

## REFORMING RELIGIOUS LIFE WITH THE RIGHT HERMENEUTIC

Franc Cardinal Rodé, CM

### GREETINGS

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

It is a great joy for me to meet with you, men and women religious, who have been chosen with eternal and personal love by the Father of all gifts and who have generously devoted your lives to Christ and his Gospel. I address my cordial greeting to all the religious in North America, especially the superiors.

With fraternal affection I greet His Eminence, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, and thank him deeply for inviting me to join you in this important gathering.

I come to you, consecrated men and women in North America, as the representative of the Holy Father, bearing his greetings and esteem for the witness of your life and the fruitfulness of the multiple forms of your service to the Church. I come to you as Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, with the accumulated experience of dealing with the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of consecrated life around the globe. But most especially, I come among you as a brother religious who has experienced the adventure and the turmoil of the renewal of consecrated life called for by the Second Vatican Council. This extraordinary experience has made me who I am and has shaped the words I address to you today with immense affection and hope.

### I. THE LESSONS FROM HISTORY ABOUT CONSECRATED LIFE

Consecrated Life within the Church and within civil society has never played a secondary or minor role. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "its universal presence and the evangelical nature of its witness are clear evidence — if any were needed — that the consecrated life

*is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church. ... In effect, the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it 'manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse.' ... It is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission."*<sup>1</sup>

One can hardly overestimate the importance of consecrated life for the good of the Church and of humanity at large. From the birth of Christianity, some men and women were moved by the Spirit to devote their entire lives to imitating Christ more closely. Their consecration gradually took on the multiple forms we are familiar with today — rules and ways of life that at once express and give continuity to the charisms given by the Spirit.

Even a sketchy overview of history can show abundant evidence that, without the presence and activity of monks and nuns, religious women and men, despite their acknowledged cultural and historical limitations, the history of Western civilization and the evangelization of vast areas of the globe would be immensely poorer.

The history of the Church in the United States of America is rich with the contributions of consecrated men and women who have left an indelible mark on the culture.

During Pope Benedict's visit to the United States in April, in his address to the young people gathered at New York's St. Joseph Seminary, the Holy Father said, "Charisms are bestowed by the Holy Spirit, who inspires founders and foundresses, and shapes congregations with a subsequent spiritual heritage. The wondrous array of charisms proper to each religious institute is an extraordinary spiritual treasury. Indeed, the history of the Church is perhaps most beautifully portrayed through the history of her schools of spirituality, most of which stem from the saintly lives of founders and foundresses."<sup>2</sup>

The first four figures Benedict XVI proposed to the youth and seminarians in Dunwoodie as exemplary testimony of the Gospel in the lands of the United States, were consecrated: Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Saint John Neumann, and

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Young People and Seminarians at Saint Joseph Seminary, Yonkers, New York, April 19, 2008.

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, who in 1679 made a vow of chastity as an expression of consecrated virginity.

Some of the most epic pages in the history of missions were written in this blessed land by the heroic French missionary Jesuits who were martyred in what is now New York State and Ontario, Canada, and by the Franciscans and other missionaries in the South and the West Coast of the United States. It is significant that, in the National Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol, various states are represented by religious, such as Mother Joseph of the Sisters of Providence, Saint Damien of Molokai, Father Eusebio Kino, Father Jacques Marquette and Father Junípero Serra.

In the last two centuries, many religious in the United States have made education their highest priority — an undertaking that, as Pope Benedict pointed out in his recent Address to Catholic Educators in Washington, came at the cost of great sacrifice. “Towering figures, like Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and other founders and foundresses, with great tenacity and foresight laid the foundations of what is today a remarkable network of parochial schools contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation. Some, like Saint Katharine Drexel, devoted their lives to educating those whom others had neglected – in her case, African Americans and Native Americans. Countless dedicated religious sisters, brothers, and priests together with selfless parents have, through Catholic schools, helped generations of immigrants to rise from poverty and take their place in mainstream society.”<sup>3</sup>

In the last forty years, the Church has undergone one of her greatest crises of all times. We all know that the dramatic situation of consecrated life has not been marginal in this state of affairs. In practically all Western countries, observers note that most religious communities are entering the end-game of a prolonged crisis whose outcome, they say, is already determined by the statistics.

