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Review for Religious (ISSN: 0034-639X, eISSN: 2767-8547) is published tri-annually in the spring, summer, and winter of each year by The Catholic University of America Press on behalf of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

Annual subscription (2021, 3 issues): print and digital for institutions \$135; print for institutions \$100; digital for institutions \$105. Print and electronic for individuals \$70; print for individuals \$45; digital for individuals \$50.

Articles should be submitted online at www.reviewforreligious.com.

Books for review and related correspondence should be sent to *Review for Religious*, Conference of Major Superiors of Men, 7300 Hanover Drive, Suite 304, Greenbelt, MD 20770. Email: editor@reviewforreligious.com.

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Religious Life from Vatican II to *Fratelli Tutti*

Michael Czerny, SJ

UNDER-SECRETARY, MIGRANTS & REFUGEES SECTION, ROME

This article first traces the essential coordinates of Vatican II's renewal of consecrated life and the subsequent magisterium; it then analyzes some of today's great challenges to religious congregations. These are so many "signs of the times" in the teaching of Pope Francis, culminating in Fratelli Tutti. Rather than directly addressing men and women religious, Fratelli Tutti invites them "among all people of good will" (FT, 6) to contribute with their proper identity and mission "to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity" (FT, 8). Religious are invited to renew and deepen their following of Christ while decisively furthering the mission of the Church.

1. TO ORIENT OUR READING

DRAWING A PICTURE of the insights that *Fratelli Tutti* offers to those who follow the evangelical counsels in consecrated life is neither an immediate task nor an obvious one. It requires both reflection and synthesis, in which one must retrospectively take into account both the novelty introduced by the Second Vatican Council in the renewal of consecrated life, as well as the subsequent magisterial development in the teaching of the popes. This will help us grasp the impulse towards evangelization and synodal reform in which Pope Francis asks everyone to take an active part. Religious are included in a special way because of their effective presence everywhere in the world and their option of total dedication to the cause of the Kingdom.

In this paper I outline, first, the essential coordinates of Vatican II's renewal of the consecrated life, analyzing key conciliar documents and the post-conciliar magisterium. Renewal has progressed as well as remaining a work in progress. The second part correlates the Holy Father's teaching to religious men and women with the main themes of *Fratelli Tutti*, each shedding light on the other and on the *aggiornamento* still underway. Pope Francis sees the great challenges as so many "signs of the times" which invite a deepening appreciation of the *sequela Christi* and a wholehearted taking up of the Church's mission in the world.

1.1 *Consecrated Life at Vatican II: A Copernican Revolution*

In many ways the Second Vatican Council represented a veritable Copernican revolution for consecrated life. Its decrees went far beyond what had been the hopes and expectations of those directly involved.

Rather than a reform of institutes or an affirmation of the ‘superior dignity’ of religious life over marriage, the Council Fathers ventured on a completely new path: they redefined religious life on the basis of the category of “consecration,” thus laying the foundations for the post-conciliar development of a “theology of charism” and a “mysticism of the consecrated life.”

Lumen Gentium certainly constitutes the watershed of this renewed approach. Renewal would no longer be conceived as a disciplinary intervention aimed at producing decrees of “reform,” but directed at placing religious life in a broader and more complete ecclesiological framework.

1.2 *Lumen Gentium: the Ecclesial Roots of Consecrated Life*

In *Lumen Gentium*, the recovery of the doctrine on “the common priesthood of the faithful”¹ made it possible not only to re-evaluate the importance of the laity, but also to specify the role and mission of religious in the life of the Church. At the foundation of the ecclesiology of communion set forth by the Council is the renewed posture towards baptism and the underlining of its sacramental effects: the incorporation of the faithful into the Church, the grace of divine adoption, and the universal call to holiness. “Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect” (*LG*, 11).

Lumen Gentium’s Chapter VI, “Religious” (*LG*, 43–47) explains how their vocation compares with and differs from the common one of the laity and how they express in the Church a type of Christian and evangelical life that is entirely unique (*LG*, 39).

The identity of a religious is defined more in terms of *being* conformed to Christ than of *doing*. The Council’s argumentation takes baptism as its starting point, as the mystery and fundamental dimension of Christian existence. Then, with the profession of the evangelical counsels, those who consecrate themselves to the service of God in the Church can derive “more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace” (*LG*, 44).

1. *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, 10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter *LG*).

Four distinctive dimensions come together in the Council's meditation on consecrated life: ecclesial vocation, human development, reality and sign, and charismatic nature.

1) *Ecclesial vocation*: by declaring that the mission and spiritual life of religious is "devoted to the welfare of the whole Church" (LG, 44), the Council specifies their belonging and destination. Consecrated life does not constitute a path of perfection marked by individualism but shows a clear ecclesial rooting. The choice of the evangelical counsels represents for the individual, and for the whole Church, an opportunity for enrichment and a privileged "place" where grace is manifested. Moreover, the Council is keen to emphasize the importance of the experiential and testimonial heritage which the consecrated life brings with it for the Church. Its manifold richness represents a true and proper "spiritual capital" for the members of the various orders, religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, and for "the entire Body of Christ" (LG, 43).

