

# Consecrated Life in India: The Asset of a Model, or A Challenge to Remodel?

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The writer has often contributed articles on spiritual life in many journals, the last contribution to VJTR being in August 2006. In this article he comments on the implications of the abundance of vocations to Consecrated Life for the Church in India and what should be the main aim of formation of religious if they have to respond to their vocation. Growth in the God experience should be the basic criterion in formation if we want to escape the temptations of the present world.

India is a land known for its sages and holy people; it is also a subcontinent which cradled the birth of many major world religions and religious leaders. The country is characterised by its multi-religious aspects and its famous philosophy of non-violence (*ahimsa*). With respect and love, it is called *BharatMata*, mother India. However, India cannot be simply thought of in terms of its poverty and crucial caste-system, but it stands for justice, and it stands for *dharma*. It stands for religious tolerance and inter-religious friendship (*mata-maitri*). India, irrespective of its multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural background, has the greatest respect for religious life and the monastic (*samnyasa*) tradition. When the majority of Indians do not follow the Christian religion, how is it that India's Christian consecrated persons and priests succeed in serving millions? What is the specific contribution that the Indian religious can make to a modern developing India? This is a relevant question to be reflected upon in this particular moment when Europe and the Western world can hardly recruit a small number of consecrated persons.

This question becomes all the more relevant, as the recent European Union voted against accepting its culture as a 'Christian culture'. Europe, which was known historically as Christendom is no longer Christian, but is slowly becoming a symbol of individualism as well as the promoter of economical and political supremacy.

## Emerging Trends of Religious Vocations

For the last few decades, especially after the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II, the Church as a whole faced various radical existential challenges. In general, with the council, the Church opened up its windows to a breath of fresh air; and Pope John XXIII called for an 'openness to

the world'.<sup>1</sup> The Church became more prophetic and more dynamic in understanding the values and relevance of other world religions. However, she also faced a crisis in the proclamation of faith, as well as in the number of consecrated persons and priests. Lay ministers, women priests and married clergy are the main themes of discussion in this area. Together with secular society, the Church is confronted with a challenge of new trends in marriage relationships, an increasing rate of divorce, separation in marriages and other radical questions such as homosexual unions, child abuse, sexual scandals, etc. The rupture in family values and consumerism in secular society have dealt a blow to Christian values; and consecrated life has even become an object of mockery for some of the mass-media.

During the post-Vatican II era, many consecrated persons left vowed life; and priests left the ministry. Some even left the main stream of the Church, while others developed an attitude of indifference and non-cooperation. This phenomenon brought a challenge to the Church in many parts of the world. A leading writer affirms this in a realistic way: "Many religious congregations today are in chaos. They are not sure about the meaning, contemporary relevance, or mission of religious life and, on the practical level, they find it difficult to cope with often rapidly declining numbers, few or no vocations and the rising average ages of membership."<sup>2</sup>

This lack of vocations to consecrated life and the priesthood has brought about a dramatic challenge to the renewal of the Church and its theology, and at the same time created some fear about the continuity and even the existence of some religious congregations. Numerical decline in membership can lead to the termination of a particular institute, and in some cases it leads slowly to the disappearance of a specific charism. The possible disappearance of congregations is a source of fear for many consecrated persons even today. One of the important post-Conciliar documents, *Vita Consecrata* affirms it:

The changes taking place in society and the decrease in the number of vocations are weighing heavily on the consecrated life in some regions of the world. The apostolic works of many Institutes and their very

<sup>1</sup>Pope JOHN XXIII, *Summi Pontificis Allocutio*, in AAS 54 (1962):786-96; "The Council at the Threshold of a New Era," Address at the Opening of the Council, *The Pope Speaks* 8 (1962), 207-16.

