

RENEWAL CHAPTERS: FIRST REFLECTIONS

By JEAN BEYER

THE CALL of the second Vatican Council for the renewal of the Church through the collaboration of the faithful was addressed with particular urgency to religious Institutes. The main elements of the programmes were clearly set out in *Perfectae Caritatis*: the gospel as a basic rule, a new discovery of the founder's charism as a means of living out the gospel ever more faithfully, a healthy respect for the sound traditions of the Institute. The generous response on the part of the Institutes is in itself a sign of immense spiritual vitality.

Renewal Chapters: response to the Church

An effort of this sort has been asked of no other institution in the Church. Nor, in any other case, has it been demanded as a formal obligation with a fixed time limit. The general chapters of renewal were to be convened within three years of the promulgation of the *motu proprio* 'Ecclesiae Sanctae'; and only on rare occasions have exceptions been allowed. It is worth noting that this procedure was not adopted without criticism; when *Ecclesiae Sanctae* was being drafted, it was suggested that more time be allowed for the preparation of the renewal chapter. Too long a delay, however, would have lost the impetus given by the council and would have dampened the fervour of so many religious. Certainly, there are few Institutes today which have not yet responded to this call of the Church. (This is why it is possible even at this stage to attempt an initial assessment of this movement of reform.) And while it is true that in a good many instances the work of preparation left much to be desired – in some Institutes this involved a second session of the chapter – it is already evident on balance that what might have looked like undue haste has been justified by events.

For purposes of the reform, chapters were given the power to revise their constitutions, and to introduce amendments and modifications, even if such changes involved cutting across existing norms of the common law (itself undergoing a far-reaching revision). One aspect of this wide freedom was to enable the religious either to suppress certain statutes or to adapt them by means of experimentation (extended to the whole Institute or restricted), which subsequent chapters would have to assess. Indeed, it is prescribed that the new constitutions or rule need be presented for the approbation of the competent hierarchical authority (where necessary) only after the second subsequent ordinary general chapter. Moreover, the approval eventually to be given would turn on the essential content of the text – the blending of

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elements of spiritual theology with law designed to give expression to the distinctive physiognomy of the Institute.¹ As for details of religious observance, these would be expressed in statutes subject to revision, adaptation, correction and qualification by the Institute itself in its chapter or ordinary assembly. It would no longer be necessary to submit these 'adaptations' to any external authority. This meant that some Institutes have as much as twelve and even twenty years for reflection, experimentation and the search for new solutions. They can take advantage of the energy and vigour of the rising generation and discover in actual living the essential of their charism, according to the spirit of the council.

These norms of *Ecclesiae Sanctae* are exactly right. They also reflect the desires of the Institutes themselves (they were duly consulted): to rid themselves of the old uniformity; to be set free from the hampering restrictions of the common law; to recover and invest with new life a heritage too often forgotten; and, at the same time, to adapt this life to the needs of the Church and of modern man, always, of course, remaining faithful to the basic charism.

Today, then, after so much effort, so many meetings and decrees, life goes on; but now, together with the generosity of the past, there is a more reflective quality. The new structures are beginning to exert their influence and to manifest the quality of those who conceived them. From all this a new spirit has emerged, which, in spite of having to prove itself, in some cases against older loyalties, has prompted Institutes and their members, quite spontaneously, to take stock of all that has been done in these conciliar and post-conciliar years, amidst all the rapid and radical changes going on in the world. Questions are asked – not without misgivings – about what was and what is, and about the future that is now being prepared in spite of every obstacle by the kind of life which is now being lived.

Not all will be on the credit side in this assessment; it could hardly be otherwise, since the council itself revealed many imperfections. There were occasions when the council was obliged to abandon a first draft and to break entirely fresh ground; situations in which it was not possible to achieve a real clarity or to establish the synthesis between diverging trends. Furthermore, these renewal chapters were in no sense constitutive. They possessed neither the gifts nor the mission of a founder. Their task, like that of the council itself, was 'to return to the sources': not to remake the gospel, but to take it as it is and return ever more faithfully to its spirit. It is not surprising, then, that there were defective elements in the renewal chapters. To distinguish what is defective from so much that is of value is the purpose of the present study. We wish to make a general assessment to determine what all these chapters represent for the life of the Church today, and to see in what way they are here and now a sign in the Church of incomparable vitality and

¹ Of course, a venerable text like the rule of St Benedict could hardly be treated in this way; which is fortunate both for monasticism and the Church!

generosity; to see also what they have meant for the Institutes themselves, by examining what actually happened and the conditions of their implementation.

TYPOLOGY OF INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE

The forms of consecrated life

Among the most important aids to renewal emphasized by the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* is the 'typology' of Institutes: the distinction which exists between various forms of consecrated life; a distinction which derives from God's gifts, the founder's charism and the mission in the Church.² It is this typology that makes it possible to rediscover the substance of the Institute, in the light of genuinely spiritual criteria, and to break free from the strait-jacket of older categories fashioned in the historical development of the Institutes and often shaped by accidental and secondary elements, such as solemn or simple vows, regular observance, the demands of common life, juridical prescriptions with regard to poverty, and so on. None of these are points which touch the essential of consecrated life. Of themselves they add nothing to the value of charism or to the depth of consecration of life within these Institutes.

The re-establishment of the main types of consecrated life is itself a recognition of the working of grace, of certain constants in God's work. The defining characteristics of the life of solitude and silence emerged in their true context of promoting the form of contemplation which is imbued with God's transcendence. The problem of apostolic Institutes was rephrased in completely new terms. It was these, more than any others, which felt the lack of a doctrine adapted to their way of life. A theology of consecrated life too monastic in outlook, too separated from the world, had long placed them in a difficult position. Add to this that canon law, by imposing a uniform pattern on consecrated life as a whole, had disfigured many of them, depriving them in some instances of the spirituality embodied in their founders' constitutions and preventing them from being truly themselves in the life of the Church. Their desire was to realize their true identity in terms of their own proper charism, and set free from the accretions of traditional observances too often superimposed or made obligatory by a law whose aim was rather to control institutions than to discern charisms.

