



THE CHURCH

Christ's Faithful: Hierarchy, Laity, Consecrated Life

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

THE CONSECRATED LIFE

"The state of life which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness." (914)

Evangelical counsels, consecrated life

Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every disciple. The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practising chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty and obedience. It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognised by the Church, that characterises the life consecrated to God. (915)

The state of consecrated life is thus one way of experiencing a "more intimate" consecration, rooted in Baptism and dedicated totally to God. In the consecrated life, Christ's faithful, moved by the Holy Spirit, propose to follow Christ more nearly, to give themselves to God who is loved above all and, pursuing the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom, to signify and proclaim in the Church the glory of the world to come. (916)

One great tree, with many branches

"From the God-given seed of the counsels a wonderful and wide-spreading tree has grown up in the field of the Lord, branching out into various forms of the religious life lived in solitude or in community. Different religious families have come into existence in which spiritual resources are multiplied for the progress in holiness of their members and for the good of the entire Body of Christ." (Vatican II, the Church) (917)

From the very beginning of the Church there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practising the evangelical counsels. They led lives dedicated to God, each in his own way. Many of them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families. These the Church, by virtue of her authority, gladly accepted and approved. (918)

Bishops will always strive to discern new gifts of consecrated life granted to the Church by the Holy Spirit; the approval of new forms of consecrated life is reserved to the Apostolic See. (919)

The eremitic life

Without always professing the three evangelical counsels publicly, hermits "devote their life to the praise of God and salvation of the world through a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude and assiduous prayer and penance". (920)

They manifest to everyone the interior aspect of the mystery of the Church, that is, personal intimacy with Christ. Hidden from the eyes of men, the life of the hermit is a silent preaching of the Lord, to whom he has surrendered his life simply because he is everything to him. Here is a particular call to find in the desert, in the thick of spiritual battle, the glory of the Crucified One. (921)

Consecrated virgins and widows

From apostolic times Christian virgins and widows, called by the Lord to cling only to him with greater freedom of heart, body and spirit, have decided with the Church's approval to live in a state of virginity or perpetual chastity "for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven". (Mt 19:12) (922)

"Virgins who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church". (Code of Canon Law, can 604) By this solemn rite (*Consecratio Virginum*), the virgin is "constituted... a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the Church's love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come." (923)

As with other forms of consecrated life, the order of virgins establishes the woman living in the world (or the nun) in prayer, penance, service of her brethren, and apostolic activity, according to the state of life and spiritual gifts given to her. Consecrated virgins can form themselves into associations to observe their commitment more faithfully. (924)

Religious life

Religious life was born in the East during the first centuries of Christianity. Lived within institutes canonically erected by the Church, it is distinguished from other forms of consecrated life by its liturgical character, public profession of the evangelical counsels, fraternal life led in common, and witness given to the union of Christ with the Church. (925)

Religious life derives from the mystery of the Church. It is a gift she has received from her Lord, a gift she offers as a stable way of life to the faithful called by God to profess the counsels. Thus, the Church can both show forth Christ and acknowledge herself to be the Saviour's bride. Religious life in its various forms is called to signify the very charity of God in the language of our time. (926)

All religious, whether exempt or not, take their place among the collaborators of the diocesan bishop in his pastoral duty. From the outset of the work of evangelization, the missionary 'planting' and expansion of the Church require the presence of the religious life in all its forms. "History witnesses to the outstanding service rendered by religious families in the propagation of the faith and in the formation of new Churches: from the ancient monastic institutions to the medieval orders, all the way to the more recent congregations." (Pope John Paul II) (927)

Secular institutes

"A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful living in the world strive for the perfection of charity and work for the sanctification of the world especially from within." (Code of Canon Law, can 710) (928)

By a "life perfectly and entirely consecrated to [such] sanctification", the members of these institutes share in the Church's task of evangelization, "in the world and from within the world", where their presence acts as "leaven in the world". "Their witness of a Christian life" aims "to order temporal things according to God and inform the world with the power of the gospel". They commit themselves to the evangelical counsels by sacred bonds and observe among themselves the communion and fellowship appropriate to their "particular secular way of life". (929)

Societies of apostolic life

Alongside the different forms of consecrated life are "societies of apostolic life whose members without religious vows pursue the particular apostolic purpose of their society, and lead a life as brothers or sisters in common according to a particular manner of life, strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions. Among these there are societies in which the members embrace the evangelical counsels" according to their constitutions. (930)

Consecration and mission: proclaiming the King who is coming

Already dedicated to him through Baptism, the person who surrenders himself to the God he loves above all else thereby consecrates himself more intimately to God's service and to the good of the Church. By this state of life consecrated to God, the Church manifests Christ and shows us how the Holy Spirit acts so wonderfully in her. And so the first mission of those who profess the evangelical counsels is to live out their consecration. Moreover, "since members of institutes of consecrated life dedicate themselves through their consecration to the service of the Church they are obliged in a special manner to engage in missionary work, in accord with the character of the institute". (931)

In the Church, which is like the sacrament - the sign and instrument - of God's own life, the consecrated life is seen as a special sign of the mystery of redemption. To follow and imitate Christ more nearly and to manifest more clearly his self-emptying is to be more deeply present to one's contemporaries, in the heart of Christ. For those who are on this 'narrower' path encourage their brethren by their example, and bear striking witness "that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes". (932)

Whether their witness is public, as in the religious state, or less public, or even secret, Christ's coming remains for all those consecrated both the origin and rising sun of their life:

"For the People of God has here no lasting city,... [and this state] reveals more clearly to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age, witnessing to the new and eternal life which we have acquired through the redemptive work of Christ and prelude our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom." (Vatican II, the Church) (933)

IN BRIEF

- **The life consecrated to God is characterised by the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, in a stable state of life recognised by the Church. (944)**
- **Already destined for him through Baptism, the person who surrenders himself to the God he loves above all else thereby consecrates himself more intimately to God's service and to the good of the whole Church. (945)**

