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The Congress of Superiors General on "CONSECRATED LIFE AT THE PRESENT DAY"

Introduction - Relevance of the Congress - Original arrangement of the themes - Method of working - Central nuclei of consecrated life - Mission - Communion - Identity - Formation and vocations - What will the Bishops say in the coming Synod? - The run-up to the Synod

Rome, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
8 December 1993

My dear confreres,

We are in the liturgical climate that precedes the coming of the Lord. We look forward to Christmas and the beginning of a new year of life and work, and naturally I send you my best wishes for growth in the newness of Christ and for fruitful work in a further stage of your commitment. Let us offer our combined thanks to the good Lord for all he has given us in the year now passing away, and let us ask him for light and strength throughout 1994.

It will be the year of the long-desired Bishops Synod on consecrated life – a Synod destined to become historic in the Church's annals.

To us it will be of particular interest for the purpose of confirming and developing the process of renewal on which we have been engaged for many years.

As a step leading to the Synod and as a contribution to it, there took place at Rome from 22 to 27

November 1993 an international Congress on "*Consecrated Life at the present day. Charisms in the Church for the world*", organized by the Union of Superiors General. I took part in it myself with six other confreres and a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

I think it will be useful if I offer for your consideration some facts and reflections that emerged during the Congress, in the hope that they may serve to intensify the climate of preparation for the ninth ordinary Synod next October.

Relevance of the Congress

In a previous circular which bore the significant title: "*An invitation to bear greater witness to our consecration*",¹ I drew attention to the importance in the Church that will attach to the coming Synod on consecrated life.

¹ AGC 342, Oct.-Dic. 1992

Aware of this importance, the Union of Superiors General (USG) decided to prepare a congress, which would provide an occasion for a broad and realistic reflection and lead to the formulation of some practical and relevant proposals to be offered to the Synod. Although the Congress set out from the experience of specifically "religious" Institutes, it purposely left itself open to reflection on the whole of "consecrated" life, because of the strong convergence attaching to the latter, despite the differences, in the communion of the Church.

More than 500 persons took part from some 150 countries: 200 of them were Superiors General, many accompanied by members of their councils, together with 50 presidents or representatives of

national and international Conferences of men and women religious, and about a hundred theologians. Present too were various members of the Roman congregations and some cardinals, bishops and lay people. To these must be added a substantial group of women Superiors General and theologians of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). It should be noted that the UISG had already held a similar congress, because the large numbers and differences in approach had seemed to them to render impossible and inopportune the holding of a single combined event.

The celebration of a Congress of such dimensions on consecrated life in the post-conciliar era provided an opportunity for a happy stocktaking of our charisms in the Church and opened up horizons of hope in the face of the challenges of the present day.

It was a deep experience of communion, dialogue and comparison between different charisms, traditions, continents and cultures.

Among elements emerging were the worldwide factors involved, the great plurality of cultures, the diversity of charisms, the sense of the particular Churches, positive experiences, future perspectives, the essential nature of consecration, the theological value attaching to the mission, the richness of the community dimension, and the flame of enthusiasm to be kindled among the new generations.

The Holy Father received all the participants on Friday, 26 November, and spoke to them on specific themes which bring hope to the consecrated persons themselves and for the whole Church.

The overall result of the Congress was positive, not only because of the numerous and consistent participation, but also for the quality of the study

contributions, the intensity of dialogue and the observations and proposals that were drawn up.

After the Congress the proposals were assessed by the Superiors General alone on two successive days (1 and 2 December) before being sent officially to the Secretary of the Synod.

I think that this must surely prove to have been the greatest commitment of the male Institutes in preparation for the meetings of the Bishops in October next.

Original arrangement of the themes

An interesting aspect that deserves emphasis was the originality and realism that accompanied the arrangement of the Congress' work.

It was decided to start from the present situation and what had been done in the postconciliar period, pointing out the constitutive values of consecrated life as the present responses, even though not without certain weaknesses, to the challenges of the epoch-making changes we are now experiencing.

And so a path was followed that differs from that of the "Lineamenta", a path to some extent complementary, offering a more experimental vision based on the concrete situations of the past ten years and on the situation at the present day, which is far different from that in which Vatican II ordered and spurred on the "updating" of religious Institutes.

