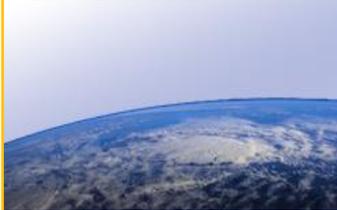


The 25th anniversary of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*

Prospects for Consecrated Life Today

In conversation with Cardinal João Braz de Aviz
Sr. Tiziana Longhitano, SFP, and Fr. Fabio Ciardi, OMI

In these changing times, what is springing forth within consecrated life? What challenges lie ahead? Which are the paths to follow in the coming years? We spoke with Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. The interview was conducted by Sr. Tiziana Longhitano SFP, professor and member of the leadership team at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, and Fr. Fabio Ciardi OMI, author of numerous publications on this topic and a professor at the Claretianum Theological Institute of Religious Life in Rome. With their consent, we share here excerpts from that conversation.



This year marks the 25th anniversary of the publication of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation Vita consecrata. How do you see consecrated life today?

Cardinal João Braz de Aviz: The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* signified a new consciousness after the Council with regard to the need for a renewal of consecrated life. But twenty-five years have passed and we are now grappling with new scenarios.

Signs of Growth and Development

In many ways, consecrated life is in a crisis today. Are there also signs of growth? Can we start from these first?

Card. João Braz de Aviz: To understand here the meaning of "crisis", we need to look at what Pope Francis meant by 'crisis' during his address to the heads of the dicasteries in the Roman Curia, last December 21, 2020. Among the key points to bring out is a growing search for a more 'fraternal' way of living in community. It is not a matter of everyone doing what the superior says, but rather of undertaking a journey together, aimed at having the presence of Jesus among the members of the community. In facing difficulties, we often give a great deal of weight to the help provided by psychology. This is certainly valid, but it is more important to find those elements that allow us to move from a simply individual lifestyle to one that is lived more relationally and together. I witnessed an important experience in this regard. One small community of nuns welcomed a sister who was suffering from severe depression. She began to slowly improve, not only because to medication and psychiatric

care, but because she also found relationships based on fraternity. She rediscovered communion. This increased desire for a more fraternal life seems to me to be a fruit of these last 25 years and is a point we must continue to work at.

A second point is to change how we think about what we mean by 'formation'. Formation can no longer be reduced to just a period of a few years with the idea that once the person has undergone this 'formation' they are then formed "forever". No one is ever formed only in this way, not even the

formator. One needs a formation that extends throughout the entire length of a person's life. One should feel that calling of the Spirit to be open to the Gospel and to the teaching of one's charism throughout all of life, not just during the initial period. This calling for continuous and ongoing formation is one of the main avenues of renewal which we are working towards. Sensitivities change, ways of doing things change, but it should not be simply because we are searching for something new. Rather it should be because, without this openness, we will be unable to breathe and end up unhappy.

Another aspect which especially concerns larger Institutes is the question of how to use the goods belonging to the community. We need to get out of a "capitalist" mentality that risks making compromises between God and money. There is a need to live in ways which are more decisively dependent on Providence and communion.

Then, lastly, there is need to go towards the poor without fear or hesitation, because Jesus is there, that is the place where the Church should be. Consecrated men and women are consistently present wherever there is pain and the need for care in the world. There are very beautiful, profound examples of people who are not only present and sharing in the pain of those who suffer, but who have even given their lives. In these times, there is a new sensitivity to the realities of misery, loss of life and to increasingly widespread waste. Furthermore, although there has been progress in this sense, there are still many fields in which we are not present, such as universities. Certainly, there is a small and valid presence there, but this needs to be further developed across different dimensions and new horizons. Here, I am speaking above all to religious, to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, because there is also the entire lay sector as well.

Critical Elements

Despite having embarked on these paths of renewal, consecrated life no longer appears to be as attractive today as it was in the past. There is a crisis. What would you say regarding this?

