

**RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE
OF BROTHERS
in the light of
VITA CONSECRATA (2/2)**

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Continuity and Faithfulness

The two sections on religious brothers, together with sections on cloistered nuns and new forms of evangelical life, are found in a chapter entitled *Continuity in the Work of the Spirit: Faithfulness in the Course of Change*.

The reason for this arrangement is not immediately evident. Nevertheless, after reflection I now find particular significance in the organization. The title of the chapter expresses the conviction of the Holy Father that in this period of profound change in the world, in the Church, and in religious institutes, God continues to call men to be religious brothers. The act of placing the sections on religious brothers in this chapter is an encouraging expression of affirmation. Brothers need to know that the Church believes in their vocation. The second part of the chapter heading – *Faithfulness in the Course of Change* – is a call to religious brothers themselves to believe in their vocation and to live it in the "course of change" with creative fidelity.

I have said that brothers need to know that the Church believes in their vocation. Statistics presented to the participants during the synod confirmed what is already generally known that the vocation of brothers is the vocation most adversely affected in the current crisis of vocations to consecrated life. But brothers are not alone. There are too few novices in many institutes of religious sisters.

It needs to be recognized that religious institutes of sisters and brothers require special affirmation today. Four out of five members of religious institutes are lay. The apostolic services of these women and men religious can be done and are in fact being done by men and women who are not members of religious institutes. These men and women, many of whom are

very committed Catholics, are well aware that there is no need today to enter religious life to perform works or ministries that only "yesterday" were done predominantly by women and men religious.

Paralleling the decline in the number of vocations to traditional religious life is a blossoming of new forms of evangelical life, including movements, groups, and associations, which, as the Holy Father acknowledges in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, are having a profound impact on renewal of the Church. In the past, such renewal, he says, "took place mainly through the religious orders" (p.168). In *Redemptoris Missio* (2) the Pope states that the participation of the laity in the mission of evangelization is changing ecclesial life. One way in which ecclesial life is changing is in the number of vocations to religious institutes.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some bishops, priests, and women and men religious themselves have begun to ask whether religious life is a form of life which contributed very significantly in the past, but has "had its day".

I find encouraging the Holy Father's frank acknowledgement of this concern in the conclusion of the apostolic exhortation (104):

"Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can respond without assuming the particular commitments of consecrated life?"

Reflecting on these questions, the Pope says that God continues to call women and men to follow Jesus Christ as consecrated religious (64, 104). Those who respond positively in faith and in love to the priceless gift of religious vocation find meaning and personal happiness. In their lived experience, they discover "the point of consecrated life". As the Pope says,

"What in people's eyes can seem a waste is, for the individuals captivated in the depths of their heart by the beauty and goodness of the Lord, an obvious response of love, a joyful expression of gratitude for having been admitted in a unique way to the knowledge of the Son and to a sharing in his divine mission in the world."

Furthermore, according to the Holy Father, the Church and society need the witness of consecrated persons. Writing explicitly of religious brothers, he declares:

"Although they perform many works in common with the lay faithful, these men do so insofar as they are consecrated, and thereby express the spirit of total self-giving to Christ and the Church, in accord with their specific charism" (60).

Brothers: consecrated religious

This short article is a reflection on the vocation of Brothers in "Religious Institutes of Brothers". It has given particular attention to paragraph 60, in which the

Pope writes specifically of this vocation. It should be mentioned explicitly, however, that since Brothers are consecrated religious, nearly every page of *Vita Consecrata* is pertinent. This article is nothing more, therefore, than an introduction to the topic. What is required now is a reflection on the vocation of brothers in the light of the entire document, beginning with the profound and challenging considerations on consecrated life in the light of the Holy Trinity, a theme which permeates the apostolic exhortation.

Since many "Religious Institutes of Brothers" are committed to the education of youth, poor youth particularly, and others to health services, brothers will find clear orientations in the sections concerning the mission of consecrated persons to promote communion in a "world torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence" (51), as well as in the sections which treat of the prophetic character of consecrated life; participation of the laity in the spirituality and mission of religious institutes; inculturation; preferential option for the poor; promotion of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; renewed commitment to education at all levels, catechesis, pastoral ministries, social communications; care of the sick; mission *ad gentes*; ecumenical and interreligious dialogue . . .

Creative Fidelity

At the end of the Congress on Consecrated Life organized three years ago by the Union of Superiors General in preparation of the synod, Pope John Paul II called institutes of consecrated life to imitate the initiative and creativity of their founders and foundresses and to respond generously and effectively to the needs of the present moment. Throughout the four weeks of the Synod, numerous Synod participants repeated that call to creative fidelity. The Holy Father

has now made that challenge a dominant and oft repeated refrain of *Vita Consecrata*:

"The Holy Spirit calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God's will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation" (73).

Conclusion

Vita Consecrata is a message of hope: it is realistic in its description of shortcomings and problems (13); but it is clear, affirming, and challenging in its articulation of the identity and mission of consecrated life in the future of the Church. Brothers can be grateful that their vocation is recognized, esteemed, and wanted.

Vita Consecrata can help religious brothers to deepen, or in some cases recover, their sense of direction, confidence, pride, and enthusiasm. The apostolic exhortation can inspire them to set off anew with revitalized vision, determination, and vigor, convinced that the Lord is with them as they strive to shape the future of their religious families.

With that kind of faith-filled and loving commitment, brothers will communicate, not in word, but in daily life, that they find meaning, significance, and happiness in living their baptismal consecration as religious brothers. The young men that the Lord is calling to be brothers will **SEE** – and not just read – the nature and mission of this particular vocation. They will be encouraged and helped to say **YES** to God's call to follow Christ as religious brothers. •