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REVITALIZING RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY: ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND LEADERSHIP

REVITALIZAR LA VIDA RELIGIOSA HOY: DESAFÍOS ÉTICOS Y LIDERAZGO

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Abstract: This paper explores the possible ways of animating religious life in a time marked by sociocultural change and vocational crisis. It seems that a part of the Consecrated have their prophetic soul sickened, that they have lost the capacity of hoping and dreaming (1st part). However, Pope Francis reminds them that this is a time of hope and new prophecy. Therefore, they need the audacity and creativity of their founders to retake the core of their own charism and find the way of incarnating it today through a deep structural transformation (2nd part). More precisely, religious life needs inspiring leadership (3rd part) and a greater attention to fraternal life (4th part).

Keywords: Religious life, Vocational crisis, Leadership, Ethical challenges, Digital era.

Sumario: Este artículo estudia los posibles modos de animar la vida consagrada en un tiempo marcado por el cambio sociocultural, la crisis vocacional y el aumento de la edad media de los religiosos. Se diría que una parte de los religiosos tienen enferma su alma profética, que han perdido la esperanza y la capacidad de soñar (1^a parte). Sin embargo, el Papa Francisco les recuerda que éste es un tiempo de esperanza y nueva profecía. Por tanto, necesitan la audacia y la creatividad de sus fundadores para retomar el núcleo del propio carisma y encarnarlo en la situación actual, afrontando una profunda transformación estructural (2^a parte). Más concretamente, los religiosos necesitan un liderazgo inspirador (3^a parte) y una mayor atención a la vida en fraternidad (4^a parte).

Palabras clave: Vida religiosa, Crisis vocacional, Liderazgo, Desafíos éticos, Era digital.

Consecrated life is facing a period of inevitable transformation, due to sociocultural change, the vocational crisis¹ and the growing average age of its members,² mainly in Western countries. In Europe, the number of the Consecrated has decreased by more than a third in just two decades.³ The small number of young members compels religious institutes to discern about activities, presences, and even about their own identity: What is our reason for being as a group here and now? What are we and what do we want to be? How do we present ourselves and how do people perceive us?

Trying to prevent any kind of discouragement, Pope Francis reminded the Consecrated that this is a time of gratitude and wonder, of hope and new prophecy.⁴ Religious life has “a glorious history” of service and dedication to the poor and the weak, but, above all, it has “a great history still to be accomplished!”⁵ That glorious past must be carried forward in forms suitable for our time. Indeed, “a charism should not be preserved like a bottle of distilled water; it should be made to bear fruit, courageously comparing it with current reality, with cultures, with history.”⁶

The first part of this article presents the risks of clinging to the past, obsessed with preserving what the institute has always done and accepting only a few adjustments in management and programming. The second part invites every religious institute to recover the core of its own charism, in order to renew and transform itself, based on theological faith and hope. The

¹ From 1995 to 2005, the solemnly professed fell by about 25%. Cf. *AOFM* 3 (2016) 376; *Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum [=AOFM]* 3 (2016) 376. From 1970 to 2015, the OFM friars decreased by 65% and OFMCap friars by 40% in the USA. SORDO PALACIOS S. – GAUNT T.P. – GAUTIER M.L., «Population trends among religious institutes of men,» CARA, *Special report*, Georgetown Univ., Washington DC 2015, 1-2. A Spanish version of this article will be published on *Estudios Franciscanos* 467 (2019).

² In 2015, 36% of all OFMCap friars worldwide were over 60 years old, and their average age was over 63 in some conferences: CENOC 69.4, CECOC 66.4, NAPCC 64.8, CIMPCAP 63. Cf. UFFICIO DI STATISTICA OFMCap, *Statistiche*, Rome 2015. Also online: www.ofmcap.org.

³ The disappearance of congregations and religious institutes is not something new. “Approximately 75 percent of all Religious Orders or Congregations ever founded have become extinct.” O’MURCHU D., *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 2016 (part three: conclusion).

⁴ Francis, «Apostolic letter to all Consecrated» (Nov 21, 2014), in *AAS* 106 (2014) 935-947, nn. I,1 e II,2.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, «*Vita consecrata*. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation,» [VC], (March 25, 1996), n. 110, in *AAS* 88 (1996) 377-486.

⁶ FRANCIS, «Address to the National Assembly of the Italian conference of major superiors (CISM),» (Tivoli, Nov. 7, 2014), in *OR* 255 (Nov. 8, 2014) 8.

third part outlines the characteristics of the leadership that is necessary today to accompany and encourage this process of transformation. Finally, the fourth part focuses on life in fraternity as the most attractive and significant aspect of consecrated life in today's world. People expect religious members to be experts in human relationships and their communities to be examples of welcoming and harmonious intercultural fraternity.

1. Reduced to just keeping and administering

In the current circumstances, consecrated persons can fall into frustration and discouragement, as if the decline were inevitable and, therefore, as if they had to prepare themselves for a dignified death (*Ars moriendi*). In fact, it would seem that a number of the Consecrated have lost their prophetic impulse, along with hope and with the capacity to dream. Enclosed in the nostalgia of past times, they have put aside their creative and their reforming capacity.

Today, there is also a lack of new theological proposals on consecrated life. To cope with this difficult and complex situation, the Consecrated need to rekindle their hope:

The present moment of consecrated life is neither the best nor the worst in history. It is ours; the one that we have to live and to manage, moved by that faith which acts in charity and makes hope possible.⁷

1.1. The danger of a certain immobility

In responding to current challenges, many religious institutes simply look for the best way of managing and programming the activities that, until recently, were socially appreciated and personally rewarding. Looking with nostalgia at the past, they try to maintain and revitalize those experiences in all possible ways, even resorting to bringing vocations from other continents. Pope Francis has called “artificial insemination”⁸ to those “imports” of religious members, which are carried out without rigorous discernment, focusing above all on filling the gaps and keeping the old activities standing.

⁷ Spanish Union of Major Superiors (CONFER), *Pasión por Cristo, pasión por la humanidad*, n. 57, Claretianas, Madrid 2005 [My translation].

⁸ Francis, «Address: Jubilee for Consecrated life» (Feb 1, 2016), in *OR* 25 (Feb. 1-2, 2016) 8.