

The religious vocation among the ecclesial vocations

Paths of hope

**"...each one of you has received a special grace;
live and put it at the service of others..."
(Pt 4,10)**

1. A reflection that goes on

In the latest years annual Assemblies, particularly attentive to the reality of religious life, the Union of Major Superiors in Italy (USMI) oriented its choices towards thematic journeys that would offer the possibility of listening to the lived experience, as well as of interrogating the actual context and individuating all together the orientation to be taken for this third millennium. These journeys are not only thematic, but also slow journeys of life that take into account objective statistic elements and, at the same time, insist on a specific spiritual journey, which may help the religious life to understand evermore deeply the invitation of Jesus, "Whoever serves me, must follow me" (John 12,25). This invitation involves us, every moment, beyond our changing works and services.

Pointing at the women standing at the feet of the cross, the Gospel of Mark expressly says, "These used to follow him and to look after him (Mark 15, 41).

"To follow and serve the Lord" is the highway before us. In fact, on our way, we shall always come across persons made dull by needs and suffering; people to whom we can offer our help and express concrete gestures of life.

Our answer may not be able to heal the depth of those situations, but we can surely defeat evil with good, if we shall never detach our eyes from the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

2. The 2006 National Assembly and the Ecclesial Congress in Verona

The theme faced by the National Assembly last year –*"Lay and religious people on the journey of evangelisation, today"*– highlighted some important nuclei of the women religious life, today, and of the time it is going through. In fact, reading the Acts afresh, we notice as some expressions are so frequently repeated as to become familiar to us, yet they are not to be taken for granted; consecrated life as an icon of the baptismal vocation; the laity in the Institutes of consecrated life; towards the "charismatic family"; communion with the laity, a perspective to be deepened; ecclesial aggregations and movements, expression and places of new ecclesial vocations.

The round Table itself and the Forum, with the participation of some ecclesial movements, offered some interesting hints and the opportunity of a dialogue that brought to evidence the common dimensions, characterising the consecrated life within the lay movements. The following ideas emerged from different interventions: the inspiration and relevance of the baptismal vocation as source and strength of Christian testimony in the choice of communitarian life out of the different vocations: family, presbyteries, religious consecration, incarnation and adherence of the various vocations to the territory.

On the background, and with a personal valence, we have the profession of Vows and the constant reference to the Word.

The tangible experience of a constant re-flourishing of charisma and the birth of numerous aggregative unities, despite the paradoxical practical and religious individualism displayed by our society surprise us and, under other aspects, provoke a reflection.

In fact, we witness a capillary branching innervated in the territory, a presence that does not impose itself, but expresses a new vitality, before the works and structures of our Institutions, which until a few years ago constituted an eloquent and incisive proposal for the Church and society itself.

Today, we are more than ever convinced that the visibility of religious Life does not impose itself because of its quality services or specific spirituality, if compared with those of common baptised people. In the present season of over-abundant charisma, religious life may be left with a tiny light, while recuperating a new awareness of its identity: the evangelical identity of its life style and its charitable mission; the readable testimony of God's primacy, even in ordinary and daily choices; the radical demands of Baptism expressed through the Gospel Counsels and professed with public vows, together with the experience of fraternity as a place of sharing, the contemplation of God's mysterious presence as a trustful waiting for the future Kingdom

With regard to the theme, which we are going to face during these days, the Verona Congress leads us to contact a vital and charismatic aspect of our Church in Italy, by photographing almost instantaneously the relation between religious life and ecclesial vocations.

We have discovered in it a mature laity, in an increasing dialogue with the pastors of the Church and a religious life more attentive to the different ecclesial realities, in the attitude of listening to the signs of the Spirit, to be present wherever today's man stands in need of re-discovering God.

Here is the *message* that the participants in the Congress *sent to the particular churches in Italy*:

"Our hope (...) is a person: the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. Life is transfigured in Him: for each of us, for human history and the whole creation. He is the foundation of the human desire for the new and eternal world in which suffering, violence and death will be defeated, and creation will shine in its extraordinary beauty. We wish to live already, today, according to this promise and to show the design of a renewed humanity, in which everything may appear transformed.

