

CHALLENGES TO CONSECRATED LIFE

√ starting off from formation/discernment

√ especially of the young generations

(text of presentation)

beppe m. roggia sdb

• a backdrop of reference

a provocative panorama: challenges and opportunities for the *postmodern*

We are in a time of previously unknown conditions: almost overwhelmed by the dimension and rapidity of epochal changes, with the consequent discomfort of not being able to live in tune with our times. We will list only a couple of flashes:

- the **postmodern** is characterized by astounding technological progress and ideological disillusionment: a predominantly fragmentary, yet chaotic and fluid age, with significant cultural and ethic “multivalence”, which impede firm and grounded judgements: a culture of the fragment is affirmed, while the logic of globalization prevails;
- the multiplication of fragments makes it possible to live very different existential situations with rapid psychological, affective, ideological, and religious shifts with the velocity of the world of communications and technology;
- there reigns a refusal of totality (what totality?) as a system, resulting in the collapse of ideologies, faiths, values, and belongings, and the takeover of an incredible indifference to the true, the false, good, evil, just, unjust and the strictly subjective. There follows the difficult balance between subjectivity and objective values. Primacy of the conscience or the flourishing of the sentiments?
- the uniqueness of the person calls for ever new approaches, in which heart and intelligence freely research paths suited to the changed conditions; and so each one moves not by belonging but led essentially by his individuality; so there is a difficult balance between the experiences of subjectivity (priority care of the ego) in respect to the choice and responsibility of belonging to institutions to the evident discomfort of everyone;
- there is a prevalence of technical practicality that signals the triumph of doing over thinking and contemplating, and a scientific knowledge that is increasingly identified with manipulating nature, with all the problematic consequences flowing from that; manipulation that also influences relationships with persons and with God;
- the weakening of one generation is reflected in the shattering of the following one;
- institutions no longer hold up;
- there is a problematic impact in the insertion of the young generations into the gears of adult society (self-marginalization, disillusionment,...);
- there is an obvious sunset of the centrality of the institution as single reference, and a multiplication of addresses, memberships and external and different interests (mosaic membership);
- there is discontinuity of projects because of an ever-decreasing number of persons available and an incapacity of a real, organized work.

This is the situation of industrialized countries. In other continents what similarities and differences are there?

Cultural particularities are forced to give way before the “armed forces” of economic globalization. The traditional philosophical and historical knowledge and the various educational methods, once fortunate and undisputed, today are obsolete and scarcely adequate for interpreting and reading reality, or else, they also push on toward relativism.

The described changes, however, can be read positively or negatively, according to the meaning that you want to give to the key word, which in all of this is ***destructuring***. On the one hand this

expresses the tendency of the postmodern to destabilize certainties, distrusting everything; on the other hand it represents a precious path for unknown studies/learning: dispersion and superficiality, but also liberation and renewal. We will mention a few:

- + in spite of the denial of the whole, each one still must build himself some kind of compass in order to be oriented, relating his position with the whole, trying to give meaning to his existence. Therefore, respect grows for the way with which each one builds value scales based on his experience. So it becomes important then to enrich one's knowledge, in order to reach a capacity for analysis, discernment and synthesis. The whole articulated with a faith that reflects. Experiencing study as a factor of integration;

- + however postmodern culture is evaluated, it claims a "*surplus*" (an abundance) of commitment. Personalist anthropology starts off from an investment of trust: every person possesses a fund of wealth and superabundance, which waits only to be put to good use = *the importance of building oneself in order to build the world* becomes an ever more involving theme in four directions: knowing, knowing how to do, knowing how to be, knowing how to live with others. The human person today cannot be a "being exploded" by an external pressure stronger than the internal one. There are mechanisms for life together inscribed into man and woman which, once freed, can yield social, harmonious cultures. Consequently, the more a person is helped to build himself individually, the more the world will improve;

- + precisely because systems of all kinds are in crisis, the demand for authenticity and coherence between what one believes and what he does is not extinguished. This requires on the educational level a clear passage between mass education and personalized education, in order to concentrate on the unique and unrepeatable mystery of the person;

- + sensitivity before the ecological question grows as a reaction to the manipulation of nature;

- + for the Church and consecrated life the invitation is launched to gather the positive elements of the postmodern for the new evangelization and for a new understanding of the values of Christian life. For a Christian, the way of living human values ought to be positive and attractive, since the Gospel is always humanizing and not mortifying. The challenge between a holy life and a happy life is offered to all, but especially to consecrated religious, imposing upon them a courageous, theoretical and practical re-reading of the way of understanding sacrifice, renunciation and fulfillment. All feel the need to see people satisfied/happy doing what they chose to do, also in their personal vocation, and not men and women sacrificed to ideals greater than self, unable to love themselves and therefore to truly love God and others.

