

CONFERENCES ON VITA CONSACRATA

The vows in Trinitarian Dimension

Introduction:

“The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit.” (VC 1) The Apostolic Exhortation affirms, from its very first sentence, the Trinitarian origin of consecrated life. In a certain sense, this is something new. The Trinitarian sources of consecrated life had not been explicitly spoken of in such a developed way before. John Paul II himself, in the catecheses on consecrated life preached a few years before the Exhortation, did not make clear mention of the topic. In some other documents there is only a mention of this.

On the other hand, VC devotes the entire first chapter to speak of Consecrated Life in the light of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. The title of the same is "Confessio Trinitatis: The Origins of the Consecrated Life in the Mystery of Christ and of the Trinity." The first thing that is striking is this very title: Consecrated life as confession of the Trinity, that is, declaration, manifestation. Consecrated life, for John Paul II, declares, expresses, speaks of the Trinity. The Pope uses different verbs to express this idea. Let us see it in some texts:

By this profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that **confessio** Trinitatis which is the mark of all Christian life; it **acknowledges** with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and **bears joyful witness** to his loving concern for every human being. (VC 16)

The evangelical counsels are thus above all *a gift of the Holy Trinity*. The consecrated life **proclaims** what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness and his beauty. In fact, “the religious state **reveals** the transcendence of the Kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things. To all people it **shows** wonderfully at work within the Church the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit.”¹ The first duty of the consecrated life is **to make visible** the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They **bear witness** to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world. To people's astonishment **they respond by proclaiming** the wonders of grace accomplished by the Lord in those whom he loves. To the degree that consecrated persons let themselves be guided by the Spirit to the heights of perfection **they can exclaim**: "I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendour; I am taken outside myself as I think of myself; I see how I was and what I have become. O wonder! I am vigilant, I am full of respect for myself, of reverence and of fear, as I would be were I before you; I do not know what to do, I am seized by fear, I do not know where to sit, where to go, where to put these members which are yours; in what deeds, in what works shall I use them, these amazing divine marvels! "The consecrated life thus becomes one of **the tangible seals** which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty (VC 20).

¹ LG 44.

But if the consecrated life is capable of expressing and manifesting the mystery of the Trinity, it is because in some way it has its origin in the Trinity. “The evangelical counsels are thus above all *a gift of the Holy Trinity.*” (VC 20)

“The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact **an expression** of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practising the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person **lives** with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.” (VC 21)

This last citation is noteworthy: by the profession of the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person **lives**, in a more profound way, the Trinitarian dimension of the Christian life. That is to say, when we say that consecrated life has its origin in the mystery of the Trinity, we are referring to this vital participation in the Trinitarian mystery. The religious, by his participation in Christ's way of living and acting, enters in some way into the divine-trinitarian dimension:

“His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called *divine*, for it was embraced by Jesus, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit” (VC 18).

Because of that, Fr. Buela Says:

“It is in the Trinity that consecrated life is born. **This is the central affirmation of the Exhortation Vita Consecrata**, seeing the heart of consecrated life in the mystery of the One God in three Persons, since **the nature of consecrated life is as a confession, manifestation and witness of the Trinity**”.²

Let us now see, following John Paul II, the action of each of the Divine Persons in relation to the consecrated person.

"A Patre ad Patrem": God's initiative

“In the light of Jesus' consecration, we can see in the initiative of the Father, the source of all holiness, the ultimate origin of the consecrated life.” (VC 22) It is the Father who calls to the consecrated life, as can already be seen in the mystery of the Transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him” (cf. Mt 17:5). The Pope will say: “The consecrated life is an initiative coming wholly from the Father (cf. Jn 15:16), who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with complete and exclusive devotion” (VC 17).

What is the content of this call, or what is its concrete form? It is a consecration similar to that of Christ. “Precisely as an expression of a special love, the Father proposes to the person called to the consecrated life the same ‘form of life’ (n. 14) proposed, for the ‘earthly existence’ (n. 14a), to his ‘beloved’ Son (nn. 15a), that is, to the ‘Consecrated person par excellence’ (n. 9b) or ‘supreme consecrated person’ (n. 2a).”³

² Ars participandi 66.

³ Angel Pardilla, Linee maestrese..., 1361.

Called by the Father, consecrated men and women must respond “by unconditionally dedicating his or her life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future, and placing them in his hands. This is why, with Saint Thomas, we come to understand the identity of the consecrated person, beginning with his or her complete self-offering, as being comparable to a genuine holocaust.” This holocaust of itself is nothing more than a **"expression of the love of the Son for the Father"** (VC 21), the marvelous **"expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father"** (VC 18). Just as the call of the Father to the consecrated person is analogous to that of the Son, so the response of the consecrated person is analogous to Christ's response of love to his Father.

