

## **The Consecrated Persons of the Global South in the 21st Century: A Call to Faithfulness and Fruitfulness**

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### **Abstract**

*This Paper addresses the question of Consecrated life in the global South. It highlights the call to faithfulness and fruitfulness. Over the centuries, Consecrated life shaped many of the Church's efforts in engaging worldly reality. It witnesses the Gospel message and promotes the Catholic faith: in this way, institutes of consecrated life break newer grounds and provide newer solutions in many areas of society. However, Consecrated life itself is an integral part Church, not insulated from the general currents in her. Vatican II documents are responses to social and ecclesial changes. Songu's reflection focuses on the teaching of Pope Francis on effective religious life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century following the Spirit of Vatican II as it relates to the global south. He presents the context of the Pope's message and re-enforces its relevance. Lessons are drawn from the Papal message itself, and proposes a way forward.*

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## Prelude

Consecrated life has shaped most of the Church's efforts in engaging worldly reality. From the monks and mendicants of the middle ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary societies, institutes of consecrated life have carried the banner of Catholicism in breaking newer grounds and providing newer solutions in areas like Agriculture, education, hospitality, healthcare, and charity. However, consecrated life itself is not insulated from the general currents in the Church.

In chapter six of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, and the Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life: *Perfectae Caritatis* the essential Conception of consecrated life is set forth. Both documents are products of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican which, like the many other councils before it, was responding to social changes.

A main aim of Vatican II is captured by the Italian word *aggiornamento*.<sup>2</sup> It means bringing up to date. The world wars, colonization and decolonization, the key discoveries and inventions of science, technology and medicine had all happened. The information revolution was also underway. A lot had happened since the close of Vatican I.

The reality of councils illustrate mother Church's desire to be alive to the signs of the time. It is worth mentioning that, in the time since Vatican II, the desire and effort for update has not died down, even as the world has entered a stage of greater advancement.

This Paper intends to highlight Pope Francis' Recent teaching on effective religious life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By way of proceeding, the paper will outline the background of this message in the hope of re-

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<sup>2</sup> Odilio Engels, "Council: History", in *Encyclopedia of Theology: a Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, Edited by Karl Rahner (New Delhi: St Paul's, 2004), 397-308: 307.

enforcing its relevance, after which it draw lessons from the message itself.

## **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Background Highlight**

Terrorism, pandemics and epidemics might have dominated global attention in the last few years, still what will change life as we know it is happening in the background. As the 21<sup>st</sup> – century rolls into a third decade, a fourth industrial revolution is building in the shadows.

Three economic revolutions have happened in the world so far.<sup>3</sup> The steam engine enabled the first industrial revolution in which mechanization was archived. The second was based on electricity which created Mass production. In the third revolution, electronics and information were used to automate Mass production. The fourth industrial revolution is building on the third, is characterized by “a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres.”<sup>4</sup>

Precisely, increases in computing power have pushed great advancements in AI. This is made all the more intense by increases in computing power and by the availability of vast amounts of data. The impact of this growth can already be seen in software solutions which are now been used used to discover new drugs, and even the algorithms used to predict our cultural interests, observes Schwuab in an article for the World Economic Forum.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Terry Breverton, *Breverton's Encyclopedia of Inventions: A Compendium of Technological Leaps, Groundbreaking Discoveries and Scientific Breakthroughs* (London: Quarks Pub, 2012; Kindle Edition).

<sup>4</sup>Klaus Schwuab, “The Fourth Economic Revolution: What it Means, How to Respond,” <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>. Accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022

<sup>5</sup> Klaus Schwuab, “The Fourth Economic Revolution: What it Means, How to Respond,”

Again, vast mobile internet connections with increased storage and processing power is opening huge possibilities. These possibilities will be multiplied by emerging technology breakthroughs in fields such as artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of things,<sup>6</sup> autonomous vehicles, 3-D printing, nanotechnology,<sup>7</sup> biotechnology, materials science, energy storage, quantum computing, web 3, and block chain.