In many of these Western countries, religious have lost hope. They are resigned to the loss of vitality, of significance, of joy, of attractiveness, of life. But America is different. The vitality, the creativity, the exuberance that marks the thriving culture of the United States is

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Catholic Educators at Conference Hall of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008.

reflected in Christian life and also in consecrated life. Just think: Since the Second Vatican Council, more than a hundred new religious communities have sprung up in this fertile soil.

This is the country that Pope Benedict visited in April in order to bring the message of the hope of Christ. But when he returned to Rome, he said, "I discovered a tremendous vitality and a decisive will to live and to witness to the faith in Jesus." With great joy, he confessed that he himself "was confirmed in hope by American Catholics."<sup>4</sup>

## II. THE PRESENT STATE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Despite this past greatness and present vitality, we know — and it is one of the major reasons we are gathered here today — that all is not well with religious life in America. My remarks today are addressed especially to the active religious.

The sheer decline in the numbers of consecrated men and women, the abandoning of many corporate apostolates and ministries, the closing of communities, the invisibility of corporate witness to consecrated life, amalgamations of provinces, mergers of different institutes, the graying of religious, the death of entire congregations — these realities are all familiar to us.

Under the umbrella of "consecrated life" and behind the statistics there lies a variety of situations.

First, there are many new communities, some better known than others, many of which are thriving and whose individual statistics are the reverse of the general trends.

Second, we have older communities that have taken action to preserve and reform genuine religious life in their own charism; they are also in a growth mode, contrary to the general trend, and their median age is lower than the overall average for religious.

Neither of these two groups sees "the writing on the wall" in the sense that observers of the general trends use it; on the contrary, the future looks promising if they continue to be what they are and as they are.

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Regina Caeli address, April 27, 2008.

Third, there are those who accept the present situation of decline as, in their words, the sign of the Spirit on the Church, a sign of a new direction to be followed. Among this group there are those who have simply acquiesced to the disappearance of religious life or at least of their community, and seek to do so in the most peaceful manner possible, thanking God for past benefits.

Then, we must admit too, that there are those who have opted for ways that take them outside communion with Christ in the Catholic Church, although they themselves may have opted to “stay” in the Church physically. These may be individuals or groups in institutes that have a different view, or they may be entire communities.

Finally, I would distinguish those who fervently believe in their own personal vocation and the charism of their community, and are seeking ways to reverse the trend. In other words, how to achieve authentic renewal. These may be whole institutes, or individuals, pockets of individuals or even communities within institutes.

My talk today is directed principally toward this last group to offer them encouragement and ideas on a way forward. It may also be of use to the first two groups, lest they lose what they have, according to St. Paul’s advice to the Corinthians: “Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall”.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the recent instruction from my Congregation on The Service of Authority and Obedience forcefully states that “Persons in authority are called to keep the charism of their own religious family alive. The exercise of authority also includes putting oneself at the service of the proper charism of the institute to which one belongs, keeping it carefully and making it real in the local community and in the province or the entire institute.”

To that end, it will be helpful to examine the roots of the crisis, and here we come face-to-face with a necessary and brutal question: Wasn’t “renewal” precisely what we did after the Council? Wasn’t this going to bring us into a new era? And was it not precisely this “renewal” that has landed us where we are today?

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:12.

First, a word on the concept of reform itself: As Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote in an insightful essay five years ago, “to reform is to give new and better form to a preexistent reality, while preserving the essentials. Unlike *innovation*, reform implies organic continuity; it does not add something foreign or extrinsic. Unlike *revolution or transformation*, reform respects and retains the substance that was previously there. Unlike *development*, it implies that something has gone wrong and needs to be corrected. The point of departure for reform is always an idea or institution that is affirmed but considered to have been imperfectly or defectively realized. The goal is to make persons or institutions more faithful to an ideal already accepted.”<sup>6</sup>

Reform, therefore, entails identifying three basic elements: 1) something essential to preserve; 2) some way of dealing with what is essential that has gone wrong and needs to be corrected, 3) a new way of dealing with what is essential that has to be implemented.

### III. THE HERMENEUTICS OF DISCONTINUITY AND RUPTURE.

The Council, in fact, offered clear and abundant guidelines for the needed reform of Consecrated Life. The crucial question is: How were those guidelines interpreted and applied? Overall, the Council in general was interpreted and applied in two very different, opposing ways that we must look at more closely if we are to understand what has happened and map out a course to follow toward the future.

Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church and concretely in religious life, been so difficult and the source of so much turmoil?” asked Pope Benedict in an important speech three years ago.<sup>7</sup>

The answer he offers is deep and crystal-clear. “It all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or – as we would say today – on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application.” He continues, “The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and clashed. One caused confusion; the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and continues to bear fruit.

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<sup>6</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, *True and False Reform*. First Things 135 (August/September 2003): p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Christmas Greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, December 22, 2005.

“On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call ‘a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the ‘hermeneutic of reform’, of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.”

### 1. The ‘hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’ described.

In the Holy Father’s analysis, “The hermeneutic of discontinuity is based upon a false concept of the Church and hence of the Council, as if the former were from man alone and the latter a sort of Constituent Assembly. The call to change would be the true “spirit of the Council”, to such a degree that whatever in its documents reconfirms the past can be safely said to be the fruit of compromise and therefore to be legitimately forsaken in favor of the Council’s ‘spirit.’

This spirit that all is new and has to be made new gives rise to the fervid excitement of the explorer, the prospect of stepping courageously beyond the letter of the Council. But the call is so vague that one is immediately left anchorless, a victim of his every whim and rejecting all correction. It is idealistic in so far as it underestimates the frailty of human nature, and it is simplistic in thinking that a Yes to the modern era will solve all tensions and create harmony<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.

“These innovations alone were supposed to represent the true spirit of the Council, and starting from and in conformity with them, it would be possible to move ahead. Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the Council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the Council’s deepest intention would be expressed, even if it were still vague.

“In a word: it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined, and room was consequently made for every whim.

“The nature of a Council as such is therefore basically misunderstood. In this way, it is considered as a sort of constituent assembly that eliminates an old constitution and creates a new one. However, the constituent assembly needs a mandator and then confirmation by the mandator, in other words, the people the constitution must serve. The Council Fathers had no such mandate and no one had ever given them one; nor could anyone have given them one because the essential constitution of the Church comes from the Lord and was given to us so that we might attain eternal life and, starting from this perspective, be able to illuminate life in time and time itself.”

Given these premises, and given also the best of intentions, what calming influence could there be on experimentation, and what principle was there to moderate the tendency to incorporate into religious life the fads and patterns of modern culture?

**2. This hermeneutics of rupture has dominated the attempts at renewal of religious life.**

There is a fine balance in the Council's documents, but at the time, given that the mandate was for up-dating, it was easier to justify change than to defend continuity.

Paragraph 2 of *Perfectae Caritatis* reads, "The adaptation and renewal of religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time." Read with the hermeneutics of rupture and discontinuity, the "return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes" tended to be interpreted in light of "adaptation to the changed conditions of our time" rather than the other way around.

The following paragraphs of the same document contain phrases quite familiar to us, and only with difficulty do we remember the rest of what the council said:

"...Let constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies and such like be suitably reedited and, obsolete laws being suppressed, be adapted to the decrees of this sacred synod" (3). "... to make allowance for adequate and prudent experimentation. ... But superiors should take counsel in an appropriate way and hear the members of the order in those things which concern the future well-being of the whole institute" (4).

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 "Those who expected that with this fundamental 'yes' to the modern era all tensions would be dispelled and that the 'openness towards the world' accordingly achieved would transform everything into pure harmony, had underestimated the inner tensions as well as the contradictions inherent in the modern epoch.

"They had underestimated the perilous frailty of human nature which has been a threat to human progress in all the periods of history and in every historical constellation. These dangers, with the new possibilities and new power of man over matter and over himself, did not disappear but instead acquired new dimensions: a look at the history of the present day shows this clearly."

As we continue reading *Perfectae Caritatis*, the numbers that follow spell out beautifully the true nature of religious life and are worthy of meditation, but despite their length and density and their appeal to spirituality, prayer, obedience, love, and so on, their fate is sealed once they are read with the hermeneutics of change.