2) *Human development*: Alongside the concept of the Church as the *People of God*, the Council's Copernican revolution revolves around the recognition of each one's dignity and rights. This change of view is also reflected in religious life, underlining the "rights" of the consecrated person, such as to education, to psycho-affective maturation, to gender equality, to the enhancement of personal talents, and to respect for the person (regardless of the institutional role held). The result is a positive reading of consecrated life which focuses not on the "deprivations" which are required but on the "gain" for those who decide to embrace it (LG, 46).

3) *Reality and sign*: Consecrated life is recognized in its reality as a sign, above all because of the eschatological tension that runs through it (LG, 46). If the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience constitute an anticipation of the condition of perfect and definitive communion to which the "children of God" will be introduced in the last times, it is because of the intrinsically relational nature of the vows: religious, by giving themselves to God in this particular way, can acquire a different freedom in the way they relate to themselves, to material goods, and to others. Instead of fleeing from the world (*fuga mundi*) and becoming "strangers to their fellowmen or useless citizens of this earthly city" (LG, 46), religious embark on a way of "engaging" with history, of living in time.

4) *Charismatic nature*: in lieu of the paradigm of renunciation, the consecrated life is seen by the Council as a way of participating in the response of the Christian people to the history of salvation. It is made clear, however, that the consecrated life does not belong to the institutional structure of the

Church, nor does it represent an “intermediate state between the clerical and lay states” (*LG*, 43), but constitutes a special gift with which the Spirit has enriched the Church and characterized her charismatic structure, inasmuch as it “undeniably belongs to its life and holiness” (*LG*, 44). The hierarchical and charismatic dimensions, both of divine origin, constitute two complementary and co-essential realities in the Church: the distinction between clerics and laity is based on the former, and the distinction between those who profess the evangelical counsels and other Christians is based on the latter.

1.3 *Perfectae Caritatis: Called to “Spread the Kingdom of God”*

In 1965, barely a year after *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s reflection on the consecrated life was enriched by the decree *Perfectae Caritatis: On the adaptation and renewal of religious life* in which the words “a life consecrated by the profession of the counsels”² appeared for the first time in an official Church document.

The decree first makes explicit the Christological foundation of religious life (*PC*, 1) and indicates the following of Christ as the “highest rule” and the “ultimate norm” (*PC*, 2a) which governs it. Its primary purpose is union with God, to which both contemplation and apostolic zeal must be directed. From the desire for a more intense communion with Christ derives the determination to cooperate “with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God” (*PC*, 5).

The multiple forms of consecrated life—contemplative, active, monastic, and lay (*PC*, 7–11)—show with how great a “variety of gifts” the Spirit embellishes the Church, making her appear “like a spouse adorned for her husband” (*PC*, 1).

For this reason, the decree recommends that each institute acquire knowledge of its own origins and history. The recovery of “the spirit and the aims proper to the founders” will help to attune the original charismatic intuition to “the changed conditions of our time” (*PC*, 2).

Listening and consultation are recognized as opportune instruments for establishing and maintaining that fraternal climate which is indispensable for the achievement of common goals (*PC*, 4).

The decree is structured by the renewed awareness matured by the Council Fathers with respect to “common life.” What binds religious together is love for God, and this unity “is a visible pledge that Christ will return” (*PC*, 15). Indeed, the very fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of life

2. *Perfectae Caritatis*, October 28, 1965, 1, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html (hereafter *PC*).

in common, since fraternal unity is “a source of great apostolic energy” (*PC*, 15). The observance of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience has also been rethought on the basis of the importance given to common life.

1.4 Evangelica Testificatio: *The “Charisms of Founders” Past and Present*

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* of 1971, Paul VI sought to respond respectfully and gracefully to the climate of “anxiety”³ that followed the Second Vatican Council. He denounced “the boldness of certain arbitrary transformations” (*ET*, 2), for the most part dictated by a hasty desire to translate the Council’s indications into practice, as well as the sterile polemics of those who—wrongly invoking Vatican II—went so far as to question the usefulness of consecrated life for the present time (*ET*, 3). He raised questions to suggest the correct hermeneutic of its declarations on religious and encouraged them “to proceed with greater sureness and with more joyful confidence along the way that you have chosen” (*ET*, 6).

The pope recalls the advisability of continuing to reflect on the Council in order to discern the appropriate changes to be made. He reiterates the importance of rediscovering the “charisms of your founders” (*ET*, 11), because on its identification depend those “fundamental options” which make it possible “continually . . . to revitalize external forms” (*ET*, 12).

Paul VI chose to include, in relation to the vow of poverty, a reference to the preferential option for the poor made by the Council.⁴ Responding to the

3. Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, June 29, 1971, 2, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio.html (hereafter *ET*).

