

INSTITUTES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

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THE DECREE *Perfectae Caritatis* introduces a significant distinction which enables us to define three types of consecrated life: life devoted to contemplation (§ 7), to apostolic works (§ 8), and the secular consecrated life (§ 9). These three sections of the decree are assuming an increasing importance in the theological reflection which is being stimulated by the renewal of Institutes of the consecrated life.

Renewal and conciliar directives

Let us make three preliminary remarks. First, the emphasis is squarely on the spiritual and charismatic nature of these Institutes. The entire task of renewal, as envisaged by the Council, is rooted in the fidelity of each Institute to its own particular graces. Here, the decree on religious life reflects that concern for fidelity and truthfulness, the respect for the divine call present in the personal and community lives of christians, which has made the entire work of the Council both forceful and appealing.

The second point to be noted is that the attitudes adopted in the decree mark the disappearance of two former ways of thinking. Scholastic theology had worked out a distinction between 'contemplative' life, 'mixed' life, and 'active' life. Active life was devoted to spiritual and temporal works of mercy, while the mixed vocation consisted in contemplation and in preaching to others the truths seen and seized on in that contemplation. It was in this mixed life that St Thomas saw the most perfect form of consecrated living: it was the ideal of his own Order of Preachers.

The other way of thinking was canonical – the result of historical factors: namely, the division of religious Institutes into Orders, Congregations, Societies of common life and secular Institutes. Religious belonging to the first two categories were equally in favour of a uniform legislation; and indeed a considerable ironing out of canonical differences was incorporated into the Code of Canon Law. But there still remain a number of 'privileges', or more accu-

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rately ecclesiastical structures, such as exemption, which the non-exempt congregations would like to see suppressed. The societies classified by the code as Societies of common life have long been seeking their real place, particularly since the Council. Several of them are not Institutes of perfection, vowed to the practice of the three counsels, and these had already taken a strong stand against the systematization proposed by the apostolic constitution of 1947, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. Others are anxious to recover their original inspiration and to break free from the law of religious, to which they had gradually been subjected against the intention of the legislator, partly in the course of practice, and partly by the principle of legal analogy, all too frequently invoked in order to assimilate these Institutes to the more current forms of a religious congregation.

From now on, it is clear that a legislation inspired by respect for persons, and applying the much-invoked principle of subsidiarity, will restore the particular law to its pride of place. Institutes of consecrated life, as free associations in the Church, will thus be able to structure for themselves, or to take up anew, particular legislation embodying the charism of the founder of each Institute. It is encouraging to see that several recent directives point in this direction.

A third and general remark. If these sections of *Perfectae Caritatis* open the way to a real and authentic renewal, one grounded on the original charism and not on a legally imposed uniform pattern, it must be admitted that the section dealing with Institutes dedicated to apostolic works is by far the least rich in doctrine. Its aim was to affirm the essential unity of the consecrated apostolic life, yet the very dichotomy which it sought to eliminate is still present in the distinction between 'religious life' and 'apostolic work'. But the intention is quite clear: the consecrated life dedicated to the apostolate is all of a piece. Interior life is no longer to be distinguished from apostolic life, nor may the latter be regarded as a danger for 'religious life'. To make such a distinction is to polarize two elements: the first of which, to the mind of many religious, has a pre-eminence which makes the apostolate, if not exactly a hazard, at least a subsidiary occupation. The distinction is one which touches the lives, members and constitutions of apostolic Institutes at the deepest level; and the purpose of re-stating it was simply to establish the unity and balance of the two parts, not to perpetuate their separation, or to enhance or devalue either one or the other.

The problem of unity and balance dominates the entire existence

of the Institutes dedicated to apostolic work, and governs the direction which their renewal is to take. Yet how many special Chapters, in dealing with renewal, have passed the question over! The first task for the majority of apostolic Institutes must be to identify their essential family characteristics, and to distinguish these from things that are not essential, such as a too conventual common legislation, or 'monastic' observances introduced in the early days and now more than ever an impediment to apostolic life. Many Institutes, having failed to consider the basic problem, find themselves with nothing more than a faulty amalgam in which old cracks and weaknesses are already apparent.

The problem is not confined to modern congregations. It pre-occupies both the old orders of 'mixed' life and societies of common life, formerly noted for a rigorous conventual style and 'common' observances whose effect was to impede personal action in the 'common interest'. In some of these societies a minimum community of three members and an effective collaboration in common tasks had come to be seen as indispensable for the maintenance of that common life considered essential to their vocation.

The defects of section 8, which speaks of religious life and apostolate in a formula aimed at all Institutes of consecrated life (even non-religious ones) dedicated to a public apostolate in the Church, are only too apparent.

On the wrong track

We have spoken of the need for apostolic Institutes to discover their characteristic features. The task seems compromised today by a public opinion which looks to the secular Institute to solve their present dilemmas. The solution has acquired something of the power of a slogan; and, as is the way with a blind force or an unreflective reaction, tends to impose itself on all institutions which are feeling their way. Such a solution was certainly not the wish of the Council, nor is it demanded by the apostolate of today. In seeking to become 'secular' and thereby discarding its basic inspiration, a religious Institute can only sign its own death warrant. A Chapter of renewal is not a Chapter of foundation. And for any true foundation there must be the awareness of a providential call and a special charism: necessary conditions for a profound spiritual life and for an enduring existence in the Church.

Members of apostolic Institutes often speak of a secular Institute

without knowing what this is. The word is a kind of symbol of the main objectives of the renewal movement: and these indeed must be taken seriously. They include the adaptation of religious dress, increased responsibility, new and more personal approaches, the suppression of obsolete community observances. Active religious will do well to recognize the four requirements for life in society recently formulated by a general Chapter: respect for the person, fundamental equality in brotherhood, the principle of subsidiarity, co-responsibility in the pursuit of the common good. These principles of social life, elaborated by the Church and proposed by her for more than a century as the natural foundation of human living, have been re-stated and ratified by the Council. Needless to say, the Church herself, in so far as her divine Constitution allows, applies them to her own social life. The same holds of religious life, provided account is taken of the charism and mission of each Institute, and with the proviso that commitment to the evangelical counsels in the consecrated life entails the renunciation of certain human rights.