The founder's charism: the basis of renewal

The return to the spirit of the founder was equally an authentic return to the gospel. True charisms bring their particular illumination to the reading of scripture; whereas the unqualified 'return to the gospel', extolled by some as the sole rule of consecrated life, could only result in confusion and un-

² *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

certainty. No Institute can live the entire gospel. (Can anyone live the mystery of Christ in its entirety?) This mystery is a living reality in the Church precisely because of the variety of gifts which enables us to understand its rich abundance. The often unreflective and naive 'return to the gospel' has led in some instances to the abandonment of those forms of apostolate which the founder was inspired to initiate. There are Institutes which have attempted to gallop off in all directions at once, by authorizing every possible experiment. One sees teaching brothers who claim to 'educate' by turning themselves into monastic groups; and monks who abandon their silence and solitude in order to minister at close quarters to those whom they helped more by their prayer than by an apostolate to which they are not called. It would be easy to list the various excesses which emanate from this unqualified return to the gospel, often embarked upon without real discernment and in contradiction to the most serious attitudes of the founder. In fact, the process has led to attempts to do over the work of the founder in a false conception of renewal, which is interpreted as 'doing what the founder would have done, if he had been alive today'. This is a principle which sets aside the primary supernatural value of the charism in favour of a conception of consecrated life as structured according to the demands of the time, the psychology of modern man and the sociological conditions of an age. Whatever the virtues and values of psychology and sociology, they do not amount to a charism. Applied in this way they overlay the charism rather than give it a new life.

Witness and discernment

It may also be asked whether all charisms must be up to date: whether they must be intelligible at every moment of the Church's history. To put it more bluntly: must their right interpretation depend on the number of vocations or a more generally intelligible witness? The delicate question of charism is not primarily one of human efficiency; nor is it discerned by the pressure-group out to impose its own views and to refashion the consecrated life in terms of certain aspirations which gradually emerge in their true worldly colours and appear out of joint when compared to the demands of the gospel. What needs constant emphasis is that every charism is given to the Church for the Church. More immediately topical at one time, it may still maintain all its validity at another without attracting numerous vocations or offering a direct response to urgent needs of the Church. Some institutions after a period of great vitality need to accept a sort of retirement. Their fidelity to God at such a time is the best guarantee of their eventual re-birth.

It is in this perspective of faith that the witness of the consecrated life needs to be evaluated. Christ's own witness was a stumbling block, a sign of contradiction. In order to see the Christ of the gospel, faith is necessary. Equally, faith is necessary to understand the charism of an Institute. The grace of God will reveal the value of the message to those who seek. To talk of the

intelligibility of the witness normally means its humanization, reducing it to words of one syllable for modern man and removing the dark and painful aspects. True vocations will never come this way. The values we tend to insist upon today – human fulfilment, professional efficiency, the secularization of religious life, may often amount to nothing more than the search for purely human success, tactical efficiency or a dangerous secularism. Even where the necessary *theoretical* distinctions are made, these are not always lived out in practice. And it is above all in the realm of practice that certain adaptations devalue consecrated life, diminish its evangelical radiance, its authentic renunciation, its witness to living faith.

There is of course one area in which the desire for intelligibility is genuine enough: where there is need to liberate the essential Institute and the grace of its foundation from the incrustations which have stifled or eaten into it, from obsolete custom and outmoded ways. Whether these concern the details of the religious habit, conventual and liturgical usages, the rituals of common life, is of small importance. What is contrary to the Spirit cannot be an object of veneration or a genuine tradition. These are the outward forms of a life which must be able to show its true countenance. And this must be the face of Christ. Apostolic Institutes are, like him, sent by the Father, united with him in prayer and action, moved by his Spirit and free from any law that might contradict his message of love.

To achieve this is difficult. It supposes an objective knowledge of the founder's inspirations, an ecclesial vision of his mission and his message, a search which requires more in the way of prayer than of discussion, of contemplation than of historical investigation. This is why we need to ask whether the chapter and the Institute as a whole was in a fit state to undertake this work of spiritual discernment. Was the chapter an assembly of prayer? The work done in the chapter is already judged by the answer to this question. Where prayer is wanting, so is the presence of Christ. It would be pure formalism to believe that the mere fact of coming together guarantees the presence of the Lord.

NORMS FOR THE RENEWAL OF AN APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE

The task of theology

Certainly the larger and more active apostolic Institutes have made an immense effort in their renewal chapters to achieve what the council has set out as the basic principle of this type of life: *A unified existence by the mutual compenetration of religious life as such and the apostolate.* The apostolate forms an integral part of this consecrated life. It is not an appendix or an accessory. It is the goal and term of the Institute, which can only live for the glory of God if it is totally consecrated to the salvation of men, whether through the personal striving after holiness or the manifestation of the mystery of salvation to others.

The formula which affirms the inter-relationship of religious life and

apostolate, inserted at the last minute into *Perfectae Caritatis*,³ is not to be found in *Lumen Gentium*. On this subject the constitution on the Church⁴ is far too monastic in tone to be applicable to all Institutes of consecrated life; a fact which is becoming increasingly clear. By the same token, the formula of *Perfectae Caritatis* is not a very happy one. It still underlines the dichotomy which it set out to destroy: the distinction between religious life and apostolic activity. It would have been better to use the terms 'interior life' and 'apostolate'. For the interior life is the soul of this consecrated life; and the apostolate is the goal and term of its foundation. The interior life vitalizes the brotherhood as well as apostolic action. The apostolate, which is the Spirit's gift, must give impetus to consecration, both as gift to God and dedication to others.

