

**INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS FOR CONSECRATED LIFE 2004
PASSION FOR CHRIST, PASSION FOR HUMANITY**

Consecrated Life in the 21st Century

**“Caritas Christi urget nos”
2 Cor 5:14**

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INTRODUCTION: a little history

The idea of this Congress came up in 1999 in a meeting of the men’s USG Executive Council. They were looking for an effective system for communicating with the CICLSAL (Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life) and a way to network with the national conferences of religious men and women in order to reflect together on “Mutuae relationes”.

The USG decided to propose this project to UISG ([Women’s]International Union of Major Superiors), because it recognized the importance of the two Unions’ having a greater collaboration between them, especially if they want to have greater weight and influence.

We can say then that the fact that the two Unions discover and feel the need to reflect together on important topics and the desire for greater collaboration between them and at other levels was at the root of this big project.

Thus this joint venture began, the first in the history of the two Unions. It is true that there was the Congress of the Young Religious in 1997, but there had never been a congress among general superiors and presidents. At the beginning we didn’t see clearly how things would develop, but thanks to a good number of meetings and a good dose of work the Congress started taking shape. However, before making the decision, an early contact was made at the end of 2001, with some general superiors (m and f), presidents of conferences and theologians to have an initial opinion and reaction regarding the proposal to organize and hold a Congress.

Reflection and research characterized the process of preparation, as well as an extraordinary collaboration not only between the two Unions, but also with a good number of congregations which offered personnel to do the work; thanks to them and their work the Congress could be accomplished successfully and effectively.

What will I share with all of you?

I decided to present, as though it were a film, the process we experienced, beginning at the start, the remote and immediate preparation, and concluding with the Congress itself. It’s a way to let you know the objectives, the Working Paper, the process, etc. At the end I’ll say a word on the 25 work groups whose reports, along with the written text by a commission (the commission of “listeners”) prepared in the evenings of the Congress, make up the fruit of the Congress, in my opinion.

1. Preparation

A. remote preparation

What do I call remote preparation? All the reflection and research put into motion by the two Unions, and which led the Central Congress Commission, made up of presidents, vice-presidents and secretaries of the two Unions, to take concrete steps and begin organizing the most important commissions concretely.

What were we looking for?

We wanted a world congress, something different from what had been celebrated until now. A Congress in which the richness of diversity would be present, and we could thus listen to the different voices. We wanted a participative Congress, in equality and reciprocity between women and men, and among the different cultural and generational realities of consecrated life. For this reason the participants would not be only general superiors, but also presidents of national and continental conferences, theologians, directors of centers and magazines and some young people. As one person expressed well in one of the many meetings, it was important that there be present:

- The experience and wisdom of those in leadership,
- The intuition and creativity of those who seek, reflect and write, and
- The dream and enthusiasm of the very young.

With this in mind we created a first commission, the “visioning group” (six persons from different congregations) with the purpose of doing a reflection to see what might be the objectives of the Congress, the content, the theme and the process. With the passing of time and together with the central commission, things were being modified and molded, but it is to them that we owe all the early work.

The *central objective* that would serve as compass for the entire preparatory work and during the Congress itself was formulated in three stages:

1. Identify *what is new*, what the Spirit is bringing to birth among us,
2. Discern *to what* the Spirit is leading us, and how far She/He is bringing us
3. Suggest *how* to respond in a new way to the challenges of our time, and thus build the Reign of God “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7).

This objective will then later develop into *partial objectives*:

1. to verify the present situation of consecrated life,
2. become aware of the co-responsibility of the two Unions and of the Conferences in the animation of consecrated life,
3. discover, welcome and strengthen what is new: signs of vitality, prophecy...
4. create a spirit and a practice of communion in the Church and in the world...

In other words, the objective of the Congress would be: **Recognize** the action of the Spirit in the today of consecrated life, **discern and express** what God is saying to us and encourage each other **to act together** with a renewed passion for Christ and for humanity. This objective was given in writing to the participants, all found it written on a sheet with their full name.

But to accomplish any objective a *process* was needed (I will talk about this when I treat the more immediate preparation) and a *spirit*. No 8 of the Working Paper expresses it beautifully:

We desire that the “spirit” of the Congress inspire all the components...”

This spirit is expressed in four verbs:

- Welcoming,
- Transforming,
- Beginning anew,
- Celebrating.

Does this spirit not speak to us or remind us of Pentecost? And Pentecost caused a change. Pentecost had a first evolution which questioned and upset many, confronted and inconvenienced others, and provoked refusal in some. The way for living the first did not sow indifference; it led to beginning a practice and celebrating life. It was not a linear evolution, but a change that today we would call paradigmatic, signalling a break between the past and the present. Will the Congress have been a new Pentecost for religious life?

We still lacked the *title and theme*

A reflection and research process led us to decide the Congress title:

Passion for Christ, Passion for humanity.

Why this theme: Passion for Christ, Passion for humanity? Because our world today needs our passion. It needs that passion that led the Son to become incarnate, to live for thirty years contemplating the reality of his time in order to care for, liberate, proclaim, question, celebrate: It needs above all to re-travel the roads of Nazareth. It needs a renewed and twofold passion, the passion for Christ which is one with the passion for humanity, two inseparable passions. The word passion speaks of intensity, something that begins viscerally, but must pass to the heart. The passion of consecrated life cannot be just any passion; it must have a seal and certain specific characteristics: compassion, search for justice, commitment... thence, from this twofold passion the cross themes will spring forth...

There was also need of a *content*. So, four questions were drawn up and sent to different groups and categories: general superiors, presidents, etc., from different parts of the world.

- What are the challenges and opportunities you see for consecrated life at this time?
- What are the signs or indications of newness and vitality that you can identify in consecrated life?
- How would you like religious life to appear in the future?
- What obstacles do you see that hinder newness and vitality in consecrated life today?

