March 25, 1984 Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptionis Donum*, and his March 25, 1996 landmark encyclical *Vita Consecrata* are invaluable sources of renewal for the consecrated life.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has also offered the Church ongoing sources of

reflection for the renewal of the consecrated life including Cardinal Somalo's Instruction "*Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*" and, on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "*Perfectae Caritatis*," Cardinal Rode hosted a comprehensive symposium aimed at revitalizing consecrated religious life as a faithful "*witness of God's transfiguring presence*." His recent instruction "*The Service of Authority and Obedience*" is helpful and challenging.

International and local Conferences of Major Superiors of religious institutes have assembled frequently to discuss pressing concerns of life and ministry. Numerous theologians have written extensively on the renewal of the consecrated life. Scores of consecrated religious have reflected deeply and written expansively on the objective meaning of the evangelical vows while also enumerating the subjective characteristics of their particular community's founding charisms.

Most of these documents, if not all, situate the foundational meaning of the consecrated life within its classical purpose: we are first and foremost an eschatological sign for the present world of a new heaven and earth to come. (The Book of Revelation 21: 1)

Ours is no small mission!

It is impossible to comment on so many sources of renewal within a short span of time. Therefore I restrict myself to three references which, though not all addressing the nature of the consecrated life directly, nevertheless when taken together, provide fresh insight into the traditional formulation of the evangelical counsels.

First, I will refer to *Spe Salvi*. Pope Benedict gives us a profound reflection on the present and future reality of God's Reign thereby broadening our appreciation for the consecrated life's eschatological witness.

Second, I will highlight one of Benedict XVI's pertinent insights on the discipline of love as expressed in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

Third, I will offer an application of that particular insight to a short meditation on virtue by the founder of my Congregation of Holy Cross, Blessed Basile Moreau who was beatified one year ago on September 15<sup>th</sup>, an event which has proven to be a blessing beyond measure for our own renewal.

The theology of eschatology refers to the eternal destiny of all human beings made in the image and likeness of God's love. The consecrated life is a visible sign of hope for the coming of that future.

In *Spe Salvi*, the Holy Father asks the most pertinent question of eschatology: "*Eternal life – what is it?*"<sup>2</sup>

Eternal life, he asserts, is not something interminable, an unending succession of days in the calendar, but rather, it is a mode of being, as expressed through a mystical encounter with Christ, both within time and beyond time. We thus know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Love's promise is fulfilled now and forever. It is like a supreme moment of joy "*in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality.*"<sup>3</sup>

*Eternal life - What is it?* Jesus himself tells us in his prayer at the Last Supper:

*"Father the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him. Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began"* (John 17:1-5).

Jesus is the incarnation of God's love; he embodies the eschatological goal of perfect love to which all things tend. He makes visible the invisible God.

Eternal life is an encounter with Christ, God's perfect love. It is a mystical encounter to which no other relationship compares yet which, paradoxically, imbues all other human relationships with the beauty and brilliance of Divine Love.

The publication this past year of private writings of Mother Teresa of Calcutta illustrates this sense of eternal life. Much has been made of Mother Teresa's intense, decisive, though never to be repeated again, encounter with Christ. It was a moment in time and beyond time. From that point on she was to encounter Christ daily in the poor and suffering of this world but never again in the intensity of that mystical moment.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that to some degree every consecrated religious has shared in that same experience. Our encounter with Christ is the primary source of our vocation. We are thus "*witnesses of God's transfiguring presence.*"<sup>5</sup>

The consecrated life is a mode of Christ's presence within the Church and the world in the non-sacramental sign of community life, however frail and imperfect we may be. We religious are all sinners striving to be saints, actively expressing Christ's self-giving, forgiving love, embodying and mirroring to the world here and now the eternal destiny that is ours.

Within the witness of their own interpersonal relationships in community and congregational life consecrated religious bear the heavy weight of giving testimony to an expression of God's eternal Love.

It is our vocation as consecrated religious, as an ecclesial community of believers, to make the eternal Christ visible to our world in a

tangible, viable expression of love's promise of perfection, frail and sinful though we may be.

Eternal life is an expansive mode of living that knows no bounds, no distinctions. As Jesus answered the Scribes who tested his belief in an afterlife, many of us can be quite mistaken in our understanding of the nature of eternal life. In the resurrection of the dead, he told them, we are like angels in Heaven; there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. (Mark 12:18-27)

In this mode of being we no longer experience distinctions: there are no haughty comparisons, no social status, and no discrimination. Unique though we are, we are all in all, in the embrace of God's Love. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28).

God's Reign of Heaven is a mode of living vastly distinct from any illusory social community where human relationships are formed and patterned through a kind of trade dependency in which giving and receiving is negotiated through the satisfactions of mutual needs.

Eternal life begins in time when human beings welcome God's eternal love finding expression in a willing sacrifice of self for others; a relationship that goes beyond any measure of fair trade, balanced exchange, or mutual satisfaction.