Meanwhile, digital fabrication technologies continue interacting with the biological world on a daily basis. Engineers, designers, and architects are combining computational design, additive manufacturing, materials engineering, and synthetic biology to pioneer a symbiosis between microorganisms, our bodies, the products we consume, and even the buildings we inhabit.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> According to Alexander S. Gillis, an Editor Tech Target, “The internet of things, or IoT, is a system of interrelated computing devices, mechanical and digital machines, objects, animals or people that are provided with unique identifiers (UIDs) and the ability to transfer data over a network without requiring human-to-human or human-to-computer interaction.” More precisely, “A [thing](#) in the internet of things can be a person with a heart monitor implant, a farm animal with a [biochip transponder](#), an automobile that has built-in [sensors](#) to alert the driver when tire pressure is low or any other natural or man-made object that can be assigned an Internet Protocol (IP) address and is able to transfer data over a network.” Cf <https://www.techtarget.com/iotagenda/definition/Internet-of-Things-IoT>, accessed 2nd April, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> **Nanotechnology**, according to S. Tom Picraux, is “the manipulation and manufacture of materials and devices on the scale of atoms or small groups of atoms. The “nanoscale” is typically measured in nanometres, or billionths of a metre (*nanos*, the Greek word for “dwarf,” being the source of the prefix), and materials built at this scale often exhibit distinctive physical and chemical properties due to [quantum mechanical](#) effects.” For instance, “billions of microscopic “nanowhiskers,” each about 10 nanometres in length, have been molecularly hooked onto natural and [synthetic](#) fibres to impart stain resistance to [clothing](#) and other fabrics; zinc oxide nanocrystals have been used to create invisible sunscreens that block ultraviolet light; and silver nanocrystals have been embedded in bandages to kill bacteria and prevent infection.” Cf <https://www.britannica.com/technology/nanotechnology>. Accessed on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> I.e. establishments like Elon Musk’s Neuralink are pioneering research in the integration of mechanics and the human brain, while technologies like CRISPR are making it possible for the eradication of hereditary defects or ailments.

Never the less, even though much has been achieved in the evolution of the internet's potentials in trade, commerce, banking, logistics and knowledge sharing, much of its resources have been owned and controlled by a few: the so called big tech. An ongoing decentralization is changing this narrative. With the arrival of block chain and web 3, control of internet resources is becoming more spread as critical support infrastructure are now able to be owned by individuals as crypto currencies and non fungible tokens (NFTs).<sup>9</sup> The decentralization of the resources essential for human togetherness is already happening.

In sum, like the [First Industrial Revolution](#)'s steam-powered factories, the [Second Industrial Revolution](#)'s application of science to mass production and manufacturing, and the Third Industrial Revolution's start into digitization, the Fourth Industrial Revolution's technologies are rapidly changing the way humans create, exchange, and distribute value.

Suffice it to say that the fourth industrial revolution will profoundly transform institutions, industries, and individuals. More importantly, this revolution will be guided by the choices that people make today: “the world in 50 to 100 years from now will owe a lot of its character to how we think about, invest in, and deploy these powerful new technologies,” predicts Klaus Schuab in an entry for Britannica Online.

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<sup>9</sup> Writing for Coindesk, an online crypto newsletter, on March 17, 2022, Mark Stevens defines web 3 as “the next iteration of the internet that promotes decentralized protocols and aims to reduce dependency on large tech companies like Youtube, Netflix and Amazon.” Cf <https://www.coindesk.com/learn/what-is-web-3-and-why-is-everyone-talking-about-it/>.

## **The Voice of Peter in The Midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Pope Francis' Counsel for Persons in Consecrated Life**

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, the Feast of the Presentation, the World Day of Consecrated Life was marked for the 26<sup>th</sup> time. Instituted in 1997, as a day for men and women in Consecrated Life by John Paul II, this year's celebration was distinguished especially by a homily of Pope Francis during a concelebrated Mass to mark the day in St Peter's Basilica.