In this light, we want to live the affections and the family as signs of God's love, work and feasts as moments of a fulfilled existence; the solidarity that bends us down on the poor and the sick as an expression of fraternity; the relation among the generations as dialogue aiming at freeing the deep energies that each person carries within, orienting them to the truth and goodness; the citizenship as an exercise of responsibility, at the service of justice and love, for a journey towards true peace, living holiness as a high measure of Christian life".

We were among those who, in the Verona Congress, welcomed the invitation of the Church addressed to her people; we were present in the memory of many holy witnesses, whose icons illumined the arena and constituted a double invitation for all of us: to take Christ into the history of humanity... up to the sacrifice of life for Him and our brothers.

The time we live in does not allow us to get dispersed in the life-details of our Congregations, but demands our total involvement, so that a new milestone may be placed along the history of the women religious life.

3. The religious vocation among other ecclesial vocations

It is almost impossible to read and to listen to anything on religious life, today, without coming across some sociological and statistic survey that brings to evidence the actual registry and numerical situation, its presence and/or geographical and pastoral expansion, its incidence or non-incidence in the world of culture and in the vital contexts of the family and of the youths

This –Father G. Cabra says– is a time of disenchantment and of returning to the mystery. Today, the civil society is occupying those spaces that once were under our exclusive control, and now they become the place of a mature and responsible laity.

We are before a phenomenon which, at first sight, appears as an abandonment of the field or a forced reduction of fields; however, a spiritual reading of the situation is recognised in this passage of a time that can become “favourable” for our religious life.

Involved as we are in an almost natural process of transformation and re-organisation of our apostolic activities, we strongly perceive the invitation to stop for a new understanding of the mystery of Consecrated Life, a mystery of total dedication to the unconditional love of God.

3.1 *The religious life and the mystery of a life-vocation*

To speak of the mystery of consecrated life means looking at the person, at life itself as a mystery, because “the human person cannot be expressed through concepts. It shuns every rational definition. (...). Freedom and love are such dimensions as cannot be seized by rational categories.

We cannot unveil the person if not in the unity with the mystery of Christ through a “direct intuition” or better through a “revelation”.

Originally it is a call, a vocation and it is actuated throughout its growing and becoming, with creative acts. The person can be defined as “spiritual category in relation with God.”

The foundation of every vocation rests on the creative act of God who calls to life and in the answer of man who, in this call and in his bond with God, recognises his *agape* foundation. To acknowledge the initiative of God means to affirm that the human person cannot be reduced to mere nature and its fundamentally constituted freedom.¹

The religious life is a re-affirmation of the eternal in time, of the mystery of God who guides the events according to a project of salvation and calls man to collaborate in the becoming of the world and its history.

The human person is, in the world, the icon of him who acknowledges his origin and his last destiny in God, resisting the temptation of self-reference.

In this sense *the religious vocation* re-proposes a clear theological vision of our existence, before a self-referent society that orients its choices on the basis of a productive and instrumental vision, which obscures the true origin of man and weakens the relation with the Absolute Being to the point of nullifying it..

The religious communities are demanded not to be mere social institutions, but to become contemplative spaces more and more, spaces in which “the secret of God may touch the heart of today’s men and women”.

This is the peculiar contribution that we are asked to offer to the life of every person, otherwise the religious life loses its connotation of Christian consecrated life. We are comforted by the joyful vision that though obscured or exalted by particular historical contingencies along the course of centuries, this awareness has never been missing. The consecrated religious have never lost their contacts with God and with the concrete problems of their times.²

3.2 *Religious life and Christian radical coherence*

Called to be a reminder of the mystery of human existence for all men and women, the religious life is sent to proclaim the mystery of a new life in Christ to everyone

¹ See: T. SPIDLIK, *L'idea russa*, ed. Lipa, 1995, pages 27.30

² Cf F. SCALIA, *Alternativi e poveri*, ed. Paoline, 2006, p. 217.

To live one's own Christian call is to acknowledge and to create a space for this love in our person and to see that others may feel it, may live an agape dimension, dying to any attachment, self-affirmation and egoism.

