

**THE CONSECRATED LIFE: ITS PLACE AND ROLE IN THE 21ST
CENTURY**

By

Lawrence N. Okwuosa, SDV

Dept. of Religion and Cultural Studies

University of Nigeria Nsukka

lawokwuosa@libero.it

Abstract

This paper focuses on the place and role of the consecrated people in our time. It argues that for the consecrated life to meet up with the demands of the 21st century world, it must embrace the spirit of change ranging through the age without losing itself and essence to change itself. This spirit of change has the blessing of the Council Fathers who fathomed the need for renewal in the consecrated life. To improve in its engagement with the world, there is need to examine first the understanding and application of consecrated life purely from the evangelical counsel. How consecrated people live and apply these vows in the imitation of Christ in the 21st century world is very important. The vows as we all know are the lowest common factors among all the consecrated persons.

Keywords: *Consecrated, Life, 21st Century, Place, Role*

Introduction

With the beginning of the 21st century, there was a great expectation of a new world order. The expectation was great and touched all spheres of human life. The Church being in the world of human beings was not left out. In the Church circle it was the clamour for new evangelization – a more effective commitment to her mission in the world. There was this belief that the world was drifting away from the good news and the news of salvation was not reaching the people effectively. Cuing into this season of expectation, consecrated life, which is an integral part of the ecclesial reality, reinforced her slogan for renewal, which was initiated with the Second Vatican Council.

With the Council, consecrated life undertook a journey of renewal which Pope Francis (2014:1) described as having both lights and shadows. In its lights is the return of the consecrated life to the origin, to the Gospel, to the charism of the founders and to the healthy traditions that have come down to the present

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time. While in its shadows are the many sexual scandals, internal conflicts and decrease in religious vocations that have bedevilled consecrated life since then. This has become of great concern to both the consecrated people themselves and the society at large, in the sense, for example, that not every consecrated person is a gay or a potential paedophile.

With these worries in our minds, we shall be looking at the place and role of the consecrated people in our time. This forms part of our religious duty to stand up and give meaning and reasons to our faith, especially in difficult times. This is what St. Peter advocated when he wrote in 1Peter 3:15, saying: "Be ready always with an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope that is in you". To do this effectively well, we shall discuss the meaning and purpose of consecrated life, the features of the 21st century and, in the light of these, look at the place and role of the consecrated life in the 21st century. At the end, we shall make some recommendations as the way forward for an authentic living and witnessing of the consecrated life in our today's world.

1. Consecrated Life, What is it?

The term "consecrate" in Latin language is *consecrare* and it has its root in the word *sacrum* meaning holy, God-like or set apart for God. Hence to be consecrated or to live a consecrated life is to be chosen by God exclusively for himself. As it is only God who makes holy, it is only God who consecrates people. The initiative belongs to him alone. It is only when God decides to incorporate one into his service or fold that the individual cooperates. According to Betti (in Eze (ed.) 2012:30) "consecration signals a profound change in the person and thus distinguishes the form of life to be lived. However, consecration does not bring about an ontological change in the individual, as happens in the one who receives the sacrament of baptism or confirmation or Holy Orders, with the resultant effects. It, instead, causes an 'ethical' change, which obliges the individual to a new title of fidelity to the common baptismal consecration. It is, therefore, not to be considered a 'a second baptism' because its effects are reversible and can be annulled and in fact, they can be nullified by the Roman Pontiff"

The history of the Catholic Church is blessed with the lives of men and women who understood Christ's call 'come follow me' (Mk 1:17) in a radical manner. It is this radicalism to answer Christ's call that moved the first recognized religious, Anthony of Egypt, like the first disciples, to abandon everything and move to the desert so as to be alone with God (Kanu 2015). Because of this radical life style in living of the gospel's values religious are seen as counter or contrast society (Lohfink 1986). By this, we mean a prophetic people, who act as the spiritual check and balance of God's new

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people. Moloney (1980) sees them as a protest movement against a Church that had conformed itself too much to society at large.

The Church in differentiating this form of life, the consecrated life, from all other forms of life in the Church says that it is “a life to follow Christ more freely and to imitate Him more nearly by the practice of the evangelical counsels” (*Perfectate Caritatis* 1). Invariably, consecrated life is essentially the embracing of the evangelical counsels (cf. CCC 914), which comprises of the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience that men and women religious profess.

