

Conference on *Vita Consecrata* - Introduction

Twenty-one years ago, St. John Paul II said: "The seed of God's call, when planted generously, will bear abundant fruit. Faced with the serious crisis of vocations to the priestly ministry and to the consecrated life that is affecting some regions of the world, it is necessary, especially in this Jubilee Year 2000, to strive so that every priest and every consecrated man and woman may rediscover the beauty of their own vocation and witness it to others"¹.

A few days ago, we have spoken of the consecrated life as a *way of beauty* to lead people back to God, insofar as it is and must be a manifestation of the mystery of Christ.

1. What should we do so that our consecrated life fulfills this mission, that is to say, that it be this way of beauty?

Let us mention first some "subjective elements".

1. To acknowledge it. To be grateful for it is the most direct way of recognizing this beauty, because it means that it is valued and loved. It is a condition for living it well.
2. To love it, one must know it more and better, and wanting to know it more and better is a sign that one loves it. Because "one does not love what one does not know", it follows that one wants to know more about what one is beginning to love. This is what this Conference is all about, among many other means. The following of Christ is a mystery of faith (it is an aspect of the mystery of the Mystical Body), which means that it is virtually inexhaustible.
3. To live it with sincerity, perfection, radicality. It is a *way of life*, that is to say, a way of acting according to certain principles that are customary.

Religious life is not an artistic product that "must be crafted to appear beautiful", as if it could be made beautiful by means of make-up (or *marketing* campaigns). The beauty of religious life is intrinsic, not extrinsic, and although supernatural, it is essential and of divine origin (as is natural beauty), that is, it is not artificial.

There are places and environments where religious life has lost its attractiveness, that is, it has lost some of its beauty. A few years ago, the secretary of the Conference of Religious of Latin America said in an article that "it is vital to answer the question of whether religious life still has any meaning today". Evidently it was a rhetorical question, she said it has and explained why. But the very fact that she posed it as a question is significant. It means that many may be tempted to give a negative answer, in fact, there is no shortage of those who do, saying that consecrated life is a thing of the past, seeing that now "it is the time of the laity"².

There are still those who think that beauty must come to Religious Life by making it "pleasing" to the world, that is, by diluting its essence and then putting a fashionable make-up on the little that remains. As an example, this is taken from a magazine of a Confederation of General Superiors, in which a Benedictine nun says the following about religious life: "It seems to me inescapable to

¹ St. JP II, *Message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, 2000.

² Whoever has the stomach and has to do it by obligation, and can read certain articles and books on religious life in the last 30 years, will realize that this type of approach occupies a not insignificant part of the reflection on religious life. And along with remarkably accurate and fruitful contributions (those that follow the line and doctrine of St. John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata*) we also find the most varied answers, theories and lucubrations about religious life.

imagine and creatively update new relationships from the conscious work of **deconstruction** of the internalized model of domination/submission. It is urgent to go beyond the discriminatory and exclusionary practices that are **at the basis of distinctions** between Clergy/Laity; Women/Men; Humanity/Nature; Western and Indigenous/Afro/Campesino/Migrant identities; All issues that have to do with Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue. Here there is a call to reconcile faith with justice, ecology, gender... to transcend all forms of impoverishment and exclusion"³.

This, like so many other things that are seen, is to confuse what is flattering to the world and what is pleasing to the worldly spirit with what is really attractive. Christ attracts from the cross, which is not pleasant, which is most contrary to the spirit of the world.

2. What objective elements make religious life attractive and beautiful?

We can make an analogy with sensible beauty, which, although being necessarily related to perception supposes a certain subjective component, depends in itself on **objective conditions**. Traditionally, in realistic philosophy, three main ones are usually mentioned: integrity, proportion and clarity (or truth). The lack or failure of some of these elements can explain, in a negative way, why religious life in many places and environments has ceased to be beautiful and attractive.

A. Integrity

1. It supposes that the thing, first of all, *exists* in reality. That is to say, in this case, that the following of Christ and his imitation be real, that they are not only on papers, in words or in the imagination.

2. Secondly, that it possesses *all that is essential to its nature*, that is to say that it is what it should be, a **complete form**, nothing more and nothing less according to an essential measure. This means that it *has reached the full realization of its essence*. That is, that none of the essential elements be missing, that it not be "cut" on any side: that none of the vows be left out, nor of the proper virtues, that fraternal charity in community life not be cut or reduced. That all its elements respect the essences: if, for example, for someone obedience is an unbearable burden because it is a "method of domination" instead of being what it is, the imitation of the obedient Christ and union in Him to the will of the Father, then that religious life will lack integrity and beauty. And so on.