I can say that this whole process belonged to what I called remote preparation. Little by little the Congress was taking shape.

B. More immediate preparation

Between the end of 2002 and beginning of 2003 the more immediate preparation began with the creation of various commissions, because to be able to hold a Congress you need many things: participants, finances, besides the content and for everything an organization, a structure and infrastructure that didn't yet exist.

Before moving to the formation of commissions I'd like to say a word about the twofold icon: the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan man. This choice was rather laborious, as far as I was able to hear, but also fruit of a serious reflection and seeking. We needed something inclusive and which would carry the passion for Christ and for humanity. Given the reaction and many comments already written on these two icons, it seems the choice was right on target. Dolores Alexandre in her exposition helped us contemplate and reflect. She suggested that we not be afraid to name our "husbands"; that is, our mistakes, weaknesses, immoderate attachments, fears, which maybe members of general curiae don't have, but which the participants at the Congress surely did (general superior, theologians, presidents...)

Creation of the commissions

Once the "visioning group" had done its mission, its members moved to become members of other commissions being created. It is a way of guaranteeing some continuity in the work. And I must say again that we had a unique experience of collaboration.

I think I am not mistaken if I say that with the creation of the first commission, the Central one, at the end of 2002, the Congress began. This commission decided to meet approximately once every two months and its mission was to offer criteria, seek the icons, choose speakers, approve the

budget and the process, make proposals when it was necessary, etc; that is, always have an overall view of how the preparatory process was developing.

The formation of two more commissions followed, both essential, that of the secretariat which began a whole Herculean work, because it had to start from zero and create the whole infrastructure, and the international theological commission whose mission was to be drawing up the Working Paper, based on the responses received to the four questions sent out. The Paper was born in February 2004. I think I am not erring if I say that it was well accepted; it offered reflection starters, inspired the contents of the Congress and oriented its process.

It's important to say that one of the criteria for the formation of all the commissions and that was kept till the end of the Congress, even if it was a real challenge, was that of have representation from the two Unions. We always looked for a healthy representation of male and female religious life in all the commissions. About 45 persons worked on them: 25 women and 20 men. A unique experience.

There were six commissions, besides the Central Committee and that of the secretariat: the theological one (we had two of them), facilitators and moderators, finances, communications (with the creation of the web page and what that requires), liturgy, environment, and finally that of the publications. There were many volunteers who helped much in every way, for example, with translations; that is, people who were not part of any organized commission.

2. **The Process:** is my second point. So that it can be understood I'll briefly run through the days we had.

Every day had an objective:

First day – Contemplative

Dolores Aleixandre, Spanish, with her conference "*Seekers of wells and roads: two icons for consecrated life*" helped us live in this atmosphere of contemplation and enter into contact with our personal experience. I'll add a word to what I said earlier.

In her exposition she invited us participants to see the two Samaritans as two contemporaries.

As in the Creation narratives of Genesis, she has us attend a presentation in three acts:

- Starts off from an initial story **of want**, chaos and emptiness,
- Contemplates the **creative action** of the Lord on persons and
- Sees their **transformation** at the end of the narratives.

Even though our attention would center on the two icons of the **Samaritan woman** and **Samaritan man**, she invited us to let ourselves be called upon by a third character: the **Scribe** who dialogs with Jesus and who appears under the sign of ambiguity: will he learn to find "*eternal life*" at the spot where the Samaritan man of the parable found it? Will he let himself be formed "*in his image and likeness*" according to the suggestion of Jesus? We don't know what his reaction was; and this open ending allows us to feel ourselves mirrored in him. The imperative that he heard from the lips of Jesus, "*You, go and do likewise*" is a challenge for us today.

There follows a reflection beside the well and a table sharing on:

- What touched you inside while listening to this conference?
- What aspects of these two icons make you reflect deeply?

Little by little creating a whole atmosphere of openness, listening, seeking and discernment.

To enrich and open more horizons, two persons of different continents reacted to three of the four main conferences. They share with the assembly their reflection and what they would have added to them, based on their experience and their culture.

Three questions help to continue to deepen the theme, but now the reflection is put into relationship with the context in which we live and work:

In the context in which you live and work...

- What are you thirsty for?
- What needs do you discover along the way that await answers from us as consecrated persons?
- How do these icons shed light on the contemporary experience of consecrated life and the challenges that come before us?

And as in the process of creation, **“God saw that it was good”**. **End of the first day.**

Second day: a reflection on the socio-cultural reality in continental groups

Joao Batista Libanio, Brazilian, talked to us on *“Impacts of socio-cultural and religious realities on consecrated and religious life from Latin America. Seeking answers.”*

Religious life has three structural elements: the founding experience of God, community life, and apostolic mission.

The perspective of his reflection is that of an analytical, not moralistic, reading in which restrictive aspects are signalled, as well as proposals...

- It is meant to lead to discernment on the reality in its ambiguity, perplexity and paradox.
- It presupposes getting close to the reality, understanding it in its complexity, so as to grasp the historic and structural elements in order to get some clues for response.
- It takes up the four verbs indicated in the Congress Working Paper: welcoming, letting oneself be transformed, beginning a new practice and celebrating.
- Be attentive to the new that is arising as gift of God, as well as that which can blossom in the continuation of the present or come into being unexpectedly.

Following the process of listening, reflection, sharing and discernment 4 questions are offered for discussion in continental groups:

- What are the sociological factors that condition consecrated life on your continent?
- According to your experience, how can these elements influence our passion for Christ, passion for humanity?
- Cite an element that might contribute positively (based on the perspective of your continent) to the passion for Christ, passion for humanity.
- Cite an element that is an obstacle to a passion for Christ, passion for humanity.