The three vows are the distinguishing marks of the consecrated life. The vows represent the total renunciation of the world, of all human goods and comforts. Consecrated people negate the three most important aspects of human life, that is, economy, social and political in order to be with Christ. Hence, the vows are the declaration of their choice for Christ alone who is above all things as the joy and meaning of their life. They embrace and promote Christ’s message of salvation and in their daily life share in His passion and resurrection by being in solidarity with the world.

Because the vows, like the consecrated people, are not ends in themselves, rather the point to another the presence of God’s kingdom in our midst. With their lives, consecrated acknowledge the presence of God’s kingdom in our midst in the person and message of Jesus Christ. They are the eschatological signs of the Reign of God. In this way, we understand that the kingdom of God is not an abstract reality. Like Ulrich Schaffer (in Fuellenbach 1994:31-32) said, it is not tied to buildings of wood or stone, names or titles, times and plans, language and expressions, our abilities and inabilities, but tied only to the possibility of living in you and me as Lord of life.

By being embodiments of the Kingdom of God in human life, consecrated people are called to play the following roles in the world:

i. To provide productive models of Christian faith: In this function, consecrated people are reminders of the intimate link between being a Christian and following Christ. Against the backdrops and cultures which tend to differentiate the two, making the following of Christ an abstract thing, consecrated persons according to J. B. Metz (in Fuellenbach 1994:134) have to provide productive models for the Church and the world at all times and in every culture on how to follow Christ. These models should illustrate how fellowship with Christ is to be lived in the new social, economic, intellectual and cultural situation of today. Following Christ is not a theological discourse or the application of the Church’s Christology but a life to be lived and

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demonstrated in the concrete circumstances of our time. It is to act in Christ's stead – doing what He would have done if He was to be with us today. For example, the scripture told us that when He saw them like sheep without a shepherd He became one for them; when He found out that they had nothing to eat, He multiplied bread for them; when they brought their sick and the possessed to Him, He had pity on them and healed them, etc.

So, consecrated people are to provide productive models of imitating Christ in every age through the act of discernment empowered by the grace of the Spirit of Christ. This would imply “entering” the mind of Christ, being one with Him and abandoning totally to his will. And the result would be that through the lives and actions of consecrated people the world would come to know who Christ really is, what vision of God he proclaimed, lived, worked and died for; what vision of the world, human society, the individual person and creation as a whole he presented (Fuellenbach 1994:137).

ii. To play corrective role: Because of the tendency for the Church to “fall asleep” instead of keeping watch and pray (Mk 14:38) consecrated life is a gift from God to watch against this tendency. This role is prophetic in nature. Like the biblical prophets, consecrated people are called to condemn the sins and indifference of the people to the teachings of Christ and their holiness of life. In line with this, *Vita Consecrata* no. 84 teaches that Consecrated people like prophets should feel in their hearts a burning desire for holiness of God and having heard His word in the dialogue of prayer, they should proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. In other words, consecrated people are the watch dogs of the Church by being alive and alert to the signs of the time and confronting them with gospel's values.

iii. To witness to community living: By embracing the consecrated life, the chosen people make the person of Jesus Christ and His mission of salvation the centre of their life. And what this means in concrete terms is that they belong whole and entire to Christ's universal family. Their charism and apostolate are translated to universal fraternity or family. In this family what matters is the sharing in God's love and mercy, which was made manifest in Christ's death and resurrection. These events gave humanity a new life and a new joy. It beholds on consecrated people, then, to make this new life and joy they share with Christ reach all corners of the earth. And the point of departure in this is by presenting religious life/communities as seats of God's love, mercy, justice and peace (Fuellenbach 1994:139). Consecrated people should be able to invite and welcome the world to their world of faith, they should be able to proclaim and present the Messiah to the world in the way

they live out their joy of salvation with one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32). Definitely, like Tertullian said, the world would say of them: “See, they say, how they love one another” (*Apology, Chapter XXXIX*).

2. The 21st Century World in Perspective

For us to understand the consecrated life, its place and role today, it is inevitable a cursory look at the world we live in. That is, the circumstances in today's world which can exercise a positive or negative influence on the consecrated life and present a context where consecrated persons ought to live and bear witness to the Gospel.

