



CONGREGATIO
PRO INSTITUTIS VITAE CONSECRATAE
ET SOCIETATIBUS VITAE APOSTOLICAE

WITNESSES TO THE BEAUTY OF GOD
The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* 25 Years later

To our brothers and sisters in consecrated life,

We give thanks for you always, “for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, for in him you were enriched in every way”, and “called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1:4). In this dramatic moment we stand in solidarity with everyone “in hardships, and perseverance” (cf. Rev 1:9), not only because of the pandemic but above all because of its consequences that greatly affect us in the daily activities of our civil and ecclesial community. Consecrated men and women are called to personally awaken in everyone a sense of hope.

We do not wish the 25th anniversary (25 March 1996) of the publication of St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the fruit of the reflection of the IX Assembly of the Synod of Bishops celebrated in October 1994, to go unnoticed. In that document, the Bishops frequently reaffirmed that “consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission [...] a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God” (*Vita consecrata*, 3).

On this occasion, we make our own the prayer and thanksgiving expressed through Pope Francis’ words “My salvation, Lord, comes from You; my hands are not empty, they are full of your grace. Knowing how to see grace is the first step” (*Homily*, 1 February 2019). To look back, to reread one’s own history is to see in it the faithful gift of God, not only with our own eyes but with “the eyes of the faithful” (*Vita consecrata*, 1), in the awareness that the mystery of the Kingdom of God is already at work in our history and awaits its full realization in heaven (*ivi*).

Before God for the world

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* was published in a time of great uncertainty, in a liquid society, with confused characteristics and weak commitments. The certainty with which the identity of consecrated life is defined is therefore surprising, “icon of the transfigured Christ” (*Vita consecrata*, 14) which reveals the glory and the face of the Father in the luminous splendor of the Spirit. Consecrated life as *confessio Trinitatis!* Truly, the concern here is not only to give a solid foundation to the consecrated person’s identity, but more so as offering an original vision of that identity, integrating the divine and human, realizing that mysterious and luminous connection between ascent and descent, between the transcendent height and the kenotic immersion on the borders of all that is human, between the sublime beauty to be contemplated and the distressing poverty to be served.

Valuable consequences flow from this fruitful insight.

The strength of the relationship

Vita consecrata is built upon the notion of a relationship, the relationship generated in and by the *Mystery of God and Trinitarian communion*. *The salvation* that comes through the lives of those who take charge of the other. A *witness* that is not unique, but that of a fraternity that lives and appreciates what it proclaims. Communal *holiness*, not of perfect solitaries, but of poor sinners who daily share and offer each other mercy and understanding. A *consecration* that does not oppose the values of the world and the universal thirst for happiness, but on the contrary reveals to all that being poor, chaste, and obedient has great humanizing power, is a true eco-system of the human condition, gives meaning and balance to life, harmony, and freedom in relationships with things, it protects from abuse, creates fraternity, and offers beauty... Today consecrated life is aware of being "poorer" than in former times, but lives - by grace - a much greater relationship with the Church and the world, with those who believe and those who do not, with those who suffer and are alone.

The sentiments of the Son

A particular aspect of the relational dimension seems to reach its highpoint when the document deals with the subject of formation. Not just any relationship, but one that leads one to have the same sentiments as the obedient Son, the suffering Servant, the innocent Lamb.

This is not an essentially new element, considering that in the past we have resorted to the relationship of following, identifying, and imitating Christ, but here something more is said and, in some respects, something new, is offered by the Word (Phil 2:5). It is about the relationship that reaches such an intense and profound level that it rediscovers within itself the *sensitivity* of the Son, who is in turn, the image and incarnation of the Father's sensitivity. We Christians believe in a *sensitive* God: he hears the groaning of the oppressed and listens to the widow's plea; he suffers with and for humanity. We want to believe that consecrated life, with its many charisms, is the very expression of this sensitivity. It could be said that each institute emphasizes with its charism a particular *divine sentiment*. It is for this reason that formation is presented in the Exhortation as a process that leads in that direction: to have the same feelings, emotions, sentiments, affections, desires, tastes, objective criteria, dreams, expectations, passions... of the Son-Servant-Lamb.

It is an exciting project that admirably brings together ("integrates") the spiritual and anthropological dimensions. A project that could transform the idea of formation in its contents, methods, and timing. It would finally be an integrated formation, built on the rock of eternal love that sets one free, forming integrated persons who have learned to evangelize their feelings, to love God with a human heart, and to love humanity with a divine heart! It will be a formation that continues for a lifetime. It is another great insight, one that remains largely to be understood and even more so to be implemented now.

The enchantment of beauty

If God is beautiful and the Lord Jesus "is the most beautiful among the sons of men", then being consecrated to him is beautiful. The consecrated person is called to be a witness of beauty. In a world which risks sinking into disturbing brutality, the *via pulchritudinis* seems to be the only way to arrive at the truth or to make it credible and attractive. Consecrated men and women must reawaken in themselves, but above all in the men and women of our time, an attraction for what is beautiful and true.

Beautiful, then, not only courageous, and truthful, must be the witness and the word offered, because the face we proclaim is beautiful.

Beautiful must be what we do and how we do it.

Beautiful is the fraternity and the atmosphere that one breathes.

Beautiful the temple and the liturgy, to which all are invited because it is beautiful to pray and sing the praises of the Most High and allow his word to be my guide.

It is beautiful to be together in his name, to work together, even if tiring at times.

How beautiful is our being virgins to love with his heart, our being poor to say that he is the only treasure, our obedience to his will for salvation, and even among ourselves to seek only him.

It is beautiful to have a heart that is free to welcome the pain of those who suffer, to show them the com-compassion of the Eternal One...

Even the environment must be beautiful, in simplicity and creative sobriety: the house, the table that is set..., that there be taste and decorum in the surroundings, so that everything in the dwelling may reveal the presence and centrality of God.

Supreme beauty, the sacrament of the mysterious beauty of the Eternal One. As Peter exclaimed on Tabor before that burst of light and splendor.

Vita consecrata has certainly marked the experience and reflection of consecrated persons in these past years. We are convinced that it should continue to be a point of reference in the coming years, together with the documents of the Magisterium and CICLSAL that have deepened its fundamental themes. We are convinced that the Exhortation can still nourish the *creative fidelity* of consecrated persons, the cornerstone of consecrated life in the third millennium. Responding to the challenges that come from the Church and contemporary society involves growing in evangelical relevance: "We cannot - Pope Francis exhorts - remain stuck in nostalgia for the past or simply keep repeating the same old things or everyday complaints. We need patience and courage in order to keep advancing, exploring new paths, and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And to do so with humility and simplicity, without great propaganda or publicity (Francis, *Homily*, 2 February 2021).

We confidently address our prayer to Mary so that consecrated men and women may "bear witness to that gift by their transfigured lives, as they joyfully make their way with all their brothers and sisters towards our heavenly homeland and the light which will never grow dim" (*Vita consecrata*, 112). We take this opportunity to greet you and wish you all good things in the Lord, the ALL for us consecrated persons.

Vatican City, 25 March 2021. Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.

João Braz Card. de Aviz
Prefect

+ Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo, ofm
Archbishop Secretary