

Call of Evangelical Counsels

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Pope Francis has declared a Year of Consecrated Life (30 November 2014 - 2 February 2016) to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the two important documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*. These documents speak extensively on the theology and the renewal of the religious life. In his Apostolic Letter for the Year of Consecrated Life,¹ the Pope spells out the aims of this special year. He urges religious "to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope." Further, he invites the consecrated men and women to examine their presence in the Church and to respond to the new demands that are constantly made on them by society, especially the cry of the poor. In response to the Pope's invitation, this article attempts to revisit one of the core elements of religious life, i.e. the triad of the evangelical counsels.

Evangelical Counsels and Religious Life

In conventional Christian language, three virtues—poverty, chastity and obedience—are called evangelical counsels. They acquire the designation 'evangelical' because of their dependence on and commitment to the Gospel.² In addition, they are called 'counsels' because they are recommended to those faithful who dedicate themselves to greater perfection in spiritual life. In other words, they are not precepts or commandments like the Decalogue of the Old Testament or the love commandment of Jesus (Mk 12: 29-31), but advices or recommendations for spiritual progress.

¹POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (21 November 2014). Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 5 December 2014, 17.

²'Evangelium' is the Latin word for the Gospel.

It is customary to explain the religious life³ in relation to the evangelical counsels. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in *Summa Theologiae* holds that “the three vows of religion form the essential of all religious life.”⁴ One can see almost a same pattern in the teachings of the Church. The Second Vatican Council, for instance, interprets religious life in terms of the evangelical counsels.⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reaffirms it when it says: “The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practicing chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty and obedience.”⁶

While reflecting on the theology of religious life, it often gives the impression that the religious life began with the classical triad—poverty, chastity and obedience—and existed for the sake of practising them. But historical facts belie such an oversimplified view. It is a fact that, at the beginning of religious life, these virtues did not exist in consecrated life as we understand them today. If we go by some of the findings of scholarly research, one has to accept that the classical triad of evangelical counsels began to appear in religious life in different forms only in the middle of the twelfth century. The formula became a norm in 1405 under Innocent VII. It then spread rapidly, but without being uniform in their expression in all formulae of profession. While the Benedictines remained attached to the triad of stability, fidelity (*conversionis morum*) and obedience, the Dominicans continued to limit themselves to the profession of obedience. The Eastern Orthodox tradition did not even consider the triad at all.⁷ From this we can fairly conclude that, as far as the historical trajectory is concerned, the evangelical counsels and the religious life do not necessarily coincide.

³The term ‘religious life’ is used in a broader sense, referring to consecrated life in general.

⁴THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 1. 2.

⁵CE. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 42-43; *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC), 1.

⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 915. While specifying the status of the consecrated people, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* makes explicit reference to the triad: “Drawn from both groups are those of Christ’s faithful who, professing the evangelical counsels through vows or other sacred bonds recognized and approved by the Church, are consecrated to God in their own special way and promote the salvific mission of the Church” (Can. 207 §2). See also Canon 573.

⁷CE. J. M. R. TILLARD, *Devant Dieu et pour le monde*. Paris: Cerf, 1977, 122. See also R. HOSTIE, *The Life and Death of Religious Orders*, Washington, CARA, 1983, 20.

The New Testament and Evangelical Counsels

If the classical triad cannot define religious life from a historical perspective, can we say that it has still its source in the Gospel? In what way can we call them 'evangelical' counsels? It is a fact that in our biblical inquiry, too, we come up against certain difficulties. Some would even say that the evangelical counsels, the foundational triad of religious life, are not found in the Gospel! Though there are indirect references to the virtues (not vows!) of poverty (Mt 19: 21) and chastity (Mt 19: 12; 1 Cor 7: 32-35), it is difficult to find any 'direct' reference to obedience in the New Testament. In other words, when we come to consider the vow of obedience we cannot refer to a definite text in the New Testament.⁸ "So far as the New Testament is concerned the only one of them which can immediately be understood as a general counsel is the counsel of virginity. Poverty is included in the New Testament primarily in the concrete manner of life followed by those accompanied Jesus. Obedience goes unmentioned."⁹ Schillebeeckx would go a step further and say that in the Gospel there is only *one* evangelical 'counsel' which is not a commandment, i.e. celibacy.¹⁰

It is true that a certain amount of ambiguity remains with regard to the origin of the evangelical counsels in the New Testament. Some of the Fathers of the Church (for example, John Chrysostom) hold the view that the triad has direct roots in the Gospel. In their

⁸F. J. MOLONEY, *Disciples and Prophets: A Biblical Model for the Religious Life*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, 119.

