

Holiness and consecrated life today

Interview with Cardinal João Braz de Aviz

Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life

For this Ekklesia issue on the universal call to holiness, we spoke with the Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. We asked him about consecrated men and women today and to help us see how perfection in charity can be lived in everyday lives.

‘Dom’ João Aviz, as he was called in his native Brazil, warmly welcomed us on our arrival. After speaking about this issue of *Ekklesia* which is focused on the universal call to holiness as highlighted by Vatican II and other recent Church documents, we asked the Prefect for his thoughts on this topic and others regarding the Church today.

In the wake of the Council, the Vita Consecrata exhortation, and the magisterium of Pope Francis, how do you see the situation of consecrated men and women today?

We cannot deny the fact that the numbers of consecrated men and women will continue to decrease significantly. Europe is grappling with problems of ageing and a lack of vocations. This is starting to be felt in Latin America, too. Yet there is much which is flourishing in other places, where instead there are sometimes challenges relating to the needs for a more developed, robust evangelization.

However, it is important to recognize and acknowledge how much life exists among consecrated people. We cannot forget this. They often work in the most difficult of places that carry health risks, disease, food shortages and social problems. Yet they continue their innovative work in service to others despite these risks and challenges. It is truly impressive. In this sense, many consecrated people and congregations are experiencing a beautiful and revitalizing period.

The primary question today for consecrated life is one of returning first and foremost to the living out of our baptism: The Gospel is for everyone, not just a select few. This changes everything! Even priests and bishops need to believe that if they do not live the Gospel, they have gone astray.

The Second Vatican Council

It is time to return to the Gospel. The first thing asked of us by the Council is to be disciples of Jesus. There is no question that the intellect must be formed but above all, what must be front and center is a living out of the Gospel. It is not a question of being "perfect" to teach the "imperfect". We need to accompany, walk side by side, and journey paths together... If I am closed off to some cultures, if I do not love, if I do not serve, if I am not near to everyone without discrimination, then I am not who I am called to be. But for many this is not easy.

A second emphasis of the Council is charisms, which are defined as gifts from on high. A charism emerges in the founder and the first community of a founder's companions. There is a need for fidelity to a charism's origins but also fidelity to the essential without fixating on what is temporary or secondary. Charisms need to be viewed in the present, not just from the time of the founder. We must recuperate what the founders lived and apply it in the present, with the characteristics of today.

Challenges Today

What do you see as today's most crucial issues?

We need to recognize the emerging fruits, such as greater, shared participation and togetherness. The concept of authority has also changed. This is very important because there will be no true sense of togetherness if superiors remain "superior" as perhaps was the case in former times. They are called to be brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. No more than that. Why is this? Because, according to the Gospel, they must occupy the lowest place, in the service of their brothers and sisters.

Then there is the question of relationships between men and women. We always saw these as a danger to consecrated life. But this is not the case. God did not create men or women in isolation. We must arrive at a new synthesis of the man-woman relationship and this should be clearly seen in communities.

Of course, nothing is certain, because power and control can exist even in the name of Jesus. Thus when Jesus' way of manifesting himself in a community has become one of commanding others, then we are on the wrong track. The sincere search for a harmonious relationship between authority and those who are part of the community does not lead to anarchy but wisdom. It is an area in need of further study.

This also involves a broader scope if we think of the national and continental groupings of consecrated people, such as CLAR in Latin America, for example. We are moving towards a sense of human solidarity and there is a lot of ongoing study and development in this regard. There is profound desire for support, for happiness, to be able to journey together. It is happening right now. Of course, we are referring to organizations which are institutional in nature where each is striving to have a soul which is not characterized by division and conflict but rather are aiming towards communion. We also need to look into the loneliness that some are experiencing.

Holiness and Voluntarism

Is the ideal of holiness still fashionable among consecrated men and women today?

I believe it is. But one challenge is the transition from a personal experience of God to one which is also communal. There is still a way to go in this regard. It is a goal, but we do not yet know how to achieve it. It's not something to be entrusted solely to experts in psychology or sociology. We need to bring out the theological dimension of this in such a way that enables us to experience the presence of Jesus among us and bear witness to it rather than dealing with it simply as an intellectual exercise. This transition to a communal approach is not one which can be imposed by arguments from outside but, rather, one which is inspirational, experiential and ultimately something attractive.

