

THE PROPHETIC FUNCTION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

CHILOTA ELOCHUKWU



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Abbreviations

AAS	Acta Apostolicae Sedis
Acta Synodalia	Acta Synodalia Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II
Co. ed.	Company editor
Gen.	General
Ibid.	Ibidem
Ltd.	Limited
op. cit.	opus citatum
p.: pp.	page; pages
pt.	part
SCRIS	Sacra Congregatio Pro Religiosis et Institutis Saecularibus
Vol.; Vols.	Volume; Volumes

Foreword

I thank Rev. Mother Chliota Elochukwu D.D.L. for asking me to write a foreword to her book *The Prophetic Function of Religious Life*.

The Church in her liturgical rites emphasizes that every christian at his baptism and confirmation is made to share in the prophetic, royal and priestly life of Christ. This teaching finds its origins in the teaching of St. Peter: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

If all christians are called to the prophetic tasks of Christ, why a book specifically entitled the "Prophetic Function of Religious Life"?

This question is answered by the author in Chapter One of the book where she ably substantiates with copious quotations that the call to the fullness of Christian life is not special preserve of a particular group of Christians, for example, the religious. "Religious consecration", says the author, is a distinctive manner of living in the Church, a particular way of fulfilling the life of faith and service begun in baptism. All are called to the prophetic life in the Church but some, by the way they live according to the giving of the Spirit, are charismatically called "to stimulate their brethren to a more perfect accom-

plishment of the prophetic duties of the Christian vocation.

The author is out to remind the religious that they should take another look at the function of the prophets in the religious history of Israel. The prophets in the religious history of Israel were "lovers, men who were so totally taken up with the over-powering presence of Yahweh that they become deeply hurt whenever they saw Yahweh's people living in a manner foreign to the ideal of Israel's vocation and covenant with Yahweh. They were part of the people of Yahweh, but by the quality of their lives and by their words they constantly told their brothers and sisters "Israel come back to Yahweh your God" (Hosea 14:2-3).

Our author, throughout this work is reminding all religious men and women that by their religious profession they are telling their brothers and sisters in the Christian faith that by special grace and gift of the Spirit they have set themselves the task of making sure that those values which stood at the heart of the Church founded by Jesus Christ are not lost. The religious are sign posts. All are moving towards the same direction but God in His inscrutable but merciful designs raises up sign posts from among the pilgrims.

In the words of the author: "Like the prophets the religious should look at the present in the light of the Word of God, called Jesus Christ. In doing this their function is not that of

superior Christians living out their special privileges, but Christians among Christians showing (their brothers and sisters) that this is what God called men to do." "The consecration of those who profess religious vows tends especially to this, that they give a visible witness to the world about the inscrutable mystery of Christ."

Today more than ever we need prophets, witnesses of authentic Christian living. We need people who will "testify openly to mankind's yearnings for its heavenly home and keep the awareness of it vividly before men's mind" (Gaudium et Spes n.38).

Any priest or religious reading this work will feel within himself or herself an awakening to the reality of his or her call to be a witness, a prophet to his or her brothers in the faith.

I nourish the hope that this book will be a text book for spiritual theology in the Seminaries, in the Juniorates, in the Postulates and of course in the Novitiates and all houses of formation.

But it must not be construed that this book is meant only for priests and religious. The prophetic function of all Christians which it ably explains is not the special preserve of the religious and clergy. In the words of Thomas Merton, the Monk: "the beatitudes pronounced by Christ cannot possibly be reserved for the use of monks (and religious and clergy) alone, for that would be the ruin of the universe. But in fact, all of us who have been baptised in Christ and have "put on Christ" as a new identity, are bound to be holy as he is holy.

May this work not find a place in our dusty book shelves, rather, may all priests, religious and laity find it a most practical spiritual handbook for the renewal of our vocation to witness to the holiness of Christ and the Church in contemporary society.

+ Albert K. Obiefuna,
Bishop of Awka.

Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study was motivated by my desire to understand the specific identity of the Religious life in the Church and in the world today.

The proper identity of Religious life today is a topic that pre-occupies many.

There is a whole new mentality wherein some young people no longer see any reason to become a religious. To some, further, Religious life contributes nothing that they cannot receive from other sources, and it seems to provide little for the Church too.

Recognising this situation many Religious ask: Why Worry? Are we not trying to revive what has out-lived its usefulness? If not, has Religious life any contribution to make?

There are many ways in which I would have discussed the specific identity of Religious life. But in view of the present emphasis on Ministry and Apostolate and in view of the need to be a person for others, I thought it best to look at Religious life from the aspect of its *prophetic function*.

It is also my intention to check out this identity in terms of the identity of the whole Religious life in the Church whether contemplative or active.

It is not my intention to centre my study on the identity of Religious life in any particular

Country for example, my Country Nigeria. This is because I think that the prophetic function which the Religious life fulfils in the Church and in the world today is valid for every Country in the world. We are aware of the diversity of cultures. We are also aware that one must bear witness to the Gospel message in a way that is meaningful to the people of a particular culture. But this in no way can take away from the universality of the basic truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is valid for all cultures.

I know that some Religious already know what should be the identity of Religious life in the Church and in the world today but I think that time spent on it again will not be regretted.

The documents of the second Vatican Council have a message for the whole Church today. They are documents that want to bring the Christian reader to the point of decision.

Chapter six of *Lumen Gentium* and the whole of *Perfectae Caritatis* have a message for Religious in particular. Due consideration should be given to the fact that the Council Fathers described in clear words those whom the Church refers to as Religious: "Men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing the evangelical counsels".¹ The Fathers of the Council

1. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.1, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.702. As found in English Translation, ed. A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and post Conciliar Documents*, (New York: Costello Publishing co., 1975), p.611.

saw this consecrated Religious life as a form of life lived in the Church, an imitation of the type of life which Christ made his own when he was in this world. They saw this life proceeding more from the action of the Spirit than any human planning.

In these documents the Church has given an answer to those theologians who had doubts concerning the place of Religious life in the Church. Some theologians questioned whether Religious life belongs to the essential structure of the Church or whether it is only a movement within the essential structure of the Church which though it may flourish, has neither a divine origin nor a divine guarantee.² To this problem and question the Council answered that the counsels which provide the spirit of the Religious life are divine gifts which the Church has received from her Lord.³ She has received this gift from her Lord because it is based on his word and example.

2. L.M. Orsy, *Open to the Spirit. Religious Life after Vatican II* (United States: Dimension Books, 1968), pp.3-15.

3. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.43, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.49. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.402).

CHAPTER ONE

Religious Life as the Fulfilment of the Christian Vocation

A. RELIGIOUS LIFE — A LIFE LIVED WITHIN THE CHURCH

Christianity has always declared: I believe in the *Holy Church*. The Church believes herself commissioned to convert and to save all men. She was founded to carry on in history the saving work of Christ. St. Paul announced this salvation as a new life in Christ, where man finds himself in radical union with others, cutting through all barriers, even natural barriers: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus".¹ The Church, therefore, must carry on this task of being the efficacious sign of the reality of grace of communion with God and unity among men. As belonging to the Church and in no way outside the Church, Religious must seek to actualize in their own lives this essential element of Church life.

1. Gal. 3:27-28.

The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII *Provida Mater* speaks of the care and predilection with which the Church fosters Religious life by her legislation. She protects this form of life, which she recognises as the fruit of special inspiration of the Holy Spirit.²

In the constitution, *Lumen Gentium* we are told that the counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience are divine gifts which the Church, and not primarily the individual, has received from her Lord and by his grace has always kept. Therefore, it is true to say that it is only within the Church that the individual is called to the state of the counsels. The same constitution went on to say that in the Church and through the Church various communities have flowered.³

B. RELIGIOUS SHARE IN THE UNIVERSAL CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO DEVELOP THE GRACE OF BAPTISM

1. A Religious is a Christian

In the first section of the *Perfectae Caritatis*, Religious are described as: "Men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing

2. Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater*, in AAS, 39 (1947), pp. 114-115.

3. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.43, in AAS, 37 (1965), p.49. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.402).

the evangelical counsels".⁴

According to the mind of the Council, the word *more* does not show a comparison. In other words, there is no indication in the mind of Council Fathers that there is a qualitative difference in the goal of sanctity striven for by the Religious and the baptized lay person. The vocation of all in the church is holiness of life. Christ is the divine teacher and exemplar of all perfection and it is on him that all holiness depends.

The teaching of the Council on this universal vocation to sanctity is clear in the documents:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples without distinction... It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.⁵

To all Christ sent the Holy Spirit to move them to whole-hearted love of God and of one another. And his followers receive this holiness from God in Baptism.