All this presupposes a new theology of apostolic consecrated life, which must avoid looking on religious life as though it were community liturgy, and on the apostolate as though it were an activity which impeded this worship of God. The whole must be seen as a gift to the Father in Jesus Christ, and as a gift to men after the heart of God's Son. Such a unified existence is the only possible explanation of consecrated apostolic life, if it is to be a life founded in love, of God and of men.

The purpose of the old distinction between religious life and apostolate was to emphasize the primacy of God himself. It was based on the supposition that the apostolate, being 'our own work', tends to distract us from our dedication 'to God alone' – all too easily invoked as the sole end of religious life. But in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the two dimensions of charity are united. To be sure, Christ's love for this Father comes first, but it is in this love and through its power that he gives himself to men. To claim that the 'first' love is subordinate to the second would go counter to the unity of life that our Lord offers and brings to fulfilment. By its consecration to God through and in Jesus Christ, the apostolic Institute dedicates itself to the body of Christ and devotes itself to its works. This consideration makes it clear that consecration conceived simply as dedication to a mission is not the same thing as consecration to God in Jesus Christ.

It is gratifying to see how chapters, leaving aside the question of defining the 'ends' of the Institute, have put the emphasis on the consecration of their life in union with that of Christ. They have also made it clear that this depends on their incorporation with Christ in baptism, without reducing the consecrated life of the counsels simply to baptismal life. On this point the texts and decrees of the chapters represent a definite progress. Nevertheless, in certain respects, the nature of consecration still needs to be developed.⁵

³ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8. 'The entire religious life of their members should be imbued with the apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity animated by the religious spirit'.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, ch VI.

⁵ Several Institutes have had difficulty in determining the specific characteristics of their own charism, in so far as this finds expression in a specialized form of work, a

For *Perfectae Caritatis*, consecrated life is a state of being committed: commitment or 'profession' being understood as a means of consecration. The majority of chapter texts have failed to spell this out. One must see positively how the counsels, when they are accepted as a law of life, involve consecration to God and to men. When this line of reflection is pursued to its conclusion, the three counsels will be seen to merge together in a single filial attitude to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: they will no longer be looked upon as renunciations, but as the demands of the love which consecration presupposes: in other words, as the full expression of what it means for the christian to 'die with Christ in order to live by his resurrection'.

Finally, and still with a view to this research, it is to be noted that consecration has for the Church an eschatological value. This finds its fullest expression in the monastic commitment. Equally, this eschatological dimension cannot be the same for every form of consecrated life. It admits of degrees of intensity: a fact which the council failed to register. This lack of precision in the doctrine and texts of the council often gives rise to hesitation among the commentators and to uncertainty in practice. The eschatological value of the life according to the counsels is too often set in complete isolation, so that it has no actual living impact on the lives of consecrated persons.

Under the influence of certain theologians, the council laid heavy emphasis on the sign-character of the life it termed 'religious life'. Here again, the constitution on the Church takes as its focal point classical monasticism: the life of the monastery, with its essential structure of solitude and silence, the centre of prayer, the house of God on the mountain. To provide a less restricted definition of the meaning of this *sign* in the life consecrated to apostolic works and in the consecration of the secular life, this doctrine would have required a very great deal of qualification. The same doctrinal approach is responsible for the absence in chapter six of *Lumen Gentium* of any mention of the secular Institutes. This theological deficiency cannot be transcended by merely juridical statements and last minute corrections on the subject of vows and 'other sacred bonds'.⁶ Even the change in the expression *status religiosus* to *status qui professione consiliorum evangelicorum constituitur* is not sufficient to make the teaching applicable to every type of consecrated life.⁷ This modification was made simply to avoid calling secular Institutes 'religious'. But such textual alterations did nothing to change the doctrinal basis of this chapter, which is clearly too monastic to take account of the variety of charisms of consecrated life in the Church. What is needed is a study of the sign character by theologians with personal experience of the

mission of the Church. Many Institutes lack the historical information necessary for clarifying their statements on consecration. Much work remains to be done here.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 44 (first sentence).

⁷ *Ibid.*, last sentence. It is significant that the semi-official english translation completely ignores this 'last minute correction' from 'religious state' to 'the state which is established by the profession of the evangelical counsels', by translating 'the *religious* state constituted by the profession . . .' etc. Cf Abbott, p 75.

various types of consecrated life and personal contact. Merely academic knowledge is not enough.

To be a 'sign' is only possible where one is what one signifies. This authenticity is more important today, when the process of renewal has changed certain external features of the life of these Institutes without the interior renewal presupposed by such adaptations. It is now incumbent on these Institutes to get their members thinking about this and not to be content with purely external alterations, especially in the matter of poverty and community relationships, without making it possible for everyone to live out their poverty in spirit and united by that inner charity which is far more than a mere living together.

It is clear, then, that substantial advances in the doctrine of consecrated life are required. The need arises from the progress already made in the movement of renewal the apostolic roots of which are still hidden.

Practical reforms

A number of practical adaptations, especially in the realm of personal life, have already been achieved. Behind many of these adaptations lies a recognition of the dignity of the person, of the maturity proper to apostolic religious and a new appreciation of personal responsibility. At the same time, it would be naive to suppose that the changes have all sprung from a unified vision of the inherent demands of the apostolic life. In many cases, decisions were taken merely to appease the more vocal and to satisfy the most urgent demands. (Only those who have endured them can appreciate the ball-and-chain nature of the external observances in many apostolic Institutes, especially congregations of brothers and women religious.)