4. In a radio message shortly before the opening of the Council, John XXIII affirmed his desire for the Church to rethink herself and her mission, starting from the poor: “Confronted with underdeveloped countries, the Church offers herself as she is and wants to be: the Church for all and particularly the Church of the poor” (John XXIII, “Radio Message to All the Christian Faithful One Month Prior to the Opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, September 11, 1962, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/messages/pont_messages/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_mes_19620911_ecumenical-council.html, translation mine). During the first session, Card. Giacomo Lercaro, following John XXIII’s intuition, presented the relationship between the Church and poverty as the most urgent problem on which the Council was called to reflect. In fact, the theme was only occasionally treated by the Council Fathers (*LG* 8; *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, 1, 3, 63, 69, 88, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, hereafter *GS*) but such references are the foundation of important post-Conciliar developments. Seeing the “irruption of the poor” in Latin America as a sign of the times, the Medellín Conference (1968) called for a redistribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors. The Puebla Conference (1979) brought to the attention of the universal Church the preferential option for the poor as well as awareness of the social

“cry of the poor,” to their “appeal as God’s privileged ones” (*ET*, 17), becomes a constant call to love effectively and to shun selfishness, for conversion of mind and heart and “for liberation from all temporal encumbrances” (*ET*, 17). Religious are called to live poverty as a choice of precariousness, of temporariness, making their own the condition of the Son of Man who “has nowhere to rest his head” (Luke 9:58, NAB).

The Holy Father points to work as an area in which to show oneself “poor,” first of all recalling “the human meaning of work” and “its true nature as the source of sustenance and of service” (*ET*, 20). The duty to “help the poor through work” redefines common life and shows how poverty can be “really lived by pooling goods” (*ET*, 21). The preferential option for the poor ultimately sheds new light on the way of living the vow of poverty and informs common life.

Above all, Pope Paul recommends joy both as “the greatest expansion of your life in Christ” (*ET*, 55) and as a witness for religious to give to those who have “lost sight of the meaning of their lives and are anxiously searching for the contemplative dimension of their being” (*ET*, 45).

1.5 Religious Life: The Path of Uncreated Beauty

The 1974 Synod of Bishops was also decisive in guiding the renewal of the consecrated life. The bishops emphasized the essential missionary character of the Church and the duty of each member to bear witness to Christ throughout the world. The theological category of “liberation,” then at the center of lively debate, was also examined in order to specify how evangelization should take on the task of liberating peoples and individuals from social injustices. Paul VI used the Synod’s propositions in drafting the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

In those years the Church was going through various vicissitudes, especially because of the tensions that had arisen among religious and institutes. There were two opposing tendencies: those who would have wished to conserve traditional patterns, and those who hoped that the impulse for innovation would not be exhausted.

The election of John Paul II as bishop of Rome in 1978 inaugurated a new phase in the renewal of consecrated life, characterized by an effort to codify the theological, ecclesial, and orienting insights of the Council.

The growing numerical and institutional crises of consecrated life; interventions by the Holy See, such as the appointment of a Papal Delegate for the Jesuits (1981–1983); and concerns aroused by liberation theology and the involvement of religious in revolutionary activities convinced the pope of

injustices that hinder the path to peace in the world. See Joan Planellas i Barnosell, *La Iglesia de los pobres en el Concilio Vaticano II* (Barcelona: Herder, 2014).

the need for a return to a firmer “sense of the institution.” While on the one hand the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law in 1983 effectively put an end to the period of conciliar experimentation, there was on the other a desire to give new emphasis to the theology of special consecration.

Thirty years after *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) represents a certain point of arrival in the journey made by the Church after the Council. Presented as “the results of a stimulating exchange”⁵ which took place on the occasion of the Synod of Bishops on the theme “The Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and the World,” it intends to complete—after the Synods dedicated to the laity (1987) and to priests (1990)—“the treatment of the distinctive features of the states of life willed by the Lord Jesus for his Church” (VC, 4).

Vita Consecrata seeks to develop more adequately the pneumatological implications of the *sequela Christi* brought about by the choice of the evangelical counsels. In fact, it states that “the call to the consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit” (VC, 19). The Gospel account of the Transfiguration (VC, 15) is taken as the biblical icon which illuminates religious life and enables it to be appreciated as a *philokalía*: the Holy Spirit overshadows consecrated persons and lets them perceive the divine grace and beauty which radiate from the humanity of Christ. Under the guidance of the Spirit, “uncreated beauty,” the life of intimacy with Christ the Bridegroom, transforms the consecrated person’s being and existence in conformity with Christ’s beauty and in assimilation to Christ’s love.

The responsibility of participating in the Church’s evangelizing mission is also placed in a pneumatological perspective, pointing out that “the first missionary duty of consecrated persons is to themselves, and they fulfill it by opening their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit of Christ” (VC, 25).

The second part of the document focuses on the value of the consecrated life as a sign and instrument of communion.⁶ In particular, community life is proposed as an “eloquent sign of ecclesial communion” and a “theological space” in which to experience the Risen Lord (VC, 42). For this reason, religious women and men should appear in the eyes of the world as “experts in communion,” as sharing faith and daily life with others makes them “witnesses and architects” of unity (VC, 46).

5. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, 13, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html (hereafter VC).

6. It echoes the statements made in the document “Fraternal Life in Community.” Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Living, “Fraternal Life in Community: Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor,” February 2, 1994, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_02021994_fraternal-life-in-community_en.html.

