

Discernment of Vocations to Religious Life and the Departure Challenge

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Abstract

The discernment of vocations to religious life is a complex process. It involves a deep consideration through prayer of one's call to follow Christ in a radical and communal way. One who feels called to live a religious life is accompanied by a formator whose duty it is to observe the facts and confirm the existence of authentic vocation, and to assist in forming the person for the life.

Departures from religious life nowadays are not few and insignificant. We need to reflect to find out the factors that contribute to these departures, as well as the best ways to stop the malady and foster perseverance in religious life.

This paper, which explores the discernment of vocations to and departures from religious life in the light of recent research, using expository and analytical methodology, will be divided into three main sections. The first section will provide an overview of the discernment process, highlighting some signs of authentic vocation. The second section will discuss some possible reasons for departures, drawing on both research and personal experience in the pastoral life of the Church. The third section will offer some suggestions on how to support those called to religious life to live the life joyfully and to persevere in it.

The paper will conclude by arguing that departures are contradictory to the “stable nature of religious life,”¹ and hence members and institutes should work hard to foster happiness and fulfillment in religious life on the one hand and should avoid whatever can lead to desertion of it on the other hand.

Key Words: Vocation, Religious Life, Formation, Discernment, Departure.

Outline:

- ·Introduction
- ·Divine Origin of Vocation to Religious Life
- ·Formation and Discernment of Vocation to Religious Life
- ·Causes of Abandonment of Religious Life
- ·Proposal and Recommendation for Fidelity and Perseverance in Religious Life
- ·Conclusion

Introduction

The issue of departures from religious life is of great concern to the Church. It is a worrisome phenomenon that makes the following questions come to mind: what could be the cause or causes of this desertion? Could it be that the initial discernment made that led to the decision to join religious life was mistaken? Can God call one to a particular state of life and later change his mind and call the person to a different state of life? What could be done to prevent this problem? These are the issues this paper seeks to address.

Our focus is on religious life which is a species of consecrated life. We shall start by highlighting the concept of vocation and its origin. Then we shall discuss formation and discernment of vocations to religious

¹Cf. Can. 573, 1.

life. The second and the third parts of the work will focus on the possible causes of abandonment of religious life, proposal and recommendations for perseverance in religious life.

Religious life is known for its perpetuity,² hence, departure from it contradicts its nature and it gives concern to the mother Church and the entire people of God. Pope Francis raised concern over the issue of abandonment of consecrated life. He said: “We may well say that at this moment faithfulness is being put to the test [...]. We are facing a 'hemorrhage' that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us.”³

The Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, (=CICLSAL) worried by the problem of departures within consecrated life has issued a document called the “Gift of Fidelity, Joy of Perseverance” in which it offers guidelines on the basis of the Code of Canon Law and the practice of the Dicastery to confront this challenge and to foster fidelity and perseverance of those called to consecrated life.⁴

Any institute experiencing defection or abandonment by its members should question its formation process, and lifestyle (*modus operandi*) seriously, to find out why this is occurring. The CICLSAL sees it as a sign of hope the “progressive overcoming of a mentality that tended to place the blame on those who left consecrated life, denying any responsibility to the Institute.”⁵ The Congregation notes that, “Every

²What is meant by this will be discussed later.

³Francis, Address to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Vatican City, 28 January 2017, cited in The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Gift of Fidelity, Joy of Perseverance, Guideline, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, n. 2. Hereafter, Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance.

⁴Cf. Gift of Fidelity, Joy of Perseverance, 3.

⁵Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 49.

request to leave should be an occasion for the entire community, and superiors in particular, to seriously question themselves about their own responsibility.”⁶

God is faithful to his words and his call to anyone to a particular state of life is for the most part permanent. When someone who has made perpetual commitment and has been in an institute for many years leaves the institute as it is the case in some defections, it is a sign that something is wrong somewhere. This study is an attempt to explore the contributing factors for departures from religious life, to proffer means of curbing the problem and to promote fidelity and perseverance in religious life.

Divine Origin of Vocation to Religious Life

No one becomes a consecrated person just because he or she wants to; the person has to be called by God. St. John Paul II talked about the divine and Trinitarian origin of consecrated life as follows:

Many of the baptized throughout history have been invited [by God] to live [consecrated life] “in the image of Christ.” But this is possible only on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit. For in such a life baptismal consecration develops into a radical response in the following of Christ through acceptance of the evangelical counsels, the first and essential of which is the sacred bond of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. This special way of “following Christ,” at the origin of which is always the initiative of the Father, has an essential Christological and pneumatological meaning: it expresses in a particular vivid way the Trinitarian nature of the Christian Life and it

⁶Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins. The Consecrated Life and Its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II, Guidelines*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2018, 21. Hereafter *New Wine in New Wineskins*.

anticipates in a certain way that eschatological fulfillment towards which the whole Church is tending.⁷

Vocation to religious life is a mystery; it is a divine gift to the Church.⁸ The Code of Canon Law affirms this fact when it states: “The evangelical counsels, based on the teaching and example of Christ the Master, are a divine gift which the Church received from the Lord and which by His grace it preserves always” (Can. 575).