The words appear constantly: “adaptation and renewal” (8), “adapt their ancient traditions” (9), “adapt to the demands of the apostolate” (9), “adjust their way of life to modern needs” (10), “express poverty in new forms” (13). In obedience, “superiors ... should gladly listen to their subjects” (14). “The religious habit ... should be simple and modest, poor and at the same time becoming. In addition it must meet the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place and to the needs of the ministry involved” (17). “...religious must be given suitable instruction ... in the currents and attitudes of sentiments and thought prevalent in social life today” (18).

It is true that these are just a few phrases picked arbitrarily from dense paragraphs rich in spiritual doctrine and which emphasize above all the perennial truths of religious life. But many were led to believe that by picking them out, and focusing exclusively on them their efforts for renewal, they were being faithful to the true “spirit” of the Council. Thus rupture and discontinuity as a point of departure become a self-fulfilling prophecy, producing, precisely, rupture and discontinuity.

### **3. Religious life was not an isolated battle-ground.**

“Aggiornamento” was the term in vogue, and meaning “up-dating,” it presupposed something to be brought up to date: It presupposed continuity. What took place was a “pseudo-aggiornamento” that was unrecognizable in Catholic terms.

Operating at the root of this “pseudo-aggiornamento” was what can best be described as “naturalism”. It supposed the radical centering of man on himself, the rejection of the supernatural, and operated in a climate of radical subjectivism.

It showed itself in multiple ways: In talk about holiness that is totally divorced from fulfillment of Christ’s law and the concept of grace. In minimizing sin. In the acceptance of

the world as it is, with no need of conversion. In taking the world as the criterion according to which the Church ought to be reformed. In a notion of apostolate or ministry that consists in being at ease in the world rather than changing it. In rejection of authority, and especially divinely constituted authority, hence the rejection of the magisterium and all canonical and disciplinary ordering in the Church.

#### **4. The results of the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture in religious life.**

We must begin here by acknowledging that there certainly was much to correct in religious life, much to be improved in the formation of religious. We must also admit that society proposed challenges for which many religious were not prepared. In some cases, routine and crusts of outdated customs needed to be shaken off. In this sense we must affirm categorically that not only was the Council not mistaken in its thrust to renew religious life, it was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit in doing so.

Pope Benedict, speaking to superiors general, said: "In these last years, consecrated life has been re-examined with a more evangelical, ecclesial and apostolic spirit; but we cannot ignore that some concrete choices have not offered to the world the authentic and vivifying face of Christ. In fact, the secularized culture has penetrated the mind and heart of not a few consecrated persons, who understand it as a way to enter modernity and a modality of approach to the contemporary world. As a result, in addition to an undoubted thrust of generosity capable of witness and of total giving, consecrated life today knows the temptation to mediocrity, bourgeois ways and a consumerist mentality."<sup>9</sup>

Towards the end of the Second Vatican Council, I was in Paris finishing my doctoral thesis on "miracles of the modernist controversy." At that time in France there was a pervasive atmosphere of enthusiasm for the Council as the press and other media presented it, which was a partial image of the Council as a "victory of the liberals over the conservatives."

When I returned to Slovenia I found that the communist regime was isolating the Catholic faithful, suffocating public expression of the faith and reducing it to a merely private affair. I

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<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Superiors General of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, May 22, 2006.

found a faithful people within a society shaped by the ideology of materialism. I soon realized that what I brought with me from my studies in Paris was of very little use for my pastoral work. I needed to be close to the people and to respect the traditional ways of expressing of their faith. I learned so much from the Christian faithful! They taught me to love the Church, to respect the Pope and the bishops in communion with him.

The great lesson I learned from that experience was this: The religious who secularized consecrated life were not doing so for the sake of the faith of the people of God. It was not the good of God's people that they were seeking. Rather than God's will, what they were seeking was their own.

Religious life, being a gift from the Holy Spirit to the individual religious and the Church, depends especially on fidelity to its origins, fidelity to the founder, fidelity to the particular charism. Fidelity to that charism is essential, for God blesses fidelity while he "opposes the proud."<sup>10</sup> The complete rupture of some with the past, then, goes against the nature of a religious congregation, and essentially it provokes God's rejection.

