

“The Cost of Discipleship”

OUR LIFE AS VOWED RELIGIOUS, HERE AND NOW

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1. Introduction:

“A major task for religious today is to become fully aware of living in period of profound transformation...We must make a deep commitment to creative change! To be true to our prophetic vocation—and to ensure that the values of the gospel are included—we religious must be in the forefront of the creative ferment which is shaping the twenty-first century.”¹

The topic assigned to me—“The cost of discipleship”—struck me as meaningful, but also as vague, vast and generic, under which almost anything could be said. In spite of clarifications given to me, such as: insist on the need of being rather than on doing, on witness, on the new evangelization, etc., I was, and still am, rather perplexed about what to tell an audience like this. Remembering the joke about the parachutist and the priest, I want to avoid the following approaches, which did not seem to be adequate for this group: (a) to summarize the current church documents on religious life; (b) to exhort the audience to live the religious commitment well, and thus be witnesses; (c) to repeat truisms about religious life that most of us will have heard—and proclaimed to others—since our novitiate.

A quick word on why these paths were not taken.

The church documents will largely be known to major superiors. A serious study of them is not only our obligation, but is very enriching as well. They cover a great array of contemporary topics linked to the vowed life today.² Dwelling on them in detail would be unnecessary and out of place for a group like this.

Exhortations hardly enlighten or change any one. Much of the time, we know we have to lead more committed lives, that our congregations are not a group of saints, and that we are supposed to be witnesses to Gospel values.

To repeat truisms, eg, that the vow of poverty demands more than detachment, or that through obedience we are to put God’s will above our likes and dislikes, would be to waste our precious time.

I decided, therefore, to take the following approach:

Let us look at the situation of religious life in India (and in the world) at the moment. What can we learn from our experience and from the experience of religious in other countries? What is happening in the world around us, in families, in young people, and consequently in our own communities today? What new questions do we need to ask? What new steps do we need to take, if any, not merely to survive, but to lead meaningful lives, and make a significant difference in the lives of today’s men and women, especially the forgotten and the powerless?

¹ Paul Gonzales SC, in *Formation*, VI, 2 (March-April 1998).

² In addition to the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), there are: *Mutuae Relationes* (1980) issued jointly by the Congregation for Bishops and for Religious and Secular Institutes; *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* (1981) that urges integration between interiority and activity; *Religious and Human Promotion* (1981), which stresses that religious involve themselves in work not primarily as professionals, but as bearers of pastoral concern; *Redemptionis Donum* (1984), which presents a theology of religious life; *Potissimum Institutioni* (1990), which deals with formation. Earlier documents that have had tremendous impact on religious life in these last forty years are the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Lumen Gentium*, whose central vision of the church as a community where *all* are called to holiness, undermined a whole way of seeing and presenting religious life; *Gaudium et Spes*, with its positive view of the world and commitment in, and to, the world; *Christus Dominus*, which expects religious to contribute to the whole church through the example of their lives; and *Perfectae Caritatis*, especially devoted to the nature and role of religious life.

I shall not take the title (“the cost of discipleship”) as defining or restricting our discussion, both because discipleship is the call of *all* Christians, not merely of those who lead celibate lives in community, and because I am not convinced that the “cost” is greater for us than, say, for a parent, or honest public servant, or a doctor in a government hospital, or a judge resisting bribes and political pressure.

Many people are aware of this today, and do not take the claims and rhetoric of religious seriously. In one case, a group of girls in a small town in Tamilnadu told a group of sisters who had come on a vocation promotion tour. “You want us to join you. It is better that *you* join *us*; we are leading better lives than you.”

If our rhetoric (Kingdom values, following Christ, eschatological signs, prophetic witness,...) is to be credible, we need to look at the real situation, and address real questions, as they are being asked today by real people. Merely to repeat right theory, or noble ideals, is not enough.

Let us start with a quick look at our vows.

Poverty: One of the surest ways of avoiding financial insecurity in a poor country like ours is to make the vow of poverty! As a member of a financially secure institution, with good housing, above average levels of food, medical care, leisure, educational opportunity and social influence, I am not poor. What does this vow mean today, in our context?

Celibacy: There is no evidence that staying unmarried and living with persons of one’s own gender makes any one more Christ-like or more mature. If sexuality is God-given and good, a life-long denial of its natural expressions, especially of loving commitment to a family with all that it implies, would need very serious justification, such as the evident pursuit of a “higher” good. This higher good cannot just be work. In fact, there is no evidence that celibates do more work or pray more than non-celibates. Can’t the beautiful things we say in praise of celibacy, and the wonderful examples of saintly celibates that we have heard, be said of a good marriage, and of many of our parents, married brothers and sisters?