This is possible because, through the grace of Baptism, we become *inhabited by the Spirit* (Rom 8, 11) who *grants us the spirit of adoptive children that makes us cry "Abbà, Father"* (Rom 8, 15). Through this gift we become *brothers and sisters in Christ*, who has pleased himself to become our brother. As children of God, we become also *heirs of the Kingdom of heaven*" (See: Rom 8, 17; Gal 4, 7).

In this horizon, the religious life is the paradigm of baptismal life: with the profession of Vows it manifests the primacy of God in its existence and of his project of salvation; living the evangelical fraternity in Christ, beyond the bond of blood, makes the condition of future life already visible

The numerous Christians, men and women, who were pushed to go to the desert and to create various types of communities, manifest the issue of a radical choice and the explicit search of a total and perfect following of Christ. Through these choices, both men and women intended to live the Christian condition in its fullness. "The Eastern Monasticism was not seen only as a separated place, proper of a category of Christians, but (...) as a reference point for all the baptised, according to the gifts granted by the Lord to each of them, proposing itself as an emblematic synthesis of Christianity"³.

Baptism and, therefore, monastic life are an expression of the liberating journey every Christian is called to fulfil, to the end of becoming son in the Son.

It is a fundamental demand to recuperate the importance of the baptismal journey in our consecrated life, for the charismatic force flowing from it, as well as for the possibility of getting rid of whatever is taken for granted and of the immobility caused by the crisis we are experiencing. Moreover, going back to the roots of our baptismal life means unclothing ourselves of all that expresses distinction, division, over-evaluation of self and of one's life choice.⁴

The awareness of our reality as baptised introduces and keeps us open to the life dimension as vocation and as following, which is translated into different expressions of life with the aim of making, somehow, the form of life chosen by the Lord Jesus present among us⁵.

" The fact that Jesus lived in virginity, obedience and poverty is not only a historical datum, a more or less meaningful private event, but a datum that we could call paradigmatic and exemplary, which is translated into an exigency for all his disciples. We must never forget that the life of Jesus and his words are vehicles of revelation and of a universal norm of behaviour."⁶

Faithfulness to the following of Jesus and his Gospel provokes an overturn of values: the Lord prevails over everything; over the family, the work, the goods and we feel available to answer the imperative of leaving behind everything immediately... Jesus is more important than the funerals of one's own father (Luke 9, 60)

All this is true "because of me and of the Gospel" (Mark 8, 35). This is the essential nucleus of the Gospel radicalism: self-entrusting to Jesus, faith in him, attachment to his steps cannot but be absolute and unconditional, even if the distance to cover remains always longer than the part already covered.⁷

3.3 *Religious life: adoration, gratuity, waiting for God*

³ *Orientale Lumen*, Lettera Apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II, 1995, n. 9

⁴ Cf *Credere oggi*, ed Messaggero, Padova, n. 157, 2007, pp66-67

⁵ Cf *Vita Consacrata*, Esortazione postsinodale di Giovanni Paolo II, 1996, n. 29

⁶ J. B.Metz, *Tempo di religiosi?*, Queriniana, Brescia 1978, p. 43.

⁷ Cf T. MATURA, *E lasciato tutto lo seguirono*, ed Qiqajon, Bose, 1999, p. 30.

Seriously considered, the baptismal consecration means, for every Christian, to follow Christ, to cut off all bonds with the kingdom of evil, to conform our life with the Word, to offer oneself as "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12, 1); this is the spiritual cult, which all the baptised are called to offer. Jesus asks his disciples to offer their life as a kind of existential adoration, "to worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4, 23), in a sacrifice of praise and a liturgy of daily life.⁸

Adoration is mentioned in the Gospels not as a ritual gesture, but as a spiritual dimension of our daily existence, as an acknowledgement of the greatness and holiness of God and of his intervention in history.

The Easter season, which we are living, re-proposes to us this adoring dimension in the encounter of Jesus with the women who rushed to the tomb and, after recognising him, prostrated themselves to his feet in an attitude of adoration. "Suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. 'Greetings', he said. And the women came up to him and, clasping his feet, they did him homage. Jesus said to them, 'do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me'". (Matthew, 28, 9). This is a very eloquent icon for the religious apostolic life.