As soon as naturalism was accepted as the new way, obedience was an early casualty, for obedience without faith and trust cannot survive. Prayer, especially community prayer, and the sacramental liturgy were minimized or abandoned. Penance, asceticism and what was referred to as "negative spirituality" became a thing of the past. Many religious were uncomfortable with wearing the habit. Social and political agitation became for them the acme of apostolic action. The New Theology shaped the understanding and the dilution of the faith. Everything became a problem for discussion. Rejecting traditional prayer, the genuine spiritual aspirations of religious sought out other more esoteric forms.

The results came swiftly in the form of an exodus of members. As a consequence, apostolates and ministries that were essential for the life of the Catholic community and its charitable outreach quickly disappeared – schools especially. Vocations quickly dried up. Even as the results began to speak for themselves, there were still those who said that things were bad because there hadn't been enough change, the project was not complete. And so the damage was further compounded.

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<sup>10</sup> James 4:6

It must further be noted that many of those responsible for the disastrous decisions and actions of those post-conciliar years, later left religious life themselves. Many of you now here are the ones who have remained faithful. With immense courage, you are shouldering the burden of reversing the damage and rebuilding your religious families. My heart and my prayers go out to you.

#### **IV. THE HERMENEUTICS OF CONTINUITY AND REFORM**

##### **1. The hermeneutic of continuity and reform described.**

The true “spirit of the Council” was described at its inauguration by Pope John XXIII when he said that the Council wishes “to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion.” And he continues: “Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us. It is necessary that adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness be presented in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”

These words give rise to a very different way of interpreting the Council from what has been described in the previous sections. We have here in essence, the hermeneutics of continuity and reform.

Continuity elicits a harmonious dialogue between faith and reason. Reason, enlightened by the supernatural gift of faith, adheres voluntarily and lovingly to what Pope John XXIII called “the substance of the ancient doctrine” that was revealed by Christ and rightly interpreted by the magisterium with the infallible and constant assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Reason enlightened by faith will not fall into the trap of modern secularism. Authentic prophetism in the Church intends to rectify behavior, not to change the apostolic revelation. Cardinal Avery Dulles explained this point well when he wrote:

“In our day the prevailing climate of agnosticism, relativism, and subjectivism is frequently taken as having the kind of normative value that belongs by right to the word of God. We must energetically oppose reformers who contend that the Church must abandon her claims to absolute truth, must allow dissent from her own doctrines, and must be governed according to the principles of liberal democracy. False reforms, I conclude, are those that fail to respect the imperatives of the Gospel and the divinely given traditions and structures of the Church, or which impair ecclesial communion and tend rather toward schism. Would-be reformers often proclaim themselves to be prophets, but show their true colors by their lack of humility, their impatience, and their disregard for the Sacred Scripture and tradition.”<sup>11</sup>

## **2. The application and fruits of the hermeneutic of continuity and reform.**

Today we can look with gratitude at the Second Vatican Council, which provided clear guidelines to distinguish between the substance of the deposit of the faith and its circumstantial manifestations. Continuity with what is essential in religious life does not stifle but rather encourages reform of what is outdated, accidental and perfectible. This is evident when we read the finely balanced criteria and guidelines for renewal in *Perfectae Caritatis*, numbers 2-18 that we referred to when we spoke about rupture and discontinuity.

When these same numbers are interpreted in terms of continuity, the changes asked for are never disassociated from their roots. Those seeking continuity in renewal will notice that the Council called for a renewal that is eminently a renewal of the spirit, emphasizing the centrality of Christ as he is found in the Gospels, following him on the path envisaged by the founder through the vows (2).

Renewal is to be sought in the more faithful observance of the rule and constitutions (4). It calls for a religious consecration that means not only dying to sin (baptismal vocation) but renouncing the world and living for God alone, service of the Church and fostering of

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<sup>11</sup> Avery Cardinal Dulles, *True and False Reform*, p. 17.

all the virtues, especially humility and obedience, seeking God alone, joining contemplation to action (5).

The priority of loving God and nourishing one's life on Scripture and the Eucharist (6).

The Council sees no dichotomy between contemplation and action; the latter springs from the former (7).

The priority of spiritual training if members of secular institutes are to be leaven in the world (11).

Chastity, Poverty, Obedience (12, 13, 14), are all cast in an eminently supernatural light, based on faith, hope and love. The radicality of their implications is clearly laid out.

The need for common life lived in prayer, charity, and mutual support as highlighted in number 15.