The "Lineamenta" start from the doctrinal patrimony of the Magisterium, outlining in the first place the nature and identity of consecrated life

and its charismatic variety, and then passing on to the commitment to renewal realized since Vatican II, even though not without certain ambiguities and unfinished elements; and finally they present consecrated life in its vital participation in the Church as communion and in the Church's mission, with the demands of the new evangelization.

The fact that the Congress had followed a different path to reach the same goal turned out to have had positive results. The two lines of approach, in fact, are substantially convergent in their conclusions, mutually reinforcing each other in a deeper analysis and shaping of consecrated life at the present day.

The method adopted by the Congress certainly presupposes a basic and clear awareness of the particular identity, lived out through the experiences of the postconciliar efforts at renewal.

The presentation at the outset of the results of a sociological investigation of consecrated life in the USA (where some consecrated persons are in particular difficulty), and of a scientific study made by the Loyola Centre of Spain on some 200,000 men and women religious of western countries, served to provide a stimulus for gaining a more objective mental picture of the reality of the present situation.

The two sociological studies, limited as they were to certain areas and hence of diminished application, were not offered as an overall presentation of the reality of consecrated life which would have to take note also of other parameters. But they highlighted the usefulness of sociological mediation when an effort is made, from the standpoint of faith, to discover what God is saying through observed facts, both positive and negative, with a

view to an evangelical discernment of the process of renewal in a difficult time of change and transformation.

This decision to "start from the reality" was also an invitation to the participants to adopt the same perspective in their reflections and contributions, especially since the Superiors present are daily involved in the complex responsibilities of a process of renewal and hence able to speak against a background of lived experience.

After the two sociological presentations, and the enrichments provided by the experience of the participants, the Congress went on to analyze consecrated life under the three fundamental aspects of *mission, communion, identity*, in that order.

In practice it was a matter of a kind of research into the personal understanding of the identity of the "consecrated vocation" in the face of the many challenges raised by cultural and ecclesial changes; of an attempt to answer the question; "What image of consecrated life can be passed on at the present day?", in the knowledge that the identity needs not only a doctrinal presentation but also a description in narrative form in theological language which will pay due attention to the fact that consecrated life is both "life" and "part of history".

During the discussion of the themes indicated and at the time of summing up, emphasis was laid as an aspect of particular urgency on the question of "*formation and vocations*", which was also given special attention later by the assembly of Superiors General in their two-day meeting that followed the Congress.

In this assembly, with its worldwide dimension, in the exchange of experiences and the intervention of people of diverse mentalities and cultures, some

debatable statements were made and then sifted in lively and interesting group discussions. On the other hand some contributions had been well thought out with a view to providing stimulus and information leading to an accurate understanding of situations and existing mentalities. Not everything that was stated in reports and round-tables is representative of the concluding thoughts of the assembly.

It can certainly be said nonetheless, that through dialogue and in the diversity of situations, the multiplicity of charisms, the differences in spirituality, the richness of the experience of God, a clear and fundamental convergence emerged together with a rich perspective of theological plurality.

Method of working

It will be useful to refer briefly to the way the work was organized, to see how so many participants could take an active part.

The mornings saw the presentation of the lengthy main reports, summing up the work of two years on the part of the USG; these were followed by four "round tables", referring to the theme concerned, for the offering of various stimuli from different geographical and cultural or "charismatic" points of view.

Thus, for example, on the day dedicated to the theme of *mission*, there were interventions amongst others from Fr Giovanni E. Vecchi, our Vicar General, with a contribution of a geographical and cultural kind on the *mission* in Latin Amer-

ica during these years of change; and by our confrere Fr Ricardo Ezzati (who works for the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life, Section for Religious) with a contribution of a "charismatic" type on the challenges to the *mission* in the charisms of apostolic life in the light of experience since the Council.

Each afternoon there were two periods of work: the first consisted of group meetings (with no fewer than 27 linguistic groups), for a deeper examination of what had been set out during the morning, with respect to four particular aspects or perspectives: "culture", "charism", "formation", and "future", distributed among the same group.

In the second afternoon period the members of the linguistic groups came together in wider "constellations" (of which there were five) to concentrate the reflections made in the earlier groups into two categories: "doctrinal aspects" and practical "proposals". Two different secretaries in each group brought a synthesis of the group-work to the constellation, and from there a previously designated competent secretary took the fruits of the day's work to the central secretariat.

The work was both intense and complex, and in it all the participants took part. It highlighted the ability for collaboration and for the attaining of visions shared to a sufficient degree between persons with a great variety of charisms and coming from many deeply different situations.

