

Ressourcement and Aggiornamento

Religious Life: A Sacrament
of Exemplary Christian Living

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In 1969, French theologian Yves Congar, who had been influential at the Second Vatican Council, wrote (in a personal communication): ‘The theology of religious life still remains a huge construction site, despite all the contributions made at Vatican II’.¹ After remarking on the importance of baptism as the fundamental consecration in anyone’s Christian life and the theme of following Christ, pursued with special intensity by religious, Congar said: ‘It is above all its sign value that links religious life to the universal vocation of the people of God. Religious life, precisely according to its reality as a sign, should reveal to the church its true nature’.² In presenting here the theology of *Perfectae Caritatis*, the council’s Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life,³ I shall follow Congar’s lead. How are religious in the church signs both for the church and for the world?

Before the council, religious were remarkable in the eyes of the faithful first of all for their distinctive habits. Most of them wore antiquated costumes that designated their wearers as a category set apart. Religious at the time felt obliged to underline their differences with ordinary lay Christians. It was common to refer to religious life as being a ‘state of perfection’, meaning a category or class of people within the church whose vows and structures rendered them better than others.

In the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (43), however, the council pointed out that the religious state ‘is not to be seen as a middle way between the clerical and lay states of life’.⁴ That was precisely the way most Catholics saw things and the way many today (even in the hierarchy) continue to see them. *Lumen Gentium*, however, says that Christians who are laity and others who are clergy are both called to witness to Christ in religious life according to the special charism that has been given to them. Remaining what they were—clerics or lay—their lives are marked by a special ecclesial grace. What precisely is that grace?

VATICAN II'S DECREE *PERFECTAE CARITATIS*

The council's document about religious life explicitly articulates the two complementary aims set for the council by Pope John XXIII, namely, *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, *i.e.*, going back to original sources and bringing things up to date.⁵ Its goal was to achieve renewal (*accommodata renovatio* in the Latin text) by means of going back to the foundations (*reditus ad fontes vitae christianae*).

Paragraph 2 of *Perfectae Caritatis* says that renewal in religious life will entail both 'a constant return to the sources of the Christian life in general and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes' and in addition 'their adaptation to the changed conditions of our times'. These fundamental points needed to be made in 1965, the year the decree was promulgated, precisely because they were not then universally or even generally operative in the experience of religious.

Many religious whose institutes had been founded for specific evangelical or charitable ministries had become entrenched in running Catholic schools or, if clerical religious, coopted for parish ministry. Adaptation to the times was less common than the habitual appeal to custom. As principles for renewal, both *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* were potent wellsprings of dynamic change.

The opening lines of *Perfectae Caritatis* refer directly back to the council's Constitution on the Church, making it clear that the decree on religious life took the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* as its point of departure. Some important principles in the constitution have implications for understanding all Christian life and must be understood if we are to grasp the message of *Perfectae Caritatis*. The organizing theme for the Constitution on the Church is that the faithful constitute for humanity a visible sign or 'sacrament' by living in ways that embody the gifts of the Holy Spirit (LG 1,9). Through baptism, all the faithful are 'regenerated', reborn, into a solidarity with Christ so profound that their lives express Christ's heavenly priesthood through the sacrifices and activities that they live out in all areas of their life (LG 10,34). Accordingly, 'all Christians, in whatever state or walk of life, are called to the fulness of Christian life and the perfection of charity' (LG 40).

So there are not some states of life (clerical and religious) that offer human beings a chance for holiness and another (lay) state of life that offers only a kind of indifferent piety. All the baptized are equally members of the Body of Christ, the source of all holiness. There is a

fundamental solidarity between religious and laity, not radical separation. Consequently Christians who are called to religious life ‘draw still more abundant life from the grace of their Baptism’ (LG 44). Baptism is the root or matrix for every expression of divine gifts. This is a fundamental principle for the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

LG (44) says explicitly that the profession of religious vows constitutes a sign meant to inspire all members of the church to fulfill their own call to discipleship. Further, religious life ‘offers a closer imitation and abiding representation...of the way of life that the Son of God made his own’ (*ibid.*). Although religious vows (or the public profession of the evangelical counsels) does not place someone within the church’s hierarchy, these vows are ‘absolutely’ an integral part of the church’s life and holiness. The church would experience a void without the witness of religious women and men in its midst as a living sign of its call to holiness.