No doubt, a number of chapters, in adopting in solemn fashion these principles mentioned above, have not always foreseen the result of doing so. The mere expression of such a declaration is sometimes construed as a rejection of the past. Of course, the defects of the past require no emphasis. Too often the fundamental rights of the human person have been disparaged. Christian equality gave way to class distinction (choir mothers and lay sisters). Authority gathered to itself initiative, responsibility and power. Members became simply 'inferiors', confronted by 'superiors', whose all-embracing authority had been strengthened by time and hallowed by an all too human interpretation of the doctrine of evangelical obedience. Responsible action, apostolic ministry, pastoral responsibility, are things which require a certain spaciousness; and the apostolic life, especially that of women, has suffered from the lack of it. Certain reactions, often violent, are symptoms that it would be dangerous to neglect. Yet there can be no approving of exorbitant claims and destructive results, or of a vindictive, factious and all too human spirit. Authentic consecrated life supposes a certain respect for the person, and, on any showing, a more evangelical declaration provides an apter prologue to a Chapter of renewal than do the principles of political rights, even if these are christian in inspiration.

The mission of secular Institutes

The great work of renewal in apostolic Institutes is a task of exploration. To succeed, it demands common prayer and reflection, fidelity and the desire for unanimity wherever the essential elements of vocation, mission and charism are concerned. This will only be achieved when the basic question has been answered: what *is* an apostolic Institute? The point is crucial at the present time, when several religious congregations are seeking to become secular Institutes in order to accommodate themselves to the needs of the age; and when they see no other solution to the problem of survival than in this new form of consecrated life.

Let us start by stating what constitutes a secular Institute. Such an Institute supposes a total consecration in charity to God and to men. This consecration to God and for God in the service of men is of its essence. The consecrated secular life is an extension of baptismal consecration, and as such is a response to a special vocation. By it a man is, in fact, consecrated anew, and in the first place by God, since he alone can consecrate a person to himself; and to this corresponds the subjective consecration of the individual who responds faithfully to the divine summons, devoting himself totally to God, loved for himself and loved in the service of others. This love of God is essential to any consecrated life. An Institute which prefers to consecrate itself to Christ's work, rather than to God himself, will hardly be characterized by the inner movement which goes directly to God in Jesus Christ, in accordance with the eternal plan of the Father.

Consecration in a secular Institute is not 'religious' consecration. It needs no withdrawn monastic or conventual institution to facilitate prayer and to bring harmony to a priestly or charitable ministry. The consecration of the secular Institutes, like their apostolate, is lived out in the world, and finds expression in a whole existence which is in its very essence secular. This needs to be emphasized: certain theologians, in their desire to bring out its element of interior worship or to emphasize that its vows are both a moral obligation and a form of commitment, would still attribute a religious character to the consecrated secular life. But the vows are not 'vows of religion'. They, too, can be appropriately called, in view of their object, 'secular'. They are taken and kept in the world, in a secular life which is present to the world and makes use of the elements of a priestly or ordinary lay life which, in either case, is secular: lived in the *saeculum*.

It is this presence in the world, coupled with a full use of the means of the world – professional work, a particular social milieu, civic responsibility, normal family life – which confers on the secular Institutes their characteristic quality. They are spiritual confraternities rather than communities. Their members do not live in groups and have no religious houses; they avoid the distinction of a special style of life. If the Institute assumes responsibility for its members spiritually, and to this extent becomes concerned with the whole of their lives, it fully respects the temporal commitment of each individual, his professional and social responsibilities, his personal choice of a job and an environment. The apostolate of the secular Institute is not the work of the Institute as such, but the fruit of personal initiative which finds expression in a profane activity, in civil life and in the service of civil society. Characteristic of this vocation is the desire to remain in the world, to work for its progress and evolution, and to do this in a personal capacity.

Such would be the requirements for an authentic secular Institute – secular in the full sense of the term. True, there are few Institutes which at present exhibit the clear-cut features of such a vocation. But there is urgent need to emphasize the distinctive traits of the consecrated secular quality, which are, of course, wanting in those impoverished secular Institutes which adopt the style of the Institute of apostolic life. This tendency is particularly to be regretted in a time when many religious are tempted to do exactly the opposite by becoming ‘secular’. The distinctive quality of the secular Institute does not consist in having cast off the things which religious Institutes are now discarding in their turn: an unduly monastic dress, a too communal form of apostolic work, a conventual style of life. It is secular by reason of an involvement in the world which is more profound in a sense than that of the laity, willed as a special vocation, lived as a voluntary commitment, understood as life-giving presence among the christian laity and as leaven in the human mass. On this score, the members of a secular Institute are more ‘lay’ than the ordinary faithful, whose place in the Church is described in chapter IV of *Lumen Gentium*.

The vocation of the secular Institute is, then, quite distinct from that of an apostolic religious Institute. The latter, even when action, dress and living conditions have been modernized, will retain, if it is faithful to its charism, an element of common life. The ritualized life-style of the convent may have passed; but a common action, in which initiative and responsibility are never simply individual,

will remain a distinctive feature of this vocation. The action of the individual commits the group and always represents it. In many cases, members of these apostolic Institutes choose to work out their dedication in common tasks, in a public apostolate which contributes to that witness of charity and service which the Church cannot cease to bear without ceasing to be what she is. But even if non-clerical religious, men or women, are obliged by lack of priests to assume a share in catechizing and preaching, to stand in for the priest where he cannot be present, they remain members of a living community which is in a certain sense answerable for their action and which they represent by observing a distinctive style of life as an expression of its spirit.

Certain wishes expressed by religious engaged in experiment, and certain current attempts at adaptation, underline the urgent need to give serious consideration to the very nature of apostolic Institutes, whether orders, congregations or societies of common life. A *de facto* assimilation to secular Institutes, resulting from certain extreme forms of adaptation, can only obscure the essential point. On the other hand, the desire to remain within the laity, and to be effectively involved, through a special competence, in the world of work or the professional milieu does not amount to a secular quality; nor does it provide reasons for speaking of a change of vocation which would transform religious into members of secular Institutes.