Obedience: This vow has had different interpretations at different periods of church history.³ There is nothing holy about following another’s plans for me than making my own, and taking responsibility for them. To call every decision of the superior the will of God is frankly to claim too much. The vow of obedience, which is an adult decision to seek and promote the mission of Christ rather than my glory, is very different from the parent-child relationship some religious communities encourage, where adult relationships and critical thinking are frowned upon. “Obedience” can be trivialized by being reduced to a question of dependence and permissions, rather than of serious adult responsibility for the world.

In another sense, every human being is under authority—not just vowed religious. And very often there is less choice and greater need of sacrifice in the secular professions than in religious life, eg, to keep one’s job, to be transferred to a difficult spot or post, to bear the consequences of one’s mistakes, to be away from spouse and children for months or years, for economic reasons.

Are the higher number of candidates to convents and seminaries that we see in India or Africa, compared to Western Europe or North America, necessarily an indication of greater commitment to God, or of a response to a God-experience? Can’t a good number of our so-called “vocations” be perhaps be explained through socio-economic factors—large families, especially in the villages, the status of a priest or religious, lack of opportunity, and hence of real choices? It needs no great research to see that when similar conditions existed in the West (larger families and lower living standards, where priests and religious enjoyed comparatively higher status and opportunities), there were more “vocations” there too. To take the case of the Salesians, for instance, one Italian province in the early sixties had more novices than all our Italian provinces together have today.

³ For a quick survey, see Table 14.1: “Variations in the Definitions of Obedience in *Review for Religious articles*, 1963-1990,) in Patricia Wittberg SC, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders* (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 245.

What are we offering ourselves and the world, that is essentially better, or at least, deeply meaningful? It is not enough, for an answer, to point to the heroic lives of a few religious. Heroic and utterly committed individuals are found in all walks of life, and people know it. Recently, when I told a nephew of mine of committed young Christians who donate ten percent of their salary to charity, as the result of their faith experience, he replied (without disparaging what I was saying) that he had class mates who belong to the Communist party who donate that much to the party regularly.

Another question which I would like to ask you and me is this: If we were to work in a secular or heterogeneous setting, with people of different backgrounds and religions, how many religious would be seen as outstandingly good people? Wouldn't we be a mixture of heroic, good, mediocre and mean human beings, like all other groups?

2. Some Facts and Figures from History:

a. The situation of religious communities in the first world is very, very different from that in the third world. Over there (that is, in North America and Western Europe) the average age of religious, especially women religious, is very high. It is difficult to find nuns below 60 years. Many congregations have not had new recruits for decades, and are, for all practical purposes, dying. As one American sister told me, "What do you do when you know there are no younger people coming after you; that you will have no one to count on in old age, that there is no community to fall back on?"

b. In most Western countries, the exodus from religious life has been dramatic, especially between 1965 and 1975. Most international religious orders peaked (numerically) in the 60s. The Jesuits, for instance, had the highest membership ever in 1965, when they numbered 36038; but the number of their scholastics had peaked ten years earlier. Today, there are 21673 Jesuits worldwide, that is, 14,361 men fewer than thirty-five years ago. Their largest "assistancy" is South Asia, with 3805 members.⁴

Both these facts apply also other international orders—the sharp drop in numbers after 1965, and the concentration of growth in the poorer countries of the world.

c. In most periods of church history, women religious outnumbered men, at times by as many as four times. But most of the writings on religious life are by men. One of the basic things rightly critiqued by women theologians is the subservient role assigned in church life, including ministry. The document *Vita Consecrata* has a reference to this, and calls for a "new feminism."

d. Ours is not, by any means, one of the most turbulent periods in the history of religious orders. Anyone who thinks it is, should read more about the Reformation period and the age of the French Revolution. As Jesuit historian John W. Padberg reminds us, the rejection of religious life by the Reformers "gained popular support because religious life had lost much of its credibility. The scandalous reputation of many religious congregations and their members—especially male religious—was all too often deserved... Over and over ... calls for reform were made, and over and over again they were ignored. The effects on religious in the lands of reform were devastating."⁵

And yet, both during that period and immediately afterwards, new congregations arose, grew and flourished.

⁴ *Jeevan*, xx, 6 (July 1999), p. 4.

⁵ John W. Padberg, "In the Midst of the Times: Religious Life and the Ever-Present Experience of the World," *Review for Religious*, 53,2 (March-April 1994), 169. Padberg's study will cure many of us of the tendency imagine the past as a golden age. "In England men and women religious had already been brutally driven out of their houses. In other countries monks and nuns left their orders in droves. Even in lands that stayed Catholic, the numbers of persons entering religious life dropped drastically. So bad had the reputation of religious life become that more than once during the Catholic reform it was proposed to the Holy See that all but four orders of men, and most orders of women, be suppressed." (Ibid., p. 169)

During the French revolution, most of the structures on which the church and religious life depended were swept away. Properties of dioceses and religious orders were confiscated and sold to the highest bidder. Most religious orders were abolished. Members were turned out of their houses. To give one example, in 1789, when the Revolution began, there were about two thousand Benedictine houses in Europe; by 1815, only about twenty were left!⁶