Considering the large number of participants, it is safe to say that the method of working fostered interchange and participation, and was judged to be positive.

Central nuclei of consecrated life

For two years the USG in its periodic meetings (two each year, each of three days duration) had taken up themes considered and experienced as fundamental in the lived reality of the present day: mission, communion and identity. It had been a combined effort to specify the practical problems arising in these times of change; to identify the fundamental points to be ensured, the positive steps for renewal, the ambiguities and deviations that could arise. It was a reflection on the practice as lived in the Institutes in fidelity to the Founders, following the guidelines of Vatican II and subsequent indications of the Magisterium so as to meet as consecrated persons the practical demands of present-day situations.

It was a matter, therefore, tackled originally from the standpoint of the responsibility for animation and guidance of Superiors General.

In its meetings the USG had gathered a multiplicity of theological interpretations concerning the ecclesial nature of consecrated life, prompted perhaps by the variety of charisms: each one tends in fact to interpret everything from the standpoint of the charismatic experience of his own Institute. Reference was made to the radical nature of the following of Christ, to the practice and public profession of the evangelical counsels, to the search for and absolute adherence to God, to the eschatological dimension of christian life, to the various forms of service (*diakonia*) in the Church's mission, to the ascetic obligation of tending to sanctity, etc.

All these interpretations are no doubt true in themselves, but maybe none of them hit exactly

upon the nucleus and fount of the identity of consecrated life in the form in which it should be presented to the coming Synod. It was not a case of giving a theological definition – that was not the province of the Superiors General – but of determining what was truly the root of everything and for everything.

The recent Congress, starting from the verifications and reflections already made, decided to take further steps along the same path.

Later we shall indicate the results achieved; what we want to emphasize at this point is that a great deal of progress has been made by reflecting on the lived experience of religious Institutes in these years of transformation that have followed Vatican II.

But let us first look at the themes dealt with in the Congress. On each of them I offer only some brief remarks as a stimulus.

Mission

The first theme dealt with was that of *mission*. It emerges with greater force in the process of change because it gives rise to the most urgent challenges. We have experienced this ourselves in the intense and prolonged discussions in the Special General Chapter and in the redrafting and restructuring of the Constitutions: “Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families”.²

² C 3

The mission refers in the first place to the Kingdom of God and its values, which Jesus proclaimed

³ Red. missio 18

and of which the Church is the sacrament and leaven ("seed, sign and instrument").³

The concept of mission depends on the way we think of the action of God the Father, of Christ and of the Spirit on humanity and in history. On our concept of ecclesial mission depends the manner in which we see our own specific mission and our vocation as apostles. Mission is at one and the same time commitment and prophecy, incarnation and eschatology; it means travelling in history with humanity, helping in the discovery and welcoming of the presence of God who saves.

It was pointed out repeatedly that mission is of the Church and that we take part in it, according to our specific vocation, in virtue of our baptism.

Mission comes from God and is a sharing in the mystery.

It is not simply an external activity stuck on to the Church's being, but something absolutely intrinsic to it and a constitutive element of its nature. It must not be confused with services offered, works, beneficiaries, etc., though all these form a not indifferent aspect of the Church. To understand the import of this one must rise in faith to the very mystery of the Trinity, where the Word is sent by the Father, and the Spirit by the Father and the Son in mission in human history. The Word takes flesh and as man is consecrated by the Father with the Spirit for the great mission of salvation which directs the pilgrimage of mankind towards the Kingdom of Christ and of God.

The Spirit, the gift of the Father and the Son, is the fruitful and tireless source of those communal charisms which oblige the different Institutes to take part in different ways in the complex mission passed on by Christ to the Church.

At the first beginnings of everything there is the initiative of God: the love of the Father who sends the Son into human history, and together with him sends the Holy Spirit; a wholly ineffable story of love. A God who wants to make man's response both possible and genuine. In fact the task of the Holy Spirit is that of incorporating men into Christ to bring them back with him to the Father; it is the great circle of the reciprocity of love.

Consecrated life is totally immersed in this great mystery which constitutes "life and holiness" in the Church.

As the Fathers explained it: from the Father's love for man through the incarnation of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit; and, for men, from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to become "sons" in the Son (or in other words "Christ's faithful") and so follow a sure path to the Father.

The deeper understanding of the true nature of consecrated life brings us to the very essence of Christianity as regards mission and also both communion and identity. Hence the indispensable need for the contemplative dimension in every charism of consecrated life: the central place of prayer and contemplation, because of being "sons" in the Son.