It is clear then that the consecrated vocation comes from the Father and entails a total surrender to Him: He is **“the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life.”** (VC 21). “Consecrated persons live **‘for’ God and ‘from’ God**” (VC 41). “Therefore, to the decisive questions: Where do you come from? and Where are you going? the consecrated life responds: **‘A Patre ad Patrem,’ ‘from the Father to the Father,’** that is, from the ‘sublime beauty of God the Father’ (VC 16) to the glorious ‘house of the Father, which has many mansions’ (VC 52).”⁴

Father is also called the formator par excellence of consecrated persons.: “God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the educator *par excellence* of those who consecrate themselves to him.” (VC 66). “Like Christ, who throughout his earthly existence let himself be formed by the Father, living always ‘in attitude of submissiveness to the Father’ (n. 22), the consecrated persons, ‘obedient to the Father's call’ must unceasingly allow themselves to be shaped by the same Father.”⁵

"Per Filium": in the footsteps of the Son

Consecrated life can only be understood in the light of the life that Christ led on earth. The other Trinitarian aspects of consecrated life also find their foundation in the realization of this fundamental dimension. John Paul II says in *Redemptionis Donum*: “Religious profession creates a new bond between the person and the One and Triune God, in Jesus Christ.” (RD 7). And in *Vita Consecrata*:

“By this profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that *confessio Trinitatis* which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being.” (VC 16).

The Holy Father points out that Christ calls the consecrated person to a “total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. *Mt* 19:27) in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes (cf. *Rev* 14:4).” This necessary identification with Christ is expressed in different ways: “The consecrated life embraces the proposal of a **‘Christiform’ existence** (n. 14b), which requires the **‘conforming adherence of one's entire existence to Christ’** (n. 16b). The aspiration of the consecrated person is **‘to become one with**

⁴ Angel Pardilla, *Linee maaestre...*, 1360.

⁵ Angel Pardilla, *Linee maaestre...*, 1362.

him, taking on his mind and his way of life' (n. 18b), with 'the explicit desire to be totally conformed to Him' (n. 18c), in response to His invitation to 'share His experience as the chaste, poor and obedient One'" (n. 18c).⁶

Therefore, configuration to Christ is the central goal of formation:

Since the very purpose of consecrated life is **conformity to the Lord Jesus** in his *total self-giving*, this must also be the principal objective of formation. Formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father. (VC 65).

By the profession of the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person attains this conformation to Christ and participates in the somehow divine life of the Son of God:

His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a **way which may be called *divine***, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. (VC 18)

Finally, as a synthesis of this point, Father Buela says:

Jesus' way of life - chaste, poor, obedient - reveals the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity and what Christian existence should be. It is the most radical and divine way of living the Gospel. **It makes us belong totally to the Father and obey totally to the Holy Spirit.** Hence the evangelical counsels are an **expression** of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.⁷

"In Spiritu": consecrated by the Holy Spirit

The work of the Spirit, following the call of the Father and guiding us into conformity with the Son, is beautifully described by Pope Magnus. Let us listen to his words.

"A bright cloud overshadowed them" (*Mt 17:5*). A significant spiritual interpretation of the Transfiguration sees this cloud as an image of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Like the whole of Christian life, the call to the consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit [...]. It is the Spirit who **awakens the desire to respond fully**; it is he who **guides the growth** of this desire, **helping it to mature** into a positive response and **sustaining** it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and moulds the hearts of those who are called, **configuring them to Christ**, the chaste, poor and obedient One, and prompting them to make his mission their own. By allowing themselves to be guided by the Spirit on an endless journey of purification, they become, day after day, *conformed to Christ*, **the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord.** (VC 19)

⁶ Angel Pardilla, *Linee maaestre...*, 1359.

⁷ Ars Participandi, 701. And another author: "What is most original in the religious life -understanding the word original in its double sense: as that which is 'first' and that which is the 'origin' of everything else-is the fact of being, by the design of the Father and the action of the Spirit, the evangelical following of Jesus Christ. And let us note that, in this case, Christological origin is rigorously equivalent to 'divine' origin (cf. LG 43), insofar as it comes, in the last instance, from the fontal Love, which is the Father - the ultimate origin of everything, in the divine and in creation - through the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit" Alonso, Severino María-

⁸ "Tota Trinitas apparuit: Pater in voce, Filius in homine, Spiritus in nube clara" (S. Th. III, 45,4 ad 2).