<sup>2</sup>Gerald A. ARBUCKLE, *Out of Chaos: Re-founding Religious Congregations*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988, 1.

presence in certain local Churches are endangered. As has already occurred at other times in history, there are Institutes which even run the risk of disappearing altogether.<sup>3</sup>

This brings out various theological reflections on the vitality and relevance of religious life. The same post-synodal document expresses this difficulty: "The difficult situation puts consecrated persons to the test. Sometimes they ask themselves: Have we perhaps lost the capacity to attract new vocations?"<sup>4</sup>

The lack of consecrated persons brought out various reactions from the few survivors. Many consecrated communities or persons took it as a golden chance to travel to underdeveloped countries to recruit vocations and thus increase the numerical strength of the institute. There can be various reasons behind this strategy. Some did it just to sustain the then existing institutions, and as a means to maintain and look after the aged in their institutes. Others saw it as a way to promote vocations in other parts of the world and focused their future mission and development in these countries, promoting indigenous vocations and cultural adaptations. For others it was an opportunity to develop their particular charism in a new promising soil. They saw it as the prophetic chance of developing their founders' charism and mission. Still others, after directly or indirectly experiencing the genuineness and dedicated ministry of priests and religious from places like India, longed to have such treasures in their communities. Whatever the underlying reasons, vocations continue to flourish in developing countries, and many there still seek to radically follow Christ through consecrated life.

### **Nuances on Consecrated Life in India**

Christianity in India traces its origin in its apostolic tradition, and Indian Christians are proud of their origin from the preaching of St Thomas. There is a long standing history of Christian faith experience in India and according to historical records, there were indigenous priests, deacons and ministers who cultivated the Christian faith. Later, St Francis Xavier and many other missionaries offered remarkable service to the development of Christianity in the Indian continent. It is also interesting to note that the Indian Christian community was growing by adapting various cultural and indigenous forms of administration, while in full communion with Rome.

<sup>3</sup>Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25 March 1996, in AAS 88 (1996) No. 63. <sup>4</sup>Ibid., 64.

Although in numbers Indian Christians are only a small minority, Indian consecrated life has a typical history that proves and affirms its vital role. It is surprising to note that instead of diminishing, consecrated life in India is to a certain extent increasing in numbers. It is interesting that the number of vocations kept growing even when a number of religious left just after the Council. C.J. Yuhaus makes a striking statement: "While the Catholic population is only about ten million in a land [India] of one billion people, the past quarter century provided in sheer numbers more vocations than the United States with a Catholic population six times that of India."<sup>5</sup> When in some parts of the world, religious life is on the verge of danger of extinction, in India many youngsters commit themselves to consecrated life. With the arrival of many consecrated communities from other countries, youngsters in India have more choices open to their call to consecrated life. The increase of charisms also brought to Indian Christianity many and various possibilities to follow Jesus in a radical yet creative way.

Vocations in India seem to be booming: an increasing number of youngsters step forward to prepare for priesthood and many men and women join consecrated life. Recently a Church-based internet journal has brought out the news that a particular Major Seminary in South India directed some seminarians to other seminaries because of lack of space. The journal claims that vocations have doubled from the ratio of 1980.<sup>6</sup> Even when religious and seminary formation is more demanding both in quality and duration, youngsters still opt for a priestly and religious life. These statistics signify that consecrated life and priestly vocation thrive in India. Their active contribution for the development of India is integral and vital for human dignity. Because "a nation is secure not by walls and weapons, but by the confidence and trust that animate the hearts of its citizens."<sup>7</sup> The orientation towards others with whom we live is the touchstone to prove the genuineness and sincerity of our love of God. God is reflected in the humanity; and humanity becomes a means to attain divine experience (*daiva-anubhava*). Indian consecrated persons and priests serve not only in developed countries such as in Europe and USA, but also in various developing parts of Africa and Latin America. They engage themselves actively in the 'evangelising' or 'new-

<sup>5</sup>C.J. YUHAUS, "Religious in Mission: New Insights," *The Living Light* 34 (1998) 33.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.zenith.org>. "Seminaries Full in South India," April 11, 2006.

<sup>7</sup>Conference of Religious in India, *Mission and Ministry: Report on the National Assembly*, Alwaye (April 17-21, 1998), 129.

evangelising' mission of the universal Church. In the third millennium, Indian consecrated life stands as an asset to the Church and to the modern society at large.