"The life of the Church, with its different ministries and charisms, is called to fulfill at every moment of history and in every circumstance the dual faithfulness to God and to man: faithfulness to God and his living Word, which is always fruitful anew; faithful to man in the concrete, to whom the Word is addressed, calling him in his life situation to an obedience of faith." (FP 1)

acceleration and complexity of vocation fragility

We live in a time of post-modernity, marked by **complexity**; so life has become a kind of jungle without sure directions, characterized by **transition** with exceedingly rapid changes and **globalization** of everything and everyone.

The most problematic knot remains the huge separation between the proposal of faith that believers are trying to present and the culture in continuous evolution, which produces a dangerous relativism especially about vocational clarity and perseverance.

These three realities bring with them some satellite agglomerates like consumerism, which is reflected in the constant search for new experiences which involve the emotional sphere, especially (I feel, I like,...); subjectivism, which assumes its own vision of reality as the only valid measure of everything. These realities, actually, become the predominant culture of the immediate, so that everything must be reached in a short time and with little effort. These experiences impose themselves as shop windows to admire as efficient and valid models of productivity; they exalt the

secularized, self-sufficient person and marginalize the religious one as irrelevant and not meaningful. The only religious area with a right to citizenship, of a rather syncretist style, is a type of emotional panacea for use in some limited moments; therefore, generally, basic religious formation has little influence and does not truly involve the whole person. The person remains self-centered, with the conviction that everything is owed him/her and can easily be obtained based on personal prestige and economic means, and not with long-term toil and perseverance, and, what's more, with a great ethical relativism. Pre-constituted value scales do not exist, and everyone makes his own yardstick for what value to give to things and life experiences.

All of this has significant fallout...

- on civic, church and religious institutions, which besides being weak and not very attractive because of the travail of the era of change, no longer have a significant sign of enjoyment or appreciation, of trust and reference;
- on the family, rather problematic and broken, which see-saws between anxious hyper-protectiveness of their children and a huge absence in their growth and education process, creating strong affective vacuums and a lack of solid reference points;
- on individual persons, especially the young, who turn out to be carriers of the denounced viruses of cultural decay and exacerbated relativism. There is a persistent state of weakness and inconsistency which leads to living in a fragmentary way, for the most part, or in letting oneself sort of be tossed about according to waves of personal moods, the environment, fashion. Their condition then becomes increasingly foundation-less, inconsistent, basically unsatisfactory, with instability of character, entrenchment of childishness, sense of inferiority, superficial behavior and lack of responsibility and realism in daily living. A closing in on self and one's immediate needs. These qualities of fragility are manifested contemporaneously with three perverse attitudes, which increasingly imbed themselves into the person. They can be concomitant or excel particularly in one aspect.

1.1 ***Excessive anchorage in the present moment***, without prospects of hope and, along with a strong unease in living it, because it is made of emptiness, things considered mean, with inevitable apathy and insecurity, because of a lack of solid certainties. Faith life is marginal, immature and lacks a true moral conscience. Prayer is scarce and "routine". An emptiness, that one tends to fill with external things and/or giving ever greater importance to secular values and other interests in respect to religious ones, in order to try to give a plausible and justifying response to what one is living. In this regard, the anxious seeking for recognition is significant...recognitions in the line of educational or professional titles; culturism and youthful appearance; ambitious career. One feels unable to live one's vocation and perceive oneself as called and identified with his/her vocation. The vocation in its total and definitive commitment appears absurd, so one feels out of place and frequently confused. In fact, the vocation is increasingly seen as a strictly private affair, which isn't able to go beyond strictly immediate moods/soul-states.

1.2. ***The restless part of self gets the upper hand*** in ongoing eruption, made up of weak points in one's history and alienations experienced, both in the past and the present; restlessness which leads to drastically reducing the ideals of consecration and mission and giving one's life for them. Especially, the pastoral illusion of being able to amass great successes and the consequent inevitable disappointment over the aridity and sterility felt in one's donation are a remarkable burden on this prevalence of one's dark sides; these easily converge into disinterest, withdrawal and ambiguous behaviors, often of a compensatory affective nature. Besides the lack of a genuine nourished root of belonging to the person of Jesus, there is the permanence of serious personal immaturity never taken seriously or faced adequately, or silenced with various cover-ups.