It is the same holiness which is cultivated by all Christians. Although their ways of life and their duties may differ, yet in the measure of their individual gifts and endowments, they must all follow the path of faith, hope, and charity. This means that there is not one *holiness for religious*

4. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal Religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.1, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.702. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.611).

5. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.40, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.44. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp.396-397).

and another for all others, or one holiness for the clergy and another for the laity. The goal proposed to all is the same, and it is for each individual to attain it in accordance with his own capabilities and in the circumstance of his own life. The call to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity is not the special preserve of a particular group of Christians, for example, the Religious.

The Council Fathers made it clear in the document that Religious life is not seen as a middle way between the clerical and lay conditions of life.⁶ With this teaching, the Council removed once and for all, the widespread concept of Religious life which presents the *following of Christ* as the special preserve of the Religious. It is very clearly stated in the document that the Religious can claim to aspire to full Christian life only because he or she is baptized. Pope John Paul II speaking to Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Washington said: "Religious consecration is a *distinctive* manner of living in the Church, a particular way of fulfilling the life of faith and service begun in baptism".⁷ The Church is a holy Church and being the member of the Church means being called to share in her holiness and

this holiness of the Church will then be manifested in the life of all the members. All Christians are endowed with grace through their baptism and therefore, they should develop in their lives the faith and holiness they have received from God. Normally the greatest means to development is through the reception of the sacraments.

2. Unique response

Every individual is offered the grace to attain to the consummation of Christian living. The manner in which each individual does this varies, as every human being is himself unique. The decisive factor in this question of perfection that varies from individual to individual is that each one is called by God himself. This comes before any particular way of life an individual might freely adopt. It follows that the measure and degree of perfection is not the same with each individual; however, the unquestionable fact remains that all without exception are called to holiness.

The individual is not assured of automatic holiness in the specific state of life to which he is called. He or she has to sanctify this state of life by sanctifying himself or herself in it. This is because man is called to holiness and to holiness in the particular form appropriate to him or her as an individual. In accordance with this, marriage for those who are called to it is not merely permitted, but is actually a vocation.⁸ For those

6. *Ibid.*, n. 43.

7. John Paul II, *Address to the Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception of the B. V. Mary*, in Washington, (October 7, 1979), in *AAS*, 71 (1979), p. 1255.

8. 1 Cor. 7:7.

who are called to embrace in a special way the evangelical counsels, this call also signifies a vocation. And both of them signify a vocation to holiness. And the only difference is the difference of means. The Council emphasized that Religious life, when accepted and lived in the right way, is opposed neither to human maturity nor to spiritual freedom.⁹ All Christians are called to perfection and obliged to pursue this perfection, because they are all incorporated into the body of Christ by baptism. This incorporation makes us children of God and Jesus asked us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.¹⁰

C. CHARISMATIC CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

I have tried to show above from the teaching of the Church grounded in the Scriptures, that the call to Christian perfection is a universal vocation. Now, if this call to perfection is a call to all Christians, is there any specific function within this context of universal call which the Religious fulfils?

Lumen Gentium in its chapter on the universal call to holiness, has removed once and for all the idea that presents the Religious life as a superior life-style but in doing so, the teaching Church created an identity crisis for the Reli-

9. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.46, in *AAS*, 57 (1965), p.52 (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.406).

10. Mt. 5:48.

gious.

There is no doubt that the Religious life is undergoing a crisis since the Council. Many Religious are asking questions concerning their proper identity and their mission in the Church and in the world. The crisis that the Religious are facing is of a sociological and theological nature:

Sociologically, many consider the Religious life as having run its course and become useless and out of date. The field of work, for example, educational works which were traditionally the field of apostolate for the Religious, have been taken over by the state or other social structures.

Theologically, the Religious life exists in the Church as a special category not for the objective work it has been doing or still does. Mons. A.M. Charue saw the Religious as: *L'avant garde* in the Church inasmuch as they, through their fidelity and fervour, strongly attract the faithful to the practice of spiritual life.¹² He went further: "Hence their special value does not consist in any Religious authority they may exercise or in works of charity they are doing, but in their spiritual influence".¹³ Perhaps some

11. A conscious and intelligent group who walk before the army to ensure security. Applying the meaning to Religious men and women, it would mean: Conscious leaders who stimulate other Christians to live their Christian life.

12. A.M. Charue, "intervention" in the 56th general session in *Acta Synodalia*, Vol. 2, pt. 3, p.383.

13. *Ibid.*, p.383. "Valor praecipuus status religiosi que tails pro tota communitate non est tandem aliquando in auctoritate quem forsan religiosi exercent aut in operibus caritatis aut aliis quae faciunt, sed praecipue in eorum spirituale influxu" (translation mine).

Religious look for their identity in community living, habit, vows and especially the apostolate; on this point, I claim with Fr. F.J. Moloney, that community, habit, vows and especially the apostolate, should not be seen as the place where the Religious find their identity, but they must be seen as the all-important *means to an end*.¹⁴

The Religious life presents certain attitudes and convictions which are intimately connected with the very finality and mission of the Church. The Council's teaching on the basic sanctity of the Church and the obligation of all the baptized to pursuit holiness and lead a life of perfection, even by practicing the counsels, lead to the crisis. The new theology on the laity has given a new insight and a new consciousness. Through baptism they become partakers in the priestly, prophetic and royal mission of Christ. Their vocation to holiness and to the apostolate follows from this baptismal consecration. This new insight has influenced some people to depreciate the vocation to the Religious life. This can be noticed, from the fact that young boys and girls who are very active in lay apostolate and are conscious of a vocation hesitate to become Religious. However, our attempt to show the still valid role of the Religious should not minimise the role of the laity and the demands of their baptism. A call to perfection is

recognised as essential for the life of every baptized person.

According to Karl Rahner, Religious cannot claim to be better Christians. He said:

The Religious life does not belong to the Church in the sense that we claim to be better or 'real' Christians. Those who love the most vividly, believe the most loyally and hope the most strongly are the best Christians, the decisive ones. God knows in the distribution of his grace where that sort of Christianity is at work; it is found at all levels of Christianity and in all Christian vocations.¹⁵

Then how do we propose a theology of the Religious life in the context of this new vision of the Church? As already said in the introduction, the Religious life belongs to the Charismatic structure of the Church. The attempt in the Council was to see Religious life in its theological perspective and not merely in a juridical frame work. In that context the Council saw Religious life as a gift which the Church has received from her Founder. This point was stressed by Fr. Sépinski who said that although the Religious state is not a category according to the divine institution of the Church, yet it constitutes a proper category in the Church.¹⁶ In other words, we cannot forget here the fact that although the Religious life in its institutionalized form is not of divine origin, yet the Counsels are: Vatican Council II says, that they are founded on the

14. F.J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets. A Biblical Model for Religious Life* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), p.155.

15. K. Rahner, *The Religious Life Today* (London: Burns and Oates, 1976), p.8.

16. A. Sépinski, "Animadversiones Scriptae de ecclesia" in *Acta Synodalia*, Vol. 1, pt. 4, pp. 577-578.

teaching and example of Christ.¹⁷

According to J. Danielou, the hierarchical structure, namely, the hierarchy and the Christian people, constitute the basic minimum requirement for the existence of the Church. The Church cannot exist without the priests who administer the sacraments and the word of God, and a people who received them. But the Church considered in its fullness, in its integrity required a form of life entirely consecrated to God. Such a form of life is the sign of the development of the community. As long as it lacks such a form the community is not fully mature.¹⁸

Danielou emphasized that the hierarchy is an indispensable organ to communicate the life of the risen Christ through the sacraments and the sacramental grace. The Religious state is an expression of this perfect sanctity inasmuch as it creates favourable conditions for the outpouring of the grace producing more abundant fruits of the sacramental grace.¹⁹ The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, while speaking of the different categories which constitute the one people of God said of the Religious that they "stimulate their brethren by their example".²⁰ *Gaudium et Spes* also recalls this

17. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.43, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.49. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.402).

18. J. Danielou, "I Religiosi nella struttura della Chiesa" in *La Chiesa del Vaticano II*, (Firenze: Editore Vallecchi, 1966), p.1098.

19. *Ibid.*, p.1098.

20. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.13, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.18. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.365).

fact. While speaking of the various gifts of the Holy Spirit it said that some in the Church are called to testify openly to mankind's yearnings for its heavenly home and keep the awareness of it vividly before men's mind.²¹

We have said that Religious life is a charism in the Church. If our assumption is correct, what then, is the specific identity of the Religious life in the Church? We will try to answer this question as far as we can in the following pages.

D. RELIGIOUS LIVING IN THE CHURCH ARE CALLED TO BE PROPHETS IN OUR TIMES

Religious are called to be prophets. When we talk in terms of this prophetic function, we mean, the living witness which the Religious should be giving to the kingdom of God, the radical living out of the Gospel message of Christ.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council described the dignity and principal functions of the people of God: We are a priestly people,²² a kingly

21. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.38, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.1056. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.937).

22. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.10, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.14. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp.360-361).

people,²³ and a prophetic people.²⁴ By baptism all Christians share in the priesthood, kingship and prophethood of Christ. Therefore, this dignity and functions belong to all the baptized.

We have already seen above that Religious are Christians first. It is my intention to look into this prophetic dimension to which every baptized person is called and see how the Religious who have made an additional commitment must live it out.

The Church looked seriously at her own identity in the second Vatican Council and she repeatedly went back to biblical models to speak of that identity. She spoke of herself as a people of God, a pilgrim people, the body of Christ and she emphasized the mystery of the Church.

It is also possible for Religious life to look to the Scriptures for a model. In this context I would suggest a quick look at the function of the prophetic charism in the Old Testament and the growth of the Religious life within the Church. However, my intention is not to give a detailed review of the Old Testament prophets but just a brief view of their activity which will help us to understand our own function. A prophet was a man of God dedicated and faithful to the covenant. He was a man of the spirit able to discern

God's will in contemporary circumstances. A prophet was one who gave expression to God's will by the fidelity of his own life and by his word. For it was not the words they spoke and the actions they performed which told of God. Their whole lives witnessed to him, even if symbolically.²⁵

Israel was a people only because of her consciousness of the covenant which God made with her. In other words, central to the Israel's very existence was the lived consciousness of the covenant. The function of the prophetic movements in Israel was not primarily to speak about future events. Speaking about the future was secondary in the function of the prophets in Israel. The prophets were men who were completely loyal to the covenant.

The prophets are best described as lovers, men who were so totally taken up with the overpowering presence of Yahweh that they were deeply hurt when they saw Yahweh's people living in division, alienated from one another, and from their unique God. In this situation they cannot refrain from bursting forth into criticism of the situation, both by the quality of their lives and by their **courageous preaching**.²⁶

The function of the prophets was to call Israel back to its original favour. Thus, the prophet looks back to the period of original faithfulness. Therefore, the oracles telling of future blessing

23. *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, n. 11, in *AA5*, 57 (1965), p. 37. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 368).

24. *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, n. 12, in *AA5*, 57 (1965), p. 16. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 362).

25. *Hos. 1-3; Is. 20:3, 8:18; Jer. 16, Ezek. 4:3, 12:6, 11, 24:24.*

26. This will help us to understand the significance of many prophetic gestures for example, *Jer. 16:9; Ezek. 4:1-5.*

or of future punishments are merely the final guarantee that this prophet is, in fact announcing God's word, and not his own.

The function of Biblical prophets was to act as a continual thorn in the side of the established Israel, to remind her why she was established originally.

There is a unique parallel between the origin and purpose of the Old Testament prophecy and the origin and purpose of Religious life in the Church. Fr. J. Murphy-O'Connor reported how the parallel was seen at the very beginning of organised Religious life, by the fourth-century monk, John Cassian. He traced the origin of Religious life to communities who went apart "to practice those things which they had learned to have been ordered by the apostles throughout the body of the Church in general".²⁷ Thus, he said that monks formed communities to see that these ideals were not only spoken of but lived. God called forth the prophets in both the Old Testament time and in the time of the Church continually, to remind both loyal Israel and the Church why it was instituted.

The Church we know was founded to carry on in history the saving work of Christ. Religious belong to this Church; and from the heart of the Church they live out their prophetic lives. Religious life is an attempt to make sure that those

CHAPTER TWO

Religious and the Prophetic Vocation of the Christian

A. CENTRAL PURPOSE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

The decree *Perfectae Caritatis* indicates the three central purposes in Religious life:

1. A Sign

The Council's texts make clear that the special mission of the Religious life is to be a sign and witness of the coming-eschatological goods. It is a sign of the kingdom founded on God's covenant with man, which does not have only an earthly destiny.¹ This is particularly evident in the sign of consecrated celibacy. According to the mind of the Council Fathers, this life has to offer a visible witness in the Church and indeed beyond, to what Christian faith and hope hold to be the pearl of great price. It is true that the whole people of God are a sign of salvation, but the Religious must stand out before men as this sign in its most explicit, most unequivocal, most challenging sense.

27. Quoted by J. Murphy-O'Connor, "What is Religious Life? Ask the Scriptures", in *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, 45 (1973), p. 13.

1. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.1, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p. 702 (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 611).

2. It is an embraced way

Religious life is a deliberately embraced way where the individual is able to realize more intensively for himself or herself the central implications of baptism. Religious life can only be an authentic sign in the Church, if at the personal level it is bringing those involved closer to God. The Council stressed that Religious life is intended above all else to lead those who embraced it to an imitation of Christ and to union with God.²

Taking the vows is one of the most deliberate ways imaginable of committing oneself to the ultimate implication of one's baptism.

3. It is a ministry

We know that the Church's true ministry of service is not, of course, totally carried out by the hierarchy. This service is the responsibility of all the members, but in many different ways. In fact, a large section of these ministries for example, to the poor, sick, the young has for long been channelled through Religious. It is also true that such service is a common responsibility, but it is true that in many of its aspects it can most effectively be done by Religious who are freed for such. Consecration too must mean service of neighbour. In one way or another ministry is essential for the concept of Religious

2. "Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.2, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.703. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.613).

life.³ Our consecrated life as Pope Paul said is "A privileged means of effective evangelization."⁴

B. MAIN PRINCIPLES OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

The Fathers of the Council indicated the three principles which must be considered in the process of the renewal of Religious life. The Council's guide lines are the very things on which the prophets also insisted:

1. A return to the Scriptures

According to the Council, the appropriate renewal of Religious life involved more than a simple return to the zeal of the first generations. It is more than an ascetic and religious intensification. The renewal has to do with a return to the source of all Christian life, in a simple statement, it is a return to the *Holy Scriptures* and to the Church's great traditions.⁵

Returning to the Scriptures as the Council called the Religious to do, Religious will find the same invitation that the prophets found. For the Old Testament prophets, a return to the Scriptures meant to renew the call to covenant community. They knew that the only reason why God

3. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.8, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.705. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp.617-618).

4. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntandi*, in AAS, 68 (1976), p.58. As found in English translation, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975), p.93.

5. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.2, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.703. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.612).

had spoken was to call them to covenant life with Himself and each other. The Old Testament prophets did not invent the message which they announce to Israel. They went back continually to the law, to the desert experience, and to the God who had revealed Himself to Israel in various ways.⁶ A true prophet looked at the present with his eyes on the past intervention of God among his people; and he praised or condemned the present in the light of the past. This is the vocation of the Religious in the Church. The renewal process must look to the word of God as its model and ideal if it is to be a renewal that follows God's ways. Perhaps, all modern scientific research and methods will play their part in the formation of an authentic Christian community, but if the overall criterion is not the word of God, it will be the product of the hands and minds of men. And as such, it will ultimately outlive its usefulness.

Therefore, like the prophets the Religious should look at the present in the light of word of God, called Jesus Christ. In doing this their function is not that of superior Christians living out their special privileges, but Christians among Christians, showing them that this is what God called them to do.

2. A return to the charism of the founder

The second criterion which the Council requested the Religious to consider during the

6. Heb. 1:1.

process of renewal is a return to the original inspiration of a given community.

In Israel, the prophets were constantly returning to the great Fathers of Israel. They did this in order to find what their message should be in their own times. They looked back to Moses who was the model of all prophets: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."⁷ This is the promise that Yahweh made to Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy and this made Moses the model of the perfect prophet in Israel. Abraham was presented as the Father of the faith of Israel, and all David's sins were forgotten, and he too became the model of perfect leader or messiah, who would guide God's covenanted people. The prophets fastened their attention on the great charismatic figures of the past, and meditating on their charism the prophets sought to find direction for the community.⁸

As each Religious family returns to the spirit of its Founder or Foundress, it will find the spirit of men and women who were prophets in their

7. By the time of Jesus, Deut. 18:18 was understood in Judaism as the promise of a new perfect Moses who would usher in the messianic times. This belief stands behind the many confessions of faith in Jesus as the great prophet: Jn. 1:25, 45; 6:14; 7:40.

8. It might be noted here, that the prophets themselves also formed groups called the prophetic guilds (Sons of prophets). These confraternities lived according to the inspiration and faith vision of the great prophets for example, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha and they actually diffused this faith vision: 1 Sam. 10:5; 19:20; 1 Kings 18:4; 2 Kings 2:3-18; 4:38ff; 6:1ff; 9:1.

own times. Men and women like St. Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Ignatius, Vincent de Paul, John Bosco, Elizabeth Seton, have been the prophets and Founders of prophetic communities within the Church. They loved the Church so much that when they saw its unrealised potential in certain areas the spirit moved them to establish communities through which God's covenant love would be manifested in life and service. However, we must not go back to these great figures and make a wholesale purchase of their times; attention must be paid to the fact that this inspiration occurred within a specific historical situation. In other words, we have to remember that the problem they faced and solutions they offered may not be the same as ours today. We must rediscover the prophetic element in their lives and repeat the same in our own times and in the light of our own problems.