- e. Religious orders were founded and flourished beyond what these traumatic times presaged. In fact, in the hundred and fifty years between the French Revolution and Vatican II, more new congregations were founded than during any previous period of church history. “More new congregations of women were founded in that century and a half than in the whole previous history of the church.”⁷
- f. The changes that have taken in religious since Vatican II are deep and dramatic, but, unlike the other two periods, the changes were often initiated from within the church. The church itself asked religious orders to revise their way of life. We are still under the impact of that change. In the West, the change has been nothing short of dramatic, and, in some cases, catastrophic. In India, we are yet to feel the impact of this type of change.
- g. Religious life has a double focus and foundation: *the experience of God and response to a need*. The experience of God—by no means restricted to members of religious orders—is what gives it personal meaning. There is no need to be religious to teach in a school, or do medical or social work. As a very honest and down-to-earth religious sister told me, “I want to belong to God in every corner of my being.” This is the heart of the matter.

As to responding to a need, a lot depends on how the needs of the world are perceived by the church at a particular time. Hence the clash that has often taken place between the hierarchy and the inspired founder/foundress. The well-known case of Mary Ward is a lesson in point. In many cases, the church thought the best response to a modern world (seen as anticlerical, agnostic and irreligious) was to set up parallel institutions outside it, run by religious orders.

- h. Today we live in a changed world—a post-colonial, post-industrial, post-modern world, dominated by new forces. The postmodern world and the postmodern person need to be understood and addressed. We need new maps for this journey. Depending on our sense of God and our sense of history, we can see the present situation as a handicap or as “the most exciting and prophetically stimulating period for religious life in centuries.”⁸

3. The Situation in India:

- a. Statistically, religious in India are riding the crest of the wave. Far from the depressing depletion of recruits the West is facing, our numbers are on the increase, our average age relatively low, our work wanted or even sought after, our social presence noticed, our institutions the envy of many others. Our striking statistics are easily summarized: 96,848 religious, of whom 79144 are women belonging to apostolic orders, 792 women in contemplative orders, 1906 are brothers and 15006 are priests. The congregations represented number 292, with a total of 7112 novices and 14,756 candidates.⁹

These numbers hide some interesting contrasts and paradoxes. Three clerical institutes—the Jesuits, the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate—together constitute nearly 52 percent of the total membership of the clerical section. Twenty-one clerical institutes have fewer than fifty members each. The brothers’ institutes are generally smaller, and the congregations fewer (1878 and 17, respectively). Here again, three institutes—the Montfort

⁶ Ibid., p.170.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gerald A. Arbuckle, “Prophecy or Restorationism in Religious Life,” *Review for Religious*, May-June 1993, p.337.

⁹ These are figures supplied by the CRI office in Delhi.

Brothers of Saint Gabriel, the Franciscan Missionary Brothers and the Missionaries of Charity Brothers—together make up 62 percent of the total number. As for sisters, there are four congregations with over 2,500 members each—the Franciscan Clarist Congregation, the Congregation of Mother of Carmel, the Sisters of the Adoration and the Sacred Heart Congregation. All four were founded in Kerala. At the other end, 54 congregations—that is, one-fourth of the sisters’ institutes—have a total membership of about 1400 (or 2 percent).¹⁰

In sharp contrast to what has happened in Western Europe and North America, the number of religious in India jumped from 35648 in 1969 to 79735 in 1994¹¹ and stands at nearly 100,000 today. In this sense, there has been no “vocation crisis” in India. Whether this indicates a greater religious sense, or a marked blessing of God, or the impact of socio-economic factors, needs study. This plethora has given rise to two phenomena—that of sending religious from India to work in institutions in the West, and starting new foundations in India, where the (otherwise dying) order is almost sure of getting candidates, especially from the rural areas.

Given this situation of “plenty,” we are probably complacent, not feeling the need to look at the problems afflicting religious life in India. The numbers may lull us into a false sense of security, as if the numerical growth were a sign that everything is fine with the congregation. There is also the danger that we may be recruiting new hands to keep our institutions going, rather than help young people to choose before God whatever is best for them. Vocation promotion, which is supposed to mean: helping a (young) man or woman to discern sincerely where God is guiding him/her, and helping the individual to make that choice and live it with a Gospel spirit, we may be putting the main emphasis on roping in candidates for our order.

If “vocation promotion” is sincere, we must present different vocations (including marriage) positively, as ways of responding to God’s love, and never imply that marriage is lower, and less of a call. Church teachings on the “excellence” of religious life should not be construed to demean marriage and the lay state.¹² Even when *Vita Consecrata* speaks of objective “superiority/excellence,” it is not meant to mean that religious as persons are superior to other human beings. This would be a grave and pathetic misreading. The issue is not: who is superior to whom? What matters is: How meaningful is this life for me? In the way I live it, am I becoming more Christlike? As Karl Rahner once told a group of seminarians, “The real question is not: ‘What is the meaning of celibacy?’ but ‘What is the meaning of my celibacy for me?’”