To continue to illuminate the discernment, the group that had done a whole work of theological reflection on the reactions and responses to the Working Paper shared the fruit of its work: *“From the Well to the Inn”*. It isn't a matter of a summary of the Working Paper, nor of giving many bits of information or details regarding the answers and reactions. Hundreds of contributions were received, and some have been published in magazines, web pages, etc. The synthesis that they offered us was interpretative. They regrouped suggestions and criticisms in three large groups: *text, context, and pretext*. A transversal and dynamic re-reading -- which we call meta-textual -- will be a help for opening our stories to new horizons and new gospel and charismatic adventures.

New questions for continuing to deepen our reflection and seeking:

- Of these reflections, what found the greatest echo in you?
- Do you want to add anything else? (If so, please write it on the formulary of the table report to add it to the Congress reflection)

After the morning break, Bishop Franc Rodé CM, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL). “*Some challenges for consecrated life today*”.

“And God saw that it was good”. End second day.

Third day

We are continuing to enter more into the process. The reflection would be on: **the today and future of consecrated life. Toward a little synthesis.**

During the morning it was “**the today of religious life**” that interrogated us and on which we reflected. The speaker, Timothy Radcliffe, showed us how September 11 is a symbol of the world in which we live at this beginning of the new millennium.

What should religious life say to this world? The world is marked by a paradox. We are more united than ever by instantaneous communications; and on the other hand, it is world increasingly more divided by violence, all types of violence, and one of them is religious. The factor that provokes the violence is precisely the closeness of the global village. What can religious life say to this close and violent world? And what must this world say to us?

He emphasizes three aspects of this culture:

- There is a crisis of persons out of place. We live in this global village, but on September 11 we discovered a violence that was hidden. How can we religious be a sign of that one family that God wants?
- What kind of future awaits us? September 11 symbolizes the beginning of an era that seems to offer only violence.
- Faced with this reality people are looking for a culture of control, a struggle for hegemony.

In this reality the word of religious life must be a word of hope.

I’ll share with you the questions that guided the reflection of the groups:

- To what extent does this analysis correspond to your experience? What intuitions or alternative nuances do you wish to suggest?
- In the light of this conference and your personal reflections, what signs can consecrated life offer to the world today? In this age of globalization, what changes would allow consecrated life to say its word more influentially, to the society in which we live?

In the afternoon Sandra Schneiders spoke to us of **religious life in the future** and not about the future of religious life.

What understanding of this life can be humanly significant and evangelically effective? This is her first question. She suggests an imaginary structure of consecrated life based on what could be and not on what will be. It is not important when or where consecrated life is lived;, the important thing is that it always be based on the Gospel. It can be lived simultaneously and in different forms according to cultural, social and ecclesiastic contexts which touch, and are touched by it.

Sandra based her exposition on two convictions:

1. Religious life is profoundly Christian
2. It is a form of life in the Church

And again, reflections in the groups, guided by two questions:

- After what has been spoken about up to now during the Congress, how does this conference help you in your reflection? In what way can personal and community witness of consecrated celibacy, lived in a world in full evolution, add something to the reality that was presented?
- Which priorities do you see as essential so that consecrated life can journey oriented toward living an evangelical alternative in the societies of our globalized world? What actions could better stimulate our commitment in favor of this priority?

And God saw that the day had been very beautiful and very good. End of third day”.

Fourth day: dreaming and planning the future

And the 4th day begins, a day that will be spent “*dreaming and planning the future*”, and discerning it in groups.

During the past days we had explored some aspects of the new images that are arising in different parts of the world where cause of God and the poor is lived passionately.

We also discerned the movement of the Spirit who leads us to those new places where we are called to live passion for Christ and passion for suffering humanity and through this same humanity.

We recognize the consecrated life is in a time of searching. This Congress is a unique occasion to listen, discern, dream and give voice to the inspirations of the Spirit who animates us at this moment and will animate us in the future.

On this fourth day of creation we contemplate the world under some angles that challenge and confront consecrated life. The work groups dream and describe the prophetic paths that today a passion for Christ and passion for humanity ask of us.

The group work consisted in:

- Sharing experiences regarding the specific topic, focusing especially on signs of life;
- Identifying the current blocks and obstacles that hinder our living a passion for Christ and passion for humanity;
- Describing the structural changes that must be made in our lifestyles and ministries, in order for those obstacles to disappear.
- Suggesting Scriptural texts that can enlighten this situation and that challenge us to experience transformation;
- Expressing convictions and lines of action that bring us to living the vision.

Each participant indicated her/his first and second preference for group work.

Work groups

I will share something of each work group, just touching on them and so as to whet the appetite.

The final text talks about the “*convictions for deciding to move ahead.*” I decided to copy some paragraphs to give you an idea. It wasn’t possible to study the material, but I think that its richness lies in the fact that it comes from international and inter-congregational groups. There was not much time to draw up texts for each group; some better than others could share on topics that all of us carried inside.

1. JUSTICE AND PEACE AND THE SUFFERING OF HUMANITY

46 Participants: 28 nationalities, 43 congregations

Convinced of the urgent need to globalize compassionate and effective solidarity everywhere that we live and serve, we propose the following:

- Animate the new forms of more international and inter-cultural forms of community life as sign of universal fraternity in Christ in a divided and violent world;

- Consolidate the formation of networks with the JPIC of the USG/UISG, civil society, NGO; UN (Earth Charter, MDGs[Millennium Development Goals])

In our service to the excluded let's not forget that we are not their voice unless we want to collaborate so that their own voice be listened to.

2. INCULTURATION-INCARNATION OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN A PLURI-CULTURAL WORLD

105 participants: 40 nationalities, 90 congregations

...We can say that the dialog with culture belongs to the most profound mission of consecrated life.

Our basic conviction is faith in God's wisdom, who willed to express Himself in different persons through different cultures. We think of it with admiration. Regarding otherness and difference, we feel the need to make dialog our life's journey.