The transformation at present in progress often takes consecrated life into the front lines of social life, in the midst of all its new problems and numerous areas void of any transcendent element. If consecrated persons do not cultivate prayer and contemplation as elements propelling towards the mystery, they run the risk of losing sight of the prime reality and becoming dangerously close to the adopting of a secularized mentality and style of life.

Rather is it necessary to keep constantly in

mind that at the basis of everything lies the fascinating mystery of the Trinity; in the words of the renewed Constitutions: "We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit and send us out to be apostles of the young".⁴

⁴ C 3

We see at once that from a deeper understanding of the mystic aspect of the mission (as also of communion and identity) there emerge on the part of God, as mutually inseparable, *vocation, consecration and mission*. This is a breakthrough of the Council which has thrown light on the identity of consecrated life. The famous verb "*consecratur*" of *Lumen gentium* has shifted the attention of Religious to "consecration" and given their specific name to Institutes of "Consecrated Life". In this term are concentrated the lights of the mystery, which bring to mind, in particular, the vital relationship between mission and consecration.

The Holy Father too, in his address to the members of the Congress, presented Christ as "*the consecrated one par excellence*", and hence the one "sent" by the Father for the salvation of the world. In the synagogue of Nazareth Jesus had applied to himself the prophecy of Isaiah;⁵ in this regard the Pope comments: "the Spirit is not simply 'upon' the Messiah, but he 'fills' him, penetrating every part of him and reaching to the very depths of all that he is and does. Indeed, the Spirit is the principle of the 'consecration' and 'mission' of the Messiah⁶ ... Every consecration in the Church is intrinsically linked to *a radical and vital synthesis of consecration and mission*".⁷

⁵ Lk 4, 16-19

⁶ PDV 19

⁷ Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn.), 8 Dec. 1993

In this way the fact is highlighted that the mission of consecrated persons is measured not only by their direct commitment to the apostolate and

work of advancement, but by their very life of consecration, the total gift of themselves to God in Christ, through the power of the grace of the Spirit which translates the gift of self into practical charity towards others.

Then an indication was given of the greater challenges posed to the Church's mission at the present day; every charismatic Institute must pay heed to them and intervene in line with its particular characteristics and with due regard to the contexts in which it is working.

The main urgent needs to be considered today are:

- the requirements of the new evangelization;
- the preferential option for the poor;
- non-violence as a style of life and activity in the pursuit of justice;
- inter-religious and intercultural dialogue which helps to break the abuses of fundamentalism and totalitarianism;
- the various new areopagi deprived of the light of the Gospel.

Reference was also made, and more than once, to an aspect presented under a name that is coming into use, that of "liminality"; it is a concept that indicates how consecrated life is sited in a "frontier situation". It can be linked with the "originality" and "creativity" proper to Founders and passed on to their followers, of which Paul VI spoke in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*: through the grace of their consecration religious "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

⁸ EN 69

greatest of risks for their health and their very lives".⁷

The mission, therefore, is a powerful stimulus for transformation which comes from the same source of vocation and consecration: in other words, from the Spirit of the Lord.

Communion

Another aspect in which consecrated life has experienced a strong thrust towards transformation is that of the renewal of the community – from the traditional type of community, based for the most part on regularity of observance, to one in which the tendency is towards the making of a true "communion" in a life of greater fraternity.

Here too the deeper analysis of the ecclesial concept of communion (strongly emphasized by Vatican II and the extraordinary Synod of 1985) has led to reflection on its mysteric dimension. Here we have to return once again to the trinitarian life in God, with its distinction of persons and unity of communion in an inexhaustible reciprocal exchange of gifts.

But it was not intended to make of the Mystery the measure of the lived experiences, even though it remains their great guiding light; the experience of life does not lead indeed to the mythologizing of the religious community, nor of communion in the Church. In the Church's pilgrimage through the centuries and in the existential experience in religious houses there has never been a perfect community, nor will there be one in future: it is an eschatological goal.

This hard fact, nonetheless, does not discourage

us from looking at the mystery of the Trinity for encouragement in building communion, either in the fraternal life of Institutes or in the living unity of life together in the Church at large.

Hence the need to include in this theme education to self-giving, to dialogue and listening, to forgiveness and the revision of life, to the practice of mercy and constant growth in kindness, to patience and reciprocal emulation, etc., not simply as a way of tackling a difficult task but as a constituent element of the human condition in time, and consequently an essential element in the realistic concept of communion itself.