1.3. *The strong emergence of community difficulties* aggravated by the crisis passing through community today, which often shows little attention to the person and a great deal of tendentiousness, because of a prevailing concern for the apostolic works. Consequently, many expectations and little attention toward others with considerable difficulty with relating deeply. The tendency is to seek a secure nest or gratifying relationships of friendship in community, friendships that will fill the personal lack of insecurity often inherited from the family and groups experiences, and a consequent need for affirmation, approval and support. In fact, there are also those who lean too much on the institution, in a very loyal way and even too docile and deferential, in order to receive identity recognition, which they don't find in themselves. A deaf battle between autonomy and dependence, with the addition of a strong dose of competitiveness, need for respect and cult of the self-image before the sisters/brothers. There follows a depreciation of community life, because it cannot understand and satisfy one's needs for affection and success/fulfillment of dreams. A depreciation and hard criticism, which expand to include every constituted authority and situation, beginning with one's own institute, the Church in general and including civic and social institutions.

Are these only a series of negative elements or is this a reality that calls on us? This reading of a context must be faced, recognizing and accepting that it is hard for us to understand, that we must walk beside the young generations, becoming responsibly aware of the cultural fabric from which they come, without a superficial pre-conceived understanding. The impression is that often our formation communities are suited for the young people of the 1950s. It almost seems that in the person – environment relationship, the latter (environment) is becoming more and more the real person-builder. In fact, there is a fragility of conscience because the environment is replacing the personal conscience.

- **three models of consecrated life**

Up until Vatican II, and also afterward, the strongest model of consecrated life was the so-called **classical model**, which stressed especially the disciplinary aspects, regular observance, uniformity, asceticism... A model that produced many fruits of holiness and apostolic zeal, but which, at the same time ran a great risk of formalism. Then, almost as an opposite alternative, the **liberal model** took over, which brutally relativized the fundamental elements of the preceding model, especially discipline and asceticism, in order to concentrate on the person of the religious, on his/her fulfillment, desires, and his/her many efforts toward apostolic efficiency. The risk, which was more than theoretical, was the abandonment and discarding of contemplative aspects and, consequently, the loss of a religious sense and sense of consecration, reduced mostly to its more functional aspects. These two models, even with undeniable useful contributions, left us at the doors of a profound crisis, in which we are still immersed and fighting. Fortunately, however, we are witnessing also a change in model, thanks especially to, and prompted by, the urging of young religious. A model, truthfully still very young, but which, still, could already be called a **radical model** or model of radical following of the Lord Jesus; a model that is connected with the now very well-known category of refoundation. A radicality of discipleship which requires starting afresh from Christ and from His centrality in the life of consecrated persons. Living without children, without trying to build a career and without one's own money, sharing a communion of fraternity without any bond other than the charismatic one... this is not to conduct a gloomy life and condemn common living, but on the contrary, to shed light on the meaning of living human life with a strong tension toward that Reign which alone can fill human love and which is the only great timeless wealth.

- **a couple of formation proposals... one-directional**

On what observatory is it important to take our position today? Perhaps with the challenge of re-foundation of the consecrated life it may be necessary to bring ourselves back to point zero in order to set up a new formation seriously and ask ourselves:

- what is the dominant concern: adaptation to the Ratio, preparation with study and professionalism, managing the works, quality of consecrated life and happiness of the person,...?
- do we form in view of prospects or on a smoothly-worn path? that is, do we form for trying to resolve only today's problems or project into the future of 2030/2050?
- start off from values or start off from the situation?
- who has to adapt first, in order to reach a point of maturity of freedom: the formator or the candidates?

attention to the hidden trap: risking to do a complex work of pure fakery, saving the facial make-up (super-specialized formators, sophisticated programs, very organized plans...) but skip the real formation problem: a deep personal formation and a great capacity for deep relationships. The test is offered by what happens after the formation communities, for the most part with the result of disappointments = the tranquil ones will look resigned; the highly committed ones will look individualistic; the overly docile ones will look de-personalized; the tolerant ones will be like those who have completed their (military) draft service;...