The Spirit not only guides the particular vocation of each consecrated person, but also raises up different charisms to respond to the different needs of the brothers and sisters. In this way He adorns the Church with different forms of consecrated life:

The same Spirit, far from removing from the life of humanity those whom the Father has called, puts them at the service of their brothers and sisters in accordance with their particular state of life, and inspires them to undertake special tasks in response to the needs of the Church and the world, by means of the charisms proper to the various Institutes. Hence many different forms of the consecrated life have arisen, whereby the Church is "adorned by the various gifts of her children ... like a bride made beautiful for her spouse (cf. *Rev* 21:2)" and is enriched by the means necessary for carrying out her mission in the world. (VC 19)⁹

Reflection of Trinitarian life in the evangelical counsels

The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practising the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.

The **chastity** of celibates and virgins, as a manifestation of dedication to God with *an undivided heart* (cf. *1 Cor* 7:32-34), is a **reflection of the infinite love which links the three Divine Persons** in the mysterious depths of the life of the Trinity, the love to which the Incarnate Word bears witness even to the point of giving his life, the love "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Rom* 5:5), which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren.

Poverty proclaims that God is man's only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ who, "though he was rich ... became poor" (*2 Cor* 8:9), it **becomes an expression of that total gift of self which the three Divine Persons** make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death.

Obedience, practised in imitation of Christ, whose food was to do the Father's will (cf. *Jn* 4:34), shows the liberating beauty of a *dependence which is not servile but filial*, marked by a deep sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust, which **is a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons**.

The consecrated life is thus called constantly to deepen the gift of the evangelical counsels with a love which grows ever more genuine and strong in the *Trinitarian* dimension: love *for Christ*, which leads to closeness with him; love *for the Holy Spirit*, who opens our hearts to his inspiration; love *for the Father*, the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life. **The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity**, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life.

⁹ Al Espíritu Santo se le atribuye la consagración: "Hablando con propiedad, no es el religioso el que se consagra a sí mismo, sino que es Dios quien le consagra, tomando especial posesión de él, invadiéndole con su gracia, renovándole por dentro, transformándole y configurándole con Jesucristo. Y el religioso, transformado y movido por el Espíritu, se deja poseer, consiente activamente en la acción de Dios y se entrega —como Jesús— en totalidad y de manera inmediata, a Dios-Trinidad, como un permanente acto de culto, como una adoración perpetua, como una liturgia viva. Severino María Alonso.

Even *fraternal life*, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with "one heart and soul" (*Acts* 4:32), is put forward as an **eloquent witness to the Trinity**. It proclaims *the Father*, who desires to make all of humanity one family. It proclaims *the Incarnate Son*, who gathers the redeemed into unity, pointing the way by his example, his prayer, his words and above all his death, which is the source of reconciliation for a divided and scattered humanity. It proclaims *the Holy Spirit* as the principle of unity in the Church, wherein he ceaselessly raises up spiritual families and fraternal communities. (VC 21)

Faithfulness to the charism

Speaking about the search for holiness proper to consecrated persons, the Exhortation refers to the charisms. Since they are a gift of the Spirit, it is in fidelity to them that consecrated life itself must be understood. For this reason, the Holy Father analyzes the charism briefly and discovers in it a triple orientation:

First, charisms lead *to the Father*, in the filial desire to seek his will through a process of unceasing conversion, wherein obedience is the source of true freedom, chastity expresses the yearning of a heart unsatisfied by any finite love, and poverty nourishes that hunger and thirst for justice which God has promised to satisfy (cf. *Mt* 5:6). Consequently the charism of each Institute will lead the consecrated person to belong wholly to God, to speak with God or about God, as is said of Saint Dominic, so that he or she can taste the goodness of the Lord (cf. *Ps* 34:8) in every situation.

Secondly, the charisms of the consecrated life also lead *to the Son*, fostering an intimate and joyful communion of life with him, in the school of his generous service of God and neighbour. Thus the attitude of consecrated persons "is progressively conformed to Christ; they learn detachment from externals, from the tumult of the senses, from all that keeps man from that freedom which allows him to be grasped by the Spirit".¹⁰ As a result, consecrated persons are enabled to take up the mission of Christ, working and suffering with him in the spreading of his Kingdom.

Finally, every charism leads *to the Holy Spirit*, insofar as it prepares individuals to let themselves be guided and sustained by him, both in their personal spiritual journeys and in their lives of communion and apostolic work, in order to embody that attitude of service which should inspire the true Christian's every choice. (VC 36).

Conclusion

"I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendour; I am taken outside myself as I think of myself; I see how I was and what I have become. O wonder! I am vigilant, I am full of respect for myself, of reverence and of fear, as I would be were I before you; I do not know what to do, I am seized by fear, I do not know where to sit, where to go, where to put these members which are yours; in what deeds, in what works shall I use them, these amazing divine marvels!"¹¹ The consecrated life thus becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty (VC 21).

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Orientalis Lumen*, n. 12.

¹¹ Symeon the New Theologian, Hymns, II, verses 19-27.