⁹K. RAHNER, "On the Evangelical Counsels," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971-1992, 50. Some authors attempt to remedy this deficiency from an ecclesiastical perspective. For example, Vermeersch makes this interesting statement: "Religious life is made perfect by a definite profession either of retirement and contemplation or of pious activity. The profession, negative as well as positive, is placed under the control and direction of ecclesiastical authority, which is entrusted with the duty of leading men in the ways of salvation and holiness. Submission to this authority, which may interfere more or less as times and circumstances require, is therefore a necessary part of religious life. In this is manifested obedience as a counsel which governs and even supplements the two others, or rather as a conditional precept, to be observed by all who desire to profess the perfect life." A. VERMEERSCH, "Religious life," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1917 ed., vol. 12, 1928.

¹⁰E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Autour du célibat du prêtre: étude critique*. Paris: Cerf, 1967, 89.

view, Jesus's invitation to the young rich man in Matthew's Gospel, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mt 19: 21), is the proof of the biblical foundation of 'religious' poverty. But others disagree with this interpretation saying that, in Matthew's Gospel, the term 'perfect' should not be understood in a narrow sense that is applicable only to a select few. On the contrary, it should be seen as a summons to every Christian to imitate God: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5: 48). It radicalizes the demands of the law which goes beyond the literal 'observance' of the precepts.¹¹

As far as chastity is concerned, some thinkers are of the opinion that Jesus's saying on 'eunuchs for the kingdom' (Mt 19: 12) is an indirect invitation to embrace celibacy for those who want to follow Christ closely in his Kingdom. But those who disagree with this suggestion hold that the pericope should not be taken as the Gospel ratification of religious chastity. They remind us that the saying in Matthew occurred in the context of a discussion on marriage and divorce caused by the irregular marital situation of the converted Christians. Therefore, they conclude that this saying of Jesus cannot be construed as the Gospel ratification of consecrated celibacy.¹²

With regard to obedience, the Pauline text from the letter to the Philippians (Phil 2: 6-11) is often cited as the New Testament endorsement of religious obedience. It maintains that behind the call to obedience in the Christian religious life stands the call to follow the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth. His life is dominated by a profound openness and obedience to God, whom he called his Father. In that sense, more than any of the vows, obedience has a solid theological and biblical foundation.¹³ However, here, too, one may come across with objections in applying this virtue exclusively to religious. Every Christian, without exception, is encouraged to follow the example of Christ in one's filial obedience to God the Father.¹⁴ In other words, the invitation to follow Christ in obedience is not reserved for a select few or any religious elite.

¹¹TILLARD, *Devant Dieu et pour le monde*, 135-142.

¹²F. J. MOLONEY, *Free to Love*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, 40-44.

¹³MOLONEY, *Disciples and Prophets*, 118-19.

¹⁴TILLARD, *Devant Dieu et pour le monde*, 143-144.

The above mentioned diverging opinions show that there is no unanimous view on the topic and, in fact, there are arguments for and against the claim of the biblical foundations for religious professions. Though there are indirect allusions in the New Testament traditions that speak of life 'according to the evangelical counsels' (Mt 19: 21; Mt 19: 12; 1 Cor 7: 32-35; Phil 2: 6-11), there is no conclusive evidence in the Gospel or in the apostolic tradition that Jesus envisioned the counsels and established religious communities for his followers to profess these virtues.¹⁵ After all, Jesus did not establish an exclusive community like that of the Qumran Sect. On the contrary, his mission was universal. He came to call every person to have intimacy with God.