The ecclesial community formed through consecrated life is united in this bond of God's love. We commit ourselves to each other, however imperfectly, not through a taking or losing of what is yours and what is mine, but through a love that is of God's possession, freely given, a love that will bow on bended knee to wash the feet of friends, strangers and enemies alike; a love that will sacrifice everything so that others might live. It is a love that is untouched by death, woven into the eternal destiny of God's creation. The timelessness of love has been placed in our hearts.

It is this love that is the treasure beyond price. In this mode of living there is no anxious worry, no fear, no boredom, no amassing possessions, no power over others, no lies, no bitterness, no jealousy, no hate.

We religious are far from perfect in living love of this eternal nature. Sometimes our sins and failures can seem an overpowering countersign to what it is we espouse. But forgiveness is of eternal love. Forgiveness is essential when we fail, falter and sin. Jesus shed his blood so that sin might be forgiven.

When we religious form this ecclesial mode of being, this community, we are an eschatological sign of a new heaven and a new earth, where nothing can separate us from God's love, not even death itself.

Love is complex. Divine Love at times seems the hardest Love of all to make our own.

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI clearly puts forward love's complexity stating that though there are many forms and facets of love, basically they are in fact one single reality. Three Greek words, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, express the many dimensions of love.<sup>6</sup>

Integrating these dimensions and living them as a single reality is the task of a life time.

*"Love is indeed 'ecstasy,'" asserts Pope Benedict XVI, "but not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God."*<sup>7</sup>

It is this kind of ecstasy that the consecrated life seeks to teach and proclaim: the liberation of self gained through self-forgetting love. It is life's supreme truth. This exodus journey out of the closed-inward looking self into an ecstatic self-giving love is a risky business and

seemingly foolhardy adventure. But the foolishness is of God! (Cf. 1 Corinthians 1, 25)

*“Eros,”* Pope Benedict wisely counsels, *“needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns”*<sup>8</sup> (*Deus Caritas Est*, paragraph 4).

If we consecrated religious are to give the world this *foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence*, we need to embody in our community life a passionate expression of love’s supreme value beyond any other.

The passion of *eros* requires a purified and disciplined integration with the self-giving *agape*. This love will then be a kind of primary, spontaneous instinct – intrinsic to our community’s life giving relationships.

How is this discipline and purification achieved? Love’s passion seems best disciplined through the development and promotion of personal and communal virtues.

Blessed Basile Moreau taught his religious that *“A principal end of the Incarnation was to provide us with a Teacher, a Master and Model of all virtues”*<sup>9</sup> (*Daily Meditations*).

Jesus is the Model of all virtues. Virtues are key to appreciating the way in which we embody and express our vows. The word *virtue* comes from the Latin *virtus* meaning strength or power. Our personalities are formed by the constellation of strong and powerful virtues (and vices) that give us our identity. People know us through our personalities; through the way in which we present ourselves to them.

Virtues give a certain texture to our character and mark our way of being in the world. Our virtues and vices give coherence to our identity. They are living, breathing dispositions of our being which

communicate to the world who we are and what values guide our lives.

The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are gifts of God infused within us from our birth. They are part of our spiritual genetic structure. When we give them expression we strengthen them; when we neglect them they weaken and become barely discernible.

It is also possible to cultivate new virtues within us, adding them to the cluster of virtues that already define us and make up our character.

The development and promotion of personal virtues are in fact the best means we have for disciplining love's passion. The so called 'divine madness' of *eros* seems capable of tearing us away from our finite existence toward an incomparable feeling of supreme happiness but it quickly proves untrue without an effective discipline to help us, with grace, move beyond our own self-interest. When our own self-satisfaction and self-interest, proves to be the object of our passionate concerns, we are sadly mistaken about the veracity of true love. It is only when love focuses on the good of others, whether the beloved, or the stranger or the enemy, more than on our own personal interest, pleasure or satisfaction, do we come to find Love revealed in its truest and fullest expression.

Jesus, the incarnation, the embodiment of eternal love, reveals our more-than-empirical human destiny. The secular culture demands concrete proof that the absolute value of self-emptying love is the supreme experience of human life. If God's Reign of eternal love is to be accepted by this skeptical epoch, we believers need to validate this truth through concrete, measurable proofs just as Jesus glorified God by accomplishing the work that was given him.

Blessed Basile Moreau, based his Congregation's spirituality on the Sulpician practice of conforming our lives to Christ's life, so that through us, despite our human frailty, we might become, as

individuals and as a community, a real and visible presence of Christ's self-forgetting love, thereby embodying here and now the gift of eternal life.

Over the centuries it seems that one of the very best ways our Christian tradition has found to discipline love is to focus and manifest its power and passion through virtuous habits of the heart which give love its visible form and expression.