Some chapter decisions have achieved a new balance between the apostolate and interior life. Most important in this respect is the freedom granted the individual to draw up his personal timetable of prayer, rest, study and work. Here it is personal prayer that most needs to be safeguarded (even if community prayer has assumed greater importance from the fact that it is no longer a routine, a choral prayer in latin, or a string of devotions). In view of the impact and spiritual effort that the apostolic life presupposes, it is evident that a half-hour of personal prayer will hardly suffice.

The Divine Office

A word needs to be said as well on the prayer of the liturgical hours. To pray the psalms calls for a degree of education which the majority of Institutes have not yet made available: but there are difficulties besides this one. Now that intelligible vernacular texts are in use, there is likely to be a surfeit if the same number of psalms is retained as in the past. The 'breviary', even in its present arrangement, still offers too much material. Whereas formerly the text was recited with partial understanding, the danger now is to recite it without wanting to understand it at all. In the past, certain texts became part

of the texture of life; they were illuminated by an inner attentiveness, a desire for true prayer. Today this same desire to 'pray' the psalms will necessitate a reduction in the number of psalms and a better choice. Moreover, they will need to be studied. As soon as we have a translation really adapted to choral recitation, the psalms should be learnt by heart, so as to liberate the attention from the printed text and create the conditions for better prayer.

While the present period of research, in the context of experiment and improvisation, offers rich opportunities for the creative talent of those who draw up and arrange the office, it has, at the same time, occasioned an uncertainty which inevitably disturbs the peace which the office supposes. One understands why it is that certain Institutes have seen fit not to impose the recitation of office. It gives rise to acute difficulties in many situations – as in small communities, for instance, where work is becoming increasingly pastoral and individual rather than being directed to a common undertaking, and where irregular hours demand dispensation from the liturgy of the hours celebrated in common. Such dispensations are always regrettable and they are best avoided. Hence the wise norm of leaving to the communities themselves the responsibility for defining the time, duration and structure of their common prayer. Some groups have succeeded in producing a common prayer of great spiritual quality and adapted to the needs of the community by choosing hymns, psalms and biblical texts, along with the opportunity for spontaneous prayers of intercession, the whole being concluded with the singing of the Lord's prayer.

Forms and organization of apostolic work

Another matter which calls for comment is the organization of apostolic work. Many of the structures and conditions of such work will be changed by the present needs of the Church and especially by the new role of women in the Church. With a priesthood no longer totally committed to the ministry, it is likely that the Church will call upon religious sisters, as consecrated persons, to discharge a ministry of the word and will recognize them as ministers of eucharistic communion and of the common prayer of the faithful. In the missions this already happens. Shortage of priests, and the desire of many priests to exercise the priesthood from within secular professions could have considerable repercussions on feminine religious life. Indeed it may be that this development will enable the consecrated woman to devote herself fully to pastoral work. There would be no likelihood of such a prospect if the clergy were sufficiently numerous, or loyal to their essential task and unencumbered by roles which really belong to the laity. Though it is still too early to be specific here, my own view is that the present crisis in the priesthood may provide the conditions for a more balanced consecrated life, above all in the case of women, and for a closer participation of religious brothers and sisters in tasks which were reserved in the past for the clergy. The crisis may thus turn out to be providential for Institutes dedicated to apostolic action.

It is beyond question that one of the most effective elements in the witness of the consecrated life has been the community enterprise. One has only to call to mind the wide range of works undertaken in response to well defined charisms, which have made the Church more visible, more manifestly a Church of service in the world. It is true that today many of the services formerly provided by religious fall within the field of social welfare and depend to an increasing extent on the competence of the state. It is nevertheless regrettable that a section of the clergy should have been ready to sow doubt among religious – men and women – about the value of their activities in the fields of medicine, education, or the social services. There will always be room for the christian witness of a common work of charity, and it is contradictory to emphasize communitarian values while casting doubt on their strongest and most visible forms of expression. In certain cases, by way of experiment, other members are entering the civil professions, and the independent or official welfare services. The question always needs to be asked whether such experiments are ‘mission’ motivated or whether they are simply ‘happenings’, due to pressure put on those hold responsibility in the Institute. Looking at the matter from the standpoint of faith, one is aware that there is a discernment of spirits as necessary for apostolic action as for prayer. One is not conformed to the will of God by following at all costs one’s own will, or by a need for activity or for research, which is sometimes nothing more than the sign of an unstable vocation resulting from the wrong sort of choice in entering the Institute.⁸ With the individual apostolate there is always the danger of losing not only the witness proper to the Institute but of doing damage to community values by undermining its foundations in practice, even though such forms of apostolate may have been given high priority on the level of chapter decrees. The result is a new tension between a paper ideal and a life which is individualized and often very selfish. This is especially true of those who have not received the spiritual education necessary to live a consecrated life with total personal responsibility, while at the same time maintaining the fraternal and even communitarian ties adapted to this form of apostolate.

A number of attempts on the part of apostolic religious to enter the secular professional world have been manifest failures. While this does not cast doubt in every case on this type of apostolate, it certainly points to a lack of the necessary preparation for such activity.

⁸ It is astonishing to see how many religious have been unable to follow clear promptings towards the monastic life, even those whom the Lord had clearly summoned by an unmistakable grace. There are other religious who hope to find in the monastic setting that life of prayer no longer present in their own Institute, which has lost its interior spirit in the current renewal. As one religious puts it: ‘We have not gone the whole way in renewal. We have not insisted sufficiently on communion through contemplation and silence. We talk too much, we are overworked. And as we do not place enough emphasis on the essentials, the result is that in community life and the apostolate we have let things slide; hence a general malaise’.