Nevertheless, attempts have been made to effect such a change. The result has not been without damage to the Institutes concerned. The public is not deceived and its criticism is often highly pertinent. This is not the place to develop the point, and it must suffice to draw attention to one or two 'experiments' which have drawn wide and justified criticism: small communities based on personal affinity; highly expensive forms of 'poor' life (the luxury which this condition requires is often quite astonishing); the suppression of silence, solitude and prayer in lives whose claim to be adapted to the needs of the Church lies mainly in irregularity and in contacts which are frequently unreal because imposed by a milieu rather than selected. For various reasons, some of these small communities have already collapsed. The burden of cost on the central residence has proved too heavy, genuine religious witness has been utterly lacking, or authentic spiritual life has been enfeebled. The judgment passed on such attempts at renewal by the members of genuine secular Institutes is both instructive and severe.

Institutes vowed to the apostolate

We can now try to define more closely the elements that go to make what the decree '*Perfectae Caritatis*' describes as an Institute dedicated to the work of the apostolate. From a reading of the decree the broad lines of a portrait emerge. The works of these Institutes are seen as ministries of the Church, a manifestation of the diverse gifts of the Spirit; and this is the basis of their place in the public life of the Church. Their apostolate is more effective to the extent to which it is in union with Christ, a point which is surely essential for the fostering and realization of a genuine renewal of these Institutes. No less vital is the essential oneness of life inherent in the apostolic vocation. The apostolic religious leads one life, not a double life; his is a vocation in which spirit and activity, prayer and apostolate, fraternal life and common action, come together in a balanced whole, a living and inspiring spiritual milieu in the Church and the world. It is one of the functions of such Institutes to radiate its spirit and to be attractive. Except where the milieu is hostile or indifferent, lay people will normally be drawn to associate in its life, spirit and apostolic work. The influence and action of an apostolic Institute in the realm of the laity will usually be evident in various forms of affiliation, establishing ties between the centre and those who participate in its action immediately or indirectly, and find inspiration in its spirituality. The power to radiate is the sign of vitality.

If we are to penetrate to the essence of Institutes dedicated to the work of the apostolate, it is essential to realize that they live and have their being in *Christ*. They are part of the extension in history of the mystery of the incarnate Word, and in consequence, their imitation of Christ, himself the apostle of his Father, is a unified, witnessing, consecrated life of charity. No consecrated life is intelligible unless there resides in its depths this mystery of charity, which is the gift of the Father in his Son and the creature's response of grace-given openness and praise through the Son to the Father. This life is therefore centred upon Christ, in whom lies its origin, its *raison d'être* and fulfilment. Christ, image of the divine goodness, is himself Love, love both of the Father and of men, and he has joined man to himself to fulfil the redemptive plan of God. The horizon of the consecrated life is that of Christ's own charity, gift to the Father and to men in a single filial love in the holy Spirit.

An analysis in depth along these lines is indispensable, if we are to keep a sense of proportion with regard to mere efficiency and to

understand, and hence respect, the working of love in apostolic charity. This charity, which is of the essence of consecrated apostolic life, is, and must be, an *apostolic* charity, derived from the sonship that is ours by adoption. Consecrated life is above all grace and vocation, the choice of man by God, consecration in and through Christ, in his death and resurrection and in the paschal mystery that is lived in the eucharist.

It is, then, inaccurate to speak about the apostolic life as though it were grounded in the generous decision of an individual to lead such a life, or even in the commitment of a community approved by the Church. It is man's gift and a ministry of the Church only because received by Christ and lived in him. In Christ, filial love was paramount. It was this that sustained his entire life and action and enabled every human gesture of his to be both a sign and a sacrament of God. The Father's love which calls to us in his Son, Christ's love which takes us up in itself, remains the foundation of all christian living, and *a fortiori* of all consecrated life, whether contemplative, apostolic or secular.

It would be a mistake, too, to understand the charity of apostolic life as seeking God in other people and finding him principally in action. On the contrary, if we are to see the apostolic vocation in its relation to him who is the first-born of the Father, we must have the courage to assert the primacy of the Father's gift and the Son's abandonment. Apostolic work itself needs to be restored to its place in the mystery of Christ. All apostolate is the return to God through call and grace. This means that any apostolate worthy of the name is a divine calling which summons men, through the apostle, to communion with God who is Love. The apostle is the one whom the Father sends; his task is to carry on the work of Christ. United to him, he unites men with Christ to bring them in the unity of love to the praise of the Father. Before being a pastoral programme, the apostolate is charity, a charity which is both expressed and fostered in action. In default of this charity, human action is not the saving act of Christ.

Once these essential features of the apostolic vocation are recognized as prevailing over all other considerations, the specific details of the apostolate, such as organization, slip into place – a place which in a sense is secondary, when set against the more fundamental things. Choice of work, the day-to-day details of the ministry, may be adapted to the needs of the time and of the Church, without prejudice to the building up of the mystical body and the construc-

tion of the Church of Christ. What matters above all is that each Institute respond to its own call, and this call is to continue the mission of Jesus by showing forth a particular image of Christ. It was not for nothing that *Perfectae Caritatis*, in treating of apostolic Institutes, was at pains to see their life not only among the structures of the Church but among the different charisms and the manifold ministries of the Body of Christ.

Apostolate and contemplation

Seen in this light, it is obvious that consecrated apostolic life makes a unity, that it is not a 'mixed' life, a mere juxtaposition of different elements. Prayer and action are not completely separate moments. Prayer pervades action; yet the primary action of the apostle is his prayer and his love for God and the people of God. As prayer is transformed by a physical act into a liturgical gesture or a spoken word, so the inward apostolate, the abiding spirit of charity, finds expression in apostolic work. The apostle is contemplative in his apostolate and apostolic in his contemplation.

But to this a further point must be added. Grace does not establish man at that level of love which enabled the incarnate Word to be continually united to his Father and present to men. To be contemplative, man must set himself to contemplate, to unite himself to God in love. And this is what prayer is ultimately about; it is not simply a briefing for tasks that lie ahead, or the particular way an apostolic worker 'clocks-in' at the start of his day. Rather, it is an act of union, prompted by the Spirit, which grows progressively more simple as the divine will is more clearly perceived and more completely embraced in interior life and outward action.

This life 'in the Spirit' is as primary and irreplaceable for the apostolic man as it was for Jesus himself, in whose life the moments of decision – the choice of the apostles, the rejection of temporal power, the final surrender to the Father's will – were always preceded by prayer. The prayer of Jesus, long and often made at night so that he might remain accessible to men by day, is the model for the apostolic man, called to continual union with that will of the Father which is found and contemplated in the world of events and men and things.