Many youngsters still seek a consecrated and committed life: "Asia is the major source of vocations for the Church. India... [is] keeping the universality of many venerable congregations alive."<sup>8</sup> Even though there is more emphasis on the qualitative aspect of commitment, religious vocation is growing in comparison with the growth in number of children in the modern family. A proportional quantitative growth is necessary for the involvement of the consecrated persons in the pastoral life of the Church, and this is a witness to the ecclesiastical dimension of consecrated life. This manifold vocation to consecrated life with its consequent participation in the mission of the Church is a model for the universal church.

### **'Vocation Crisis': A Challenge?**

For the last few centuries, Western Europe had claimed to be the source of Christian life and its propagation. Many religious and priests from Europe sacrificed their life and energy in foreign countries, especially in various parts of Asia and Africa. These missionaries contributed substantially to the education, medical service, charitable service, social development and evangelisation in the so called non-Christian areas. But, at present the western world has not enough consecrated persons and priests, and this lack of ministers brings the Church into a certain crisis and creates a challenge. Pope John Paul II, understanding the dynamics of the emerging situation, affirmed: "The problem of vocations is a real challenge which directly concerns the various Institutes but also involves the whole Church."<sup>9</sup> The important issue now is how to manage this crisis? It is a fact that by itself the Church in Europe cannot face the crisis creatively. How can it remake itself? The Church can and will grow if more missionaries are ready to offer their services.

The term 'vocation crisis' connotes the lack of sufficient religious and priests to continue the smooth functioning of the Church worldwide. The 'vocation crisis' should be seen as a challenge rather than a tragedy. It is an eye-opener and a call to every consecrated person and every Institute to re-examine their mission and vision and the particular charism

<sup>8</sup>YUHAUS, "Religious in Mission: New Insights," 34.

<sup>9</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 64.

of the founder in the modern world.<sup>10</sup> Consecrated persons should possess a spirituality of profound commitment to God and concern for the poor and the less-privileged. They should shine forth as a beacon of hope in the lives of Christians by helping them to gain a better understanding of their faith commitment. They should stand out as a distinguishing expression of the prophetic vocation to counteract the power of evil and poverty and enable others to take their place both in the Church and in society. The appropriate starting point of this commitment is Jesus Christ and his values and action for justice and equality. But religious life should not be reduced to an action-oriented life. As a prophetic sign, the consecrated vocation to become persons of God is an invitation to be persons of prayer and charity.

The long tradition of sages and monastic witnesses in India places a high value on consecrated life. In this cultural heritage, the conscience of consecrated religious should seek commitment and conviction rather than a performance-orientated life. The Indian consecrated life stands as a witness that poverty and suffering cannot be a threat to a committed life for justice and peace. India offers a unique model for religious life in the world.

The so-called 'vocation crisis' is also an invitation to evaluate and re-evaluate the liberating dimensions of various ministries that are traditionally carried out. In a way, it is an invitation to concentrate on the very person of Jesus. There is an integral relation between vocation and mission: "The mission of consecrated life as well as the vitality of institutes undoubtedly depend on the faithful commitment with which consecrated persons respond to their vocation."<sup>11</sup> Jesus, the liberator and the Messiah, exercised his whole ministry in the socio-political context of an oppressive and discriminatory social situation. But his mission was not a secular movement, but a dimension of his spirituality, which was one of total response and obedience to the loving Father.

The present time is also an invitation for us to pray continuously to God; as well as to accept our vocation first and foremost as a gratuitous divine gift. For it was God who chose us: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name"

<sup>10</sup>See John SANKARATHIL, "Religious Charism: Relevance for the Third Millennium," *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 14 (April-June 2001) 215-32. "JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 64.

(Jn 15:16). When the Gospel presents the mission of the disciples, Jesus affirms this relational aspect. It is God who is the subject of the action of 'sending' and we are accomplishing our mission through our vocation: it is 'the Lord of the harvest' who "sends out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2). Jesus did not give his apostles and disciples the task of seeking other volunteers or organizing promotional campaigns to gather new members. He instructed them to seek the divine will and divine action in their ministry (Lk 12:31).