Reflecting on Luke 2:22-40, the Holy Father invited all consecrated persons to “cultivate a renewed vision after the example of Simeon and Anna. He then urged consecrated persons to think over three questions: What moves us? What do our eyes see? Who do we take in our arms? In considering his own responses to these questions, the Pope encouraged religious to be hopeful in the midst of crises, to continue to be open, and to never become rigid;

Brothers and sisters, the Lord never fails to give us signs that invite us to cultivate *a renewed vision* of consecrated life. We need to do this, but in the light of the Holy Spirit and docile to his movements. We cannot pretend not to see these signs and go on as usual, doing the same old things, drifting back through inertia to the forms of the past, paralyzed by fear of change. I have said this over and over again: nowadays the temptation to go back, for security, out of fear, in order to preserve the faith or the charism of the founder... is a temptation. The temptation to go back and preserve “traditions” with rigidity. Let's get this into our head: rigidity is a perversion, and beneath every form of rigidity there are grave problems. Neither Simeon nor Anna was rigid; no, they were free and had the joy of celebrating: Simeon by praising the Lord and prophesying with courage to the child's mother.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, “Eucharistic Concelebration With The Members of The Institutes of Consecrated Life And The Societies of Apostolic Life: *Homily Of His Holiness Pope Francis*,” St Peter's Basilica Wednesday, 2 February 2022. CF [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220202\\_omelia-vitaconsacrata.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220202_omelia-vitaconsacrata.html). accessed on 25th April, 2022.

The holy father ended by urging religious to take Jesus into their arms.

In effect, the successor of St Peter was urging the consecrated to wake up to the challenges of the time.

## **Challenges Before the Religious of the Global South in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Consecrated persons of the developed world might be battling with so many morally visible challenges (abortion, homosexuality, loneliness, euthanasia, child and sexual abuse and even attrition) but religious of the south have to face up against upheavals peculiar to the third world's political, social and economic ecosystems. They range from, leadership, fanaticism, income inequality, access to health, and education, brain drain. All of these are exacerbated in the context of the fourth industrial revolution.

Someone once said, instead of natural disasters, God gave Africa political disasters. Corruption, visionlessness, greed and avarice have turned most of Africa into a factory of misery.

The numbers are there and they don't lie. "The continent of Africa loses over \$50 billion a year through illicit financial flows, according to a 2015 report by a UN High Level Panel led by former South African president Thabo Mbeki."<sup>11</sup> In 2021, The Global Hunger Index said 1 in 5 Africans face hunger. The numbers for unemployment, access to education, healthcare, and shelter are not any different. All except one of the countries on the low human development index table in the 2020 Global Human Development Index (HDI), which measures the quality of countries based on human development indicators, are African.

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<sup>11</sup> Ntibinyane Ntibinyane, "African Leaders and the Panama Papers", published on Good Governance Africa <https://gga.org/african-leaders-and-the-panama-papers/>, accessed May 5<sup>th</sup> 2022.

Nearer home, in Nigeria, the situation is not any different. The country seems to be on the fast lane to political disaster. Terrorism in most of the Northern states, hunger, and unemployment have all been successfully institutionalized. Terrorist and other have taken over swaths of Nigeria's territory and almost all its highways. Inter city and inter regional movements have been greatly affected as much as farming and other key commercial activities.

Economically, there is the constant threat of the monopolists. For instance, with the opening of Dangote's refinery, the fate of Nigeria's economy will be firmly in the hands of one man. Success rates for startups are worsening. The only thing that seems to be working in Nigeria is entertainment: film and music.

Demographically, high fecundity in the Muslim north in the face of mass migration and low fecundity, delayed reproductive age in the Christian south will tip the scales of power in overwhelming north. The Nigerian religious of the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century, would be dealing with a world dominantly shaped by an over-whelming Muslim majority.