Although lived in an imperfect way – more as a task to be fulfilled than a goal already achieved – communion is essential in the Church and in consecrated life, as witness the redeeming presence of Christ and the unifying role of the Holy Spirit.

Today the world raises numerous challenges to the ecclesial ideal of bringing all humanity into one great family: it seems a utopian ideal which is unattainable. And yet it is the Church's task to work towards this end. And consecrated "religious" are called upon to manifest in the Church a strong experience of communion in living communities, according to the various modalities of their respective charisms.

Among the points indicated for ensuring the authenticity of renewal, we may recall the following in particular:

a. religious Institutes must "*believe in the value of community*"; and hence commit themselves to a real life of communion in their houses, for a more active participation in communal projects, for a greater effort to achieve the "one heart and one soul" as at the origins of Christianity. In practice

this means that there must also be a certain consistency in the community, so as to avoid the danger of the kind of fragmentation which imperils the particular mission; and all this in conformity with the characteristic nature of each Institute;

b. the communion of consecrated persons is inserted in a vital manner in the "*organic communion*" of the People of God, and indeed should contribute to a more lively ecclesial communion: they should be experts in making communion! Emphasis has been laid both on the commitment of consecrated persons to be genuinely inserted in the local Church to which they bring the riches of their particular charism, and on the attention that Pastors must give to the possibility of the contribution of the individual charisms, of which the Bishops themselves are required to be guarantors;⁹

c. *communion between the charisms* of the various Institutes, especially of those which are more homogeneous: an "exchange of gifts" which renders the mission of each more incisive;

d. especially emphasized was *communion between consecrated persons and the lay faithful*; this is a promising sector of the future in which to commit oneself with hope.

The "breakthrough of the laity" in the Church was spoken of as a fact characteristic of our time – another phenomenon which poses a challenge to the charisms of consecrated persons.

Among the proposals which the Superiors General have sent to the Synod is the following: "*we are of the opinion that it is necessary to animate the laity who share in their own way in the same charism of religious, by creating various forms of association and collaboration, preserving*

⁹ cf. *Mutuae Relationes*
8-9

their autonomy for birth and development in line with the lay state”.

The Holy Father too in his address, speaking of the commitment of Religious in the new evangelization, made special reference to this kind of greater communion: it will be necessary, he said, “to deepen and clarify the spiritual and apostolic relations that exist between religious and lay people, *promoting new methods and new expressions of cooperation*, to facilitate the proclamation of Christ in our time”.¹⁰

¹⁰ Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn.), 8 Dec. 1993

In connection with communion reference was also made to the innovation it brings to the exercise of charismatic authority, centred especially on the animation and development of a charism by fostering a greater degree of shared responsibility, a renewed spirituality and a new apostolic sense.¹¹

¹¹ cf *Mutuae Relat.* 13

Identity

In discussing identity, the Congress began from the starting point of the lived experience of recent decades in response to the profound social and cultural changes that have taken place, keeping in mind the variety of charisms and of the problems inherent in various inculturation processes that have already begun.

There is here an identity on the move and not yet fully realized; it is still in the process of becoming, and probably has as yet no already proven model.

The efforts made since Vatican II were recalled: the celebration of the special General Chapters, the return to the Founder, the redrafting of the Constitutions, the greater weight given to mission, open-

ness to new experiences, renewed missionary courage, dialogue between different Institutes, increase in the number of national and international Conferences, etc.

It was possible to relate consecrated life – in the perspective of Religions – to similar external phenomena; in this way due attention was given to the current historical and cultural situation as well as to religious and anthropological circumstances.

But then was singled out the linkage between its supreme originality and the unique nature of the mystery of the Incarnation. Against the background of the sacramental character of the whole Church, so much emphasized by the Council, the discussion moved to the *symbolic and transforming function* of consecrated life in its widely different charismatic forms, as though it were an “eschatological parable” for the faith of all the People of God. Its *significance*, in this symbolic and prophetic role, does not raise it above the life of the other members of the Church as though it were of greater dignity, but distinguishes it and makes it ancillary to it because destined for a particular service. It proclaims some of the aspects of the multi-form mystery of Christ, making the rich contents of salvation perceptible to people of the present day.

Its identity is linked at one and the same time, therefore, to Christ and to the Spirit: to Christ, as the incarnate presence of God and the many-faceted sign of salvation; and to the Spirit as the divine power which animates the entire mission of salvation and fills it with grace.