“At the origin of the religious consecration there is a call of God for which there is no explanation apart from the love which he bears for the person whom he calls. This love is absolutely gratuitous, personal, and unique. It embraces the person to the extent that one no longer pertains to oneself, but to Christ. It thus reflects the character of an alliance. The glance which Jesus turned towards the rich young man has this characteristic: “Looking on him, he loved him” (Mk 10. 21).⁹ Religious life is rooted in Jesus special love for an individual and the person's deep personal ardent love and attraction to the person of Christ. The first step in the journey to religious life is taken by one who has heard about Jesus Christ, felt attracted by him and has decided to follow him.”¹⁰

The most Holy Trinity is involved in every vocation to consecrated life. The Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit have specific roles to play. “God the Father through the action of the Holy Spirit stimulates in the soul of the religious the ardent love for Jesus Christ and desire to follow him

⁷ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World, *Vita Consecrata*, (25 March 1996), 14. Hereafter, *Vita Consecrata*.

⁸ Cf. The Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, (28 October 1965), 1; can. 574, 1,2.

⁹ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, Paulines Publications Africa, Kenya 2012, 8.

¹⁰ Cf. George Ukken, *Come and See: Formation for Discernment of Vocation*, Pauline, Mumbai, 2019, pp. 8, 21.

and offer one's life for the work of the kingdom. The Holy Spirit “shapes and molds 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.”¹¹

The Holy Spirit molding and shaping the hearts of the religious and configuring them to Christ entails making them to assume the mind and heart of Jesus Christ which is essential for them to live the evangelical counsels of poverty chastity and on obedience in imitation of him.

Formation and Discernment of Vocation to Religious Life

Religious life implies “a consecration of the whole person,” which “manifests in the Church the marvelous marriage established by God as a sign of the world to come. Religious thus consummate a full gift of themselves as a sacrifice offered to God, so that their whole existence becomes a continuous worship of God in charity” (can. 607, 1). The Members of a religious institute “pronounce public vows and live a fraternal life in common” (can. 607, 2).

Formation in religious life is above all a pedagogy of configuration to Christ. The more decisive duty of formation is to lead the candidates gradually towards a full identification with Christ in the Gospel, helping the person to assume with a sense of responsibility the program of life that corresponds to the call of Jesus to leave all and follow him.¹² According to C. Serrao, formation is a rich complex process. He noted that it is difficult to find one word that can express adequately the reality of formation in all its aspects.¹³

¹¹ *Vita Consecrata*, 19.

¹² Cf. A. Pardilla, *La Forma di Vita di Christo al Centro della Formazione alla Vita Religiosa*, Editrice Rogate, Roma, 2001, p. 208.

¹³ Cf. Charles Settao, *Il discernimento della vocazione religiosa*, Edizioni OCD, Roma, 2006.

Formation is something very important in religious life because “the proper renewal of religious institutes depends chiefly on the formation of their members.”¹⁴ During the period of formation, candidates for religious life are made to “acquire greater understanding of their divine vocation,” and of the vocation to their proper institute. They “are to experience the manner of life of the institute and form their minds and hearts in its spirit” (can. 646).

The immediate end of formation according to the CICLSAL is to introduce new members to religious life and to make them aware of its specific character within the Church, and to assist them primarily to realize their unity of life in Christ through the Spirit, by means of the harmonious fusion of its spiritual, apostolic, doctrinal and practical elements.¹⁵

Discernment implies the act of going through “certain relevant stages in order to judge and make decision.”¹⁶ Discernment is very important as it helps one to go beyond mere good intentions to the deep discovery of one's inner yearning and be able to read the reality of one's life in the light of the Spirit,¹⁷ and to act according to the divine will. Discernment in religious life has to do with discovering the call of God to the life.

To make a good discernment of vocation to religious life, it is necessary that one is spiritually free and has right disposition required to make right decision. What is this right disposition? The person must have strong desire to know and do the will of God, and should also be open to the formators, and not hide from them what they should know.¹⁸

¹⁴Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, Paulines, Nairobi, 1990, 1).

¹⁵Cf. CICLSAL, *Directive on formation*, 1; cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 18.

¹⁶Guy Lespinay, *Vocation and Their Formation Today*, St Pauls Alba House, New York 2009, 19.

¹⁷Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate*, (19 March 2018), 169.

¹⁸Concealment of one's incorporation in an institute of consecrated life or society of apostolic life to a new institute one joined invalidates the person's admission into the novitiate. Cf. cann. 63,1; 643,5.^o

Our Lord Jesus Christ when on earth did always the will of his Father which he regarded as his food (Jn. 4: 34). The essence of Christian perfection is doing the will of God in all circumstances. A good discernment also demands that there is no pre-judgment. One cannot make up one's mind and then start discerning because that will mean lack of openness to God's will.¹⁹

The period of formation to religious life is a period of discernment in which the candidate is to get to clarify if he or she has vocation to religious life and seeks signs of this vocation. The formators likewise are faced with the same question and are instruments to help him or her discern whether or not the person is called to religious life, by trying to identify signs of vocation in the life of the candidate.²⁰

The goal of the discernment-accompaniment is for the right formation of conscience and the capacity to discern. Discernment is a process that is geared towards personal self-understanding and choice making in which one is able to listen to one's affection, and feelings in all sincerity.²¹

Before one chooses careers like engineer, nurse, lawyer, medical doctor, or teacher, the person considers the advantages and disadvantages, and personal aptitude. The choice of vocation to religious life is not limited to the above considerations. Religious life is chosen above all based on one's ardent love for the person of Jesus Christ and the desire to dedicate the whole of one's life to his service. Even though the person like other young people might have dreams

¹⁹Cf. George Ukken, *Come and See: Formation for Discernment of Vocation* p. 145.