Religious dress

Religious dress, particularly that of women, has come in for much debate during the years of renewal. In some Institutes, authorities and then chapters have been faced with a *fait accompli*. The effects that this has produced in the more christian and traditional regions are well known. There were sharp reactions, too, from many of the clergy, whose attitudes in this matter often show too little awareness of the essential values of religious life: brotherhood, obedience, fidelity to a particular vocation. What is certain, however, is that in many Institutes change of dress has led to a freedom of life and action for which members of the Institutes were not prepared. The Institutes which were first in the field of change have managed to avoid a violent crisis; and those who have so far altered little or nothing are storing up for themselves difficulties which are already beginning to appear in the familiar symptoms of malaise: defections, shortage of vocations, internal tensions and a certain decline of interior life.

The changes, of course, were very long overdue; and certainly, religious dress in apostolic Institutes could not maintain its monastic character. The veil belongs with full-length skirts; it looks strange on a shorter and more modern garment. A uniform colour, especially black, could hardly be retained. The best course would have been for the Institutes to find their own way without going through official approbation in preliminary stages; these were in many cases provisional and a little ridiculous.

A consecrated person who really lives what he has promised is always a witness. How many priests have put on plain clothes only to find themselves immediately recognized as priests? How many religious have found it impossible to conceal their identity? Their attempts to adopt the style of the world have become the more absurd for that. Serious apostolic Institutes which have abandoned recognizably religious dress have not done so lightly. They have made a point of maintaining some distinctive sign which frees them from the variety and caprice of feminine fashion and safeguards a witness which is in fact the inevitable expression of an interior life and the gift of self to God.

THE RENEWAL OF THE CHAPTER

Initial difficulties

After speaking of the renewal chapter, it is logical to turn to chapter-renewal. For it is certain that in many Institutes the chapter will never be the same again. Several Institutes now have chapters of affairs; but in every case, the chapters of the future will be chapters of continual renewal. The reforms already launched will need to be followed up; specifications and new directives will be necessary. If the wishes of the council are to be met, the spirit and aims proper to each Institute will need to be deepened and at the same time adapted to the needs of the Church in a changing world.

The activity of the renewal chapters so far has already given rise to a number of rather delicate issues. In the first place, adaptation, though it

will be far-reaching, must nevertheless be governed by a certain sensitivity, a respect for the human person who is not always capable of the radical changes that some would wish to impose on him: to be himself he needs to build on what he has already acquired. To turn a structure upside down amounts in many cases to the destruction both of interior life and of ordinary efficiency. It may be for this reason that chapter conclusions reached too hastily have not found general acceptance.

Again, it must be admitted that in many cases the chapters were not truly representative of their Institutes. The majority of capitulars consisted in many cases of superiors; the ordinary members of the Institute were present either in small numbers or not at all. It followed that the average age of the delegates was too old; so that the chapters lacked the courage and objectivity to take any decision and pass any decrees which might be interpreted as rejecting certain features of the past, or as a reproach to the superiors present. Too often the main concern was to apply the brake. In many cases Institutes were forced to pin their hopes to a subsequent chapter, more representative and better prepared than the first. In many instances new electoral arrangements were only arrived at with difficulty; yet without such changes there could be no guarantee of a broadly-based representation in an assembly which for many Institutes remains the highest agent of direction and government.

In former times, the general chapter was always a chapter of election, so that the preparation of the renewal chapter was hampered by questions of procedure. Hence the importance of subsequent sessions of the one chapter; there were three or four in some cases. Even now the preparatory work still seems inadequate, too hastily done and ordinarily subject to various pressures which we must mention here.

We must bear in mind that some Institutes had little or nothing in the way of a capitular tradition. In one such Institute, the general chapter consisted in a meeting of the general council augmented by provincial superiors – all nominated by the superior general. In another, the role of the chapter had been reduced to its electoral function; it was the general council that had the responsibility of adapting or modifying the constitutions of the Institute (with the approval of the holy See). It is not surprising that such gatherings were of short duration. The elections were often ‘prepared’ beforehand. The delegates, well accustomed to the normal ritual, contented themselves with giving approval to the views of the general council and were happy to be able to return to their everyday work. They were often incompetent to embark on discussion or to bring anything new to the consideration of their life. One result of this has been the excessive influence of certain outside ‘experts’.

The control of the chapter

Moreover, most constitutions had little or nothing to say about the preparation and conduct of the general chapter: that is, with regard to what

was to be done by all the members of the Institute. No indication was given on the subject of capitular 'technique'. Even now there is need for a clear and more technical legislation. Convoked after too short notice, chapters have too often had recourse to procedures inspired by the parliamentary type of assembly. These have changed and modified the mentality of the members, affecting their understanding of mission and of their representative role. The results have not always been happy. Pressure-groups and factions have arisen. The importance of a purely numerical unanimity has been emphasized to the point of depriving the superior general of all effective direction, and the chapter of the experience of its better informed members. The work of the chapters was often directed by a moderator, who conceived her task as one of getting business done. In all this the chapters were left without objective norms.

Some moderators have launched their chapters in directions which by and large were contrary to the Institute's traditions and reflected the intrigues of pressure groups. These moderators, like other officials of the assembly, were not always elected by the chapter itself, or, if there was an election, by a relative majority; that is to say, they were really picked by a minority group, one ready and prepared, and capable of concerted action. Turning the lack of juridical norms to their own advantage, these groups found it easy to get their own candidates elected. For anyone familiar with the psychology of assemblies, with the methods by which votes are prepared and procured, it is easy to see how a group could take over a chapter while retaining every appearance of legality.

Such manoeuvres, even when they seemed necessary to break the stranglehold of routine and established conventions, were not well received by the Institutes, and on the whole the reactions provoked were healthy ones. Some of the chapters have not been accepted; and the problems they have raised have been sensed by old and young alike. With the suppression or relaxation of the rule of secrecy, the inner politics of the chapters could hardly fail to become widely known: pressure groups, manoeuvres outplayed or brought off, votes obtained by surprise or at the end of a session, when the delegates, suffering from fatigue, were anxious to bring the proceedings to an early close. The question has arisen – and will arise again – of the sort of obligation inherent in decrees voted through in this sort of atmosphere. There is no doubt that the malaise experienced in certain Institutes is due in some measure to the spirit and actions of the general chapters themselves.