Pope Paul VI emphasized this urgent need for the constant return to the Charism of the Founders and Foundresses. Recalling the words of the Council, he reminded the Religious of the obligation they have to be faithful to their Founders and Foundresses, to their evangelical intentions and the example of their sanctity. In so doing Religious will help to awaken men's heart to truth and love of God.⁹ The Council justified, defended and utilized the specific

9. Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelica Testificatio*, in AAS, 63 (1971), pp. 497-526. Italian Translation as found in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* Vol. 4, (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1976), p. 632.

features of each institute. Now, like the prophets, it is up to the individual Religious families and their members to realize, to take into account, to appreciate, and to maintain faithfully whatever constitutes the heritage of each. The Council called for a dynamic fidelity, one which can hold to that heritage in today's Church.

3. A reading of the signs of the times

The Council's third criterion for the renewal of Religious life is a reading of the signs of the times. On this point, I want to review once again the function of prophetic charism in both the Old Testament and in Jesus of Nazareth. The signs of the times that the prophet witnessed varied all through the history of Israel. With some knowledge of the Old Testament prophecy we are able to notice that the situation which Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea experienced differed greatly from that of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Divine message also came to them in various ways and they in turn conveyed the message, some by lyrical fragments others by prose narratives, some in parables; another in direct speech, some in sermons, proverbs; but we notice always that the signs they saw were the signs of the times, signs of division, alienation, lukewarmness, legalism, a lack of deep-felt religious attachment to Yahweh. Religion was reduced to mere externals, where those who imposed the law lived as white washed tombs.¹⁰ An attentive

10. Mt. 23:27.

reading of Jesus' attack on the scribes and pharisees will prove that prophecy did not stop with the Old Testament. Jesus like other prophets before him refused a religious practice which paraded as faith. Jesus formed a community that was to show how life should be lived for God.

There is a parallel between what has been said of the prophets and what the second Vatican Council said of the Religious: The Council said that under the influence of the Holy Spirit a wonderful variety of Religious communities grew up adorned by various gifts so that through them God's manifold wisdom reveal itself.¹¹

The prophet's message was addressed to men of his time, to them he communicates the will of God. To them he declared and manifested and bore witness to the mind of God. These thoughts were summarized in the Council's decree *Perfectae Caritatis* when the Council said that a life consecrated by a profession of the counsels has a necessary role to play in the circumstances of the present age.¹² Perhaps, I will venture to say again that the prophets in their work can rightly be said to have demonstrated in a most excellent manner what Religious life should be.

11. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.1, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.702. (A. Flannery, op. cit., p.611).

12. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.1, in AAS, 58 (1966), p.702. (A. Flannery, op. cit., p.611).

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem which killed the prophets and rejected his own call to life, but the task of the prophets must continue. Let us therefore, carefully look at the prophetic function of the Religious life in the Church and in the world today as coming in the name of the Lord, to live in communion the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

(i) *Community as prophetic*

Religious as prophets are to read the signs of times, precisely that they may be relevant to the needs of our day. The modern man finds no existential answer to the terrible divisions which are a sign of our times. As Christians we believe that *life in Christ* is the vocation of all God's creatures. We point out that the Church, the continuing, saving and uniting presence of Christ in the world, has the answer. The Church offers to the world an authentic community, where: "Love... binds everything together in perfect harmony",¹³ and in which man can find that deep harmony which only faith in Christ can bring. Yet it is sad to notice that the Church seems to be having very little success in communicating this message of life-giving harmony. What is the reason for this? There are two possible causes involved: It may be that the world will not listen, or that the Church is not communicating her message with conviction. On this point, perhaps, we will do well to be more

13. Col. 3:14.

Christian in our analysis, by starting with some self-examination. It is worthwhile to recall the words of K. Rahner here. He said: "The Church is all of us. Criticism of the Church is right and necessary, but every critic of the Church must first subject himself to criticism".¹⁴

Perhaps, one of the major reasons why the Church is having little success in her proclamation of herself as a community of love, is because this proclamation is not in accord with the world question. The question anxiously asked comes at the level of *life*, but the answer too often comes back at the level of *words*. The world is told that the Church offers the possibility of a true union of love, but this has to be shown. We are living in a world which has been deceived too often by empty promises. They have little credibility if the promise is not backed up with a lived, convincing sign that the promise can be a reality. This would mean that the Christian's answer to the world's deeply felt desire to live in a unity of love and peace will convince only if the world can see that it works in practice.

As I said above, Religious must read the signs of the times so that they may be a witness to the needs of our day. The times may demand the adaptation of the structures of community but that is precisely in order that those structures and common life may more clearly manifest the reality of covenant community.

14. K. Rahner, *The Religious Life Today*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1976), pp.30-31.

The times speak to us for example, of broken marriages, violent war, racial prejudice, generation-gap, exclusivism. Religious should be speaking to them of the possibility of a community of love. Our lives together are prophetic voices crying out that such division and alienation do not help anyone. Pope Paul VI focused on this prophetic dimension of Religious life in a letter he wrote to the General Chapter of the Friars Minors. He said:

People do not ask of you, that you agree with the world ambiguously since they demand that you show to them the sublimity of your life, so that seeing it they may begin to doubt their ways and may look for the future city.¹⁵

It is the function of the Religious to show to the world that there is hope, and their lives are a sign of it. If the prophets are seen as men who occasionally speak of future events so are Religious communities. They witness what the future can be for all people.

Religious are not a qualitatively superior group within the Church, but they publicly accept a task of living that kind of life in Christ to which all are called to live. For various reasons, this unity of love which all the baptized are called to live is in one way or another not achieved or not seen. This should be a matter of great concern for every member of the Church, but it

15. Paul VII, *Letter to the General Chapter of Friars Minors*, in AAS, 66 (1973), p.356. As found in *Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, 92 (1973), p.215. "Homines a vobis non petunt, ut cum saeculo ambigue consentiatis, cum poscant, ut sibi vitae celestis commonstratis, quam influentes de vobis incipient dubitare et civitatem futuram inquirant". (translation mine).

seems that too little attention is paid to it at all levels. The fact that the Church finds it almost impossible to show forth to the world her vocation to perfect harmony, makes the Religious community within the Church the prophet of their age. They should show to the world that the call to share life in Christ is not just a preached doctrine but an achievable reality; a reality through which they can give hope to both Christians and non-Christians. This task of Religious has been clearly described by the Council's document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*: "Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show forth Christ through them with every increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers alike."¹⁶ This point was also stressed by the document *Mutuae Relationes*: "The consecration of those who profess religious vows tends especially to that, that they give a visible witness to the world about the inscrutable mystery of Christ."¹⁷

Religious should attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfilment of the duties of their Christian calling. The Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* is clear on this point:

All the members of the Church should unflinchingly fulfil the duties of their Christian calling. The profession of the evangelical

16. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.46, in AAS, 57 (1965), p.52. (A. Flannery, op. cit., p.406).

17. SCRIS, *Mutuae Relationes*, in AAS, 70 (1978), p.480. "Consecratio enim eorum, qui religiosa vota proficiuntur, ad illud praesertim contendit, ut ipsi mundo praebeant visibile testimonium de inscrutabili mysterio Christi". (translation mine).

counsel shines before them as a sign which can and should effectively inspire them to do so... the religious state of life, in bestowing greater freedom from the cares of earthly existence on those who follow it, simultaneously reveals more clearly to all believers the heavenly goods which are already present in this age... Finally, this state manifests in a special way the transcendence of the kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things, bringing home to all men immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sovereignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

One may say that the most effective way of performing this two-fold task is the quality of our lives together. Religious must not only tell the world and the community of the Church that they share life. They must prove that they share life by living it.

(iii) Corrective function of Religious life

Religious have something like an innovative function in the Church. Religious offer a productive model for the Church as a whole in the business of growing accustomed to living in the new social, economic, intellectual and cultural situations.

Religious life, be it purely contemplative or active, has two poles: *God* and *men*. Religious communities have as an essential quality, to be the current of divine love between these two poles. Religious have the function of incarnating in a special way the love of God for men and directing man's attention towards God.

When we go back to the motive behind the

18. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.44, in AAS, 57 (1965), pp.50-51. (A. Flannery, op. cit., pp.404-405).

adaptation and renewal of Religious life, we see clearly that it has a profoundly theological justification. It is related to the position held by Religious in the Church. It is the response to a need which springs from what the Religious life means to the Church.