Fabio Ciardi: We must take note of how fragile things are now and there are many points of fragility. We need to be aware of them and see how to face them and live with them. I believe that John Paul II would not write the exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, in the same way today as he did back then. He would write it differently. That lofty, powerful, decisive vision is no longer there. The view of religious Institutes and of religious life has had to be re-dimensioned to something much humbler. In the past, Institutes, religious life, consecrated life were seen as powerful factors in the Church. Today, with all that has happened in recent years, things have become more modest. We are aware of our fragilities and weaknesses, and this brought us down from a pedestal. Perhaps, though, it has brought us closer to people who have made the same mistakes. There is a challenge presenting itself to us now: How do we assume, accept, and "take advantage" of our weakness? It depends on how we take on and live our fragility.

Card. João Braz de Aviz: We can try to mirror the mind of Pope Francis as much as possible. Right now, where a certain model of consecrated life is seemingly ending, there is a marked sense of unease in communities. We continue to have high numbers of people leaving their congregations each year. The path we are on is reflected also with what is happening in Europe where involvement in the contemplative consecrated life is in sharp decline. There will likely be a 50% decrease in the coming years. Given this situation, things that are secondary will need to return to their role of being secondary, while essential things must return to being essential again. This is not an easy path, because what is essential today has a different character. It is no longer the same as in the past, and this makes things more complex.

In addition, there is also an intercultural challenge. Not infrequently, there is still a model that places some cultures above others. This is not good, even if these cultures are based on very beautiful and profound things. All cultures carry within themselves many elements that are in need of the Gospel encounter. It is in that encounter that we all find ourselves. We need to be on the same level, not above or below. This is a serious problem, one which we need to patiently work on, and which will take time. Some things are beginning to take shape, but it is not easy.

Lastly, there is a *problem regarding the exercise of authority and obedience*: a true evangelical experience cannot undermine true fraternity among brothers and sisters. In short, many find it difficult to keep going ahead, because they no longer feel at home, they no longer feel free. When you ask them: "But are you really happy?", you sense their difficulty. On the other hand, consecrated life is a beautiful and extraordinary vocation, and should lead to stable and authentic joy.

Steps Ahead

Let us return to reading the signs of the times. What are the new horizons and new steps forward for consecrated life today?

Fabio Ciardi: In my opinion, one step forward is in the awareness of the reality of the "charismatic family" that Pope Francis has stressed several times. By becoming aware of the circularity, and therefore the necessary communion among various vocations and states of life. We start to view the large 'halo' of volunteers, friends, and collaborators which revolves around Institutes of Consecrated Life in a much different way. It is not a question of lay people being granted the privilege of tasting a few crumbs that fall from the table of the 'real children' of the charism. Rather it is a speaking of everyone involved as being "true children" of the charism and who belong to differing states of life, all with the right to participate in a charismatic gift according to their own vocation (married, committed lay people, consecrated persons in Institutes – all born from the same charism, etc.). This is where the idea of "charismatic families" comes from. In this way, charisms reach their true universality. Although here, too, not everything is completely rosy. Some are doing this very well, while in others there is a need for improvement.

Tiziana Longhitano: For me, a step forward has also occurred at the level of dialogue, not only externally - ecumenical dialogue and dialogue with other religions - but also in the way dialogue is happening within the Church, in terms of synodality. There is a need for an open dialogue within Institutes themselves, one that responds to the desire of everyone to feel that they are participating in the journey and in the building of their own Institute's history.

Another new and increasingly all-encompassing dimension is that of ecology. In the past, the need for a comprehensive formation of the person was attentive not only to the spiritual dimension but also to the physical aspect. However, our relationship with nature was not as well developed. It is only in the last 20 years that anyone really began thinking about these topics or discussed them as a part of provincial or general chapters. Now, however, we realize these are not only integral to consecrated life but is a dimension which allows it to be perceived in a markedly more eschatological light. Many Institutes, especially international and missionary ones, are striving to deepen this aspect . . . But there are, in fact, Institutes where this sensitivity is still completely lacking. Little by little we will find a balance even in these matters that are, in my opinion, a part of the richness and patrimony of consecrated life. It also depends on how we talk about them: simply as topics to be explored where they remain ideas and discussions between experts – or as dimensions that we can derive from life.