4. The Issues Facing us Today:

Religious life, as we said earlier, rests on two foundations—the experience of God’s love and compassion for the world. Both these are not exclusive prerogatives of celibates, nor do I imply that religious automatically, or as a group, are more God-centred or more compassionate than lay people. What I do mean is: What gives meaning to religious vows and community life is a faith experience in response to which one makes a certain type of choice. And one is more at home in a community which is engaged in the type of ministry in tune with one’s type of love and compassion. Hence a variety of ministries, sustained by a similar type of “love story” that gives the apparent trivialities of life meaning. This is why two genuinely committed religious from different congregations—or, for that matter, two genuinely loving human beings from any two backgrounds—are closer to each other, and understand each other better, than members of the same group who are on an ego trip or pursuing a

¹⁰ Mathew M. Vallipalam, “Religious Vocations in India: A Sociological Analysis,” *The Living Word*, 101, 2 (March-April 1995), pp.112-115.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹² Please note the English translation of *Vita Consecrata* is not accurate in its rendering of a crucial term. It speaks of the “objective *superiority*” of religious life. The French version has *excellence* and Italian *eccellenza*. Something can be excellent without denying the excellence of the other option. See: Sweeney, p. 220. Elizabeth Starcken highlights the same point. See: Elizabeth Starcken, “Vita Consecrata: Commentary on the Document, No.2,” in *Religious Life Review*, 35, 139 (July-August 1996), p.246.

political agenda of power, either openly, or covertly. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “many so-called religious people are politicians at heart.”

This inner dimension of religious life cannot be directly checked, but it can be seen in one's transparency and lack of malice, in the absence of hidden agendas, in the inner light that comes through. As a seminarian remarked about a priest he knew, “meeting this Father is like meeting Jesus.” This cannot be put on, or programmed, or manufactured. What we are, comes through in our spontaneous comments, in our use of time, talents and money, in the priorities we set, in the way we respond to human need. Love—Godliness in human form—needs not publicity, nay shuns it. It comes through; it brightens other lives; it heals; it brings hope. I remember a cancer patient's remark about a sister in the parish who was in charge of the ministry for the sick: “When Sister so-and-so enters a room, she really lights it up!”

This is what makes religious life credible—not slick brochures, clever propaganda or subtle boasting about our achievements.

In fact, our main contribution to the world is not the work we do in our institutions, but the quality of our relationships. To run a school or hospital, to be an effective teacher, or to do most of the things we in fact do, we do not need to be vowed religious. In a world ruled by ambition, rivalry, exploitation of the weak by the strong, where money, connections and titles matter, where race and caste and class divide, we bring another way of relating, a very different way of seeing human beings. Swiss doctor Paul Tournier writes of a sister who was director of a hospital in Heidelberg. He says that she had such a way of dealing with people that each individual felt treated as a person, as a unique person. Tournier, who knew this nun, was convinced that the secret of this was not personal charm, but her relationship with Jesus Christ.

Let me quote an example nearer home. The principal of a prestigious girls' school in Chennai was once listening to a minister whose daughter was studying there. When he hinted that she expected special treatment for his daughter, since he was a minister, she told him: “For me, your daughter and your driver's daughter are the same.”

If we truly believe in Jesus' central message—that each person is a child of God loved by God beyond measure, and if this is how we relate among ourselves, without walls of position, power, caste, region and visibility, then we always have much to give. The disappoint of people, especially of youth, with us is not that we are not using the latest technology or do sound fashionable enough. They expect genuineness and a different set of values from us, and often do not find it. As a group of college girls told the sisters who were trying to recruit them, “There is discrimination among you, just as there is outside. Some are considered important, others not.” One of these students told me, “The sisters would reply: ‘No, there is no discrimination among us. Right from Mother Provincial (and the sister's arms would go up), right down to Sister Anna in the kitchen (and the arm would point right down!), we are all the same.’” The girls saw that, in all the examples, the sister in the kitchen would be the last. It was not just a gesture. The students saw that the sisters did not treat each other as equals.

For this central message of Christianity to shine forth, two groups of people in particular must be free of the virus of discrimination—major superiors and formators. The young in particular have a special antenna to see genuineness and to smell humbug. They do not listen to most of our talk; they watch everything we do, how we relate among ourselves, how we live, how we treat our workers, whether we are partial to the well-to-do over the poor. When the Cardinal of Rome came to our university parish to inaugurate a weekly Lenten fast program, the director of the youth centre asked the boys what he thought of his speech. They said nothing about his speech. What they did say was: “Why does he need such a big car?”

In a country where the majority travel by bus or cycle, our teachers are not edified—and I have such comments from them—when they come for meetings by scooter, and the principal has to have a parent's car to get there.