But the contemplation of the apostolic man does not render his action less necessary. It will, to be sure, give shape to action in a score of ways; the man of prayer will direct, assess, even modify his action in the light of his contemplation. But there is never any

question of action being supplanted by prayer, for, in the apostolic Institute, fidelity to action is as much fidelity to God as, in the case of the monk, protracted prayer and solitary, silent withdrawal from the world responds to a vital need of the Church and gives expression to her insatiable thirst for union with the redeeming Christ.

A unity which has its centre in Christ needs to be maintained by habitual contemplation of the public life of Jesus. It is in his public life that Christ is truly immersed in the ministry, by his example, his preaching and his loving service. The Institute dedicated to the apostolate must centre its life in the Word incarnate, and find in the public life of our Lord the ultimate meaning of its own life and mission. Lay or religious, its model must be the missionary Christ, the priest, preacher and teacher who cared for sinners and healed the sick, sat at table with the rich and gave his friendship to children and to the poor and humble. These traits of Jesus of Nazareth are etched into the Church's life by the various charisms of religious founders.

From this doctrinal basis, it follows that the principle of unity of life in Christ is, and must remain, the norm of all adaptation, the starting-point of all research in the field of apostolic consecrated life. Closer attention on this score might have avoided a great deal of effort which has been not only useless but has even impaired the true development of consecrated life.

In terms of renewal the first question which apostolic Institutes ought to have been asking is not how to promote the apostolate, but how to achieve a true balance of life. The basic problem with which they have been grappling for some time has not been one of efficiency or over-all pastoral direction. Even the matter of time to be given to prayer is not the central issue. The basic problem stems from the nature of the consecrated life as implanted in the life of Christ and given both to God and men, a single outgoing movement of the holy Spirit. Adaptation based on a supposed opposition between prayer and action can only destroy the unity of apostolic life by depriving it of balance. And indeed the balance is precarious already in many Institutes, which were founded to meet a definite pastoral need on a parochial basis, and lacking a profound and developed spiritual doctrine able to give meaning to a range of apostolic action more varied or at least more extensive than in its beginnings. True renewal is only to be attained in the discovery of a more profound equilibrium, wherein prayer is the bond of grace and charity, and apostolic zeal and union with God are two elements

of an ordered whole. All this, of course, entails decision and choice in such matters as the acceptance or refusal of new works and the problem of outmoded or irrelevant forms of ministry. But decisions on this level must remain faithful to the proper charism of an Institute. There must be no surrender to mere fashion; and religious Institutes should be chary of hastily conceived or insufficiently studied projects.

Contemplation will always be essential to the apostolic life, simply because the apostolate is an act of union which has its roots in communion with the Christ sent to save, and it will be fruitful only in so far as it yields to the demands of this communion. The apostle *must* be a contemplative, for his prayer is Christ's prayer: the adoration of the Father in the Spirit, the love of the Son for the Father, the redemptive love of Christ for all humankind. Without this contemplative prayer, where man meets God under his attraction and direction, in that silence and solitude needed if one is to be alert to the movements of the Spirit and to discern them with ever greater facility, one can hardly speak of the contemplative life.

For the apostolic religious, prayer, while it supposes certain times of solitude and silence each day, is something that goes on all the time. Consequently, it imposes a certain measure on external action. But authentic prayer is as alien from flight or evasion as it is from the merely human efficiency of an apostolic life without prayer: if indeed we can speak of apostolic life where prayer is relegated to certain times and places alone considered apt for it. A 'time of prayer' is any moment of deep union with God and hence of greater grace. The rhythm of action, with its alternation of intense output and relaxation, is not an altogether apt analogy for the normal development of a contemplative vocation whose direction is left to God.

Monastic contemplation and apostolic prayer

A last question remains to be considered: is there an apostolic contemplation different from monastic contemplation? One must not be duped by words. Not every christian who prays is a contemplative. To be a contemplative is to attain the union with Christ necessary to live out the mystery of God at a certain depth. Contemplation has nothing to do with the timetable, the number of hours devoted to prayer; nor is it a question of 'methods' of prayer. Contemplation, as grace-given reality, is the experience of God, discerned according to light received, and lived in a growing fidelity

to the action and call of God, to the divine choices which make an apostolic action something willed and blessed by God.

Contemplation, because it is a vision of God, is essentially the same for all who receive the grace. God is always God: so that the experience of the contemplative monk will always have something to communicate to those engaged in the apostolate.

The essential characteristic of apostolic contemplation, as distinct from the monastic, is not determined by atmosphere or environment, but by the call of God. The apostle is called in order to be sent: he is a man of mission. The monk – if he is truly a monk – is a man drawn exclusively to intimacy with God. His entire attention is fixed on God. His contemplation, if it is the authentic work of grace and a lived intimacy, is a true foreshadowing, though obscure and inconstant, of man's final situation before the face of God.

The apostle, too, may be drawn by God to a contemplation of this sort, though he will remain, by his very vocation, one whom God sends, a man of action divinely inspired. But in its profound intimacy, true apostolic contemplation belongs with any other form of divine contemplation: it is a loving choice of God, an exclusive and dynamic choice.

Let us be quite clear that contemplation, whether monastic or apostolic, while it purifies and enlightens, is not confined to the realm of extraordinary graces. The prayer of the contemplative may well be uphill work and in no way luminous. It may occur in the darkness of faith and the trusting, often painful, surrender to the will of God, crucifying in its very passivity. So long as it is loving and trustful, it will be a source of apostolic inspiration. It will often demand a surrender of the human spirit into God's hands in a way which is obscure and painful; simply because it will be Christ who is acting rather than his apostle. In this contemplation the human word may be the vehicle of graces, to which neither human intelligence nor labour nor dogmatic study could open the way. The efficaciousness of the truly apostolic work is from God; and it is often beyond the awareness of the man who has answered this call, which he accepts as the gracious gift of God's Spirit. There is here an inward quality, which shines through in the spiritual effectiveness of the apostolic minister, and is often more manifest to those who benefit from it than to the one who is chosen to carry it.