However, this does not mean that our implementation of vocation promotion should be limited to prayer alone. The command to "ask the Lord of the harvest" means something more profound and enriching: only by remaining in intimate communion with 'the Lord of the harvest', can we bring other labourers to share in the mission and vision of the Kingdom of God. The labourers in God's kingdom are those who follow in the footsteps of Christ. This requires self-detachment and being fully and lovingly attuned to 'the will of God' (Mt 12:50; Mk 3:35; Lk 8:21). Through their authentic Christian life and good example, consecrated persons have a great impact on others, as *Vita Consecrata* said: "The specific contribution of consecrated persons is first of all the witness of a life given totally to God and to their sisters and brothers."<sup>12</sup>

### **Contextual Formative Programme**

The late Pope John Paul II rightly acknowledged the spiritual tradition and dynamics of Christians in India: "The people of India rightly take pride in their rich cultural and spiritual heritage, expressed in the innate characteristics of 'contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry' which distinguish those living on the subcontinent."<sup>13</sup> This remark is also an invitation to reflect on how contextual are our formative programmes in consecrated communities and seminaries.

In order to cope with this worldwide challenge; the Indian Church has a vital role in the promotion and formation of consecrated and priestly life. Religious congregations put a special emphasis on giving a proper formation to the new generation. The small minority community of Christians in a predominately non-Christian land such as India should be

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>13</sup>JOHN PAUL II. "Called To Be 'Leaven' On Social and Moral Issues" *Address to the Bishops of the Syro-Malankara Church of India on their KA Limina Visit*, 13 May, 2003. No. 2.

prepared to read the signs of the time and develop an authentic Christian life. Pope John Paul II grasped the gist of Asian culture and affirmed: "All are to have appropriate formation and training which should be Christ-centred... with emphasis on personal sanctity and witness; their spirituality and lifestyle should be sensitive to the religious heritage of the people among whom they live and whom they serve."<sup>14</sup> A solid formation will strengthen them in their Christian spiritual identity and give them the necessary tools to confront the challenges of changing the social, cultural and economic realities of globalization.

Religious formation is neither the addition of something new to the mind, nor the subtraction of something old. It is a parting of the veils that keep us from seeking what is always there, a glimpse into the depth of the soul that is normally barred from our view. Formation should in no way lead to professionalism and careerism as a form of access to modernity and under the pretext of approaching the modern world. Such individual desires render consecrated persons and priests ineffective and unfulfilled. In an allocution to priests Pope Benedict XVI in a way invites all the consecrated persons to improve the quality of their spiritual life:

In the face of the temptations of relativism or the permissive society, there is absolutely no need for the priest [and the religious] to know all the latest changing currents of thought; what the faithful expect from him [her/them] is to be a witness to the eternal wisdom contained in the revealed Word. Solicitude for the quality of personal prayer and for good theological formation bear fruit in life.<sup>15</sup>

Formation should enable them to live in docility to divine designs not only when it brings inner joy, but also in moments of difficulty, misunderstanding, challenge, aridity and suffering. By their formation, consecrated persons should learn to take courageous decisions, as a result of spiritual discipline in their lives and to discover the *raison d'etre* of their commitment Christ.

Formation is not a period of mere practice to heal wounds and skip over sorrows and the difficult moments in life. Those who seek only to experience a higher life and to enter into a spiritual realm full of divine grace, free from conflicts and challenges can at best only achieve some psychological development. Religious and priestly formation cannot be reduced to studying psychological theories, handling techniques and

<sup>14</sup>JOHN PAUL H, *Ecclesia in Asia*, in AAS 92 (2000), No. 44. "POPE BENEDICT XVI, "Priests: Promoters of the Encounter between Man and God," Talk to the clergy in the Cathedral of Warsaw, May 25, 2006.

finding a *modus operandi* for personal development. Francis de Sales, the gentleman saint, affirms in a creative way how to understand the consecrated life: "Religious congregations are not formed for the purpose of gathering perfect persons but those who have the courage to strive towards perfection. It is a school where one comes to learn about the means to acquire perfection."<sup>16</sup> This is a remarkable piece of advice; this illustrates for us the positive and Christian dimension of consecrated life. Perfection should be seen in the context of fervent charity, which motivates us to grow in virtuous life. Formation implies a certain kind of faith commitment and progress in a life based on Christian virtues, values, convictions and principles.