Will such reminders and exhortations make a difference? Largely no, I think, for two reasons: (1) Our basic attitudes do not change through advice, but by experience and example; (2) Most of our candidates, in my view, do not choose religious in response to a religious experience, but under others'

influence and pressure. I cannot prove this, since I have done no research to check, but this is my impression after more than twenty years in formation work. There certainly are idealists who come precisely for a simple life close to the poor, but they are (in my opinion) the minority. They are deeply disappointed by a lot of things they see in religious life, but find it hard to go against the mediocrity and ego-trips of the majority.

One thing, I believe, that plays havoc with the quality of our religious life is the way we recruit candidates. Many congregations are so eager for numbers, that central factors (like true freedom in decision, happiness of the young person, freedom from undue family pressures) are ignored. This leads to unhappy and uncommitted religious, especially religious women, in my opinion. I say this especially about sisters, because in our culture, even if a young religious is unhappy, it is difficult for her to leave and start again, unless she has a job. It is easier for a seminarian or male religious candidate to leave and try another path. Even in seminarians, there is much hesitation and fear, and, often, strong family pressure, when it comes to leaving. I guess this is all the more so in the case of women.

Let me share with you, in this regard, something I have heard more than once from friends who are on the staff of national centres of formation and renewal. To quote one priest: "After seeing so many sisters who come here, I would not recommend religious life to any young woman I know. I will not discourage them, if they want to join, but I certainly will not positively encourage them. There is too much unhappiness around." Sisters, what do you say? Is there truth in this view?

Here again, generalizations and condemnations do not help. Two other things would help: assessment of our community life and ministry with the help of competent people, and research to find out what religious are actually thinking, feeling, doing, suffering. Beautiful rhetoric without a hard look at the reality is only a form of self-deceit.

One step that congregations can take to have happy and committed religious (in addition to discernment in recruiting) is to make sure that formation personnel are chosen well and adequately trained. Formators can build or wreck a young person's personality. One key quality to check is whether the person promotes an atmosphere of love or one of fear. People who grow up in fear may do the right things externally, but they will not know the meaning of commitment or service. They will be so busy protecting themselves from criticism and attacks that they will have little space left for compassionate love, which is the heart of our ministry.

One more thing before we pass on to the apostolic aspect of religious life. A study on celibates conducted in the US led to this interesting finding. For men celibates, celibacy itself was the most problematic vow, difficult to practise and unclear as to meaningfulness. For women celibates, itself, the most problematic area was not celibacy, but community life. Does your experience confirm this finding?

The other pole—active compassion for the sufferings of humankind—finds ever new expressions in time and place. It is here that intelligent analysis of situations and creative initiatives are needed. Fidelity is not merely looking back at the founding figure, but looking at the world around us with his/her eyes of compassion. A tradition, with its wisdom, its heroes and its limits shows me how far love can go (that is why we propose saintly models to our young), and how much God can do through human instruments. This gives us fresh courage to be equally creative, to look at the needs of the world around us, and listen especially to those whose voices are often drowned in the cacophony of money, power and influence. We religious have been at our best when we pioneered in areas where others feared to enter, because of the dangers involved, or were not attracted to enter, because of the lack of benefit to oneself. Education and medical care were once such areas of pioneering. Today they are not—at least not in the way most schools and hospitals are run.

Talking of example and witness, here is a striking contemporary factor. Many young people today, including seminarians and young religious, are more inspired by heroes in secular life than in religious orders. I see this in the case of seminarians, especially those who work among the poor and come across extremely committed men and women who do not have our security, and risk everything in their service of the poor—people who have sacrificed careers and home in fidelity to what they

believe in. Compared to them, our lives appear pale and insipid. When Father Timothy Radcliffe, superior general of the Dominicans, wrote about religious life recently, one of the contemporary heroes he mentions with evident admiration is Nelson Mandela. Mandela gave up family life, career, security and freedom, because his own individual freedom did not make sense to him without freedom for his people. This is the kind of commitment we need today. Father Gustavo Gutierrez once told us in class that it would be treason for a theologian to worry about his own minor problems, and forget the inhuman sufferings of his people.

Vita Consecrata places an agenda before us which would make cowardly hearts shudder: “Consecrated persons are being asked to bear witness everywhere with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life.”(n. 85)

Which are the avenues of ministry today where such a commitment is needed, where religious would be the best suited to pioneer?