Evangelical Counsels in the Footsteps of Christ

Does that mean that the Christian religious life has no biblical foundation? Not necessarily! It is true that one may not find a direct reference in the Gospel about the origin of religious life during the earthly life of Jesus. But it does not mean that religious life based on the evangelical counsels has no relationship to the Gospel. In fact, this form of Christian life is all about the Gospel and it draws its inspiration from it. Today, it is a commonly held view that the religious life and the evangelical counsels have their origin in the Gospel 'tradition,' not necessarily in the narratives.¹⁶ For instance, Rahner holds the view that the evangelical counsels are the concrete realization of the spirit of the Gospel which of course is demanded of all Christians.¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that such actualization of the Gospel spirit could take different forms and the religious life is one of those expressions of the radicalness of the Gospel.¹⁸ Though all Christians are called to practise the evangelical counsels in their own way, within this general vocation, religious attend to it while following Christ in a special way. It is not because they are the exclusive representatives of

¹⁵TILLARD, *Devant Dieu et pour le monde*, 153.

¹⁶There is a difference between finding the 'source' in the Gospel narratives and drawing inspiration from the Gospel. In the case of religious life, the latter seems to be true.

¹⁷RAHNER, "On the Evangelical Counsels," 153 (note 16).

¹⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 915.

following Christ, but because Christianity today needs an energetic stimulus. They help the Church grow “by attraction”¹⁹ with the eloquence of their lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full. It is one of the practical ways of being a missionary in the modern world. That is to say, it has an important witnessing value. Pope Paul VI highlights this aspect when he says that religious, by their lives, are a sign of total availability for the cause of the Gospel:

Being a challenge to the world and to the Church herself, this silent witness of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience, can become an eloquent witness capable of touching also non-Christians who have good will and are sensitive to certain values... Thanks to their consecration they are eminently willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the ends of the earth. They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. They are generous: often they are found at the outposts of the mission, and they take the greatest of risks for their health and their very lives. Truly the Church owes them much.²⁰

While drawing inspiration from Jesus, religious in their lives put into practice the Gospel imperative of love of God and love of man.²¹ For example, if we analyse the ‘rules’ of the religious orders and institutes down the centuries, we realise that they are formulated on the basis of the Gospel imperative of love. “Rules have one thing in common: despite the infinite variety of their particular approaches and their institutional structures, adapted to circumstances of life and milieu, all refer to the Gospel imperative of love of God and neighbour. According to the tradition of the Church, the source of such love and the model exemplifying its living reality is always to be sought in the person of Christ as he is presented in the Gospels.”²² That is to say, while living

¹⁹POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 15.

²⁰POPE PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69.

²¹RAHNER, “On the Evangelical Counsels,” 149.

²²HOSTIE, *The Life and Death of Religious Orders*, 18. The origin of community life and monastic rules testifies to this fact.

the evangelical counsels, religious attempt to make the Gospel alive in the world, especially the Gospel commandment of love. Pope Francis calls it “the obedience to the Spirit.” Such obedience is not hesitant to embrace “aggiornamento” (adapting rules) because it is ‘the fruit of wisdom forged in docility.’²³ He encourages religious to journey along the path of such obedience, both personal and communitarian, so that they will be able to adapt their rules to the needs of the times. While recognizing the importance of the rules and the charism of each institute and its founder, he makes this rather challenging observation:

The strengthening and renewal of consecrated life are the result of great love for the rule, and also the ability to look to and heed the elders of one’s congregation. In this way, the “deposit,” the charism of each religious family, is preserved by obedience and by wisdom, working together. By means of this journey, we are preserved from living our consecration in “lightly,” in an unincarnate manner, as if it were some sort of *gnosis* which would ultimately reduce religious life to caricature, a caricature in which there is following without renunciation, prayer without encounter, fraternal life without communion, obedience without trust, and charity without transcendence.²⁴

Evangelical Counsels in Today’s World

Today we need to have a relook at the way the evangelical counsels – obedience, chastity and poverty – are being practiced. It is beyond any doubt that the evangelical counsels are important for religious life. Christian vocation demands to be lived in a radical way that can plainly be observed and the evangelical counsels are effective tools in witnessing and following Christ.²⁵ This being said, however, we should ask what motivates one to adhere to these counsels. Why should one be chaste? Why should one be poor? And why should one be obedient? The intention of these questions

²³POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* (02 February 2015). Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 February, 2015, 5.

²⁴POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* (02 February 2015).