In keeping with the divine plan according to which the Church is structured and provided for, Religious live for Christ and his body, the Church.¹⁹ To act as the productive model is something that the Religious must do today with particular regard to the following of Christ in the Church as a whole.

Furthermore, Religious have the corrective role of restoring the balance to Christian life. They provide a kind of shock therapy for the Church as a whole.²⁰ They should act against the dangerous accommodations and questionable compromises that the Church as a large scale institution can incline to at times in her history; they should press for the uncompromising nature of the Gospel and of the following of Christ. Religious must try continually to remind the Church that the claim of Jesus is not a two-sided affair — now taking one side and again the other according to one's convenience and

pleasure. This is for the simple reason that God has not got several sides to him but only one which he turned to us in Jesus of Nazareth. This one-sidedness should be for the Religious the criterion of Orthodoxy. At this juncture, I have the question for the Religious: *Are the Religious still willing to give their attention to such therapeutic work?* This is a question that each Religious community and individual Religious should answer.

The adaptation and renewal began with the place held by the Religious in the Church and leads the Religious right back to the Church. The Church is the focal point and the energizing power of adaptation and renewal. In it Religious find their own position and their obligation towards God and the world. Thus, the Church's life is bound up with Religious life and is, in a certain sense, conditioned and measured by the life of Religious.

19. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.5, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), pp.704-705. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.614).

20. This corrective role of Religious life has been well developed by J.B. Metz, in his work: *Followers of Christ* (London: Burns and Oatthers, 1978, see especially pp. 12-14).

CHAPTER THREE

Religious vowed life as prophetic

To bring out the prophetic function of the Religious vows, I will suggest that we have a quick review of the meaning of each Religious vow. This is because, I think that it will make less sense to us if we try to point out the function of Religious vows without knowing what the vows really mean.

I have tried to show that the function of Religious life within the Church is a prophetic function. And we are trying to see how this function works out in practice. It is the task of Religious to be communities responding to God through lives of Chastity, poverty and obedience. The tradition of the Church assured the Religious that this is what they are called to do. It is the duty of the Religious communities to examine carefully and see how their vocation to chastity, poverty and obedience correspond to the prophetic model.

A. CHASTITY

1. Chastity is not a private concern of the Religious

It is important to notice that chastity is not a private concern of the Religious. The Council's

teaching on the universal call to chaste life is clear. Some Christians publicly profess a vow of chastity and commit themselves to a Religious community, where they will live the high ideals of a celibate form of chastity.

2. Religious chastity

The Council's teaching on chastity runs thus:

Chastity "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:22), which religious profess, must be esteemed as exceptional gift of grace. It uniquely frees the heart of man (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35), so that he becomes more fervent in love for God and for all men. For this reason it is a special symbol of heavenly benefits, and for religious it is a most effective means of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and works of the apostolate.¹

The Council's teaching on chastity might lead to a false impression that chastity is a superior means to come closer to God while marriage, perhaps, leads those involved in it away from God. Any one who might think in this way has missed the point behind the teaching, because it is the same Second Vatican Council that gave a wonderful teaching on married love in *Gaudium et Spes*.²

Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet of the last day was a celibate because of the overwhelming presence of the kingdom. It is the overwhelming presence of God in Jesus life that led him to celibacy. He was not a celibate so that he might be fit to construct the kingdom, but he was a

1. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfected Caritatis*, n.12; in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p.707. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.617).

2. Vatican Council II: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.48, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), pp.1067-1069. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp. 950-952).

celibate because of the presence of the kingdom. Jesus' opponents knew only two types of Eunuch: The one born so and the one made so by man. These Eunuchs were unable to enter upon a normal married situation. However, the motive for Jesus' inability was not physical. He was so taken over by the presence and the life of the kingdom that he had no other alternative except to give himself entirely for it.

The vow of chastity as lived in Religious life, in its full maturity will be in terms of Jesus' own celibacy. Our chaste love in its mature form should be a life, accepted out of the overwhelming presence of the kingdom of God which is present in us. In other words, our acceptance of chastity in its full development will be a decision which comes about within the context of a major religious conviction. It will be the existential consequence which flows out of the presence of love in our lives. Of course, in general, it is difficult to give a clear view why one enters Religious life. For example, one may decide for Religious life because of the Religious habit one likes or because of a person one likes.

Finally, no matter what might be the initial motivation for celibacy, the vow of chaste love in its full development should be a decision made out of the presence of love in one's life. J.B. Metz tried to define celibacy, he said: "Celibacy as an evangelical virtue is the expression of an insatiable longing for the day of the Lord."³

3. J.B. Metz, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 1978), p. 80.

3. Function of chastity

We are aware of the series of objections that are put to a life of chastity from a secularized world which uses sex to add colour and interest to even the most innocent human interests. Just a few hours in front of a television set will teach us all we need to know about these objections. It is precisely to this heavily sexualized world that our lives should address. Celibacy as practised in Religious life has its source and strength in a God of love. It is the duty of the Religious to demonstrate to the world by the quality of their love, the kingdom of God the kingdom of love. They do this by the quality of their life together. Their community life. Dwelling in the God of love they show to the world that genuine affection is not found in a predatory man and woman hunt. Religious will never convert the world by talking about chastity unless their lives continually make people wonder if the contemporary emphasis on sexuality is not faulty.

Fruitful apostolate is also involved in the practice of the vow of chastity as the *Perfectae Caritatis* indicated.⁴ The Constitution *Lumen Gentium* also said that the Lord Jesus freed the Religious from the time-consuming intimacies of married life in order to serve.⁵ Therefore in one

4. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 12; in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p. 707. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 617).

5. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 44, in *AAS*, 57 (1965), p. 50. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, pp. 403-404).

way or another fruitful apostolate is essential for the concepts of the vow of chastity as an expression of the love which prompts all chastity.

The document *Perfectae Caritatis* said that the vow of chastity is a most effective means for Religious to spend themselves readily in God's service and works of apostolate.⁶ In other words one may say that in virtue of the vow of celibacy the Religious is freed to love. It is unfortunate that sometimes Religious misunderstood the mind of the Council concerning this teaching. I have the impression that some Religious communities see community as only a base from which the real apostolate is done. Fr. J. Murphy-O'Connor discussing this point said:

The result is that Religious communities become loveless deserts. Not only does this make celibacy virtually impossible because men cannot live without love; but it means that the outsider who is shocked into asking 'what makes them different?' finds nothing but verbal answer to his question. The real answer, the existential answer is lacking. Not unnaturally, then, celibate life is judged to be meaningless.

Religious communities sometimes forget that any fruitful apostolate they will do should start with the members of their communities. Let us look deeper into this point. I wish to say here; that some Religious sometimes forget that any fruitful apostolate they might do must first of all start with every member of their community. It

6. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.12, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p.707. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.617).

7. J. Murphy-O'Connor, "What is Religious Life? Ask the Scriptures" in the *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, 45 (1973), p.59.

seems that Religious forget that the primary obligation of charity concerns those who are closest to them. And St. Paul said: "If any one does not provide for his relatives; and especially for his own family; he has disowned the faith and is worse than any unbeliever".⁸ In our own context; relatives and family would mean members of our religious communities.

It is sad that the Council's teaching on the fruitful apostolate of the vow of chastity is sometimes misinterpreted as referring only to an apostolate outside the community. However, we are not saying that Religious should sit down and simply be. What is important is that Religious recognise that the primary service they render to the Church and the world is the witness of their life together as a community. Only in this way is adequate witness given to Christ's mission. Only in this way is the world's question answered. Fruitful apostolate both within and outside the community is still essential for the understanding of Religious chaste love. Consecration to God must mean service of neighbour. This is a matter of putting the first thing first; because what a Religious community does must flow from what it is.

Religious can prophesy just as the prophets of old, that the experience of loving and belonging to the loved one is not something they can determine, but it is a reflection of the loving gift of a caring and loving God, the God who first

8. 1 Tim. 5:8.

showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, he sent Christ who died for us.⁹ The function of Religious chaste love is not to make them something odd within the context of the universal call to develop the grace of baptism but to call all Christians back to the authentic loving and joyful gift of self which is the mark of all Christians celibate or married.¹⁰

B. POVERTY

1. Communal living

A point which must not be forgotten in any interpretation of poverty as practised in the Religious life is concerned with a factor in communal living and this communal living in turn should manifest in historical and social terms factors which are inherent in the very nature of the Church herself. The fact that Religious community can provide useful assistance for the work undertaken by the Church's official hierarchy does not present them as an economic community. In other words, Religious community does not exist in order to provide cheap labour for the Church or state. Rather the Religious communities constitute a concretization in communal terms, of the social charity which must always be present in the Church as an essential manifestation of her true nature.