Each region in India may have slightly different priorities, but I would think of the following:

- a. The struggle for justice: Most of our religious orders were founded in another social and political setting, when the church preferred to set up parallel systems (in education, in social services,...) and follow mostly a “charity” (or almsgiving) model of ministry. Justice issues took a back seat. Thus, for instance, religious in the US educated poor immigrants, but did not address the issue of slavery. In India, we have done much to help the poor, but struggling by the side of the poor to get their rights has not been our agenda. On the whole, we have devoted our energies to bandaging the wounds of the victims of the system, rather than to challenge and change the system. Some of us have also a naïve and unrealistic understanding about who helps whom, unaware, for instance, that the flow of money is from the poor to the rich, and political structures are carefully maintained to perpetuate and strengthen this system of inequality. Religious elsewhere have been putting such questions on the top of their agenda. How do we help the poor to get their just due? How do we go beyond giving some money to a poor person to buy medicine, to changing the system so that he will have medical insurance? “We need to look once again, ...at corporate commitment, that focus of energy that gives us voice and impact in society. We must face societal relevance and the plight of the poor. We have to stop simply repairing the wreckage that the system leaves behind and begin consciously, urgently, and communally to change the system.”¹³
- b. Promotion of kingdom values rather than building our own kingdom: *Vita Consecrata*’s description of kingdom values is clear and practical: “in work and mission, that the kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness.” (n. 27)
- c. Creating human community: According to many, the main challenge of the coming decades, and perhaps of the century, is how to create human togetherness. Here, as we know, religions can play healing or divisive roles. One of our tasks in India is to use religious identity to unite rather than to divide people. In this, India could serve as a beacon for the rest of the world, or as a frightening example of fratricide. Here too, *Vita Consecrata* re-vests traditional Christian doctrines with practical consequences: For instance, our sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity. (n 41) And again, religious are called to be “true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion...so that communion begets communion.” (n. 46) Needless to explain how

¹³ Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, as quoted by Amata Miller, IHM, in her keynote address at the LCWR National Assembly, August 27, 1994, p. 27.

divisions within a religious community and divisions elsewhere promoted by religious (as, unfortunately happens in the case of caste and linguistic narrowness), are a total denial of our religious identity. What makes me a religious is not just the common ownership of goods, or my being unmarried; I could be a very irreligious bachelor or an irresponsible community member. What would make me religious is my being an agent of communion, reconciliation and forgiveness wherever I go. This is highly relevant in a country like ours torn by caste rivalries and religious violence.

- d. More fraternal and less authoritarian styles of leadership: Religious superiors function best, in my opinion, when they genuinely perceive themselves—and hence act—as brothers/sisters of the rest, rather than as superiors. Abuse of authority is a greater evil than individual disobedience. Superiors can cause serious harm through unloving or even cruel misuse of authority, creating a climate of fear rather than one of spontaneity and freedom.¹⁴ Coming as we are from a culture where authority figures (in the family or in civil society) tend to act dictatorially, and resent being challenged or criticised, we often unthinkingly bring into religious life paternalistic or autocratic patterns of behaviour and define obedience in terms of the “subjects” (!) doing what the superior wants, rather than build a community of adults seeking to discern the common mission and fulfil it responsibly. Many superiors fear criticism and challenge, and feel threatened by persons who think differently. Religious communities often have an unwritten agenda to stay immature, in perennial adolescence, and worship mediocrity rather than excellence. Do you agree with me?

The main task of the leader is not to control the minutiae of community living, but to facilitate the common fidelity to the mission.

- e. Treating the beneficiaries of our ministry as partners and participants rather than as mere recipients:

Very often we claim to know what the poor need, take decisions for them, give them what we think they need. They are generally not consulted about what we want to do for them. Don't we assume that we know better than they do what is good for them? Isn't it time to consult the poor, learn from them, treat beneficiaries as subjects of decisions rather than as objects of charity? This demands a change of perspective in us, and will lead to big changes, both personal and structural, in our works, including the so-called projects we execute with foreign money.

We could learn a thing or two from a serious research on religious life conducted in the United States, called the FORUS (*The Future of Religious Orders in the United States*) study, done

¹⁴ You can decide for yourself how far the following description holds good for your congregation. “The authoritarian structure in community was a pyramid of superior and subjects, a parental model of adult and minors, a static life pattern of permanent dependence. The superior was understood to mediate the voice of God, ...and lord it over the community like a benign (or not so benign) despot. The responsibilities of that role were anything but momentous; God's will was declared in the most minute and inconsequential situations which often demeaned the generosity and depth of the commitment of the members. The reverend mother seldom dealt with larger issues of mission or ministry, for these had been fixed from time immemorial and were presumed to be adequate for all time to come. So the role of the superior was one of exercising petty power about petty things often in a climate of fear. What reverent mother said was final and it was virtue to anticipate her wishes. ..Life was lived without adult freedom, and without a sense of joyful agreement to the common purpose. Many members today carry scars, chips, gripes, hurts which they believe were inflicted by former superiors.” —Helena O'Donoghue, RSM, “Religious Life Since Vatican II: Leadership,” *Religious Life Review*, 35, 178 (May-June 1996), p. 132.

with the co-operation of the country's religious orders. The conclusion points to the following factors that give vitality to a religious congregation: *responsiveness to pressing need, motivation deriving from the love of Christ, consistency with an institute's tradition, clarity of purpose (that is, others' perception of the order must be consistent with its self-definition), unencumbered efforts, and actions that match the institute's message.*¹⁵

These six factors are as relevant in India as they are in the United States.