²⁵J. B. METZ, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church*. London: Burns & Oates, 1978, 8.

is not to undermine the value of these highly admired Christian virtues. They cannot be compromised or done away with. Without calling into question their worth, one should ask in which way they can be made more relevant to the needs of our times. The counsels should help religious follow Christ more faithfully and authentically. After all, following Christ is not a passive herding of the onlookers, but a radical imitation (*imitatio Christi*) of the disciples. The Church encourages religious to continually examine their commitment to follow Christ as shown in the Gospel.²⁶ Pope Francis reminds them that “the Gospel is demanding: it demands to be lived radically and sincerely. It is not enough to read it (even though the reading and study of Scripture is essential), nor is it enough to meditate on it (which we do joyfully each day). Jesus asks us to practice it, to put his words into effect in our lives.”²⁷

Poverty: While reflecting on the evangelical counsels in today’s context, let us first look at the relevance of the vow of poverty. Religious poverty is not pauperism. It is not a ‘static state’ where one glorifies misery. One needs to remember that, in Christian discourse, poverty is a ‘dynamic virtue’ and it becomes an evangelical counsel only if it exists in the interest of others, motivated by the spirit of the Gospel. From that perspective, in the order of Jesus, poverty can become a protest against the tyranny of having, possessing, and pure self-assertion. In the words of Pope Francis, “poverty teaches solidarity, sharing and charity, and is also expressed in moderation and joy in the essential, to put us on guard against material idols that obscure the real meaning of life.”²⁸ He encourages religious to learn and experience this Gospel virtue “with the humble, the poor, the sick and all those who are on the existential outskirts of life.” It is an invitation to come out of oneself and one’s personal interests. That is to say, one’s option for poverty cannot be guided by any self-interest, including any egoistic interest of personal salvation. After all, Jesus did not die for his ‘personal salvation.’ Therefore, evangelical poverty impels a follower of Christ

²⁶Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

²⁷POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (21 November 2014), 2.

²⁸POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the International Union of Superiors General* (8 May 2013), hereafter referred to as *Address to I.U.S.G.*

into practical *solidarity* with those for whom poverty is not a matter of virtue but the condition of life and the situation exacted of them by society. Professing that poverty becomes a participation in the poverty of Jesus Christ “who, although existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil 2: 6-7). In fact, it is the Christological foundation of the vow of poverty. And for those who follow Jesus, poverty is not a lofty idea or ideal. It is incarnational. That is, it is a living reality. “A theoretical poverty is no use to us. Poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ, in the humble, in the poor, in the sick and in children.”²⁹ In other words, for a religious, though necessary, “professing” the vow of poverty is not enough. Poverty for the sake of poverty is not a virtue. “The radical nature of this poverty does not really describe a goal but a common way that discloses itself only to those who follow it, with at least enough light for the next step and with enough hope in case of failure.”³⁰ Thus, as Pope Francis reminds us, poverty in the logic of the Gospel teaches us to trust in God’s providence.

Celibacy: In the Church’s understanding, chastity “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:12) is an outstanding gift of grace. “It frees the heart of man in a unique fashion (1 Cor. 7: 32-35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all men.”³¹ From that perspective, celibacy becomes an evangelical virtue only if it is an expression of being radically seized by the spirit of Christ. What is its practical significance? It makes religious less judgmental about those for whom it is not a ‘virtue.’ Again, in the words of Pope Francis, chastity as a precious charism broadens the freedom of our gift to God and to others, with tenderness, mercy and closeness to Christ. It urges one to “come out of oneself”³² in solidarity with those for whom (those

²⁹POPE FRANCIS, *Address to I.U.S.G.*, 1.

³⁰METZ, *Followers of Christ*, 59.