"Adoration is a visible sign of recognising the other. To recognise us, our Lord Jesus stretched his hands to be nailed. From that moment onward we, too, can answer with our adoration and approach him to make visible that we acknowledge him radically and unconditionally."⁹

The constant search for the will of God in our life, as singles and as community, the assiduous listening to the Word, the daily participation in the Holy Mysteries constitute the place of adoration, of a free waiting for God.

Gratuity is an essential sign and a visible presence of religious life, called to be *leaven and ferment* among all men of our time.

In the experience of exile, the "little remnant" learned to give up every self-security, to open itself trustfully to God and to be in solidarity with the neighbours. Gratuity is the style of God and, at the same time, the style to make Him known by today's man, who is suffocated by the ephemerons, pursued by an implacable and merciless spirit of contract and exploitation of others (See: VC 104-105). The extra-abundant perfume spread in Bethany was a disconcerting sign of loving gratuity.¹⁰

The testimony of religious life, of a free self-gif, can start a revolution of gratuity all over the world. The prism of gratuity is made up of several facets, though not all of them seem to be well polished and transparent. Experience teaches us that even the least gesture of gratuity at the level of relations, solidarity and friendship exercises a beneficial influence, capable of arousing and safeguarding in him who offers it and in him who receives it a boundless trust towards God, oneself and others. This is the revolution that the world needs today. We can see a spark of God's gratuity whenever we look at the evangelical aspects of religious life, at the concreteness of a fraternity, in which normal creatures expose their individuality, forget possibilities of carrier, academic qualifications, diversities of contexts, personal recognitions to prove that a person can live in sincere and simple fraternity, close to everyone, never stranger or enemy, never disinterested of any human face.¹¹

Beyond unavoidable equivalences and the specific limitations of our reality as creatures, the profession of vows and community fraternal life are a sign of the future communion of all men with God, with Christ and among them. Thus the religious manifest "the future goods", the new life, the world of resurrection and the sovereign power of Christ" (L G, 44).

⁸ Cf L. BOISVERT, *Vivere la differenza*, EDB, 2004, p. 11.

⁹ AA. VV., *Omellerie di Pasqua*, ed Lipa, 1998, p. 49

¹⁰ Cf. F PRADO, *Dove ci porta il Signore*, ed. Paoline, 2005, p. 52

¹¹ Cf F. SCALIA, *Alternativi e poveri*, ed Paoline, 2006, p. 138.

4. Paths of hope

4.1. *A vocational phenomenon in today's Church: charisma and ministries.*

"A reciprocal enrichment can flow from the meeting and communion with the ecclesial movements. These can often offer the example of an evangelical and charismatic freshness, just as a generous and creative impulse to evangelisation. At the same time, the movements and the new forms of evangelical life can learn a lot from the joyful, faithful and charismatic testimony of religious life, which safeguards a very rich spiritual patrimony, many treasures of wisdom and experience, as well as a great variety of apostolic forms and missionary commitments.

It is important that a relation of knowledge and collaboration may grow in the Church, along with the stimulus and sharing that could be created not only among single persons, but also among Institutes, ecclesial movements and new forms of consecrated life, in view of a growth in the life of the Spirit and in the fulfilment of the unique mission of the Church."¹²

It is a vitality that is born from mutual support and recognition, that develops a healthy co-operation for the integration and articulation of all the ecclesial components, constituted at par dignity by Baptism, called to the same goal of holiness, convoked by the unique Father to witness all together to His love for humanity.

The religious men and women exercise their ministry in the Church, through the building up of God's Kingdom, the style of the Beatitudes, the free gift, the absolute dimension of relation with God, prayer, cure of the least ones, revelation of the eschaton in history and in the luminous testimony of their lives given up for God."¹³

4.2. *Some future synergies for the women religious life*

The journey of this Assembly nurtures a dream and can open new paths of commitment and testimony.

It is the dream of a religious life "in the heart and in the margins of the Church".¹⁴

In the heart of the Church, so that it may *welcome the gift of the Word* and enter a vital dialogue with her. Religious life cannot be satisfied today with the liturgical moments for listening to the Word, but is solicited to practise the Sacred Scriptures with an increased assiduity, opening itself up to the different modalities of study, of *Lectio Divina* and of *Collatio*. These are ways that help persons and communities as well, to share the journey of faith, to enter a wisdom vision of life and history and to live the very depth of theological life.