Meanwhile, ritual killings, terrorism, kidnapping, drug peddling, internet fraud, dehumanizing prostitution, trafficking in persons and children are dominating the Nigerian Story. It is as if the ordinary Nigerian is daily losing hope in fairness, truth, and justice and is prepared to “get rich or die trying.” This is a cocktail for a disaster.

It is predicted that ultimately, “the ability of government systems and public authorities to adapt will determine their survival. If they prove capable of embracing a world of disruptive change, subjecting their structures to the levels of transparency and efficiency that will enable them to maintain their competitive edge, they will endure. If they cannot evolve, they will face increasing trouble.”<sup>12</sup> With central

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<sup>12</sup> Klaus Schwuab, “The Fourth Economic Revolution: What it Means, How to Respond,”



regulation in law and commerce falling apart the world is entering a phase where individual conscience will drive the narrative. The question is are we ready as individual religious and institutions for a change in the balance of power?

### **A Cultivated Response**

As observed in the beginning, the Church's engagement of contextual reality has always been dominated by the efforts of those in consecrated life. This is what our many charisms and apostolates are for. The sheer magnitude of what is ahead validates the call of the Vicar of Christ. Inertia is dangerous in this time; the imperative for action must not be lost. The onus falls now on consecrated persons and institutes to readjust for more effective witness individually and institutionally.

Personally, sincerity of purpose is indispensable. We all have initial motives for joining consecrated life. These may change as time proceeds. However, the question of Francis remains important: “what moves us?” Apart from the Holy Spirit, there are many things that can move us. Money, comfort, prestige, respect, malice; whatever might be motivating us needs to be replaced by the Holy Spirit.

The quality of any institution lies in that of its members. The greatest assets of an institution are its personnel. This is a dynamic that needs to remain in the formation of future religious. The situation where structures are employed to mentally injure religious is not going to be so productive in the long run. The spiritual, emotional and physical welfare of members must not be sacrificed. A happy religious, is a productive religious,

Institutionally, consecrated life needs to give greater priority to merit and competence in recruiting personnel both into office and formation. Sentiments may be important, tribalism also, or maybe cronyism, or

nepotism, but they may not give us the best that is critically needed for the challenges of this time.

Even as most institutes are doing well in the area of formation - acquiring, as they are doing, specialized formation - more resources have to be allocated to this specialization. It must not be compromised.

Again, creative fidelity needs to be employed. The pope himself warns against the error of rigidity. Newer avenues for consecrated witness emerge daily. Our response to those situations in fidelity to our original charisms must not only be constant; it must be relentless for this life to be effective.

### **Conclusion: Called to be faithful and fruitful**

Consecrated life, no doubt is a call to follow Christ more closely in the profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity poverty and obedience. Yet, even as the impression has been peddled in some quarters that the call of Christ is to be faithful not fruitful, the point needs to be made that fruitfulness distinguishes a true call. By their fruits, you shall know them, Christ says in Matthew (7:16). He also caused a fruitless fig tree to wither (Matt 11:11-26). In addition to fidelity, fruitfulness is necessary.

Accepting the challenges presented by a changing world is the sure path to effective witness. In a Mass celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, Pope Francis is quoted to have said, inertia is a “seed of sin.”<sup>13</sup> It eventually ends in fruitlessness and loss of relevance. Hence the necessity of a Christ centered action becomes evident.

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Glatz, “Complaining, inertia are seeds of the devil, pope says,” Catholic News Service, March 24th, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-chronicles/complaining-inertia-are-seeds-devil-pope-says>. Accessed on May 10th, 2022.

Before conclusion, I want to tell you a story. A drunk man arrived home to the welcome of his son. In excitement, he lifted and threw the child up in mid air. In that moment something happened. The drunken state, he could see three children in the air. He became confused on which of the children in mid air was his.

If we are inspired by the right things, we would see Christ, hold him in our arms and bring him to a world that is forgetting its need of him. The effective witness to the Gospel will only be possible with a right response to the signs of the time.