That background is presupposed for the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. In its opening paragraph, PC identifies ‘perfect charity’ as the goal of every Christian life. However, perfect charity is achieved more readily and deeply by those who take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience as their pledge of commitment to the evangelical counsels. Accordingly, ‘perfect charity’ has a particular relation to religious life, serving as the aim or goal toward which a life of fidelity to the vows is directed.

We should note two things about this phrase, ‘perfect charity.’ First, perfection in charity is the aim of all the baptized, as LG 40 articulated, not of just a few among the faithful. Second, the perfection of charity exists completely only in Christ himself, the head of the body of the church; his own divine charity is shared with those who follow him as disciples and participate in his life and mission. That explains why this paragraph of the document moves quite naturally into identifying the essence of religious life as discipleship, namely, following Christ more freely and imitating him more closely.

Perfect charity is found in God’s love revealed to us by Christ through his incarnation. Therefore, from the earliest times, there have been persons in the church who have dedicated their lives to God in order to imitate Christ more closely by practising the evangelical counsels. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, some became hermits and others founded religious families, bringing forth ‘a wonderful variety of religious communities’ (PC 1). They bind themselves to the Lord in a special way in order ‘to follow Christ virginal and poor’ and imitate his ‘obedience unto death on the cross’. They live more and more for Christ and

seek to offer their entire lives along with him. A bit later, PC 5 describes this oblation of self as a sharing in Christ's self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit. Religious, therefore, 'follow Christ ... regarding this as the one thing necessary'. Like all who are baptized, religious are called to discipleship. Distinct from others, however, religious make discipleship the focus of their lives, usually in communities entirely dedicated to being conformed to Christ's generative love (perfect charity).

The tone, even the wording of the decree is fundamentally biblical. By focusing upon discipleship as the underlying reality of religious life, the decree takes us back to the graphic images of the gospels and to Jesus' call to his first disciples. The existential reality here is the inner, personal response of individual persons to the personality and the teaching of Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit. By acknowledging the similarity between the call to discipleship of religious and that extended to all the faithful, the decree expresses the original intuition of *Lumen Gentium's* ecclesiology, that the church exists after the fashion of a sign or sacrament that operates for the benefit of her own members as well as for the benefit of humanity. In this sense, religious life constitutes a sign and dynamic representation for the church's faithful of what a totalizing response to the call to discipleship looks like. This was the point emphasized by Congar in the letter cited above.

There are many different religious institutes, clerical and lay. In the spirit of St Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, *Perfectae Caritatis* (8) indicates that the inspiration and mission of each institute is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The decree recognizes that religious life is a charism, a free gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. Consequently, the criterion for the authenticity of the institute's life will always be its attention to the spirit of the founder or foundress and a return to the apostolic and spiritual inspiration given to the institute at its point of origin. This use of the theology of charisms is a central concern of the decree, and we need to understand the implications of using it.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS A CHARISMATIC GIFT

The source text that underlies this teaching is particularly 1 Cor 12:4,7f.: 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' All these gifts from God have a common origin, and they also have a common purpose, namely, building up the ecclesial body of Christ. Nonetheless, the variety of gifts is plentiful and their diversity stems from the

Holy Spirit's initiative. Even though some gifts or charisms are unusual, like prophecy or healing, most are evidently intended for the ordering and development of the community, like preaching, teaching, and administration. Furthermore, we should not forget that here in 1 Corinthians, the greatest of the charisms is love—the imitation of Christ's perfect charity.⁶