Reactions, at first on the timid side, rapidly gained strength. Members of Institutes made it clear that they wanted some control over the chapter; in a few rare instances appeals were made against the chapters to the ecclesiastical authorities. The resulting interventions were not always very helpful; they have certainly not resolved the inquiet of the Institutes which called for them. Others felt that the control of the chapter was a matter for the entire Institute. There is a growing tendency to think in terms of universal participation, not only for chapter preparation but also for the approbation of

capitular decisions. Modern communications techniques make facilities for such a proposal quite feasible. However, it remains to be seen whether all members of an Institute are actually capable of undertaking the serious work of preparation, whether they are likely to have the time and leisure, whether such intense activity will not prove to be to the detriment of apostolic life, whether the dissemination of complete and objective information is possible. Certainly, some chapters are already too numerous to ensure a family atmosphere, the possibility of genuine dialogue, reflection in common and the making of tranquil decisions before the Lord.

Appeal to the ballot box and the principle of universal suffrage is not going to produce better results automatically. If the vote is free, not all will participate. Those who do so may well represent the views of a faction, of a 'right' or a 'left'. But despite such difficulties, the desire remains for a control of the chapter by participation and vote. This presupposes complete and objective information and a climate of peace and understanding. It is a great deal to ask for, especially in a time of transition and rapid change.

In a chapter, the *pars sanior* is not always the *pars maior*. When a vote is subject to the assessment of a higher process, the adage, *maior pars non est semper sanior pars*, is relevant. The majority does not in itself constitute the most healthy opinion. The vitality of an Institute requires that the sounder view be followed, even when this does not coincide with the majority. Nothing obliges us to believe that the Lord's will is tied to that of a chapter majority, particularly a relative majority; or that the essentials are safeguarded when this majority declares itself. In some cases there are good reasons for suspecting that the opposite has happened. The demands of the gospel are such that a group can accept them only in the light of a charism; and this in turn calls for fidelity to the founder and to the essentials of the Institute.

In some Institutes, the definition of these fundamentals is a felt and urgent need. However, it does not seem that modifications in this area can be satisfactorily handled in chapter without detriment to the essential character of the Institute. It needs a body of experts and a more tranquil situation and method of working. Examples would be the rights of the professed and the validity of their commitment. In this area much work remains to be done. If numerous decrees of general chapters were contested, this was not only because there was no real unanimity in the voting, or because they were in opposition to essential points of the Institute. Even if they do not contradict the letter of the common law, certain decrees remain destructive of the spirit of an Institute, and open the way to its decline and even its fall. Subsequent chapters will have to provide some sort of chapter legislation, touching on the avoidance of abuses, methods of giving approval to decrees, control of the chapter, recourse to the referendum, approbation of decrees by successive sanctions and different assemblies. It will be useful, too, to consider what has been achieved, and what still remains to be accomplished.

COMMITMENT

Consecrated life: a life of commitment

Whether it was realized or not, the focal point in the deliberations of most chapters was the question of commitment. Taking up the directives of the council, they set out to deepen and expand the notion of the commitment of consecrated life in the love of God and dedication to man, lived in a communion formed by a mysterious call of God: a call to a more profound and experiential understanding of the gospel in the Church.

Whatever touches the essential of consecrated life equally involves the element of commitment: that personal act of surrender by which a christian 'improves' his baptism so as to belong wholly to Christ, to follow him more faithfully, to be devoted to this kingdom, to continue his work in renouncing the world of sin, while offering by a radiant witness the gift to the Father and to men which Christ was the first to make, – he who was to be at the head of a whole host of brothers.⁹

On this point, Institutes have unquestionably achieved a vigorous concrete renewal. It is the fulfilment of a long search which began before the council and which the council ratified. God consecrates by a new gift, one which casts fresh light on the gift of baptism, and enables us to grasp its deepest meaning. Perpetual commitment is the anticipation of man's final choice at Christ's second coming.

This commitment is consecration: the consecration by God who calls the christian and unites him with his own Son; the consecration to God of the christian, who, through grace, responds to this invitation by living out, ever more intensely, his union with Christ in the Church and for the world's salvation.

Commitment and the counsels

Desirous as they are of establishing a harmony of life and action, chapters will need to provide a fuller explanation of this consecration by the evangelical counsels. It is in taking them as the law of life that the christian expresses this consecration to God and to men proper to his new commitment. The doctrine needs further development than it received in the Council; it is clearly present in the conciliar texts, though it is somewhat lacking in rigour and cohesion. It is also becoming an increasingly effective force in actual living. Indeed, particularly in apostolic Institutes, there is a very definite concern to establish that each of the counsels is a gift to God and to men, a concrete expression of love; and that, properly understood, the counsels amount to a single gift of love to God and to others. It will be well to pause for a moment on this point, because it does indicate the present vitality of consecrated life in religious Institutes.

⁹ Cf Heb 2, 9–17. For the phrase 'improves his baptism', cf Shaw, D. W. D.: 'Change o heart', in *The Way*, Vol IX (April, 1969), p 123.

The gift to God and men is the gift of Christ who died and rose again. Christ is the centre of our love; on his cross, two loves meet, love of the Father and love of men. And this love is the love of the Word who, by the Father's will, gives himself to men so that, united with his own love, they too may love his Father. This vision of the christian mystery shows us the golden mean between the verticalism which neglects the salvation of the world and the horizontalism which forgets God and becomes lost in the tasks of the here and now. In this single christocentric perspective, each of the counsels is seen as an aspect of communion with Christ, God and man, the one mediator.