²⁰Cf. George Ukken, *Come and See: Formation for Discernment of Vocation* p. 9. For Guy Lespinay, signs of authentic vocation to religious life can be identified in the following: Desire to encounter God, desire to live in a group, conversion of life to the Gospel, trust in the future, capacity for renunciation, taste for knowing and learning, generosity, and the quest for an institutional form of life. See Guy Lespinay, *Vocation and their Formation Today*, pp. 19 – 42.

²¹Cf. Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 50, 51.

about love, family, and successful career, right within the person he feels more attracted to the person of Jesus Christ, because having met him, one discovers in him the source of living water which can quench all one's thirst for love, happiness, and fulfillment. This gives the person courage to be able to leave behind all the objects of one's youthful dreams and follow Jesus. The burning and ardent love one nourishes for Jesus is what will then sustain the person throughout the course of religious life and enable the person to withstand the difficulties and problems that might arise along the journey of religious life.²²

Causes of Abandonment of Religious Life

Desertion of one's state of life as a religious is a worrisome phenomenon as it contradicts the nature of perpetuity of consecrated religious life. Making perpetual/final profession in a religious institute entails a “total lifelong gift” of oneself to God in imitation of Christ for the service of his Kingdom.²³ Consecrated Life through the profession of the evangelical counsels according to the prescription of the Code of Canon Law is “a stable form of living, in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved” (can. 573). Consecrated life by its nature is not a life lived only for some period of time, rather it has character of perpetuity once one makes final commitment in an institute. When we answer God's call to religious life, “we begin a road with no turning back and with a process in which each day His presence spurs us on and supports us in responding to new challenges and living our vocation passionately.”²⁴

²² Cf. George Ukken, *Come and See: Formation for Discernment of Vocation* p. 10.

²³ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 1; can. 607, 1.

²⁴ Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, “Vocational Fidelity” in *Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life*, Litos editorial, 11.

By religious profession a religious enters into spousal covenant and mystical union with Christ which supposed to last the whole of one's life. In fact, the first motivation of one who leaves his/her father's house to the convent is to give one's life totally to God. The person is not thinking of going back even though his or her vocation is still to be discerned and confirmed by the institute.

The Council Fathers demanding that those called to consecrated life should persevere in their God-given vocation affirmed: "Let each of the faithful called to the profession of the evangelical counsels, therefore, carefully see to it that he persevere and ever grow in that vocation God has given him. Let him do this for the increased holiness of the Church, for the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity, which in and through Christ is the font and source of all holiness."²⁵

As affirmed before, when one embraces the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience one gives oneself totally to God to work for his kingdom following the footsteps of Christ. Unfortunately, some vocations suffer shipwreck along the way.

Presently, some possible causes of desertion of religious life can be both internal and external. The internal causes could be wrong motivation in embracing religious life, lack of authentic vocation/mistaken discernment; crisis of faith and decrease in the original love and attraction for Jesus Christ. A number of external factors can be responsible for the desertion of religious life. These factors are: Influence of the contemporary culture, inadequate initial formation, wrong exercise of authority, and unhealthy, unsupportive community.

²⁵Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), 47.

a. Internal Causes

i. Wrong Motivation and Mistaken Discernment

Someone may enter religious life with wrong motivation attracted by something else other than the ardent love for God and desire to dedicate the whole of one's life to the service of his kingdom. When these wrong motivations are not purified in the process of formation and the person embraces religious life, such a person will not have true joy and fulfillment of religious life. A story was told of someone who entered priesthood to please the mother, and after the death of the mother left priesthood. In that case he did not enter with right intention and freedom. Departure from religious life can be an act of coherence when a person discovered after serious discernment, that he or she never really had vocation to religious life.²⁶ In this case what people sometimes refer to abandonment is having the courage to embrace the truth. The grace of God is required to admit the truth.

ii. Crisis of faith and decrease in the original love and attraction for Jesus

Living authentic religious life and persevering in it requires the three theological virtues. One being in love with Christ enters religious life, leaving all she has behind to entrust her future in faith to God who is calling and hoping in attainment of his promises. The presence of the three theological virtues of love, faith and hope, is also indispensable for perseverance in religious life. "Certitude is a sign of vocation. "I have come to give you life, life everlasting." Anyone without such ultimate hope for something better will not be able to persevere amidst the hardships of religious life. A hope, a vision for the future, is required."²⁷ One's deep ardent love and attraction to the person of Jesus Christ drew the person to embrace religious life. The same love is

²⁶ Cf. The Gift of Fidelity. The joy of Perseverance, 2.