... We can already glimpse some concrete changes. For example, should we not move toward a consecrated life that is more pluri-cultural, inter-congregational and including in certain cases, inter-religious? These communities will need a type of authority that thinks of itself as a service. Young religious can help us advance these ideas.

3. INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOG

24 participants: 16 nationalities, 24 congregations

Some of the convictions and lines of action:

Pluralism is a richness. It is one of the characteristics of today's world.

- We don't have a monopoly on truth. "The Spirit of truth...will guide you to all truth." (Jn 16:13) Even Jesus, in a true dialog opens himself to the reality of the other (cf The meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Mk 7:24-30);
- Openness to other religions is a challenge, a condition for living mission, which from "ad extra" has changed into "ad gentes" and is also "inter gentes".

Lines of action:

- Have on the general level a person responsible for inter-religious dialog, an office for continuing, stimulating...
- Inter-religious dialog must be an integral part of initial and ongoing formation programs. Promote also a solid theological and spiritual formation.
- Learn to do a critical and prophetic reading of mass media.
- The next Congress on consecrated life could be held on the continents.

4. THE ARTS: CREATING AN IMAGE AND EXPRESSING A NEW SONG

7 participants: 7 nationalities, 7 congregations

We are convinced that it is essential to cultivate the arts in communities of consecrated life and respect the artistic gifts of our members. Cultivating the arts and cultivating the gift in artists is an antidote to violence and evil in our world, and is an integral part of action for justice. Our artists will be the ones who will see and say the new and the prophetic.

Dialog between consecrated life and the world must go to a level that is deeper than the level of words. Our artists will give form to that contribution that consecrated life offers for the creation of this new earth through music, painting, glass, stone and words. This communication of beauty will generate joy and life in the midst of violence and death.

5. MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AND THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUES

23 participants: 12 nationalities, 21 congregations

Communication is an essential field in this whole world.

Necessary structural changes

If we wish to communicate with our contemporaries, we must change our mentality and be ready to assume risks that go with entering the world of communications. It is necessary that congregations qualify persons for this field and that they support those who already dedicate themselves to it, trying to make the whole religious family feel involved in this task.

We also need to think and work in collaboration, trying to give to these means financial and personnel resources in each congregation and in the national religious conferences. This will require working with trained laypersons in these fields and offering them support.

It is necessary that members of congregations discover the importance of the media's influence in their lives. We must urgently attend to formation in this respect.

We must show ourselves as we are, with our weaknesses and our strengths. Our principal challenge is to manage to do all this in a language that today's people can understand.

6. FREEING THE PROPHETIC: SOLIDARITY IN A WORLD OF THE EXCLUDED

58 participants: 30 nationalities, 54 congregations

We reaffirm the need of promoting an integral spirituality, nourished by a contextualized reading of the Word of God, which renews us and enables us to accomplish our prophetic mission and create communities that are signs of the Reign, open to hospitality and solidarity with the most indigent.

An inter-cultural dialog, where the voice of consecrated life of the south of the world echoes most strongly, will be a decisive element in formation in consecrated life of the future.

Our congregations' plans must give priority to the struggle for justice. We reaffirm the commitment of consecrated life to the promotion of a culture which truly respects the dignity of the woman and promotes her active participation in society.

We need greater collaboration, based on Baptism and the gifts of everyone, among religious men and women at the service of mission.

7. FREEING PROPHECY: CELIBACY AND LIFE-GIVING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

30 participants: 21 nationalities, 27 congregations

We commit ourselves to doing everything possible to break down the walls that we have built between God and us, and between ourselves and our neighbor, walls of silence and suspicion, of fear and frustration, of prejudice and intolerance.

8. CULTIVATE THE TERRAIN OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

29 participants: 19 nationalities, 28 congregations

We need a radical transformation, to pass from an (exaggerated) professionalism to a more evangelical lifestyle.

Learn to incarnate the Word in our ministries and make the Bible our traveling companion. Let ourselves be evangelized by listening to what the Word means for others. Formation on all levels

must be deeply Biblical in order to be able to face forms of fundamentalism, spiritualism and devotionalism critically.

9. THIRST FOR GOD AND SEARCH FOR MEANING

85 participants: 36 nationalities, 79 congregations

Passion for the Word leads us to passion for humanity.

Listening to the Word creates a climate of interpersonal relationships and is a school for ecumenical and inter-religious dialog.

10. ONGOING FORMATION FOR PERSONAL CONVERSION AND A COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

96 participants: 38 nationalities, 93 congregations

Conviction: ongoing formation (OF) means above all the “active and intelligent openness of the spiritual man and woman who let themselves be formed by life for all their life.

11. CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE

49 participants: 23 nationalities, 49 congregations

The conviction that Jesus is in our midst until the end gives us joy, hope and boldness. It invites us to free ourselves from perishable structures.

The spousal experience with Christ frees us from “our false husbands” (reference to the Samaritan woman) and leads us to take care of our brothers and sisters. It invites us to open our communities widely so that they will be converted into schools of prayer and visible signs of Trinitarian love.

12. COMMUNITY AS MISSION

96 participants: 38 nationalities 93 congregations

Every community is called to evangelize and the best evangelization is the witness of a community formed by members of different cultures, generations and ideologies or mentalities.

Every community needs to talk and share about those communities or ministries that need to die, so that new forms of life can be liberated.

We must enable the new signs of life that are rising, instead of looking at them suspiciously ... inter-congregational, inter-confessional and ecumenical communities.

13. COLLABORATION WITH LAITY

33 participants: 19 nationalities, 32 congregations

We are invited to commit ourselves to processes of transformation:

- At the level of our communities, so they are more open and welcoming;
- At the level of our mentalities, to move from “by means of” laity to “with” laity and finally see, through our institutes, our works and even beyond, that Christ engages all of us;
- At the level of formation, development of the implications of the ecclesiology of communion;
- At the level of structures, integrating the initiative, the autonomy of Christians and the need of some reference to organizations, giving space to new needs for reflection and agreement.