Formators as well as formees have to realise that our mission and religious commitment consist in communicating to others the love of God as revealed in the plan of salvation. Theological formation and spiritual learning should lead to a reawakening of faith, hope and love among those who are in formation together with missionary enthusiasm and prophetic spirit. Prayer and concrete support for missions are an integral part of every Christian life. There is an invitation to develop a responsible sense of sharing and communion for the evangelisation of the modern world. Formational activity and involvement should neither be reduced to mere organizational efficiency nor linked to particular interests of any kind, but always should be a manifestation of divine love. Only by progressive assimilation of the Gospel values, will consecrated persons come to make their own Jesus' approach and enter more and more deeply into Jesus' way of seeing things.

Pope Benedict XVI recently affirmed: "To be a priest is not to desire to be someone important,... but to live for others, for Christ, and through him and with him to live for the men and women he seeks, whom he wants to **lead** along the path of life."<sup>17</sup> His allocation to the priests is also applicable to all consecrated persons, whether lay, religious or priests. Consecrated life is neither a means of social advancement, nor of a psychological personality development. The Holy Father on another occasion reminds priests and consecrated persons not to fall into the

<sup>16</sup>*Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales*, Edition complete d'apres les autographes et les editions originates. Par les soins des religieuses de la Visitation de Premier Monastere d'Annecy. Imprimerie J. Nierat, 1892-1932. VI, 322. See also, 295. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are the author's. -

<sup>17</sup>BENEDICT XVI, "Priest must Live for Christ and Others," Talk on the 43rd World Day of Prayer for Vocations, May 7, 2006. [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/vis/bO\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/vis/bO_en.htm).

trap of seeing their ministry/vocation as a means of social advancement, because "the only legitimate ascent towards the shepherd's ministry is the Cross."<sup>18</sup> Thus consecrated life is a call to deepen our faith commitment; and it is a school of divine love and mercy; it is an invitation to relate in a particular way to Christ; it is call to live for others and not for one's self alone. However, generous self-giving for others is impossible without discipline and constant recovery of a true faith-filled interior life.

### **Conclusion**

Consecrated persons and priests have a primary vocation to be specialists in promoting the encounter between human beings and God, the divine-human encounter. The point of departure of consecration is the very person of Jesus Christ, and growth should be measured by the holiness and prophetic witness in one's commitment. We can give to others only what we have; so consecrated persons should be experts in the spiritual and virtuous life. In the face of the attraction of relativism, the trap of mediocrity and the consumer mentality, consecrated persons are called to give witness to Jesus Christ through a holy and virtuous life. The search for a relevant consecrated life should be situated in the cultural and social realities of our existence. It is an invitation to be a witness to the gospel values and to model ourselves according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Christ is the principal master (*Guru*) of consecrated persons. The quality of life and witness are important aspects of their commitment. They are called to be in the world credible and luminous signs of the Gospel and of the values of the Kingdom of God by transforming themselves and continually renewing their commitment, seeking always to discern the will of God.

In a world imbued by secular and consumerist values, it is hard to maintain the counter-cultural manner of life that is necessary in the priesthood and the consecrated life. However, the world is in need of consecrated persons who are mature, sincere, virtuous, virile, and capable of cultivating an authentic spiritual life, to radically confront the paradoxes and challenges of the modern era without conforming to the mentality of this century. The task of every consecrated person is therefore to become, as did the apostles and prophets, visible signs of God's kingdom.s

"BENEDICT XVI, "The Priesthood is not the Means for Social Advancement," Talk to the Bishops of Malawi on their 'ad limina' visit, September 29, 2006, [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/vis/dinamiche/bO\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/vis/dinamiche/bO_en.htm), (access September 29, 2006).