²⁷ Guy Lespinay, Vocation and Their Formation Today, p. 35.

required for one to be able to withstand and face challenges that come with living the vows in community with others. This idea is beautifully put by Alvaro Rodriguez as follows:

When we say “for all my life,” we are not affirming that we will remain faithful during a very long period of time. Rather we are expressing the depth of our commitment and its quality. Certainly there is value in the length of time, but there is greater value in the depth, quality or intensity of our love which makes us to go on dying to some of the values most prized in life in order to go on living for Someone who has captivated us. Consecration is not a contract. It is a life in Christ. The crisis of consecration is, above all the crisis of the depth and quality of our love for Christ. Fidelity is only possible where there is an ardent passion – a passion for Christ, a passion for humanity.²⁸

Ardent love and passion for Christ and for souls is the basic motivation for embracing religious life and this ardent love and passion²⁹ is required for one to be able to accept sacrifices that the life entails and to persevere trusting in God's supporting grace and hope of obtaining his promise of eternal life for those who persevere in his service. Religious life is a journey of faith, love and hope.

b. External Causes

i. Influence of the Contemporary Culture

In this post-modern era, despite the laudable growth of humanity in the area of science and technology, and means of social communication, there is perturbing issue of disinterestedness in the transcendental, moral values and an increase in process of secularization. This fact is

²⁸ Alvaro Rodriguez, “Vocational Fidelity,” p. 12.

²⁹ See Passion for Christ. Passion for Humanity, “Working Paper” Acts of the Congress on Consecrated Life, Paulines Publications Africa, Kenya, 2005, p. 21.

wide spread and does not spare the so called “third world” as a result of globalization. Such environment does not provide the required incentive neither for perseverance in religious life nor for initial embracing of the life. Pope Francis referring to the influence of the culture today on consecrated life which he calls “culture of the provisional” affirms: “it is more difficult to live as a consecrated person in today's world. We are aware that today's culture of the provisional influences our life choices, and the very vocation to consecrated life. This culture can cause a precarious fidelity.”³⁰

“Today's socio-cultural context is characterized by an openness, willingness, readiness to embrace ever-new opportunities. As a consequence, a life decision is often postponed, if not completely removed, in the illusion of being able to reach personal fulfillment, regardless of a commitment that may fully involve one's existence. A definitive decision reached in those cases often appears to be disturbingly fragile. Considering consecrated life in particular, the times and ways in which many consecrated men and women decide to abandon the vocation chosen as definitive, even after a long and demanding formative journey, and also after significant stages in one's experience of consecrated and priestly life [...] are disturbing.”³¹

Religious life which is a structured and stable form of life is negatively affected in an environment where people are constantly hungry to have a taste of something else. Young religious of today are coming from this environment of ever new opportunity and are not exonerated from its influence. They want change of places of apostolate and change of authority personnel. It is difficult to change this mindset. They want to follow signs of time, to be fully human and do what others are doing.

³⁰Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation, A Conversation with Fernando Prado*, USCCB, 2018, Washington, DC, pp. 39, 53; cited in “The Gift of Fidelity. The Joy of Perseverance,” 1.

³¹Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 56.

ii. Inadequate/Ineffective Initial Formation

The initial formation in an institute is supposed to help introduce the members into religious life, the life of the institute and to imbibe the spirit and charism of the institute, thereby acquiring their specific identity and sense of belonging. When this is not the case, the institute is weak in structure and whereby the members are lacking in sense of belonging at any little challenge they may bow out. To make the members feel sense of belonging, each institute should try to inculcate its values in the initial stage of their formation and to strengthen it through adequate process of ongoing formation. Members are also to be made to feel sense of belonging by taking care of their needs holistically; and giving them listening ears when they are confronted with any problem.

Formative years should be used for what is meant for. Canon Law prescribes that the period of novitiate mentioned in can. 648, 1 “is to be set aside exclusively for the work of formation” (can. 652, 5). This prescription of law should be strictly adhered to and the practice of using postulants or novices to meet up with demand of work in an institute is to be avoided.

iii. Wrong Exercise of Authority

Failing to understand that authority is service “is not excluded from the ongoing crisis affecting the consecrated life.”³² Exercise of authority in disregard for the principle of subsidiarity, and co-responsibility can destroy the “communion of charism within institutes and negatively affects the members' sense of belonging.”³³

Authoritarianism contributes in the abandonment of religious life. CICALSAL on this fact emphasizes: “It must be stated clearly that

³²Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in a New Wineskin*, Guideline. Pauline Publications Africa, Kenya, 2018, n. 19.

³³*New Wine in New Wineskin*, 20.

authoritarianism weakens the vitality and fidelity of consecrated persons!”³⁴ Highhandedness and inhuman, heartless command in the name of obedience is among the reasons why some religious abandon religious life. Authority is wrongly used when it becomes means of manipulation and treatment of one's brothers and sisters as robots. Referring to wrong exercise of authority CICLSAL highlights:

In recent years, especially in institutes that have been recently founded, there have been episodes and situations of the manipulation of the freedom and dignity of persons – not only by reducing them to a total dependence that belittles their dignity and even at times their fundamental human rights, but also by leading them, through various deceptive means and with the pretext of fidelity to God's plans through the charisma, to a form of submission that touches even on the area of morality and sexual intimacy which brings great scandal for all when the facts come to light. To be avoided in the daily exercise of authority is constantly asking for permission to carry out normal everyday tasks. Those who exercise power must not encourage infantile attitudes that can lead to irresponsible behavior. It is difficult to lead people to maturity in this way. Unfortunately, it needs to be acknowledged that these kinds of situations are more common than we are willing to accept or denounce, and that these are more prevalent in institutes of women. This is one of the reasons that seems to motivate numerous members to [abandon religious life]. For some, [leaving] is the only way to respond to situations that have become unbearable.³⁵

It is important to let superiors and others know if one is to travel outside where the community is located. But it will be exaggerated for superior

³⁴ New Wine in a New Wine skin, 21.

