

CENTRALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

IN CONSECRATED LIFE

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0. INTRODUCTION

Pope John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* wrote, “The Changes taking place in the society and the decrease in the number of vocations are weighing heavily on the Consecrated life in some regions of the world.”¹ Addressing the men and women religious at the Archabbey of Brevnov in Prague on April 26, 1997, he voiced the same concern: “In the new climate of freedom which you are now experiencing and amid profound transformation in culture and mentality, you are realizing, perhaps more than in the past, how the consecrated life meets with resistance and obstacles, and how it can appear difficult and lacking in purpose.”² And again speaking to the participants of the European Congress on Vocations on April 29, 1997 he said, “Everyone knows the problems that make it difficult to accept Christ’s invitation. Among these are: the society of consumerism, a hedonistic vision of life, the culture of escape, exaggerated subjectivism, fear of making definitive commitments, a widespread lack of thought for the future.”³ In a message to the Council of Major Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life gathered in Czestochowa, Poland, on June 4, 1997 he said, “We live in times of chaos, of spiritual disorientation and confusion, in which we discern various liberal and secularizing tendencies; God is often openly banished from social life, attempts are made to limit faith to a purely private sphere, and in people’s moral conduct a harmful relativism creeps in. Religious indifference spreads.”⁴

Pope John Paul II has captured in words what we ourselves are experiencing in our own day. We are indeed living in the midst of these changes. The world which we are living in is characterized by consumerism, religious indifference (living as if God does not exist, many do not come to church), moral relativism (denial of objective standard of morality), secularization (separation of spiritual life from all spheres), liberalism, etc. And consequently, the way that people look at consecrated life is also changed. On the one hand consecrated life is looked upon as too heroic (wonder how these people are able to live like that!) and at the same time it is seen as archaic, a remnant of the past, irrelevant to the present world, difficult to make sense of, foolish! This is concretely seen in the decline of vocations. The scandals in consecrated and priestly life have made matters grim. And the secularizing processes which are at work in the society have not left untouched consecrated persons in the religious communities! Consumeristic tendencies, hedonistic view of life, moral relativism, liberalism, individualism (exaggerated subjectivism) and the like have

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), no. 63. Henceforth references to *Vita Consecrata* will be abbreviated as VC.

² Pope John Paul II, *John Paul II Speaks to Religious*, Book X (1997-1998), compiled by Jean Beyer (London: Little Sisters of the Poor, 1998), p.75.

³ *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108.

made inroads into religious communities. There is the temptation of 'doing rather than being' (religious are running good institutions and achieving results but do not ask them how they are living!).⁵ All these lead us to raise questions with regard to the very future of consecrated life! There is a fear that consecrated life itself may actually break down and disappear altogether!⁶

And Pope John Paul II offered a solution to these problems: Fidelity to the consecrated life. In *Vita Consecrata*, we read: "New situations are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those who know that what is required of each individual is *not success, but commitment to faithfulness*. What must be avoided at all cost is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission."⁷ The Pope does not want that consecrated life should disappear but that it should re-emerge may be in different forms suited to the times as it has been witnessed in Church history. And only sincere fidelity to the primacy of religious life over other things (all activities and apostolate) will help to solve the problems.⁸ And what is that fidelity to our consecrated life? It is fidelity to the Word of God because consecrated life is nothing but a radical following of Christ, the Word of God. It calls us to reinstate the Word of God at the centre of our personal and community life.

1. THE ANALOGY OF THE WORD OF GOD

Our meditation today is the Word of God – the centrality of the Word of God in consecrated life – and it is occasioned by Pope Benedict XVI's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*.⁹ In it he outlines the different significations of the "Word of God," i.e. different meanings of the term "Word of God." The term "Word of God" is used analogically.¹⁰ We can see at least four meanings:

1) "Word of God" refers to the 'Word' spoken by God at creation and in the salvation history. God spoke. God speaks. All things are made by the breath of his mouth, i.e. Word of God. Therefore reality is born of the Word. We are creatures of the Word.¹¹ We read in Psalm 33:3, "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their hosts by the breath of his mouth." St. Bonaventure says, "Every creature is a word of God since it proclaims God." And in the creation man occupies a singular place. Man is created by the breath of God.¹² He is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27). He is a personal creation. He is himself the word of God.

2) "Word of God" refers to Jesus Christ, the eternal son of the Father made man. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, "In many and varied ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.111.

⁶ Cf. VC 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cf. *John Paul II Speaks to Religious*, Book X (1997-1998), p.198.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini* (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 2010). The references to *Verbum Domini* will be abbreviated as VD.