The 21st century has been described as the golden age of human life. In this age, man has achieved and consolidated the achievements of the past ages in terms of science and technology. With what man has been able to achieve in the fields of medicine, architecture, information technology, space exploration and agriculture, it will not be an exaggeration to say that, in this age, impossibility is nothing. Man has truly defined and demonstrated that he is at the centre of reality. What man does not think or do is inexistent.

This age has been described variously as:

- i. The age of absolute liberalism and democratization. Actually, this was prepared in the ages past but has come to acquired a horrifying status in the sense that it favours a society in which individuals are free to choose their goals and allegiances and they militate against the promotion of collectivist non-liberal goals (Browning 2000:153-154). This has led to relativism of all kinds. Whatever matters is an individualized rendition and interpretation of reality, which in most cases is against any claim to authority and universality either in values or in any camp of knowledge (Uwalaka in Njoku, F (ed.) 2001:45).
- ii. Krishan Kumar sees the 21st century as the end time age, that is, the age of living at the end. He said “We seem to feel ourselves suspended in a transitional state where the only certainty is the lack of certainty” (in Browning 2000:57).
- iii. For Jonathan Sacks (2005), the famous Jewish scholar, our age is the age of moral emptiness. By this, he means that the contemporary man has lost himself in the consumer culture and relegated religion to the private sector. With man, it is all about unlimited relativism and untoward pluralism which are decimating eternal truths.

All these when put together translates to what is called progress in today's parlance. This progress is not ideological concepts but translated into great technological and scientific progress. Technological and scientific progress has guaranteed easy communication around the world, even though, concerns about stress from the overuse of mobile phones, the Internet and related technologies remains controversial. The world has become a global village. News spread like wild fire and information is easily accessed via the electronic media. Notwithstanding the lopsided distribution of this material progress, generally there is improvement on healthcare, education, jobs, housing and alimentation worldwide.

Unfortunately, this progress has not resulted to a culture of universal family or brotherhood. Notwithstanding the evident globalism, there is an alarming level of nationalism and racism in the world. The dichotomy between the rich and the poor still persists. The material gains of this century have not trickled down to all spheres of the society. Instead, we have a situation, whereby the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. We still witness the trampling of the dignity of the human person in various forms, the value of human rights, especially the right to life and freedom, respect of conscience and the right to objective truth and religion. Violence of all kinds, especially those animated by religious fanaticism, is on the increase. Terrorism and genocide still remain a problem in this century with the concern of the wars in Darfur, Syria, Sudan and Ukraine. Al Qaeda terrorists, Boko Haram insurgents and ISIS attackers have marred the relative peace that this century has witnessed. Low estimates on the deaths in these wars and terror attacks are in millions with so many millions of people in displacement. There has been much outcry against the perpetrators with very weak international response.

In this age, there is a subtle revolution going on in the family life. The coming out of gay people from their cocoon is today called gay pride. Same-sex marriage has slowly become more accepted, and has become legal in some countries. In 2001 the Netherlands became the first nation in the world to legalize it and since then many other nations have followed suit. Countries, like African nations, that fought against it were threatened with economic sanctions. Divorce, single parenting, teenage pregnancies and child trafficking are in the increase showing the near collapse of the traditional family system.

With regards to religion, our age, according to Arthur (2000:1), is the age of real revolution in the religious awareness of humanity. We are living in a moment of history in which the access to different religions has unprecedented depth and breadth. We live in an age of religious pluralism that Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962:11) had to say that the religious life of

mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism. No longer are people of other persuasions peripheral or distant, the idle curiosities of travellers' tales. The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbours, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street. Increasingly, not only is our civilization's destiny affected by their actions; but we drink coffee with them personally as well. Unfortunately, this closeness of the religions to one another has not resulted in world peace. What we have in terms of religious pluralism is religious relativism where there is no certain truths and where individuals freely make their own cocktail of religion by choosing and picking different materials from different religions and putting them up together as a religious belief.

3. The Role and Place of Consecrated Life in the 21st Century

From what we have seen from the overwhelming and complex situation of our time, the contemporary man is lost in time, dispersed in the fragments of reality, alienated in a kind of relativism that includes ethics, cultural, social, politics and economics. Man lives his identity and functional crisis by negating the supreme value of life. Threatened in his human finiteness, the individual is at the search of sense and fulfilment, solidarity and communion in order not to be alone in solitude and conscious of his limits. He is in need of communicating the emptiness that he feels within himself, the fear of nothing, the sense of the end that is near, the tragedy of evil that torments him in the heart and mind, around himself and in the midst of people.