³⁵ New Wine in New Wine Skin, 21.

to expect to be informed for daily outing within the locality of the community. Religious are to be accorded space as responsible adults.

“There is a widespread impression that the evangelical foundation of fraternity is often missing in the superior-subject relationship. More importance is accorded to the institution than the persons who compose it. It is no coincidence that among the principle motivations for leaving, according to the experience of this Congregation, are the weakening of the vision of faith, conflicts in the common life, and a fraternal life that lacks humanity.”³⁶

The institute should not be managed in a way that could be detrimental to the good of the members; nothing should be put ahead of their well-being. “The institute must supply the members with everything that, in accordance with the constitutions, is necessary to fulfill the purpose of their vocation” (can. 670). Religious need stable structure, adequate accommodation, balanced nourishing food, adequate health care facility, professional training for their apostolate, and a serene peaceful environment to live the consecrated life, happily. And it is the duty of the institute through the superiors to make all these available to the members.

iv. Unhealthy, Unsupportive Community

Canon 619 expresses the obligation of the superiors and members to build a fraternal community where God is sought and loved above all. The fraternal community which the legislator has in mind is one in which as a special family in Christ there is fraternal love, care and support among the members in living their consecration.³⁷ This is not the case in some religious communities where members live in indifference to one another and lack love and respect towards each other. Such community rather than be a support turns out to be a

³⁶New Wine in New Wineskin, 24.

³⁷Cf. Can. 602.

hindrance in living the life and some who are unable to bear the weight of the unhealthy atmosphere might find their way out as their heart might no more find happiness and fulfillment in the life.

Difficulties in interpersonal relationship among members of a community can trigger discomfort and solitude. Indifference to others and division into cliques in the community can bring about isolation, dissatisfaction and sadness that gives rise to resentment, complaint and boredom.³⁸

Having reflected on the possible causes of departure from religious life, we now proffer preventive measures which in our opinion can foster fidelity and perseverance of those called to religious life.

Proposal and Recommendation for Fidelity and Perseverance in Religious Life

i. Adequate Initial, Ongoing Formation and Process of Discernment

There is need to offer solid formation that is adapted to the youths knocking at the door of the convent today as “weak formation predicts hard falls.”³⁹ Good and solid initial and ongoing formation of the candidates for religious life and those already professed can go a long way towards assuring fidelity in religious life. A type of formation that “touches the person profoundly and achieves the necessary maturity” will be the best intervention for the problem of defection from religious life.⁴⁰

³⁸ Cf. Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 19.

³⁹ Jose Maria Fernandez-Martos, “Pursued Fidelity. Cherished Fidelity” in, *66 Conventus Semestralis, Unione Superiori Generali, Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life*, Litos editorial, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jose Maria Arnaiz, “Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life,” Litos editorial, p. 9.

To forestall the phenomenon of desertion of religious life, there is need for adequate formation and process of discernment of vocation. This will enable the institute to discover and select candidates who have vocation to religious life. The process will equally aid the individual to discern their vocation and those who are sincere can equally bow out on their own at the end of such formation, having discovered through the tools offered to them that religious life is not their call. Candidates to be selected for religious life should be those who have qualities required for a life in common, and have adequate human and spiritual maturity demanded by life in common.

On-going formation is of great importance as it “urges both the consecrated person and the institute to “a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord; docility to His Spirit [...] constancy in the giving of self; humility in bearing with adversities.”⁴¹

Formation and accompaniment should not be limited to the time of entrance into religious life. Members are to be encouraged to engage in continuous ongoing formation by attending seminars, workshop and each should have a spiritual director as a companion in the journey of faith in religious life.⁴² This is not only necessary for religious under temporal vows but for all religious at different levels.

Selection of personnel for formation should be carefully done and those who have required qualities are to be appointed and formed for the work. Giving effective and solid formation for the members of the institute is not possible without formators that are well prepared for the

⁴¹Congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, *Potissimum Institutioni*. Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes (2 February 1990), 67.

⁴²Given the facts that there have been serious problems in recent years, the church needs to put in place structures to guide against abuses in spiritual direction.

task of accompaniment, be it at the initial stage of formation or for ongoing formation.⁴³

ii. The Primacy of Prayer

Undoubtedly, the call to religious life is a call for mission but “the first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer” (Can. 663, 1). Hence, union with God in prayer should be given priority in the life of a religious. Crisis in religious vocation can be result of neglect of prayer. Consecrated life needs to be nourished through union with God.⁴⁴ Prayer go deeper than the liturgical ritual. It entails personal communication with God.