Religious poverty and poverty in one's mode

9. Rom. 5:8.

10. 2 Cor. 11:1-3.

of life should not be confused in such a way that it can be easily reconciled with any kind of usage of material goods. The Council clearly taught that Religious should be poor in spirit and in fact.¹¹ It is incontestable that a certain measure of real deprivation of material goods does belong to poverty; even when we leave on one side the question of precisely what goods poverty will lead us to do without. However, one thing is certain and that is that poverty as practised in the Religious life cannot simply be a poverty in spirit; however in what follows we shall see what this means.

2. A shared life in Christ

One of the favourite expressions of St. Paul is his being "in Christ". a first reading of Paul's letter is enough for us to notice that he continually spoke of *our* and *his* being "in Christ". The concept of the Christian life being a life in Christ dominated Paul's thought. In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, one can find every aspect of Christian life described as "in Christ". A Christian is baptized "in Christ" and ever after lives in Christ.¹² The Christian forms one body with other Christian "in Christ" and has redemption and eternal life "in Christ".¹³ Although these reference to Pauline expressions may seem a

11. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.12, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p.708. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.618).

12. Rom. 6.

13. Rom. 12:5.

distant way of talking about poverty yet it seems to me that the Pauline expression "in Christ" stands behind any authentic understanding of poverty as practised in Religious life. For Paul to be a Christian in any active way means to have one's life "in Christ". Here we are in touch with an aspect of Pauline thought which is not just an interesting moral or even mystical reflection; but we are at the heart of what it means to live as Christians. These Pauline expressions are expressions used to describe the Christians entering into a whole new way of living. To be a Christian means that something new is happening. A Christian has put on the "new man".¹⁴

It is a new sphere of existence which is established by baptism into Christianity. It is an ambient a new creation where all the baptized find their true home. This means ultimately that our existence as Christians is something which we personally possess even though we did not personally create it. In other words to be a Christian is to participate in the life of others to share to break down all barriers which divide: "He is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility".¹⁵ We exist and have our life as Christians only in union with other Christians it is in this sphere of a shared existence, where all divisions are eliminated, that we can claim to be alive in

Christ.¹⁶

3. Handling in all to the community

May we look a bit at the Jerusalem Church as St. Luke described it in the Acts of the Apostles. It has been a tradition in the Church to look at the ideal community of Jerusalem as the biblical basis for Religious life.¹⁷ But it does not seem that the Jerusalem Church as described by Luke was meant to be the proper and precise model for Religious community. One may say that Luke's portrait of the Jerusalem Church was meant to be a model for an ideal Church considering the historical background behind that Jerusalem community. However, we can use these texts as a model for Religious life only if we recognise that the Religious community is a microcosm of the Church; if we recognise that the Religious community is Church. If we still remember the Pauline principle which held that a Christian is never a Christian on his own, our life "in Christ" depends upon our readiness to share life. It is most significant that Luke recognised the same principle when he portrayed the ideal Church. Religious community is not outside the universal Church.

Poverty as practised in Religious life is never only a question of one's attitude of mind. A careful and non-prejudiced reading of the recordings

¹⁶. A little reflection will show that it is exactly so. None of us became a Christian on our own. It was given to us by people who were prepared to share what they already enjoyed, our parents or the people who drew us, by the quality of their own Christian lives, into this shared life "in Christ".

¹⁷. Acts 4:32-35.

¹⁴. Col. 3:10.

¹⁵. Eph. 2:14.

of the Jerusalem Church as described by Luke will make it clear that what happened was a sharing of the many goods and possessions which belonged to various individual members of the community in order to raise the standards of living of the needy members of the community.¹⁸

It will not be surprising to know that the first Christians' handing in of all their possessions to the apostles has nothing to do with devaluation of the material things. On this point we have to recognise that the handing in of the goods was never an end in itself. Luke did not present the Christian ideal as the handing in to local Christian leader every thing we possess. Christian poverty does not find its solution in handing in of possessions. Luke's presentation of the handing in of goods should be understood in the light of faith which produces a unity of love. The sharing by the earliest community of all they had demonstrated the love which each member of the community had for the other. It was because they loved one another that they were able to share. It was not reported that the non-Christians of the first century A.D. said of the Christians: "See how these Christians hand in their goods". No instead when they saw the external sign of the sharing of goods; they were able to understand that there was something new in the Christian community. They were reported to have said repeatedly: "See how these Christians love one another". Can this be said of Religious in their

¹⁸. Acts 4:34.

life of poverty today? It can happen especially in the community of women Religious that one can hand in everything that one has in order to be allowed to renew the temporary vows or in order to be allowed to take the final vows. Does our handing in of every thing promote our growth in love? I should be asking myself this valid question: Does my handing in of every thing help me to love more effectively? This requires a personal answer from myself and from every Religious.

4. The prophetic function of a shared life of a vowed community

The standard by which Religious measure their poverty is Christ. The poverty in Religious life is rooted in the Gospel which is a unique overflowing message of joy. One only needs to go through the texts of Christmas liturgy to find the theological foundation for evangelical poverty. Here we are not so much concerned with the child Jesus nor the poor world into which he came at least not in the first place. But one should be concerned with the hidden mystery that is present the mystery of the Father, the mystery of his *yes* to poverty, to the giving up of his only Son, out of his love for men. God allowed men to share in His life out of His love for men.

It is also important to notice this: Poverty is not a value in itself. Jesus did not chose poverty for its own sake,¹⁹ but out of love for the Father and for men, a love which is stronger than death. Jesus came in order to bring back the Father's

most precious creature to the Father, to redeem it from its poverty.

The whole Church has to measure herself against this standard. For the living of the Gospel as the Council insisted is the task of every Christian. But those who publicly accept to form the ardent nucleus of the baptized, should have greater responsibility.

We have seen from the writings of St. Paul and the Acts of the Apostles that poverty is never an end in itself. It is an expression of a deeper reality. It is that profound desire to share all that we have and all that we are because of the unique experience of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Poverty does not consist of having nothing and waiting for God to send bread from heaven. The witness value of our poverty does not lie in our parading through the streets with the soles flapping off our shoes or our elbows showing through our jackets and dresses. This sort of attitude may raise eyebrows,¹⁹ but it does not often convince much and no one likes to imitate such conduct. Religious evangelization does not lie in putting on a dirty and tattered dress. The most effective form of evangelization it seems to me is to live a life that causes people to want to follow it too. Religious poverty invites the Religious to a radical sharing of all that they are and all that they have so that they may produce a quality of community life that makes people *stop* and *wonder*. When the world sees that all the efforts of the Religious are directed, not to

personal aggrandizement, but to the support and strengthening of their life in Christ, then the Religious may be seen as *world stoppers*.¹⁹ Questioning the futile value that the world invents when it makes a god of personal success and material values.

Poverty means showing the world, through the radical sharing of all that we have, that we also share all that we are, in our shared life of faith "in Christ". This must work itself out in the context of material things. I would like to use the expression of F.J. Moloney which he formulated simply as: "All that I have, I give to the community, and all that I need, I receive from the community".²⁰ The second Vatican Council also used in some way the same expression.²¹

As we have already seen, poverty as practised in the Religious life demands that each member must contribute the faith, hope and love that sustain others. Similar productivity is demanded in the area of the material goods. One may ask how the Religious who has donated all his or her possessions can contribute to the community on this level. To this question, possible answer is by remunerative work which may take many shapes. For one of the characteristic of being under-privileged is that one has to work in order to live.

19. F.J. Moloney *Disciples and Prophets. A Biblical Model for Religious Life*, (London: Darton and Todd, 1980), p. 97.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

21. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 13, in *AAS*, 58 (1966), p. 708. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 618).

In the practice of poverty, there can be no universal list of what we can have or not have. What matters is that our difference from the Slavery of the world to personal achievements be plainly visible. The content of material things should not be the ultimate measure of our poverty. Our shared life in Christ should be the ultimate measure. Religious vow of poverty acquires its value only if it is motivated by love of an exceptional quality.²²

Perhaps, the reason why we make a list of what we should have or what we should not have is because the quality of our life together, our shared life in Christ is often very poor and therefore, we draw up a list which will convey an external sign that we are poor. The problem with this system is that the most self-centered, non-sharing member of a community can be perfect in matters of poverty, while all sense of true poverty based on God's word has been lost and the community divided.