14. GOVERNMENT/GOVERNANCE AND AUTHORITY

68 participants: 32 nationalities, 66 congregations

We improve to the extent that we promote all the means that help dialog, proximity and participation between members and leadership. Persons in leadership must first of all be animators rather than administrators. They must be able to free themselves from bureaucracy to concentrate more on their prophetic role: give space to the Spirit who is in the Institute, in order to find new roads; give form to the vision to commit self in the name of the Gospel. Encourage experiences and share their effects with all the members.

15. THE ECCLESIAL DIMENSION OF CONSECRATED LIFE

23 participants: 14 nationalities, 23 congregations

Twenty-five years have passed since the publication of “Mutuae relationes”. We must continue to apply it through the creation or consolidation of structures of dialog at all levels. Mixed committees in the countries, the dioceses, the continents. These structures of dialog must facilitate the dynamisms of communion: information, co-presence, co-participation, co-responsibility.

“And God contemplated all the work accomplished and saw that it was good; we were not looking for perfection, but dialog, mutual listening, wanting to live the two-fold passion that must always impel us: passion for Christ, passion for humanity”. End of the fourth day.

Fifth day: articulating/planning the future

We listened to the work of the groups. After every four groups there was time for table sharing of reactions, impressions, joys and perhaps frustrations.

In the afternoon a mixed commission of theologians of different countries of the world, the “listeners”, shared what they had been drawing up during night-time hours.

And as the 5th day ends, Brother Alvaro Rodríguez closed the Congress talking to us about the “*Enchantment of consecrated life.*” He shared a series of elements that “enchant”, like “the freshness of the centrality of Jesus”, the “power of mission”, “the rending cry that asks for humanness”, etc. And he ends with an appeal to invent, renovate and advance, defenseless. These have been days in which this “enchantment” has been tasted.

Also on this last day, Bishop Rodé returned to visit us and read for us the *Pope’s message*.

But it wouldn’t be right to end without highlighting the importance that the times of prayer had, some shorter, some longer. They were moments in which we prayed together to our Creator God, offering him the work and opening ourselves to his action. They were existential and contemplative moments that awakened again the passion for Christ and passion for humanity.

What was prophetic in this Congress?

For me, the fact that it was possible to celebrate it was prophetic. Eight hundred and forty-seven consecrated persons coming from all the world, belonging to about 300 or more congregations, reflected together on that which fills their life: the deep desire to live a Passion for Christ and Passion for humanity.

The collaboration, the listening, the respect was prophetic.

The fact that it was a Congress of equals was prophetic; all were there not in their usual roles, but as persons. Superiors, presidents, theologians, young people, directors, all equal, all brothers and sisters who listened to each other with one same ideal.

“And God saw that everything was very good. Go, multiply, fill the earth and do not stop sharing with all creation what you have experienced.”

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON CONSECRATED LIFE 2004

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Principles and prospects

Bro. Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverría

Sister Victoria presented for us a very exhaustive and rich summary of our Congress. In this second part I would like to reflect aloud on some contents that struck me most, personally, starting off with the primary objective that we treated and that the Working Paper expressed with these words: “...to discern together,...what the Spirit of God is bringing about among us,...how we can respond to the challenges of our times, thus building the Reign of God..” I believe that this is the greatest wealth that we have experienced here, because we can say that the Spirit has assisted us and opened new horizons for us. Although the Spirit is as unpredictable as the wind and we don't know where the Spirit comes from and goes to, we have listened to her/his murmuring voice in the voice of the signs of the times and places, which we sought to discern in communion of faith and prayer.

For this reason I will use the summary made by the “listeners” at the end of the Congress and my final words, which were intended to be a personal summary of what struck me most, what motivated me and touched my heart. These two documents open for us some future prospects, because our Congress cannot simply be considered a finished event, but must be, first of all, an inspiration to build a future attuned to what the Spirit asks of us today and that best responds to the needs of our contemporaries, especially those who need us most. Certainly, we are talking about a big challenge, especially today when we feel our poverty and limitations more than in other times, convinced, however, of God's gratuitous love, his unconditional pardon and his presence beside us. It is also a matter of some clues that we must use for support and guidance, so that consecrated life will respond to the challenges calling upon it at the beginning of this new millennium, to what God's people are awaiting and to us who belong to it, and so that it will make us witnesses of the new humanity manifested in Jesus Christ.

1. “ENCHANTMENT and DISENCHANTMENT”

Before going on, let's clarify the terms at the center of the reflection I am about to illustrate.

It seems to me the biggest challenge we face is that of restoring to Consecrated Life all its enchantment. The word “enchantment” is connected to all that generates contagious joy, strong attraction, gentle freshness and stimulating optimism. It unleashes grace and liking, imagination and creativity. By its nature it brings out strength, enthusiasm and desire.

The attraction and interest that “enchantment” implies – as part of the “good” – is passed on by itself and when one perceives it, it invites to be received and shared. More than with speculative investigations, we can understand what it is and what “enchantment” means in the sense which we intend, in the attraction that Jesus produced in his early followers. His person released what Jeremiah prophesied in speaking of his vocation, an irresistible “*seduction*”, which the prophet described as “*violent*”, to express all the power with which it came. When the disciples felt attracted by Jesus, it didn't bother them to leave everything they possessed to follow him, but their life turned completely upside-down. Since Jesus was the incarnation of the “*good*”, Peter, to present him to the Jews on the day of the resurrection, found only these words: “he went about doing good” (Acts 10:37). So, his person and his message were attractive in themselves for those who understood it. The likeability and enchantment that Jesus manifested did not require an act of will by his listeners; it was something more and less at the same time. In Him the “*image of the*

invisible God” (Col 1:15) was reflected. And those who grasped it “*were capable of becoming children of God*” (Jn 1:12). This is the rational and logical process based on the very nature of things, not on imposition or rules. When someone attracts and fascinates, it is natural that there be this response.