As a consequence of opting for a theology of charisms, the decree transfers the frame of reference for religious life from law to grace, from rules to charisms. In fact, religious life takes its origin not in directives from the church's hierarchical centre, but from its charismatic periphery.⁷ It is Anthony of the Desert, Benedict, Francis, Clare, Dominic, Angela of Merici and others like them who first brought religious institutes into being. They often had to struggle with the hierarchy to have their initiatives accepted and embraced by the church's centre. Such charisms often represented a corrective mechanism in the life of the church to help it reclaim its spiritual vocation, its evangelical mission, or its ministries of mercy. These charisms come *from* the Spirit, not *through* the hierarchy. Reclaiming the theology of charisms, as Vatican II has done, is an antidote to the suffocating centralization of the church in its central powers that made ecclesial life at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries so narrow and restrictive.⁸

God is completely free in distributing charisms for building up the church. This mystery of divinely given charisms has a long history. The New Testament is emphatic that Jesus received the Spirit's gifts to make his human faculties ready to express the mighty works of God: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power... [H]e went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38). Likewise, those anointed by the Spirit in baptism become apt vehicles to express the Spirit's gifts. Perhaps the compelling question for our age is whether the church's leaders are as ready to receive the Spirit's gifts as God is ready to bestow them on the faithful.

In the church's practice, some charisms (such as celibacy) have been prescribed for those holding ordained ministry in the western church (since the 12th century). Other charisms (such as preaching) are presumed to be conferred along with ordination. Is it the Holy Spirit's will that these charisms be institutionalized or prescribed in this way? Is this discipline working out in practice for the good of the faithful? Many in the church today truly wonder about that.

For religious, living the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience offers the church a model of following Christ with total dedication (*cf.* PC 12, 13, 14). Through the vow of chastity, religious meet Christ in his *kenosis*—his setting

aside of his privileges as God's eternal Son—so as to give himself to the world. By chastity, religious undertake a life-long effort to place their lives at the service of others, as Christ did, out of love for him. Voluntary poverty is a strong sign of their desire to share in the poverty of Christ, whose self-denial made possible his communion with the spiritually and materially poor of this world. By the vow of obedience, religious imitate Christ's obedience—even unto death (Phil 2:8)—for the sake of listening to the call of the gospel above all else and of making the body of Christ – as it is realised in their communities – the centre of their lives. These charisms are transformative gifts of the Holy Spirit meant for the visible enrichment of the whole church.

Until *Perfectae Caritatis*, religious life, which was not characteristically thought of as a charism before Vatican II, was highly regimented. It was treated as a responsibility of the church's hierarchy, rather than a gift of the Spirit. The change in perspective wrought by the council's decree on religious life can be seen in Canon 586, §1: 'For individual institutes there is acknowledged a rightful autonomy of life, especially of governance, by which they enjoy their own discipline in the church and have the power to preserve their own patrimony intact ...' This 'autonomy' signifies especially that those who enjoy the gift of the institute's charism are the ones who are best able to understand its meaning and adapt its ways to changing times.

Lumen Gentium 12 is the foundation for the council's theology of charisms. It teaches that the Holy Spirit is given to each of the faithful, enriching them with spiritual gifts that should be received with thanksgiving. While those who have charge over the church should judge these charisms, 'it is especially their office not to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good'. The council's decree on the apostolate of lay people (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) goes further, saying that the Holy Spirit allots special gifts to the faithful for the church's mission in the world and that the faithful have a right and a duty to use them 'in the freedom of the Holy Spirit 'who chooses where to blow' ... (AA 3). In the case of religious, *Perfectae Caritatis* clearly intended to remind religious institutes of the radical importance of staying rooted in their founding traditions and focusing on the mission for which they were founded.

AGGIORNAMENTO—FACING UP TO A WORLD OF CHANGE

As noted earlier, another theme also runs throughout the decree, namely,

‘adaptation to the changed conditions of our time’ (PC 2). This mandate is reiterated in various phrasings: ‘the manner of life, of prayer and of work should be suited to the physical and psychological conditions of today’s religious’ (n. 3), competent authorities within the institutes should provide the ‘norms for up-to-date renewal and...legislate for it’ (4), ‘their way of life should be revised in accordance with ... principles and criteria of up-to-date renewal’ (7), ‘... adapt their lives to modern requirements’ (10); and so on in paragraphs 16, 17, 19 and elsewhere. Paragraph 20 adds a note of purpose when it says that the missionary spirit must be adapted to modern conditions ‘so that the preaching of the Gospel to all nations may be more effective.’