The fostering of a deep life of prayer can hardly be achieved by the decrees of a general Chapter (often limited to outward prescription, and to somewhat superficial recommendations). It will result

from a growing fidelity to God, who bestows his gifts liberally on the truly apostolic religious. It is in this fidelity that man opens his heart to the divine gifts; while no effort of ours can compel the Lord to favour us in this way, our waiting upon him and our desire for his coming will certainly make his gift more fruitful. This necessary passivity in prayer can only be impeded by restless activism and an exaggerated concern for efficiency which leaves no room for the operation of the Spirit.

The Apostolate, union with Christ

Such reflections as these force upon us the conclusion that many Chapters of renewal have failed to reach down to the essentials. The efforts needed to get rid of archaic external observances have exhausted us; we have had neither the time nor the energy to investigate the deeper meaning of the apostolic religious life. Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether a general Chapter, as it wrestles with protocol old and new, is the most suitable place to reflect on these questions, or the most qualified assembly to awaken a greater fidelity to the graces of prayer. The task of apostolic renewal supposes a prayerful reflection on the interior aspect of apostolic action, the love of others in God, the divine gift which enables man to communicate life to his fellows in Christ and through him. Far too frequently, the apostolate has been viewed from a standpoint that might be best called administrative. How much time has been given to the serious consideration of a more fruitful and direct apostolate? Have Chapters done more than draw up a balance sheet of works in hand, and of available human and material resources?

Many Chapters give the impression of a woeful short-sightedness. Much time has been devoted to criticism; perhaps there has been too much concern to find an answer which satisfies everybody. Certainly, timorousness and agitation over change in externals has been a hindrance to apostolic zeal. Institutes in which efficiency and the power to survive were once paramount values are now disheartened by numerous defections; and a simple lack of courage has confined their efforts to securing necessary reforms rather than to the formation of an apostolic plan of action based on the graces of the foundation. Confronted by complex problems, most renewal Chapters have been keenly conscious of a lack of support and interest from the bishops, opposition from the clergy, and the lack of competent assistance necessary for a deeper renovation. And canon law

still presents an obstacle to the development of the charism proper to an Institute of apostolic life.

Nothing, of course, will prevent the work of God from being done. There are times when the vocation crisis itself can be seen as a grace, imposing as it does changes which would not otherwise have been ventured, a return to the essentials which would otherwise have been less whole-hearted, and the suppression of many large-scale common works with their heavy burden of administration and the necessity of working in superficial collaboration with lay people who in no way share the spirit of the Institute. In many cases, no doubt, all this was inevitable, and much of the criticism, especially on the score of collaboration with others, requires scrutiny, for behind it lies a failure to appreciate the essential mystery of a consecrated life and of a mission which cannot be defined simply in terms of a programme. A similar lack of understanding may lie at the basis of a number of recent inter-community projects, particularly favoured by the chaplains of catholic or social action. Such collaboration will prove apparent rather than real if the religious concerned are impeded from living fully in accord with their vocation, and acting in the spirit of their foundation. The task of renewal is difficult, and neither the demands nor the strictures which come in from all sides make it any easier. The way ahead can only be found in a truthfulness bred of charity. Where this is present, fidelity is assured.

In practice, this means going back to the founder's vision, seeing its breadth and trying to recapture something of the zeal that inspired it. It means embarking on the sort of works which accord best with the founder's original apostolic desire. Yet how many Institutes of priests are discarding the ministry of preaching and spiritual direction in favour of social action and techniques which, while mainly modern, are less amenable to the unseen influence of grace. The deviations caused by certain new attitudes have not yet run their course; their influence on the young, in particular, is very marked. And perhaps certain experiments of this sort are necessary; superficial results on a merely human level will show in the end that the apostolate belongs on another plane, that it is not the work of man but a divine action, demanding above all surrender to God who allows the apostle to be a chosen instrument in his hands.

Apostolic commitment

All consecration to God and men is a consecration in the charity

of Christ. Commitment to the consecrated life means the deepening of the essential christian vocation, whose sacramental basis is baptism, the sacrament of burial in Christ's death and of new life in his resurrection. It is the resurrection which gives to the christian life its positive meaning; the renunciations made in baptism are seen in its light to be valuable and necessary. The engagement to apostolic work in a religious Institute can only be understood in this context. As consecration to God and men, it is something positive, union with Christ, gift in him to the Father, dedication to others in the work of salvation.

In every form of consecrated life, but especially in the apostolic life, the central point of reference is always Christ. The evangelical counsels, a problem for the exegete and a stumbling block for certain theologians, are seen to have meaning and value only when they are referred to Christ, who is their foundation and law. By the effort of prayer and with the light and gift of the holy Spirit, the life of the counsels is discerned in the very existence of the incarnate Word. Here, the ancient tradition of the Church still points the way: this tradition, because it is faithful to its Master and does not create its own doctrine, reaches back into the mystery of God, the eternal mystery which human intelligence cannot transmute without betrayal. Union with Jesus Christ, in fidelity to the life and mission of the incarnate Word, is a mystery which human effort, whether of the theologian, the canon lawyer or the sociologist, can only diminish, unless the reference to Christ in the Spirit is fully recognized.

The evangelical Counsels

As part of a living synthesis, the element of renunciation proper to the life of the counsels becomes comprehensible: not as a safeguard, but as freedom, openness to God and a living reflection of the filial attitude of Jesus towards his Father and of the gift of himself to man, in which the love for his Father finds expression. Far from complicating life, the counsels can and must be a principle of unity, for each of them shows forth a particular aspect of a single, simple union with Christ. To be poor is to live the gift of God in complete dependence, to affirm that God is lovable above all things, to be detached from whatever in man might claim the place of God. Poverty is the tranquil affirmation of the primacy of God, to whom all things belong, in whom everything has both its origin and its end. Detachment from all that is not God is a basic law of the

exclusive love required of those whom God chooses for himself.