The opposite of “enchantment” is “disenchantment”. And all that generates frustration, monotony, disillusionment. Those who are or feel they are in this situation in some way, take on the attitude of “*letting pass*”, to the point of placing decisions which one should make personally into others’ hands. “*Disenchantment*” produces annoyance; it is the tomb of illusions and leads one to regret the option they made one day.

2. SIGNS OF “DISENCHANTMENT”

We are living in an extremely complex and varied post-industrial time. The world has become digitalized and globalized. It seems that *pessimism* and *disenchantment*, fed by current social and political problems, have taken over humanity at this time and that we have to agree with philosophers of this trend. What was considered the illness of the 19th century not only has not been subdued, but has become stronger and more deeply rooted. Just to give an example: Schopenhauer, considered an inveterate fatalist, an irascible old man and despondent thinker, prophet and theorist of *pessimism*, gets to the point of saying that “*all life is suffering*”. In Nietzsche’s thinking the most horrendous genocides find justification and he gets to the point of calling the soul-body duality an “anti-philosophical vulgarity”. It is difficult to reach a greater pessimism or negativity, because the person becomes destroyed.

2.1. In society

Persons who *do not count*, or in more realistic and expressive terms, who *provoke discomfort*, have multiplied, mainly because of the neo-liberal system which leads to exclusion, violence, poverty, marginalization and irrational deterioration of nature. Added to this is the de-personalization and ruining of human relationships and of all humanness. The tendency toward consumerism has spread with such force that it prevails over values like personal dignity and living together. At the same time that the world is being transformed into a “*global village*”, fundamentalism, individualism and regionalism are increasing. It is useful to mention that in order to be able to situate ourselves; and to understand that the *disenchantment* and *pessimism* that are gaining strength everywhere also touch religious life. A life which, instead, we must hold in “*enchantment*”, so that it will be a sign of hope and something new: “*Also...in the simple day to day living...consecrated life progressively matures to become the proclamation of an alternative way of living to that of the world and the dominant culture.*”

2.2. In the Church

Disenchantment, expressed in many forms, has also crossed the threshold of the Church, which is afflicted by the evil that would now qualify as “*pandemic*”. There’s nothing strange about this because, as Vatican Council II says, “*journeying with humanity, it (the Church) experiences the earthly lot of the world*”. Consequently the Church is touched in some way by whatever happens in the world, - even though it is manifest differently in Her -, and by other causes that come into existence within the Church for many different reasons.

The complex situation of *disenchantment* seems reflected in an internal crisis that shows up in many ways. We all see the discomfort of groups and persons inside or outside the Church, because of the way She responds to world problems, the complaints regarding authority and how it is exercised, the growing centralism, dogmatism and legalism, which are often burdensome and do not let

persons express and manifest themselves freely. The complaints do not come only from groups or circles hostile to the Church, or who wish to impose unlimited laicism, systematically opposing Church doctrine and teaching. These come especially from within. Even the Pope speaks of “the darkening of hope”, as one of the most disturbing current signs. Pointing out these facts is not to accentuate the gloom, but is only a simple observation, for the purpose of collaborating toward consecrated life’s concerted efforts toward overcoming this disease and rendering the message of Jesus attractive and pleasant, while renewing itself and becoming attractive and optimistic.

2.3. In Consecrated Life

Consecrated life “*is in the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission*”. This does not exempt her from the global crisis that we are suffering. Various studies on this topic, it seems, instead of attributing it to bad will, to adaptation to present society and to lack of conviction about our being consecrated, stress the fact that we are at the end of a model that no longer responds to the times we are living and that we need to change course. Observing in the symptoms that afflict consecrated life at this time a sign of infidelity and decadence is “*to lack of a sense of discernment and measurement*” and to be “*prophets of misfortune*”, as John XXIII said, referring to those who saw only problems in the Church of pre-conciliar times.

Along with John XXIII, applying to religious life what he said about the Church, we must say that “*among the many shadows, quite a few indices make us conceive a hope for better times*”. For example, persons full of ideals and enthusiasm who embrace and stay in religious life because they consider it a valid instrument for the building of the Reign and it gives meaning to their life; the communities inserted into marginalized and poor areas, who participate in the same suffering and hopes of the poor; the presence of religious in places where there aren’t other pastoral agents, etc... What we need is to note clearly that “*a new order is being born*”, that it requires new answers, not just reforms; and that, what is exception now must become general rule.

Changes are always slow and difficult, much more so when we are dealing with collectivity. The current instability of religious life and the process of searching to “*start a new practice*”, also involve a certain “*disenchantment*”. There are many signs, both on the personal and community levels. The Congress’ Working Paper (*hereafter WP*) speaks of “*obstacles that hinder, retard or slow down the impulse of the Spirit*” and derive “*from ourselves, from the Church and from the world in which we live.*”

In our life as religious, we have all had experiences that we recall nostalgically. We’ve known persons and communities of a special *attraction* which enchanted us and made a strong impact on us. The centuries-old and admirable history of religious life contains magnificent and marvelous pages in all congregations and of many individual religious. With their presence and activities they made religious life supremely attractive; these religious had a great social impact and their valor has been officially recognized. Now it is time to ask ourselves: What happened to make this contagious *enchantment* disappear in greater or lesser degree? Surely, I don’t want to generalize and I want to give testimony of persons and communities that we can describe as “*enchanters*”. However, this does not seem to be the case, generally. Suffice it to see the scarcity of novices in both male and female institutes.