In 1965, when *Perfectae Caritatis* was promulgated, the meaning of *aggiornamento*—or adaptation to modern conditions—did not seem all that mysterious. There were obviously burdensome and redundant practices in some monastic or mendicant orders, like the recitation of multiple liturgies of the hours (for example, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin in addition to the Divine Office), or in more modern institutes a multiplicity of litanies or other devotions that were tedious and out-dated. Some institutes had been waiting for years for encouragement to modify their religious habit. Some semi-cloistered institutes of women engaged in apostolic work, especially teaching, needed to be relieved of restrictions upon their movements for the sake of their ministry. PC 4 articulated the need for ‘sufficient prudent experimentation.’

With changes in religious life, however, as with changes in the church’s pastoral life, conservative forces in the local church as well as centralizing forces in the Vatican found the degree of experimentation, innovation, and adaptation that ensued startling and upsetting. Following the council, religious women particularly took daring initiatives to serve the poor, enter new mission fields, and collaborate in direct pastoral activities in parishes. In many cases, they judged that they would be more effective and more credible as witnesses to a living gospel by adapting their lifestyle, their dress, and their domicile to be closer to those whom they served. It takes little imagination to understand these decisions in terms of the New Testament themes of self-emptying, identification with the poor, and serving rather than being served (*cf.* PC 5).

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

In *True and False Reform in the Church*, Yves Congar speaks of the

complementary role of the church at the centre (the pope and the Vatican) and the church at the periphery. Fresh ideas often start at the periphery: reform initiatives and pastoral responses to human needs, including new forms of religious life. These new beginnings are the expression of charisms given to the church for its strengthening and its growth. This is the source of new life and often of correction and healing for ecclesial sclerosis. The church's hierarchy has the responsibility to foster the unity of the universal church and to bring these initiatives that arise in the far-flung regions of the church into the structural framework of the church.⁹ But it also has the responsibility to foster them and to welcome and harmonize their contribution to the church's renewal.

Too often the 'periphery' is not aware of the church's theology of charisms or of its own role in bringing about needed adaptations to changing times. Today people who might have been agents of renewal are walking away from their parishes and dioceses because they do not understand their potential to respond to what they experience as hopeless situations. Likewise, too often the 'centre' is unprepared to welcome pastoral or spiritual initiatives for what they are, eruptions of spiritual gifts into the taken-for-granted sphere of habitual practices.

Perfectae Caritatis was written in the perspective of a fundamentally biblical, New Testament ecclesiology. It is a document that still contains powerful insights about the nature of the church and especially about the role of those who are called to religious life. The points emphasized here, the sign value of lives lived in loving solidarity with others and the deep relational gift of a charism received directly from God's Holy Spirit, could not be more contemporary. The function of religious life is above all to signify what ecclesial life at its best really looks like.

De facto, the theology of *Perfectae Caritatis* has been encoded in the Canon Law of the Church, especially Canons 573-746, and in a whole series of apostolic letters and curial documents.¹⁰ The present life of the church leads me to believe, however, that there is much contained in the decree worthy of further interpretation and careful application. The reception of this seminal decree goes on.

1. Letter to Sr M. Frebet, OP, dated 20 March 1969, and sent from the Saulchoir.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Abbreviated hereafter as PC.

4. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) of Vatican II—abbreviated later as LG.

5. Gerald O'Collins, SJ, "Ressourcement and Vatican II" in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford University Press, 2012), 373.
6. Paul's letters provide three lists of charisms, given in 1 Cor 12-14, Rom 12:6-8, and Eph 4:4-11.
7. See Edward J. Malatesta, SJ, "Charism" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Liturgical Press, 1993), 140-143.
8. See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, transl. Paul Philibert (Liturgical Press, 2011), 237f., esp. 240.
9. Congar, *op. cit.*, 237-264.
10. See especially *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971), *Mutuae Relationes* (1978), and *Vita Consecrata* (1996).

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