Sometimes apostolic work crushes the prayer aspect of the life of a religious and it should not be so. In everything a religious does she should pray but there must be time set aside for personal prayer. A religious need to put on guard the danger of activism. Religious life is a supernatural life that needs grace for it to endure. It is not a life that is lived in the flesh. It needs the grace of God which one can receive through prayer. Jesus gave us example of how to integrate prayer and work. Despite his busy schedule he will still withdraw to a lonely place for prayer and communion with his father and sometimes he used to spend the whole night in prayer.⁴⁵ Jesus integrated well his prayer life

⁴³ “Various institutes lack members who are adequately prepared for the task of formation. This shortage is rather widespread, particularly in smaller institutes that have expanded their presence in other continents. It must always be kept in mind that formation cannot be improvised and that it demands both long-term and continuous preparation. Without a solid formation of formators, it would not be possible to provide a true and promising accompaniment of the youngest members by brothers and sisters who are truly prepared for and can be relied on for this ministry.” *New Wine in a New Wine Skin*, 16.

⁴⁴ Cf. Commentary on canon 663, in the *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, John P. Beal et al., editors, Theological Publications in India, Bengaluru, 2019, 829.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lk 6: 12-13.

and preaching. This example should be emulated by consecrated persons for them to persevere in their call.

One will be able to persevere in religious life by keeping alive the original ardent love that attracted one to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. To keep this love alive and burning, a religious should map out daily personal spiritual programme and be faithful to it. The spiritual programme necessary to nourish one's spiritual life is delineated in canon 663 and 664 of the Code of Canon Law and it include: contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer, daily participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice, reception of the sacred Body of Christ, adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, reading and meditation on the sacred scripture, and mental prayer, worthy celebration of the liturgy of the hour as prescribed by proper law, devotion to our Blessed Mother Mary through the rosary, attendance of annual retreat, daily examination of conscience and frequent confession.⁴⁶ Reading spiritual books and lives of the saint is also a good practice to nourish one's spiritual life.

For perseverance and fidelity consecrated persons are to pray continuously for the grace of fidelity which God does not deny to those who seek for it with sincere heart.⁴⁷ The document "Starting Afresh from Christ," highlighted the role of the Holy Spirit in the perseverance of consecrated persons. It urges them to be open "to the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, who becomes the author of the consecrated person's necessary perseverance."⁴⁸ The action of the Holy Spirit is at the beginning of the journey of consecrated life and he is the one that

⁴⁶ Cf. Cann. 663, 664.

⁴⁷ Cf. Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 39; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree *Presbiterorum ordinis*, 16.

⁴⁸ Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction Starting Afresh from Christ. A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium, (19 May 2002), 10; cited in Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 39.

sustains this vocation to the end by helping a religious to live a life of intimate union with Christ.

iii. Building a Strong Culture by the Institute

Culture has to do with mentality, criteria for evaluation, models of behavior, the personal and community style, the way of being. Unlike weak culture in an institute which does not strengthen fidelity nor attract vocation, a strong culture in an institute can help one to overcome weaknesses, promote vocational fidelity, attract young candidates, foster pastoral effectiveness and the significance of their presence.⁴⁹ An institute with strong culture is one whose lifestyle is coherent with its charism and values of consecrated life; and fidelity in living the demands of the evangelical counsels is a means of making consecrated life attractive and it helps the institute to fulfill its prophetic role. This fact is underlined thus:

Throughout its secular history consecrated life has shown an ever-renewed ability to attract those who, searching for meaning, find in it a significant reference model. This attraction needs to be rediscovered and encouraged “in its original attractiveness, as an antidote to the 'paralysis of normality' and as openness to grace that turns the world and its ways of thinking upside-down. Rekindling the allure of evangelical radicalism amongst young generations, so that they can rediscover the prophetic value of chastity, poverty and obedience as a harbinger of the Kingdom and the complete fulfilment of their lives is something that cannot be neglected at a time dominated by consumeristic and commercialistic mindsets.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cf. Francesco Cereda, “A Search for Signs of Vitality in Consecrated Life” in *Fidelity and abandonment*, 93.

⁵⁰ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 9.

Men and Women of consecrated life have to rekindle the attractiveness of the radical nature of the Gospel and increase in vitality, “which is perceived as something obscure both from inside and outside” of them.⁵¹ Francesco Cereda suggested four paths through which an institute can build strong culture which are: 1) Giving God and his Kingdom primary position in their life; 2) Prophetic Witness; 3) Gift of Communion; 4) Formation Commitment.⁵²

iv. Building Enabling Supportive Fraternal Community

Among the reasons which those who left religious life do give is the problem of conflict, misunderstanding and, incoherence in living the values of the institutes by some members of the institute. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on this affirms:

With healthy realism, we must note first of all the persistent high number of those leaving the consecrated life. It is important to shed light on the main reasons for these departures which are happening not only among those after initial stages of formation [profession, ordination], but also among those who [have been in priesthood or in the institute for many year]. This phenomenon is now observable in every cultural and geographical context. It must be clearly stated that this is not only and always crises of an affective nature [such as falling in love with somebody]. These crises are often the results of some outlying disappointment at living an inauthentic common life. The deviation between what is proposed in terms of values and what is actually lived can even lead to a crisis of faith. There is the risk that an excessive number of perceived pressing and overvalued activities neither allow for a solid spiritual life nor nurture and sustain the desire to remain faithful.⁵³

⁵¹ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 10.

⁵² See Francesco Cereda, “A Search for Signs of Vitality in Consecrated Life,” pp 94, 95.

⁵³ New Wine in New Wineskins, 12.