The Code of Canon Law n. 660 speaks of a systematic and suitable formation. But our formation, so specialized these years, when it comes down to it, what is it geared to? To the expectations of a changing world, the needs of our institutes? the increasingly difficult management of our works? For what model of consecrated life? For what and for whom? If the prophetic and eschatological dimension has such a central and determinative role, is it not perhaps true that the current formation models are staking too much on the external dimension (time, projects, itineraries, specializations, formal fulfillment of the dictates of the Ratio)? Or, doesn't it seem to us – extension of the liberal model – that, also in formation, we indulge too much on the privatization of the vocation in the measure of a rather narcissistic self-fulfillment, with the conception of a charism reduced to the strict sizes of one's ego? As a result then, at the end of initial formation, they feel not suited either to the very charism nor to the living situation?

If the new model of consecrated life, incipient as it may be, is that radical one to start afresh from Christ, we need to re-think also about re-playing the rich formation contents, that by now we possess within our institutes, with new modes of objectives and methods. I would like here to indicate three directions of an eschatological type, to follow in our formation journeys:

✱ **The time dimension**

As the document *Starting Afresh from Christ* states, it is necessary to replay the relationship with time in our consecrated life: to re-appropriate it, without "suffering" it and to entire wisely into its various rhythms (daily, weekly, monthly, annually). (cf. RdC n. 15) Time continues to be a gift of God to us. How we use it becomes our responding gift to Him or our cheating his generous goodness. It is urgent to educate ourselves and to others to become decelerators of time and animators of essential time. The key word starts to be "*priority*". It is not possible to live in a frenetic time, as many consecrated people are forced to do today, probably already since the years of early formation. Only in a decelerated time is it possible to discover the mystery. Otherwise, we are prisoners of a time voided of the mystery, precisely like for many of our contemporaries. That demands a wise pedagogy, developed in early formation; that is to know how to organize one's days, assuring a sustainable rhythm of life for the person, with sufficient space for contemplation, study/reflection, rest and silence. Without this we tie our hands to the effective possibility of any kind of profound and lasting formation, and, especially any radical/prophetic dimension of consecrated life. This is a strategic requirement, an important phase, in order to re-convert our life to something solid, beyond the artificial learnings that we normally assure. A time that, by means of

the liturgy, will mold our existence, progressively reviving in us the mysteries of the life of the Son of God, starting off from his Passover of death and resurrection each day (cf. RdC n. 15)

*** Recovering mysticism**

Today we have to say that we are faced with a new need and a consequent return to mysticism, both through a strong attraction to oriental religions and through the various “mysterical cults” of many sects, including satanism. A deviant (diverted) need for mysticism? Forms of revenge for the disappointment for a missed mysticism or not at all found in the three great religions of the Book? Certainly, so taken up by the contemporaneous historical questions, we consecrated persons have also neglected mysticism, or, so immersed in the needs of renewal and adaptation to today’s challenges, we even let the rich mystical roots of our founders and institutes be sheared off. In too many cases we simply continued to reproduce a spirituality of other times, without bothering to revitalize it according to the specifics of our personal existence and our age, creating only spiritual masks and manikins. By dint of loving God badly and loving ourselves too complacently, we have put a mask on God, reducing him to the dimensions of our worries. And so, God stopped surprising us, and the splendor of the crucified and glorious face of Christ has become an accumulation of approximate portraits in pale colors. And still, the God of our Lord Jesus should not stop surprising, because He is the contrary of boredom and stereotype. But we must free him from the masks and disguises we’ve put on him. During early formation we ought to work and motivate our young people more and earlier, on openness to the desire for God, which all carry within their vital center, motivate them to let themselves be moved by God, accepting his action in us, rather than work on questions, the standardized courses of faith and the study of faith. The risk, also in consecrated life, is to be only catechized, never contemplative. Instead, it is urgent to move from abstract formulas and from the “formality” of practices of piety, from emotional reductionism of some powerful moment, to a vital, personal, daily encounter. In short, we and our young people with us, are still too much taken with a secret fear of God, which closes us in “present-ism” and does not let us enter beyond, immersed with our gaze and with our life in the horizon of the infinite and the eternal. Instead, the worry of letting ourselves be loved by Him has the upper hand. Formation must enable us to cross over from being God-fearing acquaintances of God to being people enamored of Him and then, please, let’s start afresh from Christ with the courage of placing our spiritual life and mystical experience in first place (cf. RdC. n. 20-22), in order to grasp fully the genuine flavors of our human condition.