As Jesus of Nazareth grew in wisdom and grace, he cultivated and acquired certain virtues in his life which gave form to his basic character, his personality and way of being:

Jesus' virtuous living of chastity brought him to the desert wilderness, to the lonely mountain and to the garden of Gethsemane where he prayed with all his heart. Chastity committed Jesus to single-hearted intimacy with God, dispelling any temptation to live for himself. He was gentle and humble of heart. In the purity of his heart, Jesus and the Father were one. Sending us his Spirit he invites us to be one with them in the purity of our hearts. He illustrated this intimacy so beautifully in the image of the vine and the branches.

The purity of Jesus' undivided heart allowed him to mature in his virtuous living of obedience. Jesus' obedience, formed through chastity's prayerful intimacy with God, allowed him to unite his will with his Father's will. God wills that we love all people, without exception: the beloved, yes, of course, but so too all our family members, our neighbors, the stranger and the foreigner as well, and most terrifying of all, our enemy, such a harsh and dreadful love. *"Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love only those who love you, what merit is there in that?"* (Luke 6: 29-30)

Jesus taught us to be obedient: *"This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's love for one's friends"* (John 15:12-13).

In uniting his will with his Father's in perfect obedience Jesus could not but help to grow in the virtue of poverty.

Jesus' virtuous living of poverty afforded him such trusting dependence upon God's providing for him that he could exhaust himself freely sharing with his followers all that that was in his heart, all the hours of his day.

Forgetting himself, Jesus had pity on the vast crowds, Jesus taught from the depth of his being, sharing of his life as a friend, holding nothing back. He lived in the fullness of God's Spirit and he gave of himself completely, the very breath of his Spirit, until all was consummated.

He exhorts us not to worry about preserving our lives because then, paradoxically, we will find that we are losing them. *"Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it"* (Luke 17:33).

Jesus' chastity, obedience, and poverty united as a single reality. The many and varied virtues he cultivated were manifestations of the one love, bringing us to our eternal destiny in God's being, "all in all."<sup>10</sup>

Through these three virtues, these three schools of love, these three evangelical counsels, Jesus embodied God's eternal love.

Blessed Basile Moreau exhorted his religious to be in awe before the magnificence of their vocation:

*"You are going to put on the mind and heart of the Master; you are going to reproduce in yourself his thoughts, his sentiments, his desires, his words and his actions; in short his entire way of life as it applies to your vocation. Your conscience will be your witness in the words of the apostle to the nations: ' I live but it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; Jesus Christ speaks through my mouth, prays through my lips and acts through my body'"<sup>11</sup>*

Blessed Moreau's empirical approach is in tune with John Paul II's contention that consecrated religious best express their unique vocation by completely conforming themselves to Christ as individuals and as a community.

As John the Evangelist stated so boldly: "We can be sure we are in God only when the one who claims to be living in him is living the same kind of life Christ lived." (1 John 2:6)

As consecrated religious we seek to identify ourselves so intimately with Jesus that, through us, the human family will see God made visible in our time and place, much as Jesus made visible the invisible God in his time and place.

In our day we consider the world a global village. International religious congregations now have the extraordinary opportunity to witness in a privileged, unparalleled way, a global sign of the new heaven and the new earth of God's Reign.

In my Congregation, for example, though an American citizen, I share a culture of life with my brothers from the Asian countries of Bangladesh, India and the Philippines; with my brothers from the African countries of Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania; with my brothers from the Latin American nations of Chile, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Haiti; with my brothers from the European nations of Italy, Ireland, and France; with my brothers from North America in Canada and the United States. Thus my citizenship is that of Heaven not simply that of earth. In God's love we are one.

We are responsible for each other. What is theirs is mine; what is mine is theirs. It is a quite remarkable witness, unlike any other. Clearly it is an extraordinary sign in time to the new heaven and new earth in eternity.

Pope Benedict describes it well:

*“God’s Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect. At the same time his love is our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is ‘truly’ life.”<sup>12</sup>*

Consecrated religious are a reflection of human destiny, a mirror to the world. What we are, so too is the human family of every age and time, meant to be. We belong to one another; we are responsible for one another. There are no exceptions.

We want to live our vows in such a way that our witness will give hope to all not only to live in Christ but to die with him as well. In this way, and in this way only, his love will be our own.

Blessed Moreau chose as the motto for his Congregation the verse: *O Crux Ave, Spes Unica!* - *Hail O Cross, Our Only Hope!* believing beyond any shadow of a doubt that the self-emptying asceticism of Christ’s cross would reveal the fullness of Love’s promise.

The consecrated life is a living treasure, a treasure of the heart; a treasure of God’s Reign. How blessed we are to have heard Jesus calling us: “Come. Follow me.”

How blessed we are to follow him!

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (25 March 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Spe Salvi*, (30 November, 2007), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Spe Salvi*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Kolodiejchuk, *The Private Writings of the ‘Saint of Calcutta’* (Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Very Rev. Basile Moreau, *Daily Meditations, May 28<sup>th</sup>* (Catholic Life Publications, 1958), 386.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, [Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger] *God is Near Us* (Ignatius Press 2003), p. 145.

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<sup>11</sup> Very Rev. Basile Moreau, C.S.C. *Sermons*

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Spe Salvi, 31.