¹⁰ A term which is said of many in a way which is somewhat the same and somewhat different is said to be an analogous term. 'Good' is an analogous term. God is good; man is good; food is good; etc. God, man and food are good but they are not good in the same way.

¹¹ Cf. VD 8.

¹² VD 9.

of all things, through whom also he created the world.” (1:1-2) The God who spoke to us through the creation, through the events of salvation history, through the judges, kings and prophets, as a climax of His revelation speaks through his Son. In His Son, the word of God finds expression not in discourse or concepts or rules but in the very person of Jesus.¹³ Christ is the culmination of revelation.¹⁴ The synod fathers have used a simile: “Consider the cosmos as the work of an author who expresses himself through the ‘symphony’ of creation. In this symphony one finds at a certain point, what would be called in mystical terms a ‘solo’, a theme entrusted to a single instrument or voice which is so important that the meaning of the entire work depends on it. This ‘solo’ is Jesus.”¹⁵

3) “Word of God” refers to the word preached by the apostles in obedience to the command of the Risen Jesus, i.e. the word handed down in the Church’s living tradition. Jesus commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel. They faithfully carried it out by their oral preaching, by their example and by their ordinances. Their preaching consisted of what they heard from the lips of Christ, what they learned from his way of life and his works, and what they came to know through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is we call the apostolic tradition. And this apostolic tradition enables us to understand the truth revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. Therefore the living tradition contains the very word of God and we need to recognize in the tradition the very word of God.¹⁶ *Verbum Domini* declares, “The Church lives in the certainty that her Lord, who spoke in the past, continues today to communicate his word in her living tradition and in Sacred Scripture.”¹⁷

4) “Word of God” refers to the word attested and divinely inspired, i.e. sacred Scriptures. Sacred scripture is the “the Word of God set down in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

So we find that the term ‘word of God’ does not refer only to the sacred Scriptures. It refers analogically to God’s word in creation, in the salvation history, Christ Jesus and in the living tradition of the Church. Hence we should avoid the temptation of treating only the sacred Scriptures as the Word of God and neglect the rest. They are also important.

2. THE WORD OF GOD IN CONSECRATED LIFE

2.1 Consecrated life, an exegesis of God’s Word¹⁹

We know how consecrated life originated in Church history. It was the time of peace for the Church after two centuries of persecution. Christians enjoyed religious freedom by the edict of Milan issued by Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. With the coming of religious freedom Christianity grew and became organized. But it also had its flip side of things. Many Christians, unmindful of the baptismal call for a new life in Christ, started leading very

¹³ Cf. VD 11.

¹⁴ Cf. VD 14.

¹⁵ VD 13.

¹⁶ Cf. VD 18.

¹⁷ VD 18.

¹⁸ VD 19.

¹⁹ It is an expression used by *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life, no. 82. References to this document are from Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988). References to *Perfectae Caritatis* will be abbreviated as PC.

superficial life seeking worldly luxuries and comforts. Some bishops, instead of caring for the people were involved in petty politics, and fought with each other for prestigious positions in the Church administration. The rich and powerful dominated the life of the Church. This led to a disillusionment in the mind of some Christians who asked themselves if this was the way of life that was sketched out by Jesus. Some felt that Christian life had deteriorated and began a revolutionary movement of living strictly the baptismal promises through prayer, contemplation and self-denial. And they lived in the desert!

One of the celebrated figures connected with the origins of consecrated life is St. Anthony of the Desert (251-356 A.D.). He was born of wealthy landowner Christian parents in a small village on the shore of the Nile. When he was about 18 years old, his parents died leaving him the care of his unmarried sister. In 285 at the age of 34 he decided to follow the words of Jesus: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come, follow me."²⁰ Taking these words quite literally, Anthony gave away some of the family estate to his neighbours, sold the remaining property and gave the proceeds to the poor and became a disciple of a local hermit. Being attracted by the personality and the great sanctity of Anthony many more people began leaving their homes and spending the rest of their lives as seekers of God in the desert. In the beginning they had no common rules and regulations governing their life as they were in solitude. In the course of time, solitary monasticism gave rise to a common form of monastic life. There were also monasteries founded exclusively for women. And this form of life slowly spread from Egypt to other parts of the world. And through the centuries it has evolved. And it has been organized by the Church.