Living common life is obligatory for the religious. However, common life is not an end in itself but a means to an end of supporting one another in living proper vocation for growth in holiness and for the attainment of the apostolic goal of the institute. There is need for mutual love and communion among the members for the existence of authentic religious community. Common life loses meaning where there is no fraternal love and mutual support. Consequently, Canon Law prescribes that, “The life of brothers or sisters proper to each institute, by which all the members are united together as a special family in Christ, is to be defined in such a way that it becomes a mutual support for all in fulfilling the vocation of each. Moreover, by their communion as brothers or sisters rooted and founded in charity, members are to be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ” (can. 602). Every religious institute is a spiritual family constituted by the possession of the same charism and one apostolic goal. Such family is to be characterized by unity of mind and purpose, charity, mutual trust and support. Individuals who are in religious life need a peaceful and serene environment to live their life of consecration with joy in order to be effective in their apostolic life.

A community where there is no fraternal love but rather hatred, mistrust, malicious criticism, and quarrelling can be discouraging, as it drains one's physical, spiritual and psychological energy, which can lead to abandonment of religious life. Alluding to the negative effects that a conflict community can have on those who have embraced religious life Guy Lespinay asserts: “Daily contact with difficult cases weakens those young people who enter our communities; and in the long run can discourage them. The multiplicity of problems and conflicts results in the depreciation of religious life and heightens distaste for common life. These situations initiate the loss of the original enthusiasm and invite apathy and mediocrity. Indifference

settles in and the individual will override submission to [one's] superiors and to the Gospel. The rule of life loses its significance.”⁵⁴

For the most part, desertion of religious life is due to inability of some individuals to cope with community life which in some cases becomes more strenuous and energy sapping because of the lifestyle of the members where the ego is much alive and in control. Religious community should be imbued with fraternal love, trust, understanding, mutual help and support. When this is lacking, only the one who is solidly built in Christ, and has strong mental capacity will still find reason to continue and will be ready to pay the price. The call to follow Christ as consecrated person in the religious life, no doubt demands carrying one's cross daily and follow Christ (Lk 9: 23), but Jacob reminds us if I drive my sheep too hard, they might all die in one day.⁵⁵

Jesus is the center of religious life and all forms of consecrated life. Jesus came that humanity would have abundant life.⁵⁶ Those who have embraced religious life should be marked with the search for excellence, fullness, richness and quality of life. Francesco Cereda rightly affirms that, “To give or to give back “spirit and life” to our institutions seems to be the privileged way to face the challenges of vocational fragility of today's young consecrated members as well as the difficulties in the vocational fidelity of consecrated people of all ages. Alive, vivacious and vital environment stimulates the interest, fascination and attractiveness of the call; but it especially generates fruitfulness, authenticity and total response. Life generates life. The fullness of life in a community or a province strengthens the vocation of the weak and helps to live fidelity with imagination.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Guy. Lespinay, *Vocations and Their Formation Today*, p. 131.

⁵⁵ Cf. Genesis 33: 13.

⁵⁶ Cf. Jn 10:10.

⁵⁷ Francesco Cereda, “A Search for Signs of Vitality in Consecrated Life,” in *Fidelity and Abandonment*, p. 71.

Fraternity is a great support to perseverance of the religious in their vocation. Hence, Pope Francis invites religious to create a home, to let prophecy take flesh, to make their home and days less cold, less indifferent and anonymous.⁵⁸ In other words to be one another's keeper. "To create a home is to create bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home."⁵⁹

"Within a truly fraternal community, each member has a sense of co-responsibility for the faithfulness of the others; each one contributes to a serene climate of sharing life, of understanding, and of mutual help; each is attentive to the moments of fatigue, suffering, isolation or lack of motivation in others; each offers support to those who are saddened by difficulties and trials."⁶⁰

"The most effective atmosphere to encourage the individual consecrated member to grow in his own vocation is found in a truly fraternal community that enjoys a serene family atmosphere, one of welcome and faith, that has a participative style in the internal organization of the community where there is a true sharing of life, prayer and apostolate, co-responsibility, understanding and mutual help."⁶¹

A loving caring community is a great help towards fidelity and perseverance in religious life. Pope Francis urges "communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another."⁶²

⁵⁸ Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, (25 March 2019), 217.

⁵⁹ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 59.

⁶⁰ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life, Fraternal Life in Community, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, Paulines, Nairobi, 2004, 57.

⁶¹ Francesco Cereda, "A Search for Signs of Vitality in Consecrated Life," pp. 97 -98.

⁶² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (24 November 2013) 99, cited in *New Wine in New Wine Skin*, 24.

A healthy, supportive, fraternal religious community is one filled with joy and Holy Spirit (Acts 13: 52); where there is mutual love, care shared responsibility, forgiveness, and communication.⁶³ “Such communities become places of evangelization, “places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes, where love, drawing strength from prayer, the wellspring of communion, is called to become a pattern of life and source of joy.”⁶⁴

Religious are to foster peace and serene atmosphere in their common life by resolving conflicts and tensions as soon as they surface to prevent them from degenerating into open conflict and fueling dissatisfaction among the members of the community.⁶⁵ Forming people properly to live community life has a lot to contribute in the perseverance of the consecrated persons in their vocation.

v. *Right Mode of Exercise of Authority*

According to the mind of the Church, “Superiors are to exercise their power in a spirit of service [...]. They are to govern their subjects as sons or daughters of God and, promoting the voluntary obedience with reverence for the human person [...]. Superiors are to strive to build a community of brothers or sisters in Christ, in which God is sought and loved before all things.”⁶⁶

Religious superiors exercise their authority in the spirit of service and docility to the will of God by consulting the members and carrying them along in the affairs of the community and institute. They treat the members of the community as adults by using persuasive method rather than engaging in authoritarian governance.