The divine call implicit in the consecrated life is normally couched in terms of consecrated celibacy. A sign in the social order, celibacy is neither the primary nor the only evangelical counsel. Again, it is to be seen as one instance of a single dedication: the Father's own attachment of human love to the love of God. The religious vowed to chastity shares in a particular manner in the filial love of Christ, so that, in the love he extends to the men whom Christ saves, the love is mysteriously contained. A life 'homed' onto God in charity is drawn into the pattern of the trinitarian life and slowly transformed until will, love and desire find their only object in God. And this union of the will to God is the foundation of obedience. For Christ, his obedience to the Father, his surrender to God's will in all the situations of his life and in the intimacy of his prayer, was a vital element in his existence, his 'food'. Hence to live in Christ is to live attuned to God's will in surrender to the Father, both in the acceptance of the circumstances of life and in the passivity of prayer in which man is subject to the divine. What is first lived in prayer is accomplished in action, and only when its intention arises from prayer will action show forth that singleness of mind which is obedience to the Father in the life of the Spirit.

The counsels and contemplation

The three counsels, lived out according to Christ's pattern, are an expression, in the realm both of action and of contemplation, of the divine adoption. As long as the Spirit himself prays within us, the voice that we raise to the Father is that of his Son, and prayer bears the characteristics of sonship: the poverty of filial dependence, the chastity of exclusive love for the Father, the filial obedience by which Christ accomplished his Father's will for the salvation of the world.

The counsels and the apostolate

What holds of contemplation is also true of the apostolate, which is inward desire before it issues in outward action. Under the action of the Spirit, the apostolate becomes an expression of Christ's gift to man, and consequently the apostle must reflect in his own life the gratuitous character of salvation itself, recognizing that the Father's gift is transmitted in poverty of spirit. For the apostle is the bearer of a grace which he transmits without meriting, and gives without necessarily being possessed of it himself. The apostle's

detachment with regard to his action is the guarantee of the genuineness and truth of what he does. Only the poor in spirit can be truly apostolic.

The same must be said of consecrated chastity, the expression of God's loving gift to men in the generosity of the heart of his Son. The human love of the apostle stands in need of continual purification, if it is to share in, and communicate, Christ's love for men. And to be chaste, the apostle must be poor, declining to turn the gift of God to his own account by seeking a too-human gratitude, a too-carnal attachment which would compromise the gratuitousness of salvation of which God has made him the instrument. Because he is detached in heart, he can give himself to men without attaching himself to them; or turning them away from him who is the one source of every gift and of all life.

Poverty of spirit and the dedication to God and man in chastity are made possible by the Spirit that was in Christ, making him obedient to the Father. The presence of the Word is extended through time by the saving mission of the holy Spirit. There is no apostleship, except where the Father sends and the apostle submits to his will and is faithful to his truth under the guidance of the Spirit. Consecrated obedience is given both in prayer and in action, and on either level transcends the merely human structures of the Church to reside in the mystery of God, in a personal relationship with Christ, eternal Son of the Father.

Human love itself grows increasingly rich when joined to this apostolic love which transforms and exalts it into a filial attachment to the Father and gift to man in the ministry of the Word and of the eucharistic sacrifice. It is this higher reference that explains the consecrated celibacy of the apostle, his personal poverty (above all, spiritual) and his obedient devotion. But to be truly poor, chaste and obedient, after the example of Christ, love must principally and above all be a loving dependence on the Father and a joyous living by the Spirit in the resurrection and in the hope of future glory. Hence, all forms of commitment and structures of social living which can help to foster fidelity to God and a deeper love, must take second place in comparison with the vocation and response which are the substance of consecrated life. The point is fundamental for the renewal required by the Council, and must remain such in the lives of apostolic Institutes. It is the norm to which all other attempts aimed at a deeper understanding of consecrated life in the Church should be referred.

Renewal of the life of the counsels

Through the Council, the Church gives fresh approval to the long tradition which sees in the three counsels the distinctive element of the consecrated life. The importance of this re-assertion cannot be too strongly emphasized. For once the counsels are seen in their true perspective, as gift both to God and to men, it becomes possible to view the entire consecrated life from a single standpoint. All that goes to make it necessarily transcends the order of precept. We are dealing with a way of life which is governed in all its aspects by the compelling force of charity.

There are three aspects of consecrated life, already discussed in more general terms, which call for closer examination: prayer, community and action.

Consecrated life, as we have seen, is founded upon prayer, in which man's response to God and the fidelity of his love are affirmed. The particular manner of prayer to be adopted will depend on personal vocation and on the prompting of grace. The personal element needs to be restored to its rightful place in the religious life, for it embodies, sustains and confirms the intimate relationship of the individual with God. In this matter, it is encouraging to note the progress that has been made by a number of Chapters in allowing freer forms of prayer, in declining to impose an obligatory maximum and leaving it to the individual to go beyond the strictly necessary and to pray at the time which best suits him and in the place which most lends itself to the purpose. In this way, the prayer which was once understood simply as a religious 'duty' or exercise of piety is being replaced by a prayer which is a living and spontaneous response to God in a personal vocation.

But progress along these lines is not sufficient in itself to resolve the problem of prayer as encountered today in the apostolic Institute. The work of the apostolate makes prolonged prayer difficult. Often there is barely time for the prescribed minimum necessary to consecrated life. Hence the prayer of the apostolic worker will be diffused throughout his life and deepened when possible by a more intense prayer in moments of free time and by an appropriate form of common prayer, especially in the active and personal participation in the eucharist. This situation, of which today's religious are profoundly conscious, would seem to call for new and far-reaching investigations in the realm of apostolic prayer.

Apostolic Institutes and the divine office

One aspect of the problem is the divine office. Even in its simplified form, the office hardly accords with the needs either of the apostolate or of apostolic community life. It is this which accounts, in part at least, for the widespread disaffection among clerics for this form of prayer. The office has never been properly adapted either to the life of the diocesan priest or to that of the apostolic religious, to say nothing of the laity. The monk or the mendicant on his travels was enabled by the breviary to be joined in heart and spirit with the office being sung in choir. It is hard to see how an office which has never been experienced in the slow contemplative rhythm or choral recitation or in its proper liturgical setting, can have the same meaning.

In this matter, certain liturgists are pressing for more uniformity than seems desirable. Why *should* the same office be imposed on all religious? (To say that such an office facilitates common prayer during congresses and conferences is hardly a valid argument!) Indeed, the question arises why office should be imposed at all, since in all prayer it is the Church that prays. To offer prayer in the name of the Church, it is not necessary to recite the divine office. What matters is that prayer should be grace of God and union with Christ, and this element of personal commitment is essential to all prayer, even when made in common.