The truth is that the contemporary man is insecure and lives in fear; he is stressed, confused and unsure of himself. He lives out the experience of truth only aesthetically and rhetorically. He experiences life from the point of continuous flux. Since, for him everything changes and nothing is permanent, his understanding of love, affection becomes something transient, liquid, unstable and destined to change (Scognamiglio 2006:42-43). The contemporary man avoids permanent commitments and exclusive bonds. This is what Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, called "Liquid Society".

How the consecrated people are able to handle this complex situation vis-à-vis the teaching of St. Peter would go a long way in determining the true place and role of the consecrated life in today's world. Actually, this is not the first time in the history of the church consecrated people would be facing challenges in their mission in the world and in the church. Like in the past, the issue bothers more on authenticity and application of the gospel values to the

signs of the time. For this, we shall examine some of the core points of witnessing in the consecrated life. They are:

- **Renewed witnessing of God in the world:** Basically, it is the duty of every Christian to witness of the goodness of Christ in the world, but the consecrated people are called to do so in style. Having left homes, parents, careers and the world, in parenthesis, they are presumed free to dedicate their whole life to this service. Hence, in a world at risk of obliterating every influence, image and memory of Christ in the social circle, it is the duty of the consecrated persons to renew their witnessing of Christ beginning with the way they live their lives. This is not to say that there is no witnessing going on, rather what is at stake are the quality and focus of such witnessing. It is not enough to witness to the world; consecrated people should be able to identify the “world” at risk today. The fundamental option for the poor if it must make sense today must be inclusive. It must include both the materially poor and the presumed materially rich, who may be suffering from psychological, moral and spiritual poverty like desperation, lack of identity and sense of life direction. All people, both the rich and the poor, need Christ to enjoy holistic existence and to be saved.

Again, it is not enough to witness God’s love for humanity, it is necessary to buttress God’s plan for the entire humanity. What is God teaching us and the entire humanity in the midst of these confusions? What does the gospel say in situations like this? Are there salvific lessons to learn from what is happening? How can we avoid a repeat? With authentic generous listening to the world and worthy response to these questions, consecrated people would invariably be educating the world on the new culture of love initiated by Christ. They would be mapping out a new chapter based on the gospel of Christ for the entire humanity.

- **Formation of world conscience:** The challenge for all citizens in a pluralist democracy is to form and inform their conscience, and to that conscience be true, including the discharge of any public trust and the formulation of laws and policies which enhance the prospects for freedom and human flourishing for all, regardless of their religious beliefs (Frank Brennan 2011). In this war of winning the human conscience, consecrated people should not be found wanting, if they are to have an authentic place and role in the world today. They should not feel comfortable with being the conscience of the society but, in turn, form the world’s collective conscience. As prophetic persons, they must guarantee the enforcement and sustainment of truth, justice and peace everywhere and at all times. They must find a way to make it clear that certain behaviours or attitudes are not only at variance

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with human ethical values but also against the gospel values. They must not divorce morality from religion and vice versa. In their dealings with the world, there must be a definite understanding of the concepts of evil and good, right and wrong; no mid way should be tolerated for any reason at all. Christ, himself, abhorred it.

- **Promotion of authentic human culture:** Learning from the mistakes of the early missionaries who annihilated the people from their culture, by blackmailing cultures they did not understand, in the name of religion, consecrated persons should appreciate and promote human cultures. For example, in Africa, many customs and rites, once considered to be strange, are seen today, in the light of ethnological science, as integral parts of social systems, worthy of study and commanding respect. African rich cultural values should be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who precedes all human efforts in missionary activities. Hence, it beholds on consecrated people to recognize, accept, and even animate whatever honours the human person and his dignity. Whatever does not look like the gospel should not be condemned at face level, developments in the sciences and technology, which are parts of human culture should be examined and possibly given new meanings and expressions in the light of the gospel.