⁶³ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, (25 March 1996), 45.

⁶⁴ *Vita consecrata*, 51; Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 42.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 20.

⁶⁶ Cann. 618-619; cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14; New in a New Wineskin, 24.

Religious community requires the presence of a superior who is available, supportive, transparent, and has ability to create friendly, personocentric atmosphere, who sees members of community as friends and his/ her own brothers or sisters; and uses authority as service for the vocational growth of the members of the community through listening, dialogue, encouragement, and communal discernment.⁶⁷

“Goodness and fidelity characterize the nature of God and all His actions towards the chosen people, but also towards creation.”⁶⁸ When God called one to a particular state of life, he does not change his mind but one can lose grace of the call through carelessness and infidelity to the demands of the call. The person can accept the call or rejects it but God remain faithful. God desires that we are faithful but faithfulness cannot be achieved only from our human effort but requires the grace of God through personal encounter. “The encounter with God touches the totality of the person. In this encounter we are called to live the total surrender of ourselves: intellect and will, mind and heart, with the firmness and sweetness of our consent. Faith is the mystery of the encounter generated by the Spirit, between the Father and the Son in the heart of every person who welcomes the Word and accepts to be conformed to Him.”⁶⁹

“In perseverance authentic love for Christ is revealed, a love that fixes the eyes of the heart and mind on Him, as an athlete does when fixing his eyes on the finish line. When life has no purpose, everything becomes heavy, devoid of meaning and love shows its instability.”⁷⁰ Fidelity and perseverance in one's vocation is an act of love and faithfulness to God. The perseverance of consecrated persons is also a

⁶⁷ Cf. Francesco Cereda, “A Search for Signs of Vitality in Consecrated Life,” 98.

⁶⁸ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 24.

⁶⁹ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 26.

⁷⁰ Gift of Fidelity. Joy of Perseverance, 28.

gift of the God of the covenant: “the unspoken but eloquent witness of religious to the faithful God whose love is without end.”⁷¹ Persevering in one's vocation is a task, and it requires on the part of the religious, ability to overcome difficulties, to walk in the right direction and in a good company.⁷²

Conclusion

We set out in this study to highlight the nature of religious vocation, formation and discernment of vocation to religious life; to examine the possible causes of departure from religious life and to make suggestions towards solution to the problem. Vocation to religious life is a divine call, and God's call is permanent, hence departure from it after one has made final commitment contradicts the nature of the call. God is always faithful but the individual is not always faithful and that is where the problem lies. Each one made by God has special function to perform for the good of humanity through the state of life to which he calls him/her.

Formation which implies a process of configuration to Christ has two major goals: discernment of vocation to religious life and accompaniment of those called to religious life. One who shows sign of authentic vocation which primarily is ardent love for Christ and desire for total dedication of one's life to the service of God's kingdom, is admitted to first and final profession in religious life. We have seen that there are various factors internal and external that can be responsible for the desertion of religious life.

⁷¹Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*, Rome, (31 May 1983), 37.

⁷²Cf. Jose Maria Arnaiz, “Fidelity and Abandonment in Today's Consecrated Life,” p. 3.

To prevent the problem of departures from religious life, both the individual and institute have work to do. On the part of the individual, to preserve in one's vocation as a religious, one needs to be prayerful and faithful to the institute's rule of life and constitution approved by the Church; and also observe the prescriptions of the Church Law on the obligations and rights of the religious.

Each institute, in order to promote happy and fulfilled life of its members and foster perseverance, should give enough space for personal and community prayer in planning their daily programme of life; they are to build a strong culture by its fidelity to the founding charism, offer adequate initial and ongoing formation, foster fraternal community life and exercise the service of authority in a way established by Canon Law and their Constitution. Both institute and member should give primacy to prayer. Religious life is a life of grace and can only be lived well and to the end by God's help which comes through prayer.

One who embraced religious life after a period of formation and discernment of the vocation should try to persevere in the call, as it is difficult for one to affirm with all assurance after perpetual profession that he or she has no vocation. God does not change his mind when he calls someone to a particular state of life but he respects the person's freedom to accept or refuse the call. One can, out of one's negligence in prayer and observance of the obligations of the proper state of life, lose the grace of the vocation.

In order to be fruitful in one's vocation and persevere to the end one needs the presence of Holy Spirit and to be close to Jesus (cf. Jn 15:5). One originally embraced religious life because of the burning and ardent love one had for Jesus stimulated by the Holy Spirit, the same love and passion for Jesus is indispensable throughout the course of religious life to enable a religious withstand the difficulties and problems that might arise along the journey of religious life. The

consecrated person should realize that this cannot happen without the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have talked in this paper about initial and ongoing formation but another important area to explore is ongoing discernment of vocation which can help in resolving some of the conflicts for one to take right decision but that will be object of further research.

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