Thus, consecrated life was born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life.²¹ *Lumen Gentium* affirms, "The teaching and the example of Christ provide the foundation for the evangelical counsels of chaste self-dedication to God, of poverty and of obedience."²² And in the same way, every charism and every rule springs from and is an expression of the word of God, the founders and foundresses being illumined by the Holy Spirit.²³

2.2 Necessity of reading the Word of God

Consecrated life began by an effort to strictly follow Christ as it is put forth in the Gospel.²⁴ And the consecrated persons have heroically answered the call to imitate Jesus more closely. And they can be sustained in this life-long striving only by the same Word of God. The Word of God that gave origin will also give renewal and growth. Reading the word of God, we look at God, we hear him speak to us and we come to know him.²⁵ St. Gregory the Great has said that through prayerful reading we can discover the heart of God in the Word

²⁰ Mt 19:21, Lk 12:33

²¹ Cf. VD 83.

²² Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n.43. The references to *Lumen Gentium* are from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988). References to *Lumen Gentium* will be abbreviated as LG.

²³ Cf. VC 94, VD 83.

²⁴ Cf. PC 6.

²⁵ Cf. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Venite seorsum* (15 August 1969) in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), p.598.

of God.²⁶ Therefore the Church wants that the religious “have the Sacred Scripture at hand daily, so that they might learn the ‘surpassing worth of knowing Jesus’ (Phil 3:8) by reading and meditating on the divine Scriptures.”²⁷

In order that the Word of God becomes part and parcel of their life, the Church wants that those in formation be given training in the study and meditation of the scriptures right from the initial stages: “The study and meditation of the Gospel and of the whole of the Holy Scriptures by all the religious, from the time of the Novitiate, should be more strongly encouraged.”²⁸ The Church also calls upon the Novice Master/Mistress should endeavour to teach novices “to bring about in their lives, ... more or less lengthy periods, in solitude or in community, devoted to prayer and meditative reading of the Word of God.”²⁹ If the formation personnel have to instill in the candidates the love for the Word of God, they themselves should be people who are guided by the Word of God. They should have the “wisdom resulting from attentive and prolonged listening to the word of God.”³⁰

Exhortations of Popes to the consecrated have always included an invitation to study the word of God. Addressing the religious in his message for the 34th world day of prayer for vocations on April 20, 1997, Pope John Paul II said: “Let yourselves be continually challenged by the Word of God, shared in community and lived with generosity in the service of others, especially young people. In a climate of love and fraternity, enlightened by the Word of God, it is easier to answer ‘yes’ to the call.”³¹ And again speaking to the general chapters of Monastic communities of Bethlehem, The Assumption of the Virgin and Saint Bruno on March 14, 1998 Pope John Paul II said: “In the likeness of Mary and with her, continually listen to the Word of God, keeping it and pondering it day and night in your heart! ... Familiarity with the Word of God which nourishes contemplation, enables you to receive light for recognizing the Lord’s ways through the signs of the times and for discerning God’s designs.”³²

This does not mean that the consecrated are not meditating on the Word of God or that they do not sufficiently read the Word of God. The various prayer moments throughout the day is filled with the Word of God. Every liturgical action is by its very nature steeped in sacred Scripture. In the words of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. From it are taken the readings, which are explained in the homily and the psalms that are sung. From Scripture the petitions, prayers and liturgical hymns receive their inspiration and substance. From

²⁶ Quoted by Pope John Paul II in his address to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary on June 4, 1995, *John Paul II Speaks to Religious*, Book IX (1995-1996), compiled by Jean Beyer (London: Little Sisters of the Poor, 1998), p.81.

²⁷ Cf. PC 6.

²⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae II*, (6 August, 1966) in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), no. 16.

²⁹ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Renovationis causam* (6 January 1969) in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), no.31.

³⁰ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *La plenaria* (January, 1981) in *Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1988), no.20.

³¹ *John Paul II Speaks to Religious*, Book X (1997-1998), compiled by Jean Beyer (London: Little Sisters of the Poor, 1998), p.69.

³² *Ibid.*, p.184.

Scripture the liturgical actions and signs draw their meaning.”³³ And the same is to be said of other sacraments as well.³⁴ Liturgy of the Hours is another privileged form of hearing the word of God as it brings us into contact with Scripture and the living tradition of the Church.³⁵ The *Angelus* is a daily commemoration of the mystery of the incarnate word. Rosary is a meditation on the holy mysteries found in the Scriptures in union with Mary.³⁶ Thus, the whole day the consecrated by participating in these are effectively engaged in meditating the Word of God. And the Pope encourages the religious to take part in them consciously.