It is the dream of a religious life as *promoter and facilitator* of "*mutuae relationes*" within the Church. We are called to continue practising a spirituality of communion within the reality we live in, favouring dialogue and collaboration with the pastors, the priests and the laity. We urgently need to consider the need of a re-thinking of ourselves all together as Church and in the Church, promoting dynamisms of communion and dialogue: information, co-responsibility and subsidiary condition so that we may harmonise the pastoral plans with the resources of the various pastoral subjects and with the congregational projects according to one's own charism.

The dream of a religious life is that it may express the very *proximity and compassion* of the Samaritan in situations of abandonment, of overwhelming conditions, of abuses, violation of the person, by living a companionship that flows from the logic of love (John 3, 16), from empathy and compassion; namely the capacity of going down into the feeling and suffering of the other with such an affection as never to deprive him/her of the evangelical salt (Matthew 5, 13) and

¹² cf Ripartire da Cristo, Istruzione CIVCSVA, 2002, n. 30.

¹³ cf Consacrazione e Servizio, n. 7-8, 2006, p. 84

¹⁴ Cf G. BRUNI, Abitare la terra, ed. Messaggero, Padova, 2003, p. 21

the leaven (Matthew 5, 20), which denounce the irreducibility of Christianity in the world

It is a dream of a consecrated life to assume the process of *inculturation*, by welcoming, as first step, the *evangelisation* of *culture*. It is such an inculturation as it may reach all the dimensions of religious life: charism, life-style, formation journey and forms of apostolate; prayer and liturgy, foundations of spiritual life, communitarian organisation and expression of government.¹⁵

It is equally a dream of women religious life in Italy to accept the challenge of the institutional changes and to live this epochal passage with far-sightedness and faith, in ecclesial co-operation without collapses and discouragements, safeguarding the gift of the greatest charism, namely charity.

Superior forces induce us, from within, to lighten the patrimony and the physical structures of our Congregations; they compel us to close and/or to re-structure our works and ministries; they solicit the opening and research of other presences beyond the traditional ones, to the end of re-vitalising the mission.

6. The journey of the Assembly

6.1 The theological-spiritual vision of religious life

During this Assembly we shall have the opportunity to reflect first of all on the theological-spiritual dimension of religious life and to centre our attention on the fundamental vision of our being in the Church. We are aware of the fact that theology has never reached a clear description of the specific identity of religious consecration and that it is unable...to say in a complete manner what...we are.

It seems that the religious vocation among all other ecclesial vocations can recognise itself just in the absolute way of its adherence to God Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit- so that God may be recognised and welcomed visibly as the Whole.

"God is enough for me" the monks said in the desert, eliminating and simplifying their life extremely, so that truly God might be the unique necessary being. Why did they do this? They did not do it to distinguish themselves from the ordinary baptised people, but to be a memory of the radical newness of our life in Christ, of the new creature flown from Baptism

We, too, are called to be extreme and radical signs of what belongs to all because of Baptism and to anticipate, in a symbolic way, the full eschatological maturation: to be children in the Son, in a journey from image to similitude, a thing that only the Spirit can realise.

We are asked to be simply different, to witness to the absolute beauty of the common baptismal vocation before all other Disciples of Christ and before the whole world.

We shall reflect on this theme with the help of a spiritual father, a theologian of beauty, and of a sister who, like us, is called to the service of authority, and whose reflection will linger on the testimony of a lived spiritual journey.

6.2 The ecclesial-pastoral dimension

The various ecclesial vocations rooted in Baptism, interact among themselves, so as to express visibly a sign of ecclesial communion. Every charism, in fact, is given to the Church for the common edification, "*The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good*" (1 Co. 12, 7).

To deepen this aspect, we have asked the contribution of a Bishop, a pastor of the Church who expresses the ecclesial communion with his own richness of Biblical and pastoral language. His vision will help us to catch our identity as religious, among other vocations and will solicit the capacity of re-thinking

¹⁵ Cf .F. PRADO, *Dove ci porta il Signore*, ed Paoline, 2005, pp. 34-39; 278-288.

ourselves together, a thing that is ever more necessary to express clearly the vocational specificity.