Chastity is the gift to God of a unique love, and for his sake to men whom he loves in his Son. This unique love is characteristic of the celibate and makes of consecrated celibacy a gift to the Lord, a union with Christ, a communion with men by the power of the Spirit. The renunciation of marriage, the integrity of the gift of the entire person, body and spirit, are simply the consequences of an eminently positive act, which makes it possible to live out the dimensions of the Incarnation: that love for the Father which becomes love for men in the glory of the Father.

The effect of consecrated celibacy, *sacrum connubium*, is to transform life into a marriage with God, a union with Christ, an openness to the eternal marriage. But celibacy is authentic christian virginity only where this same love of the Father and of men in Jesus Christ leads to the spirit of poverty and obedience.

To love the Father in Christ and as Christ loves, is to be poor. For the Word has received everything; he proceeds from the Father. It is from the Father that the Son receives his doctrine; his works are the Father's works, his will is to do the will of the Father. The unique love of the Son for the Father finds its expression in his poverty: all is from the Father and will be returned to the Father. It is in this poverty that Christ receives and accomplishes his mission, with nowhere to lay his head. He is always urged on to do the will of the Father, whether in announcing the kingdom, in the gift of himself, in the care of the sick, in the love of the weak, in the welcome extended to the rich, in the forgiveness of sins, or in the combat against the Prince of darkness. The poverty of Christ is this abandonment to God, source of every gift and crown of every offering. All this is far removed from that material concept of poverty defined in purely economic terms or as a matter of abdication of goods, renunciation, will and disposition of revenues, alms to the poor and common life. The poverty of Christ is his lack of self-will, which is the essence of his obedience to the Father, an obedience which, too, is love. The son is Word and fidelity, openness to the Father and praise. It is in the same context of sonship that we should understand the meaning of christian obedience.

Holy obedience in the consecrated life is first and foremost obedience to a divine call. This call is manifest in a variety of ways: in the individual's personal vocation, in the charism of the Institute, in the work assigned to him

in the promptings of grace, in the prayer of Christ within us, in the movements of the Spirit. Consecrated obedience understood in this way does not necessarily involve superiors (as in the eremitical life), or living together (as in a secular Institute). Its character is essentially flexible in an Institute dedicated to the apostolate, where pastoral responsibilities are binding in conscience and in many cases derive from obedience to God. Obedience supposes the chastity which consists in a single love and the poverty which consists in the surrender of every created thing in the gift of self to the Father of Jesus Christ.

When the counsels are lived out at a certain depth, it becomes clear that the three are in reality one: the counsel to follow Christ through love in the abandonment of every created thing: father, mother, sisters, fields, house, country, even oneself, for the kingdom of God. It is a step which allows no looking back. Gift to God in Christ, loss for gain, death for resurrection, union in the sacrifice of the cross, to live in the glory of the resurrection.

Certainly, Christ today is glorified; our death will never be his. We shall die in his light, with his grace and in the power of his Spirit. So, if the counsels are renunciation and death, they are more fundamentally glory and resurrection, liberty and life, charity and love. We live them in Christ who is the Lord of glory.

For the sake of completeness, it will be well to add here that the life consecrated by the three evangelical counsels contains in germ all other counsels, and especially those of prayer and fraternity: love of God through contemplation, love of the brethren through action. These two are one, in the sense that we cannot contemplate God without seeing man in his incarnate Word. Nor can we be active except in the love of men; and this action is itself contemplation, whether its form is the apostolate of simple witness, of charitable work, or apostolic ministry. In each case, human life is made holy by a consecration to God in the life of the counsels.

Not all chapters, however, have succeeded in pin-pointing the essential of the counsels, which in the past have been understood in too material a sense. Tradition has stereotyped them into observances, precepts and rules. In seeking to re-interpret them according to the wish of the council, many chapters have fallen into the snare of simply modernizing the stereotypes. So now they are interpreted in the sociological terms characteristic of the modern mentality; and this line of adaptation has even, in some cases, supplanted genuine renewal. Obedience is seen as collaboration, and its implications whittled down to allow for greater freedom of choice and action. Poverty is presented first and foremost as a matter of pooling possessions, sharing with the poorest, the concern to appear poor, even when this is hardly feasible in view of the guaranteed support of the fraternity and the work of the Institute. Celibacy is presented as a liberation from family ties in order to be at the service of others. It is true, of course, that the counsels have these implications. Obedience – whether to the superior or to the brethren – is necessary for real collaboration. Poverty means being poor among the poor,

adopting a sober life-style and giving to those in need what is really superfluous. Celibacy means liberation from the 'tribulations of the flesh' and family cares, the more fully to be devoted to the service of all. There is, however, a vast difference between consecrated celibacy and the celibacy undertaken as a means to greater dedication or freedom. It is enough to recall how often celibacy has been chosen to facilitate scientific research, the care of the sick, social action: motives which do not of themselves imply the dimension of personal consecration to God and others according to the gospel.

It must be admitted that the pointers offered by the council with regard to the counsels were not a complete nor even a fully balanced doctrine. Divergent opinions were simply juxtaposed at the last minute: in the case of obedience, for instance. Poverty was presented too much in terms of a sign rather than a quality of life, as a concern to share, as a personal and collective witness to social poverty. More than once the texts underscore the things that scandalize rather than what gives edification; and what edifies is the poverty willed by God, lived at the very core of one's existence: the poverty of the beatitudes which can shine forth as well in abundance as in destitution, which can be lived on a personal as well as a communal basis, but which involves none of the excesses to which many have given way.