One step to take with regard to holiness is a shifting away from 'voluntarism' – holiness that is achieved through one's own efforts – in order to experience God's life offered to us as gift, as a welcomed gift to which we then communicate (to others). Certainly we need to have mastery over ourselves but this is not simply a question of controlling my own will. Even with all my best effort, I will never be able to sacrifice myself as Jesus did. Yet I am able to love as Jesus loved us because there is the Holy Spirit who gives us his love and renders us capable of loving like him.

This leads us back to the Trinity, as well as the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery. There is no other way. Here we draw on the life of God. It is necessary to respect the ancient ascetic traditions that have served as a guide for so many but we must also bear in mind that voluntarism leads to oneself, not to others. There is need for a transition to loving together with others, as Jesus did.

Stumbling Blocks

What do you see as stumbling blocks to a holy, sanctifying life?

We've just mentioned voluntarism. Another I think is the difficulty today in saying a "yes" forever. While formally proclaimed in words, in reality it is not conceived as "forever". I may say my "yes" forever with a kind of hidden, unexpressed condition: ". . . for as long as I am happy". Then, when I no longer find happiness, I leave. Why is this? Some say its "because I want to find what God wants from me, and I know he wants my happiness". It is a commonly encountered difficulty.

There are 2,500 people abandoning consecrated life annually. That's a significant number and the Pope speaks of a very real hemorrhage. A majority of them feel: "I am no longer at home here. . ." Certainly, there is the challenge around the giving and receiving of affection but it is not always the primary cause.

Yet there is a positive yearning underneath all this. One is searching to recover the human dimension of consecrated life. I need affection, a relationship in which masculine and feminine aspects complement one another. I need to feel "at home" and be able to say with confidence what is in my heart. Such needs should not be summarily judged as a lack of a spirit of sacrifice. Often they reveal a lack of evangelical love within relationships. This searching itself is something positive but it often does not go in-depth far enough. Encountering pain and conflict sometimes gives rise to a sense of disorientation. But following Jesus cannot be separated from the cross, from an ever new "dying" and "rising".

Certainly, it is a spiritual journey and spirituality is indispensable but it must be authentic. Some people no longer find themselves in the way of life lived up until now and at a certain point say: "I cannot keep going ahead. I am leaving.". Even those Institutes with many

resources, structures of formation and social care provisions are beginning to see such things as no longer effective.

Consecrated women also emphasize a particular aspect. Following the pandemic, and with the ongoing wars, they speak of vulnerability. It seems to me an interesting concept, a sign of a new awareness. Those of us who seek a path of consecration are more aware of the fact that we are vulnerable. We are not a superior species. It is important to share this in community life, to have the courage not only to talk about victories but also to talk about our being weak, small, etc.

Work of the Dicastery

Can you speak of how the Dicastery seeks to live this holiness of the community?

We try to follow evangelical guidelines and those that come from Pope Francis, such as not accentuating the divide between "authorities" and others. We've grown a lot in this regard. If there is a problem that needs to be addressed, we try to sit down, talk about it and see together what can be done. We aim at adopting a fraternal work style instead of a pyramidal one. In this way, the temptation to want to forge a career is also thwarted. We help each other a lot in our respective work and involve others, and that includes the Prefect and the Archbishop Secretary of the Dicastery as well.

We also created a WhatsApp message group among us at the Dicastery. This allows us to greet one another as the day begins or remember a feast day or birthday . . . in simple ways. At the recitation of the *Angelus* or the *Regina Coeli* at 12 noon, we try to pray for that person. Or we try to greet those who are passing through the Dicastery, like the nine-year-old daughter of one of our collaborators visiting for the first time. She was very happy with the welcome she received. This also applies to times when someone is sick, too, especially if it is something serious. This effort to be a "family" is developing more and more, so it is becoming more than just a 'working' together.

We also remind one another that it is not enough to just deal with "cases". We need to love the people behind the 'cases' that arrive at us. For example, sometimes we sense that documentation that arrives does not thoroughly express a situation in its entirety, so we reach out to the people involved in order to better understand. We also try to ensure that those who come to our Dicastery feel welcomed and not judged. There have been very nice experiences in this regard.

Edited by
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