It is in the context of this articulated reflection on the vocation and mission to communion, to think with the Church (*sentire cum Ecclesia*), that we find the invitation to establish closer and more incisive relationships of exchange and collaboration with the laity (VC, 54). The Exhortation is conscious that religious life can no longer exist in parallel with the laity. Their collective contribution is indispensable for religious in “rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time” (VC, 54).

The last part of the document is an appeal to religious to become witnesses of charity: in the promotion of the dignity of the person (VC, 82); in the service to life (VC, 83); to the truth (VC, 96); to culture and communication (VC, 97–98); and to dialogue (VC, 100–103).

With these clear socio-pastoral guidelines, we conclude our review of the Council’s impact and of subsequent magisterium on religious life down to our own day.

2. THE TEACHING OF POPE FRANCIS TO RELIGIOUS: A READING OF *FRATELLI TUTTI* FOR CONSECRATED LIFE

After examining the most significant Church documents on consecrated life in the last 60 years in order to trace the substantial renewal initiated by Vatican II, I would now like to focus on the teaching of Pope Francis to religious men and women in order to identify elements of continuity with the previous magisterium as well as the most original aspects of his way of looking at religious life.

In doing so, I will try to highlight how many of the insights that structure *Fratelli Tutti* coincide with words addressed by the Pope to religious in various circumstances. Together with the review of *aggiornamento* in Part 1, this creates a hermeneutical circle that allows us to read each in the light of the others: the Council, the post-conciliar developments, Pope Francis addressing religious, and the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

Fratelli Tutti is not explicitly addressed to religious because Pope Francis does not want to ‘factionalize’ the message of the encyclical by specifying its recipients; rather, he chooses to “make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will.”⁷

As members of the *People of God*, religious are therefore called upon to “contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity” (FT, 8) with their commitment and in the distinctive mission that is theirs.

7. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, 6, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter FT).

2.1 *Pope Francis, the Religious, the Jesuit*

By way of introduction, let me call attention to the characteristic way in which Francis speaks to religious. Here one senses how his personal experience as a religious, as a Jesuit, converges in the pope's speeches. Yes, he takes realistic snapshots of the most urgent problems; he also shows that he knows, in depth, both the latent riches of religious life and the most hidden fragilities that are played out internally, as well as the "external" dynamics that involve religious as they engage with community and manage their choices of governance.

At the same time, the Holy Father is firmly convinced of the intrinsic witness quality that emanates from consecrated life, as a sign of "perfect happiness" for the Church. It is by looking at religious women and men and fixing one's gaze on their essentially radical choice that one realizes how God is capable of filling human hearts and making them happy. This is why Francis has repeated the old saying: "Where there are religious, there is joy!"⁸ He also speaks with great earthiness and often humor, showing his own love for the life and ministry of religious.

We would say that, as Pope and as a Jesuit, he does not limit himself to describing and interpreting consecrated life. Rather, he intends to bring its wounds out into the open in order to treat them and then appreciate anew its promise and exalt its beauty. Thus, having denounced many "shortcomings" and mistaken attitudes, Francis proposes a return to the Gospel as an antidote to the ills from which consecrated life today suffers, encouraging religious to place their trust in God's providential help and move forward with hope.

The Holy Father's deeply experiential reading, therefore, sets out to identify practical trajectories for coming out of the impasse: to emerge from self-isolation in order to encounter the world, especially in its realities of exclusion, grinding poverty, and unlimited suffering. This is where Pope Francis locates the possibility of redefining the charismatic nature of the life and mission of consecrated persons.

2.2 *Testing the "Charisms," Starting Again From the "Mission"*

In 2014, on the fiftieth anniversary of *Perfectae Caritatis*, Pope Francis convoked a Year of Consecrated Life, in order to "propose again to the Church as a whole the beauty and value of this special form of *sequela*

8. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, November 21, 2014, 2, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html.

Christi.”⁹ From the outset, it became clear that the anniversary would not merely celebrate but was meant to reflect on the relevance of consecrated life and the challenges it must face in the Third Millennium.

In an Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons, the pope launched three emblematic questions to begin an “honest” analysis of the present condition of religious life: “Are our ministries, our works and our presence consonant with what the Spirit asked of our founders and foundresses? Are they suitable for carrying out today, in society and the Church, those same ministries and works? Do we have the same passion for our people, are we close to them to the point of sharing in their joys and sorrows, thus truly understanding their needs and helping to respond to them?”¹⁰

With his direct questions, almost an initial provocation, he invited religious not to “be afraid to discard the ‘old wineskins,’”¹¹ that is, not to be afraid to renew everything in consecrated life that does not respond adequately to the call of the Spirit for the Church today. In fact, remaining attached to the structures as well as the habits of the past, we run the danger of embracing a fallacious sense of security which comes, however, at a very high cost: becoming indifferent to the cry of those who await the proclamation of the Good News.

Where Paul VI had asked religious to revive their external forms and test the pertinence of their works by fidelity to the “charism of your founders” (*ET*, 11), Francis asks them to keep their charisms alive by exercising them in evangelization, throwing themselves headlong into service: “Our mission—in accordance with each particular charism—reminds us that we are called to be a leaven in this dough.”¹²

In order to show fidelity to the mission entrusted to them, in the diversity of charismatic expressions willed by the Spirit, religious must become missionaries in the contexts to which they are destined by the spirit of their institute. It is necessary to overcome that distinction between

9. Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life,” November 30, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_messaggio-anno-vita-consacrata.html.

10. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 2.

11. Pope Francis, “Address to participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life,” November 27, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141127_plenaria-vita-consacrata.html.

12. Pope Francis, “Homily for the XXI World Day of Consecrated Life,” February 2, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20170202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html (all homilies for the World Day for Consecrated Life hereafter cited as “WDCL Homily”).

“contemplative life” and “active life” which has for a long time relegated the task of missionary activity exclusively to one “branch” of religious families, in order to broaden everyone’s horizons and recognize that “all forms of consecrated life, each according to its characteristics, are called to be in a permanent state of mission.”¹³

In order to express true charismatic fidelity, it is necessary to not curb the dynamism of charity: the original evangelical intuition that lies at the basis of every form of consecrated life is not an ideal to be contemplated, to be placed “under glass” or to be kept as a relic, but to be applied to the concreteness of life, in attention to the least and the most fragile. Francis admonishes without hesitation: “Woe to the crystallization of our charisms in an abstract document: the founders’ charisms . . . are not to be sealed in a bottle, they are not museum pieces.”¹⁴

The secret to making charisms bear fruit lies in courageously confronting them with present realities, with history, with the experience of the men and women of our time. We need to “decentralize,”¹⁵ that is, to ensure that Jesus Christ alone is at the center.

A renewed impetus in the mission also preserves religious from falling into that dangerous “temptation of survival”¹⁶ that can “sterilize” consecrated life. Especially in the face of the evident decline in vocations to religious life and the worrying increase in the number of those leaving—a “hemorrhage that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church”¹⁷—many are tempted to retreat into good order, locking themselves up in their own houses and in their own schemes. They give in to nostalgia, they project themselves backwards in time, to the glorious memories of eras gone by when the novitiates were swarming with young people and it was almost impossible to accommodate the numerous applicants.

Clinging to survival robs charisms of their creative power and transforms religious into fearful, reactionary disciples, inducing them “to protect spaces,

13. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily”; “Conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” February 2, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20160202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.

14. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2016.

15. Pope Francis, *Address to participants in the National Assembly of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors*, November 7, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141107_conferenza-italiana-superiori-maggiori.html. The Italian verb *decentrarsi* is reflexive, literally, to *de-center-self*.

16. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2017.

17. Pope Francis, “Address to participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life,” January 28, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170128_plenaria-civcsva.html.

buildings and structures, rather than to encourage new initiatives. . . . The temptation of survival turns what the Lord presents as an opportunity for mission into something dangerous, threatening, potentially disastrous.”¹⁸

This retrograde and defeatist posture, which clouds both mind and spirit, is “the spiritual euthanasia of a consecrated heart.”¹⁹ Moving in this direction is like resignedly accepting to die; it is to undertake a worldly path, which disposes itself to be a sort of “*ars bene moriendi*.”²⁰ Such counter-testimony manifests itself in tiredness, routine, internal divisions, seeking power and privileges, and unwise governance (which succumbs sometimes to authoritarianism, at other times to “*laissez faire*”).

We must not “give in to the criteria of worldliness”²¹ nor submit to the temptation of numbers and efficiency, of programming that relies exclusively on one’s own strength. Rather, religious must resume walking in the Lord, fix their gaze on him, “embrace the future with hope.”²²

Francis’s appeal to his brothers and sisters in religious life is heartfelt: “Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the Good News.”²³

Advancing along paths of hope (*FT*, 55) is the “strategy” of the believer. It is the only way to avoid being engulfed by anxiety, by the difficulties of the moment. It is the only sensible choice, because it leads one to recognize that the future is securely under the guidance of the Spirit.

2.3 Witnesses of Encounter, Creators of Dialogue

It is possible to escape from the narrow confines of the present: enough to turn once again to Christ and open oneself “to the daily ‘havoc’ of grace.”²⁴ Christ is the newness that makes all things new, as Francis repeatedly says, and

18. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2017.

19. Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Conference Organized by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life,” May 4, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/may/documents/papa-francesco_20180504_congregazione-vitaconsacrata.html.

20. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” February 2, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20190202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.

21. Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life,” 2017.

22. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 3.

23. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 4.

24. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” February 2, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20180202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.

whoever crosses the Lord's path cannot remain the same as before. One understands, in this sense, the centrality accorded to the category of encounter in the pope's theological thought: in it the conciliar lessons on the primacy of divine election, on the universal call to holiness (*LG*, 40), are summed-up and brought forward. And the entire exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* was written "to repropose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time, with all its risks, challenges and opportunities."²⁵

Francis highlights how the vocation to the consecrated life does not arise from a shrewd cost-benefit calculation, but is a free gift that springs from the overabundant love of God and arises from "a grace of the Lord which touches us, through a life-changing encounter."²⁶ Precisely for this reason, it is vital to always return to the sources and "to retrace in our mind the decisive moments of encounter with him, to renew our first love."²⁷

In order to heal from the "paralysis of normality," from the deadly logic that immobilizes consecrated life and ossifies it, the pope indicates to religious the path of fidelity to concrete things, to ordinary commitments, in which it is possible to draw strength from grace flowing from the first encounter with Christ: "daily prayer, Holy Mass, Confession, real charity, the daily word of God, closeness, especially to those most in need spiritually or physically."²⁸

Such an encounter, then, is not "something private between us and God,"²⁹ but happens in a particular time and place. It springs from the heart of the Church, through sisters and brothers who by their witness of faith have led us to God. The consecrated life therefore needs this continuous contact with the *People of God*, since there it finds not only its origin but its continual nourishment. Conversely, when religious think they can do without others, and perhaps isolate themselves, they invariably experience decline—those who walk alone wither, stagnate, are condemned to die.