The description of a similar identity can be expressed in various ways indicating one or other aspect of special disciples of Christ animated by his Spirit.

In the document submitted to the Secretary of the Synod, the Superiors General were agreed in stating that "at the present day the prevailing theological category in the magisterium is that of '*consecration*' expressed in the Church through the public profession of the evangelical counsels. Another broad theological category, which would seem capable of unifying the variety of perspectives, is that of '*charism*'. Every Institute arises through the impulse of the Spirit offered to the Founders, and by them transmitted to the members. The charism implies a specific manner of being, of mission, of spirituality and of the manner in which the Institute is structured".

We could say that these two categories (consecration and charism) are superimposed and mutually interchangeable. Each time, in fact, it is a matter not of a generic consecration but of a particular one, specified by a mission and an evangelical project which constitutes the experience of the Holy Spirit which is the substance of every charism. On the other hand a charism arises precisely from a particular consecration in the Spirit of the Lord as its first source.

From the reflections made in the Congress we can pick out some requirements:

a. The first requirement is the one recalled by the Pope in his address: "*spirituality*": "The first basic value to foster therefore is that of 'spirituality', in accordance with the typical charism of each Institute. In religious consecration, the intimacy, richness and stability of a special link with the Holy Spirit are at the root of all things. Indeed the Church does not need religious who are dazzled by secularism and the appeals of the contemporary world but courageous witnesses and tireless

¹² Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn.), 8 Dec. 1993

apostles of the kingdom".¹² A renewed spirituality renders the charism 'significant' as a living testimony to newness of life;

b. The *prophetic and eschatological testimony* which manifests the christological characteristics of the new Man, and the pneumatological witness of holiness, through the fervour of charity. This implies that in order to be significant in view of the kingdom, one must question oneself on the aspect of inculturation in the testimony of one's own spirituality;

c. The identity of consecrated life is mutually related to other forms of life in the Church: all of them coincide in a fundamental identity: being disciples of Christ (*Christifideles*). Among the People of God, the followers of the Lord can be: "lay disciples", "ordained disciples" or "consecrated disciples"; what is substantive for all of them is that they are "*Christifideles*". Consecrated life must be able to make clear some particular traits which confer on them a special significance of the spirit of the beatitudes for the good of all; that they be an existential parable narrated by the Holy Spirit: a stimulating symbol with prophetic force.

It was interesting to hear in our discussions the manner in which consecrated life is considered from different ecclesial standpoints: secular, feminine, historical, cultural, clerical; particularly penetrating (in view of the Synod) was the remark of the theologian Bruno Forte from the perspective of the ordained priest, to whom is entrusted in the Church as a sign of Christ its Head, the ministry of unity: "not a synthesis of all gifts and ministries, but the ministry of the synthesis".

Formation and vocations

This theme, which at the present day represents one of the most pressing practical problems for consecrated life, was not one on which the Congress planned an introductory report, but it was the standpoint from which many of the groups worked. The time of transition and crisis through which we are living made it felt with extraordinary urgency and it is closely linked with all the themes that were studied.

These must in fact become part of the living experience of each religious. They give rise to a question and a challenge: what kind of attitude to ongoing formation, what kind of process of initial formation, what methodological process can lead the religious to a vital identification with a specific charismatic project and to live and bear witness with renewed fidelity to the values of the kingdom, in harmony with the requirements of the times?

In the groups and constellations this question was frequently heard, and methods of responding to it were indicated. The same fundamental preoccupation also surfaced in a special intervention in the assembly on the final day.

Subsequently the Superiors General dealt with it directly in their document. They emphasized the need for continuity between initial and ongoing formation; the latter extends to all members of the Church who have been called in recent years to verify in depth their following of Christ from the standpoints of mission, communion, and rethought identity.

In their document the Superiors express certain *convictions* and proposals.