The self-sacrificing love of Christ, cannot be measured by laws and lists, because it goes beyond any kind of material measurement. The

22. If we understand Religious poverty as a shared life it will solve the problem of Religious from some parts of the world where people see Religious poverty as difficult to practice because the Religious is seen as still incorporated in the extended family system. A family of a Religious may be poor and naturally the family look for some help from their daughter or son who is a Religious. In this case the superior of the Religious house after prudent consideration of the family's needs may give some help to the family. In this situation what will be the reaction of the members of that Religious community? Will they feel cheated? Where their own families are not helped because in reality their families do not need this help. If we really share life, this help given shall not be a problem for us.

vow of poverty is one of our major means of showing to the world that we are committed to this love, and when we examine our conscience on poverty, we must start at the level of our shared life of love, and only when we have come to this basic motive for our very existence as a Christian community should we turn our attention to the material circumstances which are only the context within which our poverty, our shared life in Christ, must work itself out.

The signs of our times demonstrate that the world, and possibly the Christian Church seem to have lost touch with the radical invitation to evangelical poverty. When we come closer home we must notice that society is clearly divided between those who have, and those who do not have. These divisions are also found within the Christian Churches, where wealth of possessions and culture in one community can live side by side with terrible poverty in another. In this situation the challenge of Religious poverty, which is a radical sharing of all that we have and all that we are, takes on a prophetic function. We find that the vow of poverty is not an end in itself. Poverty as lived in the Religious life is found to be a major aspect of our prophetic function within the Church.

Our lives of poverty, where all is given, announce to the world, not the evil of possession, but the value of a shared life inspired by the radical faith demanded from the rich young man. This shared life is outwardly reflected in the sharing of all that we are and all that we have,

and it must make the world stop and wonder what makes us live in this way. The answer must not be in terms of economics or sacrifice, but in terms of that extraordinary gift which is ours: The sharing of *new life in Christ*.

C. OBEDIENCE

Obedience should be seen as the first and decisive attitude in following Christ. Behind the call to obedience in the Christian Church stands the call to follow the life-style of Jesus. Jesus' life was dominated by a profound openness and obedience to God, whom he called his Father.

1. Religious obedience an imitation of Jesus Christ

The attitude of Jesus is taken as fundamental to the vow of obedience and this is reflected in the Council's document on the Religious life:

By their profession of obedience, religious offer the full dedication of their own wills as a sacrifice of themselves to God, and by this means they are united more permanently and securely with God's saving will. After the example of Jesus Christ, who came to do his Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34; 5:30; Heb. 10:7; Ps. 39:9) and "taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7) learned obedience through what he suffered (cf. Heb. 10:8); religious moved by the Holy Spirit subject themselves in faith to those who hold God's place, their superiors.²³

St. Paul recognised this fundamental need when he wrote to the Ephesians: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children and walk in love, as

23. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life; *perfectae Caritatis*, n.14, in *AAS*, 58 (1966) p.708. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.619).

Christ loved us and gave himself for us"²⁴. Religious should ask themselves what should be the concrete modality of their imitation of God? Ephesians were told that their modality should be "walking in love". But this seemed too general; may Religious ask if there is any further indication on how a Christian should love? They are offered a definite model: "As Christ loved us" St. Paul presented Christ as the concrete example; to imitate god, it should be the duty of the Religious to love as Christ loved, that is completely.

2. Function of Religious obedience

All Christians should be obedience in imitation of Christ. Religious are not exclusively called to this form of life. All the baptized are invited. If it is so, what is the function of obedience in a Religious community? If we still accept that the Religious community is a microcosm of the Church, we should bear this concept in mind as we continue our research. In order to find out what Religious obedience should be in their daily life, we need to review our notion of superiors: Who they are, how to choose them and what we expect from them. Behind this notion must stand the word of Jesus:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be

24. Eph. 5:1-2.

first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".²⁵

We also need to review our understanding of our life, primarily as a faith community. If we focus our attention on the above two points there is no doubt that obedience practised in the Religious communities will become a sign in the world, a genuine instrument of evangelization where members are seen to be mature, responsible, and totally dedicated to life of Christ.

Any superior, will have to act authoritatively on certain occasions. There will be times when superiors have to intervene as St. Paul did when things were not going well.²⁶ However, Paul never intervened on his own authority, he did so in order to call his converts back to the Lord. A fear-ridden individual who has to be protected from all decision-making by the strong superior, does not act in a fully human way. At the same time another person who would want to do everything in his or her own way all the time has lost the sense of being an imitator of Jesus of Nazareth.

I think we would do well if we try to correct the impression that authority decides every matter. Perhaps, it will repay us more if we see it as our duty to reach decision together, but there will always be some situations where the superior will need to make the final decision, and this, perhaps may cause real pain and suffering.

But, if behind these difficult situations, we have a community based on love, on faith, on hope, the problems which arise may never be insurmountable. In a context of loving obedience, no error on the part of the subjects or the superior will be irreparable, this is another area where Religious life has to examine its conscience.

The word to obey, is the same as the word to hear. Obedience, for the prophets of old, was to be constantly attentive to the voice of God. Faced with the legalism that paraded as religion, they as well as Jesus realized that formalistic obedience can be more devastating than saying no to the covenant. Pharisaic religion is a good example of that. The people some times confused their own aspirations with the demands of Yahweh, because they did not have what Solomon requested of God, a listening heart.²⁶ Religious obedience is the obedience of a prophet. Religious must be seen as living under divine urgency to come out of themselves and to lose themselves in pursuing the plan of God. In this way we will continue to proclaim to the people among whom we live the freedom which a radical openness to God can create. Paul VI as I have already indicated saw our consecrated lives of Chastity, poverty and obedience as a privileged means of effective evangelization. He went on to explain how this is possible:

25. Mk. 10:42-45.

26. 1 Kings 3:9.

At the deepest level of their being they are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine absolute and the call to holiness. It is to this universal holiness that they bear witness. They embody the Church in her desire to give herself completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. By the quality of their lives they are a sign of total availability to God, the Church and the brethren.²⁷

Obedience therefore should be seen as working together, listening together in our prophetic function. "Speak Lord for your servant is listening, listening to obey", is an utterance valid for both superior and subject for woe to the superior that commands his or her will and not that of God who has imposed on him or her the duty of being the principal listener in the prophetic College of religious or sacred ministers.

27. Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi* in AAS 68 (1976), p. 58. As found in English Translation, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975), p. 93.

CHAPTER FOUR

Practical Suggestions:

(SOME HELPS WHICH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES SHOULD PROVIDE TO ASSIST THEIR MEMBERS CARRY OUT THEIR PROPHETIC FUNCTION)

A. A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

A Religious, in order to be a reminder of the presence of God and a spiritual guide to any one in search of help must be a person of deep faith in Jesus. Religious community is not an economic community; nor a tennis club, but a faith community. The fundamental need of Religious should be to know Jesus. From our every day experience we know that it is impossible for one to imitate a person one does not know. This I think is the challenge of the Religious life. This problem stands behind the Council's request that we return to the Scriptures.¹ In order to be prophet of our days, Religious must see Christ as central in their life. Religious must know Jesus and not just commit themselves to some attractive, artistic presentation of him which strikes their fancy. A life based on this sort of commitment is destined to tragedy. Fr. J. Murphy-

1. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, n. 25, in AAS, 58 (1966) p. 829 (A. Flannery *op cit.*, p. 764)

O'Connor has something on this point. He said:

The religious community as a microcosm of the Church is a faith community which exists in response to a divine call expressed in a person: Christ. The goal of the members is to follow Christ as perfectly as possible. Hence, their most fundamental need is to know Christ, not just in an abstract historical way, but as a person whose appeal they feel. The challenge of the faith becomes real and vital only when the divine demand is rearticulated in a personal form, that is, in a personality who can say with utter conviction 'for me to live is Christ' (Phil. 1:21).²

J. Macquarrie of the University of Oxford defined theology as: "The study which through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available".³ Macquarrie insisted that any theologian who should engage in the explanation of faith must first of all participate in that particular faith before he would be able to explain it to others. I think that Macquarrie's reflection applies to Religious life too. Because in order to remind the community of the Church and the world of today what God wants, Religious must first of all know this God, have deep faith in Him, be closer to Him.