This happened in the medieval age when the presence of institutes of consecrated life had a great influence in the transmission and formation of culture. The monasteries, for example, were the places in which the cultural riches of the past were handed on and the new culture of Christian humanism was developed. This has proven true whenever the light of the Gospel has enlightened new nations and cultures. Many consecrated persons have been the promoters of culture and often the defenders, researchers and scholars of indigenous cultures (Working paper for the 1994 World Synod of Bishops, 107). Consequently, it is not out of place for today's consecrated people to get themselves involved in the promotion of culture and in the dialogue between culture and faith. This would go a long way in defining their relationship with the world as not one of antagonism. Christianity is not at war with any culture and does not belong to any particular culture instead it Christianizes the culture at her disposition.

- **Facilitation of interreligious dialogue:** The awareness of the pluralistic and cross-cultural nature of our contemporary world in terms of religions, politics, ideologies and philosophies calls for dialogue. Today, we are more conscious of the fact of diversity than ever before. And in order to make the best out of the situation and avoid unnecessary conflicts and wars, the different groups must engage in dialogue at different levels. We cannot do

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without dialogue today because that would amount to isolating ourselves and talking to ourselves alone without anybody else listening. Since according to Hans Kung (1991:105) there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions; consecrated people should facilitate interreligious dialogue.

Contrary to popular understanding, interreligious dialogue does not negate the Christian faith; make relative all truths and affirm every religion as a valid means of salvation. Authentic interreligious dialogue aims at the sharing of those truths that transcend and unite us all as children of the same father, God. A good point of departure in this is the recognition of man's need for prayer. St. John Paul II affirms this by saying that the Spirit of God is present in the prayer of every person who prays, Christian and otherwise (Gioia 1997:174-175). Developing a kind of world ethic that would provide the world with the peace and justice it needs badly should be a collective duty among the religions. Waging "holy war" against religious terrorism, environmental degradation and global warming should be a matter for all the religions of the world together.

The fact remains that Christ never avoided the religions of his time and this consecrated people have to appreciate and imitate. Christ went to the synagogue, read from the Jewish sacred text and because he understood it very well was able to affirm unequivocally that he is its fulfilment. For this, consecrated people cannot but get involved in this unique contemporary mission of dialogue with other religions. Even St. Paul did the same thing at his time. In his famous Areopagus speech of the Unknown God, he engaged the religions of his time with the gospel truth.

4. The Way Forward

For the consecrated life to meet up with the demands of the 21st century world, it must embrace the spirit of change ranging through the age without losing itself and essence to change itself. This spirit of change has the blessing of the Council Fathers who fathomed the need for renewal in the consecrated life. To improve in its engagement with the world, there is need to examine first the understanding and application of consecrated life purely from the evangelical counsel. How consecrated people live and apply these vows in the imitation of Christ in the 21st century world is very important. The vows as we all know are the lowest common factors among all the consecrated persons.

Coming to the vow of poverty, John Hardon opines that not a few are saying that actual poverty in following Christ is no longer feasible, if it was ever

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defensible, in the religious life. Whatever else it is, poverty does not mean, for some religious today, deprivation. It is said to be essentially a subjective disposition which ranges all the way from “being concerned for the poor”, emphasize on personal self denial and not group acquisitiveness, to “being open to the Spirit” in the changing circumstances of the times. These new concepts of poverty have led religious institutes to write into their updated juridical structures such provisions as demands for salaries corresponding to lay persons engaged in the same work, dress and apparel that has discarded the religious and clerical garb in favour of secular clothes with accumulating wardrobes.

Unfortunately, in our world today, the only vow of poverty that would make sense to the people is a poverty that changes the fate of the poor around. It is a self-emptying poverty for the sake of the other, which is for the sake of the kingdom as Christ said, “When I was hungry you gave me to eat” (Mt 25:35). No matter how this is conceived or formulated the poor or society at large wants to benefit from the vow. They do not understand and it makes no sense that consecrated people vow poverty but they live in visible affluence. No explanation to this would convince the critical mind of the 21st century person, who wants to see the poor religious truly poor.