Perhaps we could say that it is a sociological phenomenon, because in countries of Catholic minorities and difficult economic conditions, vocations abound. It is certain that, with this reasoning, it is easy to confuse sociologic and Gospel vocation. However, when someone “*enchants*”, the causes that produce such a reaction are common and overcome cultural circumstances, even though they are expressed in them.

The challenge is for all, men and women religious. How to make the “maturity” of consecrated life possible so that it will be *attractive* and spread a *likeableness*, not only to be admired, but to invite others to commit themselves to it, call attention to it, seduce, and above all, be instrument of salvation for the world?

2. - STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS THAT “FASCINATE”

In summary, and very briefly, I’ll quickly indicate some aspects that can contribute toward consecrated life’s recovering its “*fascination*”, and return to being “*the proclamation of an alternative way of living to that of the world and the dominant culture*”¹.

2.1.- The “freshness of the centrality of Jesus

The person of Jesus Christ with his message has been and continues to be the fundamental element of consecrated life. It has never been doubted. The first principle of renewal that the Council proposed says: “*The...renewal of religious life involves two simultaneous processes: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times*”². And it continues explaining the concept with these words: “*Since the fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the gospel, such is to be regarded by all communities as their supreme law.*”³ I think that we have all made extraordinary efforts to recuperate our charisms and the spirit proper to our Congregation, but I am not totally sure that the Gospel is our supreme law.

The two icons that the Congress chose for its reflection, “The Samaritan woman and the Samaritan man,” are a sign of hope of what must occupy first place in every Congregation and Institute. The WP, speaking of the new model of consecrated life that is arising, picks up the invitation of the Council to “*recapture the Gospel as its first norm*”⁴. One could object that the charism serves precisely to clarify the various aspects or the richness of Jesus Christ, whom nothing or no one can embrace in totality. There is a lot of difference, however, between considering as means that which is the end, and end that which is a means.

Everyone knows *the freshness and newness* that the person of Jesus emanates in abandoning the old and claiming the new. He invites us to respond in all times and circumstances, both personal and social, in accord with the spirit of the Gospel, and not with certain pre-established parameters. Here, too, we can apply the words: “*New wine in new wineskins*”. The figure of Jesus in itself arouses *enthusiasm and moves*, more than particular charisms, even though these naturally can help in turning one’s gaze toward Jesus, and toward him they must be directed.

The “listeners” of our way of following Jesus and starting off with the contributions of the work groups, propose to us what they called “the seven virtues for today” and invite us to draw from them the new face of consecrated life:

- Depth: evangelic discernment, authenticity
- Hospitality and gratuitousness
- Non-violence and meekness
- Freedom of spirit

¹ *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 6.

² Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 2a.

⁴ WP, 73.

- Boldness and creative ability
- Tolerance and dialog
- Simplicity: valuing/treasuring poor and small resources

2.2.- The “attraction” of spirituality

The topic of spirituality is related to the preceding topic. The person of Jesus aroused in those who have met and contemplated him, a certain spirituality. Christian spirituality is nothing other than assuming the same spirit of Jesus in order to travel the journey that all persons must make toward God. What road is more captivating for the man and the woman of today? One of the most prominent phenomena of today is the thirst for God which is manifested in the world in a thousand ways and manners, inside and outside the Church. Every human being has a “*passionate (thirst) for living water*”⁵, “*for an encounter with Jesus*”⁶. We must recognize, however, that not all roads lead to God in the same way.

St. John of the Cross says to “scorn” every mediation that places itself between us and God: “...*if left unrejected these sensory things are an impediment to the spirit because they detain the soul and prevent the spirit from soaring to the invisible. This is one of the reasons our Lord told the disciples that it was fitting for him to go so that the Holy Spirit might come (Jn 16:7). And so that Mary Magdalene would ground herself in faith, he refused to allow her to touch his feet after his resurrection (cf Jn 20:17).*”⁷ Should we not perhaps make a substantial change in our style of prayer? In many cases, the formulas and devotions -- which are repetitive and habitual -- have replaced the “freshness” that the encounter with God generates.

The true *mystic* -- like Jesus -- does not lose sight of history; on the contrary he measures himself by it; he integrates his spiritual and religious life with his daily living and with solicitude toward the neighbor; he experiences the world and what lives in it -- persons and nature -- as an extension of himself and ways in which God manifests Himself. Those who experience God in all things, necessarily will act the way Jesus did, including especially the poor in his life and as part of his plans; he will center his existence, the environment around him and society, according to Gospel criteria and will live in simplicity. For this reason the group of “listeners” invites us also to live a new spirituality that integrates the spiritual and corporal, the feminine and masculine, the personal and communitarian, the natural and cultural, the temporal and eschatological, the inter-congregational and inter-generational and accompany us in all that we live and do.

2.3.- The “force” of mission

The attraction of consecrated life, more than in itself, lies in the lifestyle and specific ends of each institute. Their *mission* has written the most beautiful and extraordinary pages of their history. Consecrated life, by its very nature, must not remain closed in on itself, but rather it is called to open itself and dedicate itself, like Jesus, to the service of the very powerless. In addition, “*consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus’ life.*”⁸ To continue and collaborate in the plan of Jesus, the Reign, is the most effective stimulus for voluntarily and joyfully facing the trials and difficulties that the choice of consecrated life brings with it. All this confirms a very common saying “Having a ‘why’, every ‘how’ is possible.” Those who are convinced as religious of the fundamental purpose of their life will overcome every obstacle to reach it; and their joyous,

⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ *Ascent of Mount Carmel II, L.II, Chap 11.7).*

⁸ *Vita Consacrata, 72.*

optimistic and trusting presence will be the best way to communicate to others that this vocation is worth living and gives meaning to life.

The *signs of the times*, read in the light of faith, are the best incentive for awakening *enthusiasm and interest* for mission and, consequently, a renewed and faithful life in following Jesus. Very few times in the history of humanity has there been such a profound crisis of values. But, also, only a few times have we had the opportunity to identify a new model of consecrated life which responds to the challenges that present themselves, keeping in mind the Gospel and personal commitment to put it into practice.