Papal cloister should be maintained by nuns dedicated exclusively to the contemplative life (16).

The habit should be adapted, implying it should remain (17).

A number of the better-known new religious orders and movements were already under way at the time of the Council. These invariably examined themselves in the light of the orientations issued by the Council, and were unanimously faithful to its authentic spirit as expressed in the letter of the Council. And the new congregations founded since then also find the key to their own self-understanding in the Council's doctrine. Though the concept of "renewal" is not applicable to a new group, the element of continuity and the essential elements of religious life as spelled out by the Council has guided these foundations without exception. Is it mere coincidence that they are growing?

The Holy Father summed up the fruits of this hermeneutic as follows:

"Wherever this interpretation guided the implementation of the Council, new life developed and new fruit ripened. Forty years after the Council, we can show that the positive is far greater and livelier than it appeared to be in the turbulent years around 1968. Today, we see that although the good seed developed slowly, it is nonetheless growing; and our deep gratitude for the work done by the Council is likewise growing."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI, Christmas Greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, December 22, 2005.

## V. SEEKING RENEWAL AT THIS JUNCTURE IN HISTORY

We now need to face the question: Where can we go from here? Is there new life for religious communities in North America seeking authentic reform?

Here we must note that, though the background to the problems is the same, and there are common problems and challenges faced by both men and women religious (the engineering of language, the slant toward relativism, the fading of a sense of the supernatural, in some cases doubt about the relevance and centrality of Christ), it is also true that each group faces its own particular challenges. Women religious especially need to engage critically a certain strain of feminism by now outmoded but which still nevertheless continues to exert much influence in certain circles.

Let me focus on some of the common elements. If rupture and confusion are what characterize the recent difficulties in religious life, then the way forward has to be a greater seeking of continuity and clarity. Like the scribe who has been instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven, we should bring from our storeroom both the new and the old.<sup>13</sup>

### 1. Continuity with the essentials, first of all of our Catholic faith.

It would seem superfluous to make this remark, for one would imagine there is no discussion on this point. However, we have all, sadly, experienced the presence of groups or individuals who, by their own admission, have “moved beyond the Church,” yet remain externally “in” the Church. Surely, such an ambivalent existence cannot bring forth fruits of joy and peace,<sup>14</sup> neither for themselves nor for the Church. We pray that the Holy Spirit will give them the light to see the path to true peace and freedom, and the courage to follow it.

I quote again the instruction on the Service of Authority and Obedience: “Persons in authority have the task of helping to keep alive the sense of faith and of ecclesial communion, in the midst of a people that recognizes and praises the wonders of God, witnessing to the joy of belonging to him in the great family of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. The task of following the Lord cannot be taken by solitary navigators but

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Matthew 13:52.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Galatians 5:22.

is accomplished in the bark of Peter, which survives the storms; and consecrated persons contribute a hardworking and joyful fidelity to good navigation.<sup>32</sup> Persons in authority should therefore remember that “Our obedience is a believing with the Church, a thinking and speaking with the Church, serving through her.”

## **2. Continuity with the concept of religious life as understood by the Church.**

According to the Council, “Church authority has the duty, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of interpreting these evangelical counsels, of regulating their practice and finally to build on them stable forms of living.”<sup>15</sup>

Both Church authority and the tradition of the Church throughout the centuries have spelled out what the substance of consecrated life is. Pope Benedict put it this way: “Belonging to the Lord: this is the mission of the men and women who have chosen to follow Christ – chaste, poor and obedient – so that the world may believe and be saved.”<sup>16</sup>

## **3. Continuity with the charism of the founder.**

This is of capital importance, and a key to renew and revitalize our congregations, attract vocations and fulfill our obligations toward the young people who eventually enter our religious families. The council insists on this. We must ensure that life in our congregations is both fully Catholic and fully in line with the charism of the founder or foundress. There can be no contradiction here, since the charism was given to the founders in the context of the Church, and it was submitted to the approval of the Church. Many congregations are making strenuous efforts in this regard.

However, some religious superiors have found that this is not enough. They are making great efforts to revive the figure and centrality of their founder; they are renewing religious observance and life in their communities; but they say the vocations are still not coming. There are two further, very important elements to take into consideration.