Mindful of the past and grateful for it, confident of the future and open to it, religious must "live the present with passion,"³⁰ that is, live it without shirking their responsibilities to the Gospel, without turning their eyes away from the tragedies of a wounded and lost humanity. In societies that seem to foster the clash between different cultures, in which social coexistence is compromised by inequalities and the systematic abuse of the weakest,

25. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, 2, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

26. Pope Francis, "WDCL Homily," 2016.

27. Pope Francis, "WDCL Homily," 2019.

28. Pope Francis, "WDCL Homily," 2019.

29. Pope Francis, "WDCL Homily," 2019.

30. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 2.

“consecrated men and women are called first and foremost to be men and women of encounter.”³¹

In light of *Fratelli Tutti*, this means collaborating in the creation of social bonds characterized by friendship and fraternity, acting in the fabric of civil coexistence as a link among the various different subjects who make it up.

Promoting a healthy culture of encounter—the “encounter that becomes culture” (*FT*, 216–221)—is the prerequisite for achieving a social pact in which no one is denied rights and opportunities. Religious become, then, artisans of a culture of encounter whenever they stand in defense of human rights and oppose the “throwaway culture” (*FT*, 188) in which the depredation of resources would be rationalized as inevitable collateral damage: not only food or superfluous goods, but also human beings are evaluated as “dispensable” and functional to maintain the prevailing economic system (*FT*, 18–20).

In *Fratelli Tutti*, the theme of migration also receives careful analysis. Attitudes of closure and intolerance make communication more difficult and hinder encounters between residents and newcomers. Francis does not hesitate to say that for Catholics to adhere to various forms of nationalist and xenophobic ideology is irreconcilable with an authentic believing life (*FT*, 39). The task of religious is to facilitate the recovery of a direct “contact” with the protagonists of the drama of migration, helping lay people to get personally involved in the existential stories of these men, women, and children forced to flee.

On the front lines of “borders and their limits” (*FT*, 129–132), as “guides who are themselves guided”³² and initiated into the “art of accompaniment,”³³ religious are called to take on an urgent commitment to formation: to accompany the passage from a conception of society in which the foreigner is discriminated against, to an understanding of social coexistence in which full citizenship is guaranteed to all. Facilitating the integration of migrants also means helping those who are called upon to welcome them to go beyond their prejudices and preconceptions. The first step is to recover the value of life as a web of true and authentic relationships (*FT*, 87) and to work to create bonds of hospitality (*FT*, 88–90).

Announcing the Year of Consecrated Life in 2014, Francis asked all religious “to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the

31. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2016.

32. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” February 2, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20150202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.

33. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 169, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter *EG*).

poor, and finding creative ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach others how to pray. Consequently, I would hope that structures can be streamlined, large religious houses repurposed for works which better respond to the present demands of evangelization and charity, and apostolates adjusted to new needs.”³⁴

With *Fratelli Tutti* six years later, these requests take on new emphasis: rather than “implementing welfare programs from the top down” (*FT*, 129), he encourages religious institutes to contribute actively in offering concrete possibilities for integration: granting visas, humanitarian corridors, accessibility to essential services and education, and encouraging religious freedom (*FT*, 130).

Charity, which is always “capable of incorporating all these elements” (*FT*, 165), thus becomes the key to sustaining integral human development. If love looks to the person, it unfolds in a concrete manner, that is, it addresses the multiplicity of circumstances in which the value and dignity of each person is placed at risk. In this way it shows itself capable of identifying its own privileged recipients: the elderly, the disabled, the young, women, the marginalized, the poor, and all those who fall within the vast domain of the “hidden exiles” (*FT*, 98). Love is the dynamism capable of expanding the meaning of our existence, but also the only force capable of generating a society open to integration.

For religious, the law of love implies something more than a determination to perform a series of beneficial actions, since it leads to the maturation of “a greater sense of mutual belonging” (*FT*, 95). For Jesus told us that we are all brothers and sisters (cf. Matt 23:8).

2.4 *Community Life: A Prophetic Sign of Unity in Difference*

The theme of fraternity constitutes one of the main threads that run through the magisterium of Pope Francis. Consider *Evangelii Gaudium* (ch. 4), in which the social effects of a joyful proclamation of the Gospel are made explicit, or *Laudato Si'* (ch. 5), which identifies five major streams of dialogue for a world that is more just towards people and more respectful of creation.