³¹SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

³²Pope Francis asks religious to ‘come out’ of themselves and ‘go forth’ to the existential peripheries. He reminds them that “Go into all the world” were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us (cf. Mk 16:15). Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (21 November 2014), 4.

who are lonely and have no one) celibacy is not a matter of virtue but their lot. These unfortunate ones include not only those who do not succeed in getting married due to whatever circumstances of life and society but also those who as a result of broken marriages and families have been driven into a helpless isolation that lacks all sense of promise. This radical celibacy tells us how a vow can be "practical" that it obliges one towards those who are shut up in lack of expectation and in resignation.³³ Here one participates in the proclamation of the liberating message of Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk 4: 18-19). Celibacy from this Christological perspective is an expression by which, like Jesus, religious are seized by the overwhelming power of the Kingdom that they give themselves completely to it. In short, a life of celibacy is nothing else but the existential consequence which flows out of the experience of the urgent presence of the Kingdom of God. To the followers of Christ, celibacy offers an opportunity to grow in *compassion* (Mk 6: 34), the essence of the Gospel.³⁴ Seen from that point of view, no longer can the celibate be regarded as deprived, deformed or in some way 'strange.'³⁵ On the contrary, celibacy can become a "fruitful" virtue which generates spiritual children in the Church.³⁶

Obedience: The Second Vatican Council urges religious to follow the example of Jesus in the practice of obedience. It reminds them that "Jesus Christ who came to do the will of the Father (John 4:34) and 'assuming the nature of a slave' (Phil 2:7) learned obedience in the school of suffering."³⁷ Even in his extreme suffering he remains obedient to the Father. In fact, Jesus' suffering is the suffering of God in solidarity with all those who suffer unjustly. In his Passion, he shares the fate and impotence of the helpless victims of this world. Here, the radical nature of his obedience is measured

³³METZ, *Followers of Christ*, 61.

³⁴Cf. W. KASPER, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 2014.

³⁵MOLONEY, *Free to Love*, 53.

³⁶POPE FRANCIS, *Address to I.U.S.G.*, 1.

³⁷SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14.

by the standard of his suffering. His cry from the cross is the cry of that God-forsaken man who for his part has never forsaken God. Religious are invited and encouraged to follow the radical nature of obedience that we find in Jesus, obedience 'unto death, even death on a cross.'³⁸

The imitation of Christ is where religious obedience has its source. Pope Francis highlights this aspect when he says: "For a religious, to advance on the path of obedience means to abase oneself in service, that is, to take the same path as Jesus, who 'did not deem equality with God a thing to be grasped' (Phil 2: 6). By emptying himself he made himself a servant in order to serve."³⁹ Seen from this Christological perspective, obedience could involve fear and suffering, as in the case of Jesus in Gethsemane: "He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground" (Lk 22: 44). It says that one who follows Christ closely may also face such dark moments in life while observing the vow of obedience. Since religious obedience too flows out from the experience of the urgent presence of the Kingdom of God, one cannot but act like Jesus. In such Christological obedience, religious should not entertain an attitude of resignation in the face of obstacles and call it quits. On the contrary, like Jesus, they should remain faithful to their call and commitment and continue their journey along the way of friendliness towards others. Thus, obedience becomes an evangelical virtue. If Jesus' obedience is the radical and uncalculated surrender of life to God the Father, religious who walk in the way of Jesus should be ready to follow him in this virtue too. Here, the virtue of obedience has a practical consequence. Such obedience impels religious to stand close to those for whom obedience is not a matter of virtue but a sign of oppression and being placed in tutelage. It needs to be affirmed that authentic obedience in the order of Jesus is not an expression of feeble submission. The vow of obedience should not be used as an excuse for not taking responsibilities, being 'nice always' or never run the risk of making mistakes. In simple terms, that is laziness, not obedience. On the contrary, true

³⁸METZ, *Followers of Christ*, 64.

³⁹POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* (02 February 2015).

obedience in the school of Jesus is a *passionate obedience* which does not rule out dangers and misunderstandings. In that sense, religious obedience is the obedience of a prophet. Here, “the Lord *turns obedience into wisdom* by the working of his Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰ It helps religious who live under the divine urgency to go away from themselves and to lose themselves in the mysterious plan of God.⁴¹ It is an invitation to be ‘mystics’ in the order of Jesus. The mysticism of Jesus is unique and striking:

In the end Jesus did not teach an ascending *mysticism of closed eyes*, but rather a God-mysticism with an increased readiness for perceiving, a *mysticism of open eyes*, which sees more and not less. It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and—convenient or not—pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it, for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings.⁴²

Conclusion

Looking at the evangelical counsels from different perspectives (biblical, historical, religious and societal), we recognise its immense relevance and potential for the Church and the world. In fact, at the beginning, this particular form of Christian life began as a prophetic protest against the domestication of Christianity and the practice of faith. Though times have changed, its significance, scope and goal remain the same: to be a prophetic witness to the Gospel. Moreover, like the prophets whose life became a reminder to the people of Israel of their commitment to Yahweh and to the covenant, religious today play an important role in reminding the Church of not losing her identity as the people of God.