It is time to pass from these reflections to some concrete proposals. After all, one good deed is better than a thousand grand intentions. I end, therefore, with a few suggestions on what we could do in our setting. Some of these are things some of us are already doing, and I am merely passing on their wisdom to others. Others points may need clarification, or further discussion. Since the purpose of this type of meeting is not to legislate for all, but to stimulate, think together, listen to one another, and go away with a clearer vision, the awareness of mutual support and some steps we can take even immediately, here are a few ideas for your to consider, accept, modify or throw out!

4. Proposals:

1. Gospels, not feudalism: To make sure than we do not live a three-tier set up in ministry or mentality—the clergy “on top,” women religious on the middle rung and laity as inferior to both. We often do not realize how unchristian this is, and how offensive to the affected party. Priests especially need a change of mentality in this area—not to see sisters as below them, and lay people as still lower. But hardly any person or group gives up power or privilege easily. In this matter, women religious should not accept to be treated as second rate citizens in the church, and all of us should do much more to treat lay people as our equals, not persons to command or boss over. As for the role of women religious in the church, *Vita Consecrata* sees the urgent necessity of “certain concrete steps, beginning with providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.” (no 58)
2. Ministry of women religious: To train women religious for many more areas of ministry, in addition to teaching and hospital work. Such areas include: higher studies in theological subjects, in retreat ministry, counselling, spiritual direction, etc. When I attended the Jesuit-run “Centre for Religious Development” in Boston that trains spiritual directors, I found, to my surprise, that in my course (for experienced spiritual directors) I was the only priest, and the only male. All the rest were women—both married women and women religious. The staff included both women and men.
3. Animation rather than administration: To make sure that religious are mostly in ministry, rather than in mere administrative or bureaucratic jobs, such as clerical posts or in charge of purchases. This is especially true in the case of women religious and men who are not priests. All of us will have to be ready to do any work when needed, but it is not healthy if a religious feels about her/his normal work: “I did not have to become a religious or live a celibate life in community to do this work.”
4. Seminary staff mirroring the church: To appoint religious sisters and lay women and men to the faculty of seminaries and formation houses of religious, both male and female. The church encourages this. Seminaries and religious formation houses (of men) in India need to do more.

¹⁵ Elizabeth McDonough, “Come Follow Me: Reflections on Some Current Theories of Religious Life,” *Review for Religious*, 54, 2 (March-April 1995), p. 176.

5. Treatment centre: To set up a treatment centre for clergy and religious with mental illness, addictions, unhealed trauma. The newly founded “Salesian Psychological Association” (SPA) has this among its several dreams.¹⁶ Suggestions and offers of help are most welcome.
6. Research: To conduct carefully prepared and competently conducted research on religious—our motivation, dreams, difficulties, frustrations, suggestions for ministry. Right now, we go by impressions, or talk of ideals without looking at the reality.
7. Divisions among religious: To face the issues of regionalism and caste consciousness directly and positively. Problems and at times scandalous divisions do exist. They cannot be swept under the carpet. They need to be faced directly, so that we do not give counter-witness to the Gospel.
8. On-going formation: To provide facilities for sabbaticals, renewal courses, on-going formation programmes, including retraining of religious at or before retirement (eg, from schools), so that the remaining twenty or more years are apostolically fruitful and personally meaningful.
9. Training for celibacy: To provide a more realistic and more helpful training for celibacy. One way to start may be to provide short updating courses for formators in this central area of our life. It seems to me that neither our seminaries nor our religious formation houses are providing adequate training for living a celibate life in today’s world.
10. CRI Think-Pray Tank: To create an affective “thinking-praying core group” (a mere “think-tank” without a faith vision will not do) that studies crucial issues and the signs of the times, and suggest steps to the whole CRI body. Eg, when there is violence against religious, when fake “conversion” charges are brought out against us, when there are strong divisions in a religious community, or widespread discontent against the governing body. In a rapidly changing society that is presenting us with very new and at times very disturbing situations, ad hoc solutions are not enough.
11. Evaluation: To have systematic evaluation and assessment of our provinces by competent teams.
12. Faith-sharing: Our sense of God and our unity among ourselves can be strengthened through faith-sharing, both within the religious community and with others. Examples of questions to ask ourselves during such sharing would be: “What does not mean to me to be a (Salesian, an FMM, etc)? What are the essential elements of our community life? What do I contribute? What am I receiving? What essential element must be found in all our works? Is that true of my work? How do I find meaning?”
13. Debt relief: To provide debt relief to our workers, according to their situation. This would be a great way to celebrate the Jubilee year.

¹⁶ For more information on SPA, please contact its secretary, Father P.O.Jose SDB, at Don Bosco, Okhla Road, New Delhi 110025.