Although set within the horizon opened up by these magisterial documents, *Fratelli Tutti* refers directly to the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* and herein finds its formal basis for reflecting “together.” Co-signed by Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmad Al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi, the document represents an epochal turning point in the promotion of interreligious dialogue. The moment was “not a mere diplomatic act” (*FT*, 5)

34. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 4.

but an occasion of encounter and joint commitment in favor of humanity, as well as a milestone in the construction of a world that is more fraternal and more united in solidarity.

The programmatic value of *Fratelli Tutti* is therefore to be found in the firm decision to implement the teachings of the Council: universal fraternity and social friendship are for today's world a "sign of the times" (*GS*, 4).

The Encyclical dares to bring together two terms that are apparently opposed, friendship and society. When speaking of friendship, we usually mean a "selective" form of love: we choose friends, we elect them to be our "equals." It is customary to distinguish the sphere of friendships, which constitute the sphere of the "private," from the social context in which we find ourselves involved with persons who are perhaps "imposed" on us from outside. The message of the Encyclical aims precisely at launching "a new vision of fraternity" (*FT*, 6) for humanity: to act towards others, near and far, as if we were choosing them as our brothers and sisters and friends.

In this new dream for the whole world, consecrated life takes on a specific value: to show the joy and beauty of fraternity, to find and share the "'mystique' of living together" (*EG*, 87). It reveals all its prophetic power as a "sign" in this our time when consumerism feeds the logic of individualism and the "culture of fragmentation,"³⁵ and the throw-away logic extends to every sphere of existence: to the unborn, to the elderly, to those least able to contribute to the economy.

Life as vowed sisters and brothers in community becomes an "eloquent and joyful witness"³⁶ that attracts people to the Gospel and tells them that unity is the decisive ingredient for a full existence. It is from life in common that "the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ"³⁷ shine forth, and that the dream of a new humanity is already being realized.

The reality of consecrated life as a sign, the *via pulchritudinis* which reassembles the fragments of Beauty in the human city,³⁸ finds in fraternity the prophetic anticipation of a world in which unity is achieved while safeguarding mutual differences. True fraternity does not homogenize but allows us to remain ourselves together with others (*FT*, 100) and, aiming at

35. Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life," 2017.

36. Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life," 2017.

37. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 4.

38. Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Contemplate: To Consecrated Men and Women on the Trail of Beauty*, trans. Christine Cooley (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), available at: <http://www.congregazione.vitaconsacrata.va/content/dam/vitaconsacrata/LibriPPDF/Inglese/CONTEMPLATE.pdf>.

the essential, to discover that it is not possible to do without the others. “Religious life is this vision. It means seeing what really matters in life.”³⁹

Religious should give witness to this appreciation for diversity, for the plurality of cultures and identities; to this criterion of fraternity that aspires to universality, not in the abstract, but as already a reality in their communities and works.

Hence the urgent call to safeguard life as brothers and sisters, preserving it from “criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility”⁴⁰ and making sure that behavior leaves no room for various forms of “enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs” (*EG*, 100).

What Francis recommends to everyone in *Fratelli Tutti* applies especially to consecrated persons: *dialogue*, as a means of seeking the truth together and knowing it in its effective objectivity, overcoming every kind of “appropriation” that limits it to a single point of view (*FT*, 206); *kindness*, as an attitude of respect, respecting “other people’s right to be themselves and to be different” (*FT*, 218) and “concern not to offend by word or deed” (*FT*, 223); sincere, honest *interaction* in community, learning neither to impose one’s own opinions nor to undervalue those of others (*FT*, 224); and *intergenerational communication* (*FT*, 53, 199), an essential aspect of life as brothers and sisters in community, a practical horizon in which to exercise the evangelical style of relating to others.

Francis recommends that, in their common life, religious should seek a fruitful exchange between young and old, “never discarding whole generations.”⁴¹ Commenting on the Lucan passage of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22–39), he affirms that “an institute remains youthful by going back to its roots, by listening to its older members. There is no future without this encounter between the old and the young. There is no growth without roots and no flowering without new buds. There is never prophecy without memory, or memory without prophecy. And constant encounter.”⁴² Religious communities favoring such fruitful encounter and communication do much to console their elders, enrich their younger members, and give convincing, prophetic witness of communion to a world increasingly afflicted by intergenerational apartheid.

39. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” February 1, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20200201_omelia-vitaconsacrata.html.

40. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 2014, 4.

41. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2018. Translation my own, from “mai fare scarti generazionali” in the original.

42. Pope Francis, “WDCL Homily,” 2018.

In the Encyclical, in fact, the pope notes the collapse of the great political ideologies of the last century and how this has led to a generalized lack of confidence in long-term goals and planning (*FT*, 15–17). He expresses concern for the new generations. For it is mainly the young who are conditioned by the distrust of those who preceded them towards planning the “common good.” A sort of disconnect occurs, an interruption, between the goals set by past generations and the ambitions with which young people tend to imagine the future.

The ruthless logic of globalization is grafted onto the weakening of the community dimension of existence. The current economic model, when aimed exclusively at optimizing profits, takes advantage of the diminishing communitarian dimension of life and the segmentation of identities (*FT*, 12).