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<sup>15</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to Superiors General of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, May 22, 2006.

#### **4. The formation of the new generations. The formation program.**

In the present circumstances, offering an adequate, faithful formation program is a particularly significant challenge. No individual can do it alone, no individual house can do it, sometimes not even a province; resources are scattered; there may not be much unity or agreement as regards what the substance of formation should be. Nevertheless, this is probably the single most important element that affects the long-term renewal of our congregations and our ability to attract new vocations. Therefore it is essential that it be addressed by all those who desire to see their institutes flourish once more.

I offer some considerations in this regard:

- a. It is worth any sacrifice to dedicate to formation the most outstanding of your members. They must be fully in communion with the Church. They must be prudent, eminently spiritual and practical. They must love their congregation and identify with the founder's charism, have a spiritual love for their charges, be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of young people today, and have the complete support of their major superiors.
- b. Postulancy and novitiate programs are easier to cater for, but the challenge is greater as regards the study of philosophy and theology, or other college careers necessary for the apostolate of the members. When it is necessary to have religious study in centers of learning outside the congregation's own, these must be chosen prudently so that the doctrine the young religious receive will be sure and in depth, and the external circumstances will allow them to live an authentic community and religious life, continuing to cultivate all areas of their formation, including the spiritual, the sacramental and the human.
- c. The new vocations should be educated in the light of the rich contributions of John Paul II and Benedict XVI as regards understanding the dignity of the human person, the nature of freedom, the nature of the religious dimension of our lives, the need for human formation.
- d. They should be imbued with love for their own founder, history, traditions, contributions, and a healthy ambition to serve souls.

- e. Fidelity to the spirit of religious life and of one's institute should not be depersonalized or static. It should rather be creative, capable of finding innovative ways to develop and apply the charism and of reaching out to the new generation of Catholics and to potential members to the institute.

### **5. Active promotion of vocations.**

Vocations are a gift from God, the initiative is completely his. Nevertheless, as is his custom, he normally uses secondary causes and he depends on our collaboration to carry out his plans.

I distinguish two different and complementary ways to promote vocations: One I will call *indirect* and the other *direct*. And, counter-intuitively, I think that what I call indirect promotion is actually the more important of the two in the context of the Church today because all of us can engage in it, the whole body of the Church benefits from it, and without it the direct promotion of vocations remains mostly sterile.

“**Indirect**” promotion is everything that builds up the life of Christ in the Church, and it can be summarized in three dimensions of life: *spirituality*, *catechesis*, and *apostolate or ministry*. And we have to focus these three dimensions to Christian life on the *two places* that most affect the vocation to consecration: on the family and on the heart, mind and soul of the individual young person.

Very often in our own lives and communities the reason the seed does not bear fruit is not that the ground is rocky or otherwise bad, but that many other concerns clamor for our time and attention. What I mean is, today we are engaged in and worried about many things, like Martha.<sup>17</sup> Committees, conferences, social justice issues, press releases, and such like, clog our calendar. But there is one thing and one thing alone that will ultimately change the world, and that is the inner transformation of the human person through contact with the grace of Christ.

*Spirituality* is centered not on a vague religious feeling of being right with God and neighbor and having nice experiences in prayer. Its essence is continual conversion,

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Luke 10:41.

nourished on the sacraments, and the fulfillment of God's plan for one's life. It has an objective dimension.

*Catechesis* is not limited to initial instruction, but is the continued deepening in the riches of our Catholic faith that alone among all religions and all versions of Christianity provides solid and completely satisfying nourishment for the intellect as well as the soul. It is essential that catechesis go hand-in-hand with spirituality, and to be able to give a reason for one's hope, as Peter said.<sup>18</sup> Witness Pope Benedict.

The third dimension is *action*, the external living of Christ's charity that takes one beyond the boundary of his own comfort. For the individual, this is a new experience of Christ. In prayer and the sacraments you are transformed by your contact with Christ, in catechesis your mind is nourished, but it takes the practice of Gospel charity to enter fully into the charity of Christ who didn't hold onto what he was,<sup>19</sup> but came among us to serve.<sup>20</sup> In doing apostolate you walk as it were "in Jesus' sandals".