The prayer of the apostolic religious must be above all, then, personal. The heavier his burden of responsibility, the more varied his tasks, the more his prayer will need to be intimate, spontaneous and free. For the monk, divine office is the ground rhythm of life. For the apostolic religious it is an obstacle to the style of action demanded by the modern world, where the needs of the apostolate are less foreseeable and more pressing than in former times. The truth needs to be faced that for the apostolic worker, whether priest or religious, rest and recollection and the general ordering of life can no longer be provided for by the daily horarium, and that new solutions will have to be sought, such as days or even longer periods spent away from the milieu of work and community.

A number of Chapters have seen the problem very clearly, even if for want of time, and, indeed, of experience, they have not discovered a suitable solution. In some cases, the daily recitation of lauds and vespers has been retained as the form of common prayer: whilst some Chapters have made no prescriptions at all, leaving to the communities themselves the freedom to select or compose their

own form of common prayer. Perhaps it needs to be emphasized that in today's circumstances, the common prayer of lay religious should centre upon a fitting celebration of the eucharist. Other elements could then be grouped around this centre. A liturgy beginning with a service of praise (three psalms) followed by three readings (with pauses for meditative prayer) could culminate at the altar (offertory, eucharistic prayer and communion) and round-off with the singing of the *Benedictus*, the concluding prayer, the blessing and dismissal. In the old holy week liturgy, we were familiar with the inclusion of vespers in the eucharistic celebration, and the new *ordo* has combined the eucharist with lauds. The best course, then, would seem to lie in a complete revision of common prayer along such lines, rather than in the imposition of structures which are incompatible with apostolic life and do not meet the requirements of genuine prayer.

Fraternal life in apostolic Institutes

The problem of common prayer brings us inevitably to that of 'common life'. Let us make clear, to begin with, that the term should be avoided. We shall refer therefore not to 'common life', but to 'fraternal life'. Consecrated life is a vocation to brotherhood; in the charism of a new foundation God brings into being a new form of brotherly life. As the term is used today, 'religious life' is strongly associated with 'common life', a phrase which, if not ambiguous, is certainly polyvalent. It frequently denotes a form of life incompatible with the full development of apostolic brotherhood. 'Common life' suggests 'life in common', organized group life, the gathering of members of a house or team around the same table, under the same roof and in the same work, a life which finds its distinctive characteristic in uniformity. Understood in this sense, common life can only be maintained by regularity, uniform discipline, dependence on one superior. The sharing of material goods is insisted upon in a way that equiparates common life with religious poverty. Indeed, poverty has come more and more to be seen as the core of common life, whereas in the beginning the concept was one of communion in the same vocation, of being bound together by charity in the same spirit.

In this respect, apostolic Institutes are still where they started. They were founded for the apostolate, but subsequently adopted a conventual and cenobitic style thought to be 'religious life'. Few Institutes have yet gone beyond the former norms of 'common life'

to find the community life proper to them. It is revealing to notice how often the attempt to accommodate fraternal life to the concrete conditions of the apostolate is instinctively resented as relaxation, an infidelity. To be sure, a uniform and restricted community life makes for easier control, closer collaboration and a more highly organized work; it involves heavy – perhaps excessively heavy – renunciations. Is it certain that it promotes true charity and a truly fraternal life adapted to the apostolate of today? Experience often shows the opposite. Nor is this surprising, for a house of ‘common life’ does not cater for people called by vocation to work outside its walls and to be completely involved in apostolic action. For apostles like these, ‘common life’ means something quite different. True apostolic community must be formed and maintained in the unity of a common calling and of a common mission. Fraternal life, more than any other aspect of the life of an apostolic Institute, must be lived in terms of its proper apostolate. Unless the problem is put in the right terms, the desirable balance will never be achieved. At the origin of the malaise which still reigns, in spite of renewal Chapters, in many apostolic Institutes, there is a situation which of its very nature breeds conflict.

To live in brotherhood in an apostolic Institute is to live united by the same spirit, even if the work undertaken is largely personal, as in the case of priestly work and the type of mission which demands mobility and a high degree of availability. The house of the Institute is then no longer a convent or a ‘community house’ but rather a home port, a place of rest, study and silent prayer where the apostolic worker can relax when a task is accomplished without being caught up in a rhythm of life detrimental to repose and peace.

As these Institutes become more deeply aware of the demands the apostolate is making on them, they will appreciate that their ‘common life’ is not conventual and must be characterized by its own particular style. Such a life is far from the ordered routine of the monastery; the most regular thing about it is the constant presence of the unpredictable – the calls, the personal needs, the individual encounters which make up the apostolic ministry.

Up till now, the majority of apostolic Institutes have undertaken such common work as teaching and the care of the sick and aged. In a large degree, their activity lies in an essentially profane work, undertaken in charity, to meet a human need not provided for by the civil authority. The apostolic element was one of personal witness rather than spiritual contact and apostolic ministry,

properly so-called and expressly pursued as such. It is true that in many cases a human contact inspired by charity achieves more, under God, than preaching or a more strictly pastoral relationship. The disinterested and generous witness of the corporal works of mercy is plain to see, and is usually appreciated for what it is. If the further development of the religious apostolate were to mean the diminution of this witness, so vital for the life of the Church, it would be better to drop the subject completely!

But for all their importance, such works have barred the way to a more directly spiritual apostolate. It is astonishing how many parish priests and curates, called by their ministry to a personal and spiritual apostolate, throw themselves into cultural and social work to the detriment of a properly priestly activity such as preaching, catechizing, personal contact and spiritual direction. A quasi-spontaneous deviation from the apostolate of the word towards that of organization afflicts the entire Church. In the past we were constrained by precise definitions of law; today we are confined in the still more unyielding and uniform structures set up by sociology.

Structures, of course, are necessary, and certain objections to them are exaggerated. The evil to be avoided (if there is an evil) lies not so much in structures themselves as in our tendency to be for ever setting up new ones. We are afraid to find ourselves alone in a solitude where bearings are hard to find, where we are without human support in the darkness of faith. And it is in faith that apostolic action, priestly or charitable ministry and any truly spiritual work is grounded. Hence the need for Institutes dedicated to the apostolate to consider the purpose of their foundation, to check for deviations and for possible neglect of the spiritual aspect of their lives because of the encumbrance of organized works.