3. That all its essential elements are *integrated* and *refer to a single principle* that unites them, *articulates* them; conferring a *specific identity*. That is here the imitation of Jesus Christ by the profession of the evangelical counsels as an act of the virtue of religion, that is to say, as holocaust, in the maximum objective fulfillment of the baptismal character.

B. Proportion

This condition manifests the *relationships, at its various levels, between the constituent elements of a thing.* Proportion means simply and basically that there is an *orderly arrangement of parts related to each other and belonging essentially to the same reality*. That is to say, each thing in its place.

³ SOME OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR APOSTOLIC CONSECRATED LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN REGIONAL CONTEXTS: AMERICA, Sr. Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB.

This means that in the beautiful reality there is an order, and that this order is visible, and it is the order proportionate to our nature. In the spiritual, this order is proportionate to the highest desires and the highest aspirations of our soul. St. Thomas says that spiritual beauty "consists in the proper ordering of the soul and in the abundance of spiritual goods"⁴.

Concretely in the subject that concerns us, it means that always and in everything the supernatural is above all the natural, it is the principle of actuality, which at the same time that elevates it, transcends it.

So much so, that St. Thomas goes so far as to say that there are moments in which the spiritual beauty of the religious life implies a certain loss of beauty, humanly speaking. He applies this to the case of begging: he says that humanly speaking it produces shame because it is to recognize a misery or lack, and it is to depend in a certain way on the other to whom one begs, and this is against beauty (which presupposes integrity), but since it is assumed for love of Christ and to imitate him "it deserves to be highly exalted, as when it is assumed out of humility [...]. Begging assumed out of love for Christ is not only not to be reprobated, but deserves the highest praise"⁵. Proportion is spiritual proportion.

Then, due proportion places the substantial above the accidental; it tells us that the spirit is above the letter, and that at the same time it makes use of it to be, in some way, expressed; that the forms need a spirit and a soul in order not to be dead formalities, and that the spirit needs a body and forms in order not to be a disembodied spirit; that the virtues to be sought and practiced are hierarchical, that the ultimate end is the perfect imitation of Jesus Christ (and we do not want to know any more), a perfect imitation which, as regards the very acts of the soul, is identified with the *perfection of charity*, that is, love of God above all, and of others in the most heroic degrees, *those who fall under counsel*, as St. Thomas masterfully teaches in *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*. In short, due proportion comes from the Mystery of the Incarnation itself.

C. Clarity

"It is the objective basis of our own perception of the beautiful." Clarity is realized where reality *shines*. In defining clarity it is said to be "the splendor of the form" understood as a principle of *intelligibility*, however, it is more proper to speak of the "splendor of the *entity* or of the beautiful thing"⁶.

This is what St. John Paul II refers to so many times in *Vita Consecrata*. As we said, more than 30 times he refers to beauty as the way to God that passes through consecrated life. This "splendor of being" of religious life depends on the first two elements. A consecrated life built on solid foundations, respectful of the essences, which tends with all its strength to its proper end, does not need anything else to be splendorous.

This does not mean that we should not or cannot show its beauty or propose it to others. It is precisely the contrary, because the good is communicative of itself. This is why the Angelic Doctor

⁴ *Contra retrahentes*, Ch. 7, 11.9.

⁵ *Contra retrahentes*, Ch. 7, 11.9.

⁶ Cf. *S. Th.*, I, q.39, a.8, c.: "inquantum est *ens* quoddam" (insofar as it is an *entity*). Thus begins also the metaphysics of Aristotle and the commentary to that book of the Angelic doctor.

himself says that "religious, because they are in a state of perfection, can recommend their own religion. [...] In a special and principal way, it is permitted to the perfect man to recommend the state of perfection, so that others may be encouraged to follow perfection: as it is permitted to the Christian to recommend the Christian religion among infidels so that they may be converted to the faith. ***The more holy a person is***, the greater is his zeal to attract others to the state of perfection"⁷.

May these Days help us to grow in this love and zeal for perfection and for the path of perfection that we find in the consecrated life. It only remains for me to thank in a very special way all the fathers who have accepted to speak during them, to encourage everyone to obtain all the fruit possible according to the Divine Goodness, and to make our own the words of St. John Paul II: "Let us pray for young people, to whom the Lord addresses his invitation to follow him more closely, that they may not be distracted by the things of this world, and open their hearts to the friendly voice that calls them; that they may feel capable of dedicating themselves, for life, "with undivided heart" to Christ, to the Church and to souls; that they may believe that grace gives them the strength necessary for such a donation and see the beauty and greatness of the priestly, religious and missionary life" ⁸.

⁷ *Contra retrahentes*, Ch. 13, 4.5.

⁸ St. JP II, *Message for the XVII World Day of Prayer for Vocations*.