It is a fact that, in the history of the Church, the religious orders came into being not in times when the Church is flourishing but in times when it was profoundly disoriented and unsure of itself. With their life and witnessing they revitalized the Church. At the same

⁴⁰POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* (02 February 2015).

⁴¹MOLONEY, *Free to Love*, 85.

⁴²J. B. METZ, *Passion for God: The Mystical- Political Dimension of Christianity*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998, 163; emphasis added.

time, religious exercised (and still continue to do so) a corrective role as a kind of “shock treatment of the Holy Spirit” for the institutional Church. “Against the dangerous accommodations and questionable compromises that the Church as a large-scale institution can always incline to, they press for the uncompromising nature of the Gospel and of the imitation of Christ. In this sense, they are institutionalised form of a *dangerous memory* (of Jesus Christ) within the Church.”⁴³ Moreover, if they do so, in Pope Francis’ words, they wake up the world to God and his horizon. They accomplish this task with an authentic life of visionary protest against all sorts of conformism in the Church and society.

To be a dynamic component of the Church, religious life needs constant renewal and updating of its mission and vision. In earlier days religious through their witnessing showed the world that it was possible to live differently in this world.⁴⁴ We need to recognize that times have changed. A new situation demands a new way of being and acting: “New wine is poured into fresh wineskins” (Mt 2: 22). It is an invitation for renewal. Today, if one sees vows as mere suppression of some aspects of human life, it falls short of real Christian virtue in the order of Jesus Christ. “If nothing is wagered with the vows, but only something denied, they easily become masochistic.”⁴⁵ It is also important for religious to remind themselves that if the practice of their vows does not come close to the commitment of Christ, they risk being irrelevant and anachronistic. In some cases, it might draw some attention from the world and arouse curiosity among onlookers, but the question remains: Is it in conformity with the life and vision of Jesus expressed in the evangelical counsels? So, religious need to think seriously how effective their commitment to the cause of the Gospel is. Nothing could be imposed from the outside. One has to live one’s conviction. Religious are called upon to make the distinction between convenience and conviction, and live that life to the full.

Finally, in their passion for God, true religious as the followers of Christ need to resist the temptation of letting themselves be

⁴³METZ, *Followers of Christ*, 12.

⁴⁴Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 10 January 2014, 6.

⁴⁵METZ, *Passion for God*, 153.

separated from God in the face of allurements, hardships or difficulties. With Paul they should be able to say, "No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8: 39). Like Jesus on the Cross with his passionate cry (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!), they need to remain faithful to God, even when the rest of the world already believes that it does not need God anymore.⁴⁶ Like Israel in the OT and Jesus in the NT, the identity of religious depends on their 'capacity' for God, showed itself in a particular kind of incapacity: the incapacity to let itself be consoled by myths or ideas of the modern world. It is this poverty of Jesus that religious are invited to imitate.⁴⁷ Pope Francis summarizes the identity and future tasks of religious thus:

Religious are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father, poverty, community life and chastity. In this sense, the vows cannot end up being caricatures; otherwise, for example, community life becomes hell, and chastity becomes a way of life for unfruitful bachelors. The vow of chastity must be a vow of fruitfulness. In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection.⁴⁸

⁴⁶True religious refuse to conform themselves to the standards of the world or let themselves be 'integrated' into the current systems. METZ, *Passion for God*, 151

⁴⁷"Our Christian witness to God needs to be reminded of this in our mythically enthralled postmodern age. After all, this is also true for us: Whoever hears the message of the resurrection in such a way that the cry of the crucified has become inaudible in it, hears not the Gospel but rather a myth of the victor. Whoever hears the Christian message in such a way that in it there is nothing left to be expected, but only something that needs to be perceived and acknowledged, hears falsely." METZ, *Passion for God*, 153.

⁴⁸*America*, vol. 209/8 (30 September 2013), 26