14. To stop international robbery: To influence our international religious orders to put pressure on the rich nations to cancel the debt of poorer nations (who, in most cases, have paid back much more than what they borrowed!).
15. Premises at the disposal of the poor: To open our premises (school buildings, chapel, halls, grounds, equipment,...) for use by the people of the neighbourhood, especially the poor. We have no absolute right to the property we call ours.
16. New ministries: To study, as individual congregations and at the CRI level, the new and most urgent needs of our people, where courageous pioneering ministry is urgently needed. To suggest a few: AIDS ministry, both preventive and caring; street children; unorganized labour, especially children and women; many forms of rural apostolate; the pathetic condition of government schools where most children “study” without blackboards and often without teachers; helping women who have been victims of violence; ministry to prisoners, prostitutes and other despised segments of society who are generally victims rather than perpetrators; pastoral ministry in hospitals; youth retreats; writing for the general public; literacy programmes; mass media, especially TV; creating Christian and constructive literature in Indian languages; mediation and reconciliation in areas of inter-religious, inter-caste and inter-tribal violence; counselling programmes in our schools for pupils and parents; human rights cells; legal education of the poor; ...Such pioneering are not against the spirit of the founder/foundress, since the issue is precisely: What would s/he have done in this setting? Who are the needy here and now?
17. Ecological spirituality: Ecology is just a fad; it is a serious moral and spiritual issue, an essential dimension of being human. This earth, our common home, belongs to all of us, and to future generations. We owe to all our fellow human beings, present and future, to live ecologically balanced lives, reflected in our life-style, our teaching, our respect for mother earth and her gifts. Hence, recycle rather than throw away; use bio-degradable containers rather than plastic; resist the setting up of killer industries and polluting factories.
18. Study of world religions: To include in our formation a study of the major religions of the world, especially the religions of India. India is the best place in the world for doing this first hand.
19. Feedback: To provide opportunities to those in our care—colleagues, pupils, patients, parents, workers—to provide honest feedback on our life, witness and apostolate, without being penalized for it! Often they know us better than a superior who comes now and then. They do not usually tell us what they think, for fear of reprisal or emotional outbursts in front of criticism.
20. Intellectual life: To have a library/reading room in every religious house, with both religious and secular reading matter. The CRI can perhaps suggest a reading list. Very often religious, especially sisters, do very little reading, and are not in touch with what is happening around them. We need to understand the forces shaping society today. We join the convent to serve the larger world, not to discuss what is happening in the convent. The unhealthy mental “smallness” often noted in religious houses is partly due to lack of intellectual interests.

Conclusion

The proposals I have outlined above are only an invitation to translate our *God-experience* and our *active compassion* into understandable signs of God’s love today. They do not make sense as mere resolutions or “things to do for a while.” To be effective signs and witnesses in a rapidly changing

and highly unjust world, we need a vision that provides meaning; a faith that gives us courage; a supportive community that by its very genuineness challenges the system of selfishness on which the so-called “world” is built. Our job is neither to condemn the world nor imitate it. Our task is simple and relevant: to be a conscious leaven in the mass, an effective presence that brings hope to the marginalized, transparent human beings in whom others can see what it means to make the human journey lovingly and responsibly. We are called today, in the words of theologian Elizabeth Johnson, to be “subversive sages, compassionate healers, social prophets and founders of a revitalization movement.” I think our lives can be considered meaningful, and our discipleship worth the cost, if people who meet us, irrespective of their background, can tell us what many members of a Japanese student group, hardly any of them Catholic, individually wrote to a sister they had got to know: “When I grow up, I want to be a woman like you.”

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There is no lack of reading material on religious life in general, or on any of the vows, or other aspects of the vowed life, such as, community life, or mission. What follows is only a small and selected reading list on some of the points mentioned in the talk.

A. Church Documents:

Documents of Vatican II, especially:

Lumen Gentium

Gaudium et Spes

Perfectae Caritatis

Christus Dominus

Mutuae Relationes (1980)

The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life (1981)

Religious and Human Promotion (1981)

Redemptionis Donum (1984)

Potissimum Institutioni (1990)

Fraternal Life in Common (1994)

Vita Consecrata (1996)

B. Other Readings:

(The following short list includes mostly Western books and articles, and touch on the profound changes affecting religious in the recent decades. While the first world situation is different from ours in a number of ways, there is much we can learn from their experience, their achievements, their current struggles. We can also be better prepared to face the changes that are hitting us, or will hit us, more forcefully in the coming decades. I have not listed many Indian authors, not because they are not important, but because they will be better known to our religious. Well-known Indian religious journals, such as, *Vidyajyoti*, *In Christo*, *The Living Word*, *The Indian Journal of Spirituality*, *Kristu Jyoti*, and *Mission 2000* carry articles on religious life. I shall presume that this audience is familiar with them.)

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