A further contribution to understand the urgency of a re-thinking of ourselves together will be offered by a lay woman, an assiduous and direct expert in women religious life and meaningfully committed to the frontier of the lay testimony.

6.3 The common charism of religious life

The inter-congregational journey of these years and the necessity of a prophetic sign without ambiguity, calls for the shining of the common religious life charism, which is at the foundation of all the specific charisma. After a long season during which we have almost excessively engraved the specific charisma of every Congregation, we now feel forcefully the need of bringing to a clear evidence the gift or the charism of consecrated life that joins us: the splendour of charity, of the agape Love that defeats evil and death.

We have requested a Superior General to lead us to the reflection on this aspect, since her testimony in the Verona Congress has made the sign of our vocation to shine in the ecclesial structure.

The socio-cultural dimension

Finally, we could not miss in our reflection the contribution of a learned man who, from his observatory, will tell us how the multiplicity of ecclesial vocations is perceived outwardly and how they contribute to elaborate the Christian mentality and culture in the vast and complex panorama of contemporary society. In particular, he will tell us which specific contribution we religious can offer, to root the culture of faith and the evangelical mentality in the huge "areopagus" of today's philosophical and religious proposals. A life choice like our own cannot renounce to be a prophetic "spiritual therapy" for today's world, which Consecrated Life speaks of (no. 87), so that the ecclesial task of the new evangelisation may be more and more efficacious.

7. Two Gospel icons

The Gospel offers us numerous women icons, which can express the proprium of religious life; however, thinking of our context, two of them seem to be particularly fit.

The first one is that of the anonymous *poor woman* who throws into the treasure of the temple just two cents "*all she had to live with*" (Luke, 21, 1-4). Jesus looks at her and shows her to his disciples as a model. Truly, that poor woman, whom Luke makes us to look at between the narration of Christ in Jerusalem and his passion, is the icon of the Son who surrenders himself to the Father, who gives up himself for our salvation.

We see in this woman a total entrusting of self to God, an unconditional certainty that He will take care of her, thus she does not need other securities. God is enough for her!

The second icon is *Mary of Bethany, who on the eve of the passion and death of Jesus anticipates his death and burial* with the sign of a most precious perfume. The gratuity of her love speaks to us of the absolute love, intuiting the drama that is exploding around Jesus, and the very precious perfume witnesses to the value of a death offered because of Love, for a most pure and free act of Love. It is the same perfume that will continue to attract people to the following of the Risen Christ

¹ Cf. T. SPIDLIK, *L'Idea russa*, ed. Lipa, 1995, pp. 27-30

² Cf. F. SCALIA, *Alternativi e poveri*, ed. Paoline, 2006, p. 217.

³ *Orientale Lumen*, Lettera Apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II, 1995, n. 9

⁴ Cf. *Credere oggi*, ed. Messaggero, Padova, n. 157, 2007, pp 66-67

⁵ Cf. *Vita Consacrata*, Esortazione postsinodale di Giovanni Paolo II, 1996, n. 29

- ⁶ J. B. Metz, *Tempo di religios?*, Queriniana, Brescia 1978, p. 43.
- ⁷ Cf T. MATURA, *E lasciato tutto lo seguirono*, ed Qiqajon, Bose, 1999, p. 30.
- ⁸ Cf L. BOISVERT, *Vivere la differenza*, EDB, 2004, p. 11.
- ⁹ AA. VV., *Omelie di Pasqua*, ed Lipa, 1998, p. 49.
- ¹⁰ Cf. F PRADO, *Dove ci porta il Signore*, ed. Paoline, 2005, p. 52
- ¹¹ Cf F. SCALIA, *Alternativi e poveri*, ed Paoline, 2006, p. 138.
- ¹² cf Ripartire da Cristo, Istruzione CIVCSVA, 2002, n. 30.
- ¹³ cf Consacrazione e Servizio, n. 7-8, 2006, p. 84
- ¹⁴ Cf G. BRUNI, *Abitare la terra*, ed. Messaggero, Padova, 2003, p. 21.
- ¹⁵ Cf .F. PRADO, *Dove ci porta il Signore*, ed Paoline, 2005, pp. 34-39; 278-288.