Card. João Braz de Aviz: I agree. We can no longer move forward without a maturing of ecological consciousness. The current Covid crisis shows us this. Do we not bear some responsibility for the emergence of this virus, for the climate change, for the air we breathe and the situations we

experience? Ecology has become a central issue. According to creation theology, the "common home" is an essential part of our lives. We cannot look at it in isolation: we "are" water, we "are" food, and so on.

Fabio Ciardi: Steps forward have also been taken at the level of concrete communion among Institutes. Many formation initiatives are now consolidated. Communion among Institutes is also taking place in relation to apostolic activities, too: social initiatives, combatting poverty, joint projects, sharing of pastoral practices, etc.

Tiziana Longhitano: Another positive element is the changing understanding of *leadership formation*. This does not stop with the vow of obedience, but aims at a formation in participation, at making history together in one's own Institute, in one's own community. This is not just a charismatic history but a concrete, real, lived history of daily life as well. In this way, we have slowly moved from leadership training only for a select group, such as superiors for example, to leadership training for all sisters. In the past, I do not think there was this sensitivity.

Fabio Ciardi: I do not like the word "leadership" too much. I would rather speak of a "synodal journey" in which everyone is actively involved. Perhaps this is the new translation of the term "spirituality of communion": Concrete life is marked by the active participation of everyone. 'Communion' and 'synodal journey': These are the new phrases for today.

Ongoing Steps Ahead

What aspects seem to you to be still in need of further attention?

Tiziana Longhitano: One thing that makes me stop and think is the cultural difference between *men religious and consecrated women*, especially in the abysmal differences regarding theological formation. I teach at the Urbaniana University. For several years now I have been asking myself the question: 'Men religious normally complete seven or eight years of theological studies, also because many are preparing for the priesthood. Yet, in the case of young women, why is it that after women study theology for three years, superiors have the impression that they are wasting their time?'

Thankfully, this is not always the case. But, as dean of the Higher Institute of Catechesis and Missionary Spirituality, I often see sisters hurry to finish their studies because they must "get back to work". Many also had insufficient time to devote to studying. They come to classes in the morning, but often must work in the afternoon. Why is there no ecclesiastical norm that rightfully provides for credible formation of women religious as well as for men? Why must this be left to the free choice of superiors who are often fearful of even sending sisters to universities? In the realm of theology, I would like to see consecrated women have the same dignity as consecrated men.

Card. João Braz de Aviz: I understand what Sister Tiziana is saying about the gap between consecrated men and women. There is also a gap between consecrated presbyters and consecrated laity. What is the difference between them, in terms of the exercise of authority within Institutes? Pope Francis has asked us in the dicastery to relativize this distinction at the level of local superiors in mixed Institutes. However, when you arrive to the level of provincials and superior generals, this distinction is still powerfully present. We will have to resolve this, too, especially for those Institutes where the founders wanted this equal dignity.

Another step that remains to be taken is that of a *vision of consecrated life as more grounded and rooted in the mystery of the Trinity*. In the light of this mystery, it is necessary to deepen the co-essentiality of hierarchical and charismatic gifts in the Church, where it is still not easily understood and accepted.

Editor's Note: We have only offered a small taste of the rich dialogue that took place during our interview. However, it demonstrates the many perspectives and ideas still in need of consideration and further development. This dialogue permitted us to become aware that within this diverse 'mix' of consecrated life, of the old and the new, an innovative reality is emerging, one that will bear fruit in the years to come. (Carlos García Andrade, CMF, Manuel Barbiero, S.S.S., and Hubertus Blaumeiser)