Using our individual charism, enriching the above with the example and experience of our founders and history, we can all contribute to the renewal of a vigorous, authentic Christian life in all those with whom we are in contact. It will be well worth our while to examine the nature and thrust of every single project we have under way, to look at the use we make of our time and what occupies it, and then to take the time to cleanse and prioritize. And we should also look at the content and quality especially of our youth programs.

I have called this work "indirect" because it prepares the seed-bed of vocations (the family) and the subject of vocations (the individual young person), to have an open and generous disposition toward God's will (spirituality) to appreciate the greatness and gift of the faith (catechesis) and to be able to sacrifice and give oneself to the call for the good of souls (apostolate).

In those families and in those individual lives is where God will normally plant the seed of a vocation. And this brings us to our next point: direct promotion.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mark 10:45.

“**Direct**” promotion of vocations is when we set out to find and encourage those young people God is calling to our own community. It supposes that we truly believe God is working in those souls, and therefore we seek with confidence and don’t get disheartened if success does not come immediately.

We do direct promotion in many ways: We advertize, we speak in schools and colleges, we write, we invite, we offer retreats and “Come and See” programs, and so forth. This must and should continue and increase if possible, using all the means we have at our disposal today.

I believe three elements contribute to making this direct promotion effective:

First, the indirect preparation mentioned above (whether it was done through an apostolate or ministry of one’s own community, or another community or ecclesial movement, or in the individual’s home parish).

Second: What we offer must be genuine. In other words, the community life and formation I invite this young person to, must reflect the particular charism of my religious family and be in full, joyful communion with the Church.

Lastly, the vocations promoter must be equipped humanly, intellectually and spiritually for his or her delicate task.

## **I. CONCLUSION**

It should not surprise us that the road ahead is fraught with challenges and difficulties. However, I want you to be sure of my complete support for any honest effort to renew individual religious families along the lines of fidelity to the Church and to the founder. Much honesty, humility, courage, open-mindedness, dialogue, sacrifice, perseverance and prayer will be needed, for as Pope Benedict reminded us, “Jesus warned us that there are two ways: one is the narrow way that leads to life, the other is wide that leads to destruction” (cf. Matthew 7:13-14).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Benedict XVI, Christmas Greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, December 22, 2005.

You are justly proud of the religious and civic heritage of North America, and you are aware of the impact that life here has on the world at large. The Catholic Church, as evidenced by the receptivity of civic and social leaders to the message of Pope Benedict, is called to enrich and enlighten consciences and thus give a stable foundation to society, being a true leaven in the mass.<sup>22</sup> And the renewal of the Church in this great country, and her ability to serve, necessarily passes through the renewal of religious life.

One of the sources of my hope is the experience I had of the power of communion with the Holy Father. In communist Slovenia, people were afraid to speak out against the regime, for fear of reprisals. One month after the election of John Paul II, I was giving a speech in the theology faculty of Ljubljana University before a crowd of 1,200 people. The theme was "Christianity in Slovenia Yesterday and Today." I surprised myself by making a radical critique of the communist regime and demanding the rights of Christians. The speech ended in a thunder of applause such as had not been heard in Slovenia for 40 years.

The communist ideology commission called a hasty meeting to discuss how anybody could dare to speak out in such a way. They concluded that it must be the effect of the new Pope. And they were right. John Paul had given us courage. I knew that from then on, despite the consequences, I would never be afraid to speak the truth. This incident taught me the spiritual, psychological and pastoral value of fidelity to the Holy Father. That is why I am convinced that if we adhere to what John Paul II taught us yesterday and what Benedict is teaching us today, we will emerge from the crisis of consecrated life into a new springtime of renewal in consecrated life in America.

Thank you, brothers and sisters, for your gift of self to Christ and humankind, for your testimony and your work, and not least of all for your patience and kindness in listening to my words today.

Let me now end with a prayer taken from the Opening prayer and the Prayer after Communion of the Mass for Religious in the Roman Missal:

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Matthew 13:33.

“Father, you inspire and bring to fulfillment every good intention. Guide your people in the way of salvation and watch over those who have left all things to give themselves entirely to you. By following Christ and renouncing worldly power and profit, may they serve you and their brothers faithfully in the spirit of poverty and humility. Make them one in their concern for each other and in their common dedication to the works of charity. By their holy way of life may they be true witnesses of Christ to all the world. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.”