*** Let’s return to letting our young people dream.**

It is really depressing to meet young consecrated persons, who, having reached the end of initial formation, are “switched off”, fully “integrated into the system”, and have lost most of their dream potential. It is urgent to go back seriously to letting/making the young people dream! How? Beginning from their will to live and activating a route of metamorphosis of happiness. It begins from interior wounds and lacerations which each one carries within; you have the person become aware of them without “dramatics”, with more hope than fear. And you invite the candidate to give himself over, as he is, disarmed and unmasked in his poverty and fragility, to Him, the Lord. The genuine contemplation of the face of Christ begins from this stance. If it begins by way of other bases, very probably it is a false contemplation. It is precisely an attitude experienced in the true poverty of self situated in the contemporary poverty of today, that generates the desire for holiness as ideal and as a step of the daily journey. Not a “so-called” holiness, nor a distant holiness made of the miraculous extraordinariness of Saints, but a holiness as need of something, that relates to me and touches me personally and which I can’t do without, if I want to experience the full joy of my life. Holiness that becomes a life impassioned for Jesus Christ, through a new covenant of spirituality and missionary thrust with one’s own foundress/founder. And here the dream/reality of the renewed charism is triggered, in order to respond to God’s hopes for these times: to be and feel

the founder/foundress alive today, for a new relaunching of his/her charism today. To enter into the gaze of the founder/foundress, which is continually immersed in the face of Christ for the needs of the Reign today.

Our young people have to learn from ants, who are sober/simple and tenacious.

- * sobriety/simplicity to go counter-current to the consumerist and bourgeois trend of everything in order to train in knowing how to pick up signs and seeds of hope, even though small. Especially signs of globalization in solidarity, of peace-building, of welcoming the diverse, of respect and a defense of life “to the bitter end”, of relaunching spirituality. A precious exercise, which renders them capable of not being blocked by every contradiction and opposition that they meet, whether in societal travail, or, especially in the local Church, or in the consecrated life in their community.
- * sobriety/simplicity regarding excessive concern about themselves and engaging time and precious energies in “victimism”, and tenacity in being firmly determined in the toil of fulfilling the dream. One who hopes, journeys, does not flee, but becomes incarnate in concrete history; that one knows that he/she must begin with the little that is possible and thus patiently build the future, without awaiting the right occasion for everything to happen at once. He/she plans to give his/her life with a certainty in the future, without stooping to reproaching the world, the Church and consecrated life because they don’t respond to his gift.

- **with the animating principle of communion**

May our young people really be formed as Church, home (= spirituality) and school (= education) of communion. (cf. NMI 43, 44) A fundamental motivating conviction, well rooted in them, must be the following: only an undivided people is truly capable of a future. We are dealing with a difficult operation, because the people of God, both on a large scale and the small scale of communities and families, started off for the third millennium still too greatly divided. For many reasons there was a lack of adult witnesses who went before them. So, it is necessary to invent, within our communities, an artisan laboratory of communion. Let’s not immediately burn the charismatic dreams of our young people! Let’s let them experiment also new forms of testimony and charismatic service, moved by their antennae particularly suited to grasp the signs of the times. Let’s, however, ask them to share their experience in community among brothers/sisters (and let’s be open to doing it!), making it resonate with our experience. That is, let’s move from the simple permission or prohibition to do it, to a review/discernment together: concretely verify the dream, through a charismatic screen, in order to avoid escapes into subjectivism and dangerous shortsightedness. But it is necessary that we adults agree with this process, without prejudicial blocking, jealousy, envy, or condemnation. No. Instead, a true deep sharing of the experience in light of the Word, the charism and the signs of the times. Consequently, an animating principle of communitarian communion, which becomes support, creativity, and promotion of initiatives of communion in the area. Some attempts in this direction are in process: look at inter-institute formation, see the experiences of shared availability in pastoral projects in the territory and in the particular Church, see the “Vidimus Dominum” movement of young religious which continues to grow stronger,...; there are signals that the times are ripe for a wide-range effective communal work. And, we must say, it is precisely the young people, who more than anyone, notice this and are, therefore, the most available for new solutions of communal synergy of consecrated life. In summary: witness and service of the young consecrated people should be today the fulfillment of the command of the Risen One: “Go to my brothers and tell them: ‘I have seen the Lord!’”. We wish this for each other with all our heart.