In the spirit of change, unfortunately, alien ideas have been introduced in the interpretation and living of the vow of chastity. Complete chaste life in the following of the chaste Christ is considered either psychologically harmful or sociologically unproductive and emotionally unhealthy. Reports in the public press about the marriages of “priests and nuns” are simply the end result of sometimes years-long liaisons that are no longer considered sinful for religious. Since nothing is hidden from the wary eyes of the 21st century world, they have come to doubt that consecrated hearts are truly on fire with passion for Christ and the lost ones of the kingdom. The talk about the heavenly wedding with the Lamb and consecrated persons representing this wedding and reproducing spiritually for the kingdom of God makes no sense any more. In Africa, for example, virginity, chaste life and total dedication to one’s spouse are priceless virtues. In moving forward today, consecrated people must honestly answer Pope Francis’ question in clear terms. He asked: “Is Jesus really our first and only love, as we promised he would be when we professed our vows? (2014:1). Only if Jesus is, will we be empowered to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path. Only when the world sees this to be true of us would they entrust their hearts to us to be saved.

Against the backdrop that the vow of obedience is all about group conformism, maintenance of law and order and respect for instituted

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authority, which has succeeded in making some adult religious perpetual infants, the vow should be seen as guiding every religious towards channelling his or her talent, ambition and resources towards the promotion of communal charism. By living out this vow, consecrated people reveal their identity as truly charismatic people; people empowered by the authority of the Holy Spirit, dotted with his gifts and sent to the world since no one sends himself or herself. But what happens, when decorated religious cannot act under this influence or is seen to be afraid of the world in their operations? For our critical world, these are signs of incompetence and inauthentic life. And since a bad sales person sells nothing, uncharismatic consecrated persons do not make impressions.

All these orientations would involve change in religious formation, apostolate and community life. The formation of consecrated people in seclusion should be discarded. They should be formed in an attitude of openness and fraternal dialogue and possibly not outside the people and culture of their possible ministration. In this kind of formation, spiritual direction must be complemented with psychological examinations and therapies to determine the suitability of candidates for the life. It is presumed that formation should be holistic thus necessitating the collaboration of all within and outside of the community. Formation of consecrated people should not be left in the hands of the intellectual few who may not be dotted with other human qualities for such a delicate task.

For fraternal love and joy to exist in the communities and, thus, empower the consecrated to give their best in the world, religious community should really be homes/families to them in facts and in deeds. The injustices of condemning a consecrated person to find a “paying job”, subjected to countless pressures to conformity, or having to look for financial security from blood relatives, or watching less qualified persons preferred because they are willing to compromise must be abhorred. Success belongs to God and must not be measured in material terms alone. Since what goes on in the communities have become public the impression all these make in the public arena is that consecrated people do not really believe, especially in divine providence.

To finish this paper without saying that consecrated life must employ traditional African values of respect for elders, sharing and solidarity in their everyday community life and dealing with the outside world would amount to real abstract thinking. Though, consecrated people are loved and respected they should understand that it is all because of Christ, who they represent and if they must be seen as such, they must reciprocate this love and affection by being their brothers’ keepers. They must not be found wanting in humility

and respect for elders. Christ, though the Son of God had to obey Mary even when his hour has not come by changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Consecrated people should learn to stoop down to conquer the world. If they want the world to *under-stand* them and be at their *stand*, they must learn to be *under*.

Having reached this far, we can re-echo what Benedict XVI said that: “The consecrated life whatever difficulty it may face will not go into extinction. It is the grace of God for his church. Hence, we should not join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, we should clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light – as Saint Paul urged (cf. *Rom* 13:11-14) – keeping awake and watchful”.

Conclusion

All said and done, it is only a religious who has experienced truly the love of God that can be of immense help to the world today. Since one cannot give what he or she does not have, it is necessary that religious people examine themselves thoroughly to determine if actually they are called and if actually they are living their life in accordance to the voice they heard. When this two do not complement each other it would really be difficult for an authentic witnessing to take place as this story illustrates:

During the time of the desert monks, around 450 AD, a young monk went to an old and holy monk and asked him, “Father, how is it that so many today leave the monastery? The old man answered him, “When a good hunting dog sees a rabbit, he will immediately run after it, howling and barking with excitement. This will, of course, attract other dogs, and they in turn will run and bark and howl like the one that saw the rabbit, although they have not actually seen it themselves. After a while the ones who did not really see the rabbit, but relied only on the barking and howling of the first dog, will get tired and give up the chase, because they are no longer interested. They drift off and go home. Only the dog that really saw the rabbit will go on running and eventually catch up with it. That is the way with many who enter”, the old monk concluded. “Only the one who has his or her eyes on Christ and has seen him will and can survive. The others, who came only because the enthusiasm of others had drawn them will lose interest and leave”.

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