Apart from taking part in these practices the Synod recommends that the Consecrated persons do a faith-filled reading of the Word of God through *lectio divina*. And the Pope writes “the great monastic tradition has always considered meditation on sacred Scripture to be an essential part of its specific spirituality, particularly in the form of *lectio divina*. Today too, both old and new expressions of special consecration are called to be genuine schools of the spiritual life, where the Scriptures can be read according to the Holy Spirit in the Church, for the benefit of the entire People of God. The Synod therefore recommended that communities of consecrated life always make provision for solid instruction in the faith-filled reading of the Bible.”³⁷ The Pope looks with gratitude and encourages the Contemplatives whose specific charism is to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to him attentively.³⁸

3. A METHOD OF READING THE BIBLE

The consecrated are invited to a faith-filled reading of the Bible. And *lectio divina* (spiritual reading or holy reading) is one of the methods of meditative or contemplative reading of the Scriptures. It is an ancient method. It had its origins in the monastic communities and was practised in many institutes of consecrated life. *Vita Consecrata* recommends it to all consecrated persons.³⁹ And the Popes have suggested it for all Christians.⁴⁰ It can be practised as a community or individually, but even when done individually it should build communion in our journey to God.⁴¹ Traditionally the duration for *lectio divina* is one hour in the morning. It can also be done in two blocks of half hour duration in the morning and evening.

The basic steps of this procedure are the following.⁴²

³³ Quoted in VD 52.

³⁴ Cf. VD 53.

³⁵ Cf. VD 62.

³⁶ Cf. VD 88.

³⁷ VD 83.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cf. VC 94.

⁴⁰ Cf. VC 94; Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html (accessed on 27/08/2011), 39; VD 87. Carmelite Constitutions no.82 declares: ‘*Lectio divina* is an authentic source of Christian spirituality recommended by our rule. ...’ Principles of *lectio divina* were expressed around 220 AD and practised by Catholic monks especially the monastic rules of Sts. Pachomius, Augustine, Basil and Benedict.

⁴¹ Cf. VD 86.

⁴² Cf. VD 87.

Lectio, reading of a text: We read the text carefully and attentively. Reading of the text leads to a desire to understand its true meaning: what does the biblical text say in itself? What the text says in itself is important or else we run the risk of reading our own ideas in to the text! Commentaries can help us to understand the meaning of the text.

Meditatio, meditation: It is the reflective stage. After having read and understood the text, we need to understand what the text is telling us (me). The text is applied to our (my) life. Individually and as a member of the community, one allows oneself to be moved or challenged by the text. We ask what the biblical text is telling us.

Oratio, prayer: Now we respond to the Lord. It can be in the form of petition or thanksgiving or praise. It is not an intellectual response that is asked. Rather it is the opening of the heart to God. After having understood what God wants of us (me), we respond to God spontaneously what we feel about the text, what we feel about what God is telling us through that text.

Contemplatio, contemplation: It is hearing God speak to me (us). We take up God's own way of seeing and judging reality, forming within us the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) and we ask ourselves: what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us.

The process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.

This method is the scholastic form. It was developed in the middle ages with its tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual life and to rely on rational analysis. This is the form recommended by Pope Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*. In the monastic form of the *lectio divina*, instead, there are no steps as outlined above. *Lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio* are four moments along the circumference of a circle. All these points of the circle are related to each other as well as to the center, which is the Spirit of God speaking to us through the text and in our hearts. Therefore, paying attention to any one of the four 'moments' is to be in direct relationship to all the others. In this perspective, one may begin one's prayer at any 'moment' along the circle. One may freely move from one 'moment' to another, as Spirit inspires.⁴³

Some of the effects of *lectio divina* are the following: ⁴⁴(1) The word of God is brought to bear on our life. The word of God illumines life with the light of wisdom (the gift of the Spirit). It gives a kind of a supernatural insight (which allows us to avoid being conformed to the mentality of the world). (2) It helps us to seek the will of God in the signs of the times. (3) Consecrated life is a life of continual conversion and exclusive dedication to the love of God and neighbour. *Lectio divina* reveals to us what God wants of us and what we need to be converted to him. (4) It gives us fervour in contemplation and vigour to apostolic activities.

4. CONCLUSION

⁴³ Cf. Thomas Keating, *The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina*, <http://www.crossroadshikers.org/LectioDevina.htm> (accessed on 27/08/2011).

⁴⁴ Cf. VC 94

The challenges faced by the consecrated life can be met effectively by fidelity to living the Word of God. The consecrated are the living exegesis of the Word of God. And fidelity to living the Word of God requires them to let themselves continually challenged by the Word of God through a faith-filled reading of it.