Faced with the discouraging reality of ever lonelier and more isolated individuals, distracted consumers and alienated spectators of today’s ugliness, the path of fraternity appears as the only way out of an asphyxiating and solipsistic existence.

2.5 *A World of Religions with Their Spiritual Capital*

The last chapter of *Fratelli Tutti* is dedicated to *religions* and the decisive contribution they can make—all and together—“to building fraternity and defending justice in society” (*FT*, 271).

Because of the wealth of experience and the treasures of wisdom and spirituality that they have accumulated down the centuries, religions have the right and the duty to intervene in social dialogue and public debate. Their voice must be appreciated and heard as much as that of business, politics, and science (*FT*, 275).

For the Church, Francis claims the public role of the mission proper to her and the active participation in working “for the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity” (*FT*, 276). Accordingly, it is necessary to affirm that religious freedom is a fundamental right and that all religions must be able to express publicly their point of view on social issues (*FT*, 279).

Following the guidelines outlined by Vatican II in the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* and the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis has given a new impetus to the ecumenical and interreligious movements. When identity is strong and structured, he argues, it does not fear dialogue and confrontation, nor does it perceive the other as an enemy or a threat. On the contrary, avoiding confrontation expresses great fragility and insecurity about oneself. Those who have solid cultural and religious roots do not see the possibility of dialogue with those who are different as a diminution, impoverishment, or threat, but rather recognize it as an opportunity to grow and mature in their

own belonging. The original contribution of religions to today's culture consists in their constitutive openness to transcendence.

Therefore, interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel are not contradictory terms, but aspects of the Church's one evangelizing mission.⁴³ In fact, it is necessary that these two elements maintain their intimate bond and, at the same time, their distinction, so that they are neither confused, nor instrumentalized, nor taken to be equivalent, as if they were interchangeable.

In a world of various religions, then, the "spiritual capital" and "multiple and miraculous growth" (*LG*, 43) of religious life is treasured and continuously developed and handed on. This evolving charismatic wisdom represents an irreplaceable service to the world. Bearing witness to filial awareness, that is, recognizing ourselves before God as children of one Father, can hasten and sustain the realization of peace among all.

Once upon a time it used to be in the so-called "foreign missions" that priests, sisters, and brothers occasionally came into contact with believers of other faiths; today religious pluralism is a fact of life in practically every context, in nearly every society.

2.6 *The Challenge for Consecrated Life: Inculturation of the Faith*

The contribution of religious to the Church's mission of evangelization and dialogue is fundamental, but the real challenge now facing them more than ever is to participate actively in the inculturation of the faith.

On the one hand, overcoming the identification between Western culture and the Catholic Church, addressed in *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*, 42), has made it possible to rethink the *forma ecclesiae* as unity in difference, in the manner of the Trinitarian persons. On the other hand, it is true that the Church after Vatican II has run into a certain resistance to implementing this important principle.

For Francis, the Revelation of God reverberates in every people, just as light refracts on the surface of a polyhedron (*EG*, 235). Every cultural identity is "flesh" in which the Word of God unveils the face of the Father. The final document from the Synod for the Amazon states that it is necessary to reject every "colonial style of evangelization" and that to proclaim the Good News is to recognize that "seeds of the Word [are] already present in cultures."⁴⁴

43. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, 10–28, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

44. *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, October 26, 2019, 55, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20191026_sinodo-amazonia_en.html.

Francis explains that real unity is not uniformity but a complex harmony that assumes the differences and values the fragments, because “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts” (EG, 235; FT, 78).

For the pope, it is not just a matter of knowing others better, but of reaping what the Holy Spirit has sown in them as a gift for us as well (EG, 246). The service to the evangelization of culture cannot do without religious, because their presence *on the ground* and *in context* is indispensable for developing enculturated theology. It is by reflecting on their lived pastoral experiences, by thematizing and systematizing these reflections, that the relevant theology emerges and develops.

In fact, the way in which a people through its cultural traditions expresses an *ethos*, that is, a global sense of life and death and a sapiential perspective on God and humanity, serves as a prerequisite for the proclamation of the Gospel. Faith does not come with a predetermined cultural model, nor does it just juxtapose itself with the cultures it encounters. Faith informs them from within, precisely from that ethical-anthropological-spiritual core that is essentially theirs.

In today’s circumstances, then, *Fratelli Tutti* provides the orientation for religious women and men, whose task of mediating is both delicate and necessary: to enter into the life of a people, first of all, to approach its customs and traditions with respect; to learn to know their cultural *ethos*, being near day by day and participating discreetly; and then to make explicit those contents and those sensibilities that allow the Christian message to take root and dwell there and manifest all the redemptive and regenerative power of God’s Revelation in Jesus Christ.

Religious of every form and “family” therefore have an essential mission of enculturating the faith and developing contextual theology: to interpret the faith and to discern the contents of a people’s *ethos* so as to forge theological categories with which to proclaim Revelation from the perspective of that culture.

As their religious vocation and life “decentralize,”⁴⁵ so does the theology. Both involve an exodus from focus on the self, a giving of oneself without reserve, a becoming receptive space for the other, thus following the disconcerting logic of the Incarnation.

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45. Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the National Assembly of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors*, 2014. See footnote 15 above