The *convictions* indicated are the following:

“a. We assert the importance of an integral formation, according to the particular charism. This formation, in the light of God’s Word, must be centred on the experience of God which finds its summit in the eucharistic liturgy. Following Christ and under the action of the Spirit, the formation must be human, progressive, and inculturated; it will provide ‘initiation’ to community, understood as communion in the Church; it will prepare candidates for mission, in contact with real life experiences.

b. Formation today will be awake to the following needs: the radical following of Christ (which has typical expressions in consecrated life), dialogue and the giving of reciprocal witness, education to affective and interpersonal relationships, communal and personal discernment, respect for persons and the understanding of social dynamics, the option for the poor and attention to oppressive mechanisms.

c. We need to prepare teams of formation personnel who will be at the same time teachers, educators and witnesses; they should come from and be rooted in local cultures, because we believe that as far as possible formation should take place at the field of work; but they should have a cross-cultural experience so that they can ‘transcend’ (purify, discern, challenge) the local culture.

d. An ongoing formation, which respects the individual and takes account of the different phases of life and different social, cultural and ecclesial contexts, is indispensable for the growth of persons and the inculturation of charisms.

e. We think it urgent to try new forms of the ‘initiation’ into consecrated life of young people from

ethnic minorities and marginalized groups.”

After setting out these convictions, the Superiors made some proposals. Of these I quote just two, which seem more significant for the Synod.

The first runs as follows: “Formation requires esteem for other ecclesial vocations; for this purpose we propose that there be greater collaboration between the Institutes of consecrated life and the Bishops in the formation of all vocations; in particular we propose the creation of Study Institutes and the holding of meetings in collaboration with members of different Institutes, the diocesan clergy and the laity”.

And the second: “We propose that in diocesan seminaries and in theological Faculties there be courses in the theology of consecrated life, and that in our centres of formation studies be promoted on the different Vocations”.

What will the Bishops say in the coming Synod?

We know that an ordinary Synod fulfils a specifically pastoral task in view of the good of the whole Church; it operates in an ecclesial context of communion and mutual complementarity among the different vocations. The attention of the Bishops is centred on: pastoral applications, universality and urgency.

It is evident that what this Congress has to offer, despite its worldwide representation, is in fact only partial: in the sense that it does not deal with the whole of consecrated life; secondly, its reflections stem fundamentally from the experience of only male religious Institutes; and finally, it represents

the sensitivities of the leaders of the Union of Superiors General, which of necessity may have had a perspective and method of study not fully shared by all those represented. The horizons of non-religious consecrated life have not been considered, and the delicate issue of feminism has been touched on only in passing.

It will also be necessary to analyze with greater care the so-called "fellowship rearrangement" in the Church with a vivid sense of "exchange of gifts" in an "organic communion": this is a field in which the Bishops have a particular responsibility and sensitivity and will speak in the context of their ministry of unity.

The Synod, therefore, will have to confront a much wider array of points, starting especially from the standpoint of Pastors. We have already spoken of this in part, in the circular of October '92.¹³

¹³ AGC 342

Encouraged by the Congress, we may here express the hope that the Bishops will have in mind some fundamental leading ideas that will ensure the authenticity and fertility of consecrated life in the Church, from the points of view of its pastoral nature, its universality and urgent need. I am thinking of the following:

— A deepening of the conciliar doctrine of consecrated life, in so far as it belongs to the life and holiness of the Church; recognizing also the fact that consecrated persons have shown forth its nature in history through the centuries in the most needy and difficult circumstances.

— That the different charisms be welcomed and fostered among the People of God in line with their pluriform and complementary nature, whether of the contemplative kind or the specifically apostolic or secular. May the Bishops help the

members to live in fidelity to their Founders, with the courage of the Spirit's creativity in response to the signs of the times and with a concrete effort at inculturation.

— That communion and fraternal dialogue be fostered between consecrated persons and Bishops, between those consecrated and the clergy, between the consecrated members of different Institutes, and in particular that there may be developed a more intense communion between the latter and the lay faithful in such a way that the laity may participate, according to their state, in the riches of the charism of the Founders.

— That the increase in communion may lead, in Institutes of specifically *religious* life, to a special fostering of the community dimension according to the spirit of the individual charisms. It will be a community life that ensures the specific significance of the particular vocation and shared responsibility in the particular mission project, to be rethought in the light of the challenges of the new evangelization.

— That the Synod may provide an opportunity for promoting the figure and role of the consecrated woman in the Church.

— That the urgent need to take care of vocations and the indispensability of a solid formation, both initial and ongoing, be accepted as a primary obligation.

— That the Synod may emphasize the insistence laid by the Holy Father on spirituality: "The first basic value to foster is that of spirituality, in accordance with the typical charism of each Institute. In religious consecration, the intimacy, richness and a stability of a special link with the Holy

¹⁴Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn.), 8 Dec. 1993

Spirit are at the root of everything... What need there is today for authentic spirituality!"¹⁴

The run-up to the Synod

It could be said that in this Congress we had in advance a "taste" of the Synod itself. But we can still bring an influence to bear on its preparation.