The apostolate, common action of apostolic Institutes

All this brings us to the work of apostolic Institute under the aspect of common action. Their strength has always been, and still remains, their union in action. Such union may be seen as a counsel of Christ, since Christians may be said to live by a divine counsel if their lives are a free and serious response to a particular call of our Lord, and hence contribute to the witness of the Church. Our Lord bade his apostles to be one among themselves. He sent out his disciples two by two. His active presence in the world was carried on through the college formed by the first apostles, the twelve. What is true of prayer holds also of apostolic action: where many

are gathered together in his name, he is among them. Even in the most personal and confidential aspects of his ministry, when the apostle acts of necessity alone, he is in living union with Christ and his brothers in the ministry.

But not every work which possesses, however superficially, the characteristics of common action is the working out of a counsel. If the answer to a divine call is to be truly spiritual, the living of the grace of vocation, it is not enough to refer to everyday, necessary norms. Fidelity to a particular vocation is to be found only in the desire for the 'more', the striving to go further. Not all celibacy is consecrated celibacy. Not all poverty is an evangelical counsel. Not all obedience is the filial obedience to the Father in Christ. Similarly, not all apostolate is of counsel. For this, there must be the striving for more than is commanded. The strict obligations of the priesthood must be exceeded in a higher reference; the duties laid on every christian must be fulfilled with a particular generosity (Christ bids us go to the poorest), so that obedience to the Vicar of Christ grows more faithful, and prayer more intimate and loving.

It is in this light that the apostolic work of an Institute should be approached. We are not considering one work of the Church among others, but a response in generosity to a special call of the Lord. Consequently, the work of apostolic religious will always be specialized work, if not in its form, at least in its spirit.

Chapters of renewal: a prelude

The foregoing pages have touched upon the essential question raised by the vocation of the apostolic Institutes. In drawing attention to their particular charism, their grace of foundation and their mission in the Church, the Council has indicated in general terms where the answers are to be sought. What degree of success have these Institutes met with in their effort to recapture their original inspiration? Has it all happened too late? Certainly, many difficulties would have been avoided if the work had been undertaken earlier! A general survey of the Chapters reveals that many of them finished their task leaving essential points of their vocation untouched. Some Chapters have brought disunion in their wake. Others have done little more than to clear the way for a work which must slowly take its course. Everywhere account has had to be taken of the human realities which govern the existence of the apostolic Institutes: the aged members, the unpreparedness of many for the suppression of community distinctions, the pressure groups with

their extreme solutions and their lack of concern for the common good. But in spite of such mistakes (mistakes which amount in some cases to injustice), there are no grounds for pessimism. In making the apostolic Institutes aware of their true vocation, a great work has been achieved, and the way lies open for rich developments. Congregations and apostolic societies wholly given to contemplation in a profound and spiritual apostolate will play also their part in the new spring announced at the opening of the Council.

But certain difficulties cannot be passed over in silence. A uniform liturgy, too conventual in style, may result in forms of prayer which hamper apostolic life and do not accord with the founder's intentions. The influence of sociology, while suppressing abuses of authority and destroying over-rigid structures, instils a spirit of worldliness, impatient towards the exacting and often mortifying demands of the gospel. Canon law has been taxed with excessive rigidity. Imposed from outside, it has taken small account of what is distinctive to particular forms of consecrated life; certain traits of which have as a result been seriously distorted. But might not something similar happen, where law is replaced by sociology, with its own brand of uniformity?

The renewal of apostolic Institutes will be achieved only in accordance with God's designs and on condition that the Church herself is docile to those designs. A foundation is a grace. A consecrated Institute is a living response to a new and original call. Such an Institute must therefore be on guard against certain pastoral programmes which would deflect its effort towards real needs, but at the price of its proper spirit and mission.

A sense of crisis in apostolic Institutes is heightened by a widespread decline in recruitment. Possibly, this very crisis is a grace. For while a period of reflection is necessary for the working out of new formation schemes and a renewed programme of action, this necessary reflection cannot remain for ever in the realm of discussion and project-making. Few priests would advise entry into an Institute where all is called in question and no immediate prospect of union or spiritual clarity is apparent.

Amid the doubts and questions that surround the consecrated life, one truth is clear. Apostolic Institutes are called to a deeper grasp of their own vocation in the Church; and, if they are faithful to this calling, will contribute largely to the ultimate success of the Council and the renewal of the Church to which it opened the way.

A note on houses of prayer

Several congregations of women have adopted the project of setting up houses to which religious might withdraw for a shorter or longer spell to give themselves entirely to prayer. Such projects give expression to a genuine desire; but it will be well to draw attention to some of the difficulties they raise.

The need for such houses is often most keenly felt in Institutes which carry the heaviest burden of work. For these, the harmony of prayer and action in a balanced whole is particularly hard to achieve, and in such cases there is a danger that the problem of excessive work may be met by a remedy which in its turn is too radical. The question which needs to be asked is whether a spell of solitude will bear fruit, subsequently, in an apostolate open to the spirit and permeated by prayer.

Furthermore, those who request a prolonged stay in such houses are often religious who have not found in their Institute the recollection they both need and desire. In some cases, the protracted stay in a house of greater solitude and silence may easily be an attempt to follow a contemplative vocation which is genuinely monastic. But no second-best can substitute for the fulness of a properly monastic life, and it may be doubted whether such people will ever find contentment.

These questions are enough to demonstrate that the project is extremely delicate. In some cases it would seem more useful to place at the disposal of religious some retreat-house where a degree of solitude adapted to their needs might be found. This would seem more satisfactory than the establishment of houses which in the end may satisfy no one. But in any case, the deeper solution to the problem is to be found elsewhere: in the balance which permits the apostolic worker to lead a contemplative life adapted to his activity, a balance which will often impose some retrenchment in the area of work in order to safeguard the vital minimum of prayer in the apostolic life. The temporary retreat into solitude, the 'privileged' times of prayer, presuppose this balance. Otherwise the contrast will prove too strong for such things to bear fruit. To pray *more*, it is first necessary to pray. To profit from a life of *greater* solitude, especially if the latter is merely temporary and restorative in purpose, an established interior solitude is a pre-requisite.

From these observations, which stem from the basic experience of all contemplative life, it will be clear that the question of the house of prayer must be considered above all in its spiritual implications.