I have said that it is possible for one to enter into the Religious life because one is attracted by someone that one likes. One may also enter into the Religious life because one is attracted by the community's specific work, by the importance it attaches to the evangelical quality of life, by the

importance it attaches to the contemplative dimension of Christianity, or because of some impression one receives from someone. All these reasons enter into the choice of this form of Christian living, but J.M.R. Tillard said that those who are satisfied with these reasons and do not look for the deeper meaning and motivation, risk never getting to the essentials. Those who stay on without looking for deeper motivation, may simply persevere in the Religious life without living it as a profoundly meaningful experience.⁴

B. A COMMUNITY OF PRAYER

The word of the Council is worth repeating here:

Before all else, religious life is ordered to the following of Christ by its members and to becoming united with God by the profession of the evangelical counsels. For this reason, it must be seriously and carefully considered that even the best-contrived adaptation to the needs of our time will be of no avail unless they are animated by a spiritual renewal, which must always be assigned primary importance even in the active ministry.⁵

One may say that our problem in the Religious life is that we often hide behind structures. We often give a list of marvelous things that we are doing, but hesitate to say that we are lonely, that the prayer life and celebration of the Eucharist in the community mean nothing. I may venture to

2. J. Murphy O'Connor, "What is Religious Life? Ask the Scriptures" in *Supplement to Doctrine and Life*, 45(1973), p.25

3. J. Macquarrie, *Principle of Christian Theology*, (London: S C M Press Ltd, 1977) p.1.

4. J.M.R. Tillard, *There are Charisms and Charisms: The Religious Life* (Bruxelles: Lumen Vitae, 1977, p.29).

5. Vatican Council II, Decree on the up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n.2, in *AAS*, 58(1966), p. 703. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p.613).

say that among the most significant factors for the failure to live out the life is the fact that often efforts are based upon external programs which do not lead to a true conversion of heart. If we are not really converted ourselves, trying to convert others will be a kind of trying to build on sand because what a Religious community does must flow from what it is. Pope John Paul II, in his address to the Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception, emphasizing the need for prayer life said: "Without prayer, religious life has no meaning. It has lost contact with its source, it has emptied itself to substance, and it no longer can fulfill its goal".⁶ Pope Paul VI gave the same teaching, he said: "Do not forget the testimony of history: faithfulness to prayer or its neglect is the measure of vitality or of decadence of Religious life."⁷

C. A FREE COMMUNITY

Religious must live the Gospel in authentic freedom. This does not mean the power to choose arbitrarily between several possibilities, but it is a reasoned decision, springing from the person's innermost depths, which causes him or her to follow at any price the counsels that appear

6. John Paul II, *Address to the Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of Immaculate Conception*, in AAS, 71(1979), p. 1256.

7. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio*, in AAS, 63(1971), p. 519. "Neque obliviscamini historiae testimonium, fidelitatem videret orationi servatam aut eius neglectum esse veluti paradigma vigoris aut occasus vitae religiosae". (translation mine)

to be God's will. This is not a question of doing as you please, or doing what appeals to you, but rather of *doing* courageously what you know your God has called you to accomplish. This is the freedom that will give the Religious the desire, the conviction and the strength to live the Gospel values of chastity, poverty and obedience; a life that is attentive to the call of the spirit.

D. A COMMUNITY OF LOVE

We have said much on love, perhaps, what we will do here is to repeat what Pope John Paul II said about love in his address to the group of Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception. The Pope said:

Two dynamic forces are operative in religious life: your love for you. We cannot live without love. If we do not encounter love, if we do not experience it and make it our own, and if we do not participate intimately in it, our life is meaningless. Without love we remain incomprehensible to ourselves.⁸

The Pope gave the same teaching in his encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis*.⁹ Perhaps Pope John Paul II did not mean that Religious should show love by travelling round the whole world loving every man and woman. I think that

8. John Paul II, *Address to the Religious present in the American National Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception*, in AAS, 71(1979), p. 1256.

9. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, in AAS, 71(1979), p. 274. As found in English Translation, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (Milano: Editrice Ancora, 1979), p. 20.

he meant that Religious show love by doing all that they can to live the concrete reality of a loving and trusting community.

E. THE CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS IS THE GOSPEL

It is sad to notice, especially in communities of women Religious that the criteria for success may be by the number of successful applications for the university, university degrees already obtained, new buildings completed or by prosperous and successful parents and friends association. All these things are good in themselves, but shall we stop there? It is now more difficult for Religious to accept rejection, failure, disapproval and scorn, because of past recognition and achievements. When their apostolic work is questioned, their institutions closed, their values rejected, they become disheartened unless they remember that they are simply being treated like the master who was scorned, rejected and crucified.

Perhaps, one of the things that draw some Religious communities back from living out their prophetic function is that they are so closely tied to their institutions that at times they confuse means with ends, forgetting that they are first and foremost messengers of the Gospel rather than professional workers.

CONCLUSION

As we come towards the end of this discussion, it will be worthwhile to notice again the following:

It is quite clear from the teaching of the Council that all the baptized are called to follow Christ, and, that the Religious can claim to be following Christ only because she or he is living by faith what he or she pledged to be and to do in baptism. The following of Christ as we have already seen is not the special preserve of the Religious. However, there is an urgent need in the Church that the follower of Christ be seen, and this is why the Religious have publicly committed themselves to following Christ through their commitment to the Religious life.

The tradition of the Church emphasises that Religious communities are to live in chastity, poverty and obedience. We have tried to see above that a Religious does not find his or her identity merely in chastity, poverty and obedience. However, these traditional marks of Religious life are the essential means by which a Religious lives out his or her unique role as a prophet within the context of the universal call to develop the grace of baptism.

If we attempt to talk about one genuinely free person in the history of humankind, we will talk in terms of Jesus of Nazareth. His freedom was rooted in his profound openness to God, an openness which led him further away from the criteria of a worldly success story. Religious life

must accept as its project, the public living out, not just of an externally observed chastity, poverty and obedience, but of the Gospel. This is the only way in which Religious will announce to the world, by the quality of their lives already lived in the joy of the risen Christ, the freedom which produces genuine love.

I suggest that those Religious who have not known that Religious have a function to fulfil within the Church and the world of today start now. It is never too late. It is extremely important that Religious know their function in the Church and in the world of today. But once they know about this function, it can be a terrible thing if they continue to behave as if they are completely ignorant of this function.

Pope Paul VI in his address to the General Chapters of Religious Orders and congregations recalled the function and immutable importance of Religious life within the Church. He said:

It has seemed good to us to recall here the priceless importance and necessary function of religious life, for this stable way of life, which receives its proper character from profession of the evangelical vows, is perfect way of living according to the example and teaching of Jesus Christ. It is a state of life which keeps in view the constant growth of charity leading to its final perfection.¹⁰

The Pope stressed the supreme importance it is for the Church to bear witness socially and publicly. And he recognised how such witness is

¹⁰. Paul VI, *Address to the General Chapters of Religious Orders and Congregations*, in *AAS*, 56(1964), p.566. As found in English Translation, *Pope Paul VI to all Religious* (U.S.A.: The Daughters of St. Paul, not dated) p.7.

proclaimed by the way of life embraced by Religious institutes. He said:

Right now it is of supreme importance for the Church to bear witness socially and publicly. Such witness is proclaimed by the way of life embraced by the Religious institutes. And the more it is stressed that the role of laity demands that they live and advance the Christian life in the world, so much the more is it necessary for those who have truly renounced the world to let their example radiantly shine forth.¹¹

Religious have to accept courageously the frightening mission which the Lord has entrusted to them to live as prophets. Some times, like Jeremiah we feel helpless.¹² It is such a big job. It is then that the Lord tells us: "If I thought that you could do it alone, I wouldn't have asked you. It is my work, not yours. You can only manifest what I have accomplished in you."

Things have not completely gone wrong, for there are some Religious communities who are already living out this prophetic charism of the Religious life in our age.

The Council Fathers in the concluding admonition sum up the essential of the Religious life and its importance in preaching the message of Christ. The Council declared the high esteem in which the Church held the Religious life and pronounced the instructive verdict that there will always be communities of men and women

¹¹. Paul VI, *Address to the General Chapters of Religious Orders and Congregations*, in *AAS*, 56(1964), p.567. As found in English Translation, *Pope Paul VI to all Religious* (U.S.A.: The Daughters of St. Paul, not dated) p.7.

¹². Jer 1:6.

whose rule and way of life will be based upon the evangelical counsels.¹³

Finally, let the Religious remember that their call to Religious life is a gift. It is freely given and it must be freely received. The acceptance to live as Religious does not stop with the initial acceptance, vocation is a continuous relationship between the soul and God. Our lives as Religious involve an on-going response. It implies a growth. The total self-giving for the love of God and men suggests a life-time task: It will take a life-time to open completely to the Lord.

Our identity as Religious lies in our openness to live radically the Gospel truth. Religious community is prophetic in so far as it is caught up in Christ, spends much time in union with him, radically following him and in this way reminding the Church and the world of the call of God, of the relative value of all mundane things and the absolute reality of God, thus challenging the Church and the world to fidelity to the principles of the kingdom proclaimed by Christ. Our lives should demonstrate that we are living out the Gospel values.

13. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 25, in AAS, 58 (1966), p. 712. (A. Flannery, *op. cit.*, p. 823).

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Mother Chilota is a Theologian who is very much interested in researching Religious life.

She likes that saying of St. Theresa which says that a true lover is always conscious of the loved one.

Chilota invites the Religious and all those who will read this work to surrender to the overwhelming force of the love of Jesus Christ. And she also believes that Religious life is a life of joy when lived with love and conviction.