It is the common conviction that a movement of new Evangelization is already taking place, determined by various external and internal phenomena of the Church: the broadening of the geographic vision of the world, new frontiers to receive the light of the Gospel, the awareness of communion among all the People of God, and the complementary nature of vocations among them. All this has a strong incidence on the transformation of consecrated life. We are living in fact in a more advanced secular climate; one hears, for example, words like "modern" and "post-modern": it is a change of era. And from its tendencies arises a kind of provocation; we have to ask ourselves: does the presence of consecrated persons speak to people today as it did in christian times? What do they manage to communicate to others with any clarity? What practical significance do they have? What is expected, especially by young people, of those who call themselves radical disciples of Christ: a living sign of the Holy Spirit for men and women of the present day?

Our GC23 had already singled out four challenges to be faced in providing a witness that would be efficacious in an integral process of education: those at a distance, insignificance or irrelevance of faith, multiplicity of religions, and poverty.

The response to be given is still in process of elaboration. Some points are already solidly established, but around them research is still going on. The Congress offered no prefabricated models, but indicated the path to follow. Among the stronger indications it suggested I would record the following:

a. The fact of the uninterrupted presence of consecrated life in the Church's history, with its great variety of forms and constant creativity, makes us think that the Holy Spirit is vigorous in the animation of the Church, and will not leave it bereft of community charisms, even though this may not apply to the future of every individual Institute.

b. The change that is taking place in the geography of consecrated life is impressive; it is shifting towards the South and East. Among other things this raises the problem of inculturation. When this process is more advanced, consecrated life will take on a more multi-cultural appearance and will have to strengthen the unity of a communion that is more convinced and clearly defined.

c. Despite the crisis, we are living in a time of hope. It springs:

— from faith in the presence of the Holy Spirit, source of a variety of charisms, who never ceases, as we have just said, to stir the hearts of men and continually activate the Church;

— from the flourishing of the charism of Founders (some with more than 15 centuries of life) when the fire of the origins is rekindled;

— from the logic of the paschal mystery which throws light also on the flourishing of consecrated life: from everything that dies generously in the

Lord there are born new realities full of life. We cannot plan the future, even with our sophisticated techniques. It is vitally enclosed within our fidelity to the Founder and the signs of the times. We need the boldness and trust to create small genuine realities that may be fertile and constant in the face of obstacles which seem above our strength. Think, for instance, of our Project Africa, which was launched at a time of crisis.

d. The sum total of positive values gathered in the Congress strengthens the conviction that all hope for the future rests in our quality of witness and hard work; qualities that must be found in individuals, in communities, in our activities and works. Without these qualities, even though we may still be many, we shall follow a downward path towards decline. On the other hand, from a seed rich in vitality, be it ever so small, we can rise to great heights, even quantitatively.

Let us proceed, therefore, towards the Synod. With us on the way there is also Mary, the mother and guide of all consecrated life. The Pope has told us that she "will guide you and accompany you in this difficult and enormous task of renewal, and may she intercede for the successful outcome of the next Synod. I ask you, Immaculate Virgin, supreme model of faithful obedience, to revive in the Church the witness of the evangelical counsels, so that all may see the beauty of the christian countenance in the spirit of the beatitudes. Therefore, Mary most holy, help Pastors too, so that they may have a vision and appreciation of consecrated life that reinforces its presence and mission among God's People".¹⁵

I hope, dear confreres, that this rapid presentation of the Congress may prove to be a stimulus to

¹⁵Oss. Romano (Eng. edtn.), 8 Dec. 1993

all of us, in these months that precede the historic Synod, to intensify our prayers for this ecclesial event, to renew our awareness of our vocation and to live it in mission and communion, deepening the priority commitment to ongoing formation as indicated by the GC23.

During the assemblies there was frequent reference to the Founders, who were the first to receive and accept the charism and live it with the whole of their existence, embodying it in a determined historical and ecclesial context, and have passed it on in vital form as a seed to be cultivated so as to keep its fertility alive. Let us feel ourselves accompanied by our Founder and Father Don Bosco in a journey traced out and illumined by Mary who, by her motherly intervention, desired our charism for young people.

Once again I send you cordial good wishes for 1994.

Affectionately in the coming Lord,

Don F. Viganò