The document “Principles and Prospects” of the “listeners” offers us as one of the sprouts of newness the fulcrum of mission carried out according to our particular charisms and shared; it excites our imagination and launches us into new, bold, prophetic and front-line initiatives in the area of the proclamation of Jesus Christ through inculturation, inter-religious and inter-confessional dialog, the insertion of the option for the neediest and the excluded, and new forms of communication.

2.4.- The “rending cry” of humanness

Among the most worrisome and painful aspects for today’s men and women is the lack of humanness. Violence and terrorism, hunger and marginalization have reached alarming levels. The rending cry for a more just and human world every day becomes louder and at the same time, more attractive, especially to young generations, to respond to and make it more human.

It is obvious that we religious cannot live at the margins of this humanitarian current which generates optimism and hope amid so much pain and suffering. It must become part of our structures, not theoretically, but in practice. We must be the human face of the Church; we must be bearers of life, like the Samaritan man, and dispensers of *humanness* to which the world is so sensitive today: “*Consecrated persons make visible, in their consecration and total dedication, the loving and saving presence of Christ,...(they become) a prolongation of his humanity*”.⁹ On some occasions, structures prevail over the *human values* of which we must be carriers, and we meet some attitudes and a certain rigidity which has nothing to do with the Gospel, nor with a radical following of Christ.

Being *human beings* does not signify making consecrated life “*light*”; instead, it means being capable of always placing the person in first place, before codified norms and certain interests. That has never been easy. True *communities*, however, arise from this; communities where a harmony of spirit and ideals leads to unity and sharing. The WP contains words that perhaps have not been understood and that reflect what we are saying: “*If we do not pay attention to the human substratum that sustains consecrated life, we could easily be building on sand*”.¹⁰ The experiences of founders and foundresses with their collaborators are an example of what we have just said. No law or rule united them, but rather a common ideal and the desire to bring to reality a charism considered advantageous for evangelization and the presence of the Church.

We must not forget, as the document of our “listeners” reminds us, that we are part of humanity. A humanity thirsting for comfort in a world of consumerism and poverty, thirsting for love in the midst of chaos and disordered of love, thirsting for transcendence in a context of political and existential disenchantment. We must be recognized through this human face and not that of the sacred institution (priest, Levite, temple) far from the poor and the pains of humanity or that of a

⁹ *Vita Consacrata*, 76.

¹⁰ WP 40.

wife prostituted to alliances of convenience represented by various husbands, as in the case of the Samaritan woman. For this reason we must let ourselves be called upon by the thirst for meaning, by humanity's pain, by the love and compassion manifested by Jesus toward humanity.

2.5.- The “enchanting” person-structure balance

The person is the reason and center of the Church's mission as Paul VI strongly stated at the end of Vatican II. Morals and human sciences agree in considering the person as the firmest or foundational nucleus of every reality. Everything converges on the person and everything must be considered according to how it can involve the person, help him/her to be fulfilled and to mature. These principles are seen to be implemented in the attitudes and teachings of Jesus. His words: “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27), never had any exception. Also John Paul II, in his first encyclical, considered an organizational document for his pontificate, clearly stated: “*The human person is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself*”.¹¹

Still, in practice, this way is full of obstacles. In our apostolate, we condemn, with reason, the evils of globalization; we ask that every people and individual persons, regardless of their cultures, needs and interests, accept a certain political line, take on determined economic programs which they don't understand and which don't benefit the people, etc. The rationale that we give is that human rights, the culture and individuality of the person are not being respected. These same reasons must also characterize the life and structures of consecrated life. It is easy to lose balance, to forget that each person is unique and unrepeatable and to apply to religious life the “*culture of control*” common in modern society, as T. Radcliffe says.¹²

To maintain the *person-structure* balance, we need to keep in mind also the *decentralization* of consecrated life. The Eurocentric style still predominates, which means that the *inculturation* of consecrated life is a duty still to be accomplished. It is important to respect and value the various spiritualities and the different forms of living consecrated life, even within the same institutes. The community is formed not because all live under the same roof, but because they support the same mission through the specificity and proper culture of each one. In this sense it is necessary to let eastern spirituality and that of emerging continents help us understand the Gospel more deeply, while at the same time also remaining open to enrichment through ecumenical and inter-religious dialog, knowing well with Peter that: “... *God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.*” (Acts 10:34-35)

My attention was alerted strongly by the fact that the comments that the young religious made during the Congress referred precisely to the quality that they look for in community life. I think that that represents a sign of the times that we must look at. Naturally we are talking of a community that gives more importance to relationships than to structures, which harmoniously integrates the personal and the communitarian, which responds to and is open to new forms of poverty and which helps us live Gospel values.

CONCLUSION

Today, more than ever we need to *invent, innovate and move forward free of possessions.* (Gabriel Ringlet)

¹¹ *Redemptor Hominis* 14,a

¹² *Religious Life after 11 September*; 9.

To invent new responses that correspond to social, economic and political changes of peoples where we are rooted, attentive above all to those who remain outside the benefits of globalization, in rich countries as well as in poor ones.

To change our structures of encounter with God, of community life, of the service of our sisters and brothers, of professional life side by side with the seculars.

And to move forward free of possessions, in the following of Jesus and with the fire of his passion. Aware that none of that will be lived authentically if we do not open ourselves, in a stance of conversion, to the powerful action of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit who inflames our heart with the passion for humanity.

To structure consecrated life around the elements indicated is not easy. Probably because they distance us from our securities in order to restore us to our daily life. Let's remember however, that it was here, that the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan man experienced the newness and attraction of Jesus. Starting off from daily life, lived in the style and the spirit of the Gospel, we can restore its "*fascination*" to consecrated life.