Fidelity in time of change

To the problems of commitment are linked those of fidelity to the spirit of the Institute. There are urgent questions at the moment about the scope of one's commitment: Is a religious profession still binding after a chapter which has changed so much and so radically: the life style of the Institute, its community life, its apostolate, the witness formerly characterized by the religious habit? The question is a fundamental one, since the outward changes bring with them more profound ones, in the essential spirit, in the forms of obedience, the manner of living poverty, the interior life, silence, solitude, common prayer. Here is the basic problem.

It must be admitted that in some Institutes many members hold themselves liberated in conscience from their commitment. They consider themselves free to leave the Institute without asking for dispensation from their vows. In our opinion no one could contradict such an opinion. The chapters have often failed to take account of the real meaning and consequences of their decrees. And when this problem was raised – a very rare occurrence at the chapter itself – it was usually dismissed with reference to 'excessive legalism', and to the 'full powers' of the chapter.

The first to react were the older people – those whose age precluded them from leaving an Institute which had taken complete possession of their lives but in which today they no longer feel at home. The problem becomes more acute when the younger members find themselves confronted with the same problem. These are looking for a true renewal of spirit; so that when they feel that in their Institute they can no longer live their consecrated life, they fall victims to their own weariness and frustration.

The urgent nature of the problem is emphasized by the defection of responsible people, who find themselves unable to live what they had promised and what they had once bound themselves to. The growing number of transfers from apostolic Institutes to the monastic orders throws light on the same problem. Some individuals, reflecting on their vocation in terms of the changes imposed upon them, feel that their character is now more contemplative than apostolic.¹⁰ But this is not all. The problem is aggravated by the defection of members who have been the promoters of a certain kind of renewal; the protagonists of secularization who provoked an exaggerated horizontalism. In some cases the defections of influential chapter members have put a question mark against certain chapter decisions and the whole spirit of the chapter. In other Institutes there is a sense of confusion; defections are bound to be a source of disquiet, especially when those who leave are serious but frustrated, fervent but disenchanted.

In such situations the question of recruitment and of the future of the Institute is acute. This too reduces itself to the same problem of commitment. It is often alleged that the young have no longer the courage or the will to commit themselves; or the problem is explained away in terms of the general crisis of the Church. This sort of explanation founders on the fact that numbers of young people, and indeed the best of them, are making commitment in the contemplative life, where they hope to find more stability and security. Nor is this quest for security an indication of weakness of nerve, of neurotic anxiety. It is a condition of life. One does not throw in one's lot with an institution which is giving clear signs of malaise, lack of unity and serious purpose. It is even happening that members of these Institutes, which include some of the best known, are openly dissuading people from joining them. One can hardly be happy about advising young people to enter an Institute where the spiritual formation will be inadequate. It is enough to be aware of the way in which certain novitiates are organized, to understand the bewilderment of young people and of those whose task it is to advise them. Commitment, if it is to be permanent, presupposes a choice which proceeds from clear motives, and that the institution is viable and has an assured future rooted in a serious formation. All in all, the question might well be asked whether certain novitiates would not do well to close their doors until such time as the Institute itself has found its balance.

Temporary commitment

The problems of formation, too, resolve themselves into the basic question of commitment. Thanks to the instruction *Renovationis Causam*, progress long

¹⁰ Indeed this is hardly surprising in view of the circumstances in which the first choice was often made: the early age of entry into the postulanship or the 'minor juniorate', lack of information concerning monastic and secular types of vocation, the directives of certain priests who appointed themselves 'recruiting-officers' for certain Institutes. It is a healthy sign to see the various types of vocation beginning to assert themselves in the Church, and the choice of them being made with greater freedom.

overdue is being made in this field. It is now possible for Institutes to reconsider the whole question of temporary commitment. This question has been aired for some time. Temporary commitment was imposed by the Church to provide a better recruitment and greater freedom and to avoid the traditionally familiar abuses involved where there is the anxiety to maintain the number of young religious demanded by the work of the Institute. Today, when a departure no longer creates the stir that it did, when dispensation from vows, even that of priestly celibacy, is easily obtained, one becomes aware that some defections are in fact curative of a painful situation, especially where juniorates and apostolic schools were the favoured means of recruitment.¹¹

The traditional outlook on vows has also brought its problems. Institutes have leaned far too heavily on the concept of sacrilege in order to sustain the fidelity of their members. Now we are faced with a very strong reaction, manifest in the feeling that it would be better not to pronounce vows at all. Moreover one can consecrate oneself to God without making explicit vows; a promise, a deliberate resolve is sufficient. These forms of commitment are related to the primitive tradition, when the profession of monastic life was simply the taking of the habit. There are monastic orders, concerned to bring out the full significance of solemn profession, which have already suppressed temporary vows, preferring in their place the *propositum*, the promise, to live the rule and to observe the counsels until the time for solemn profession.

Several Institutes have suffered considerably from the practice of annual, bi-annual or triennial renewal of vows. It cannot be good to be forever calling one's whole life in question. The practice does not favour a tranquil development of the individual's consecration to God in the Institute. It can be the occasion of real difficulty, where temporary profession is reduced to the level of a purely juridical action in the case of those who have doubts about their vocation and are unable to decide whether to stay or leave. Such people renew their commitment simply to be able to go on thinking, and not to give themselves without reserve.

If perpetual profession of the counsels must be deferred, it is equally important that it should not be devalued. There are two courses of action which seem to commend themselves: a simple commitment to embrace community life according to the constitutions, or a perpetual profession but conditional on the definitive acceptance on the part of superiors. This latter

¹¹ It would be unfair to lay such charges at the door of every establishment of this sort. There are apostolic schools where young people are prepared for every type of priestly and religious vocation and left free to make their choice; others, on the other hand, admit only those who propose to enter the Institute which directs them. These Institutes have always had a large number of defections, to say nothing of members who have found little fulfilment in life. Today there is an even greater number of defections and a heavy falling off in recruitment. Furthermore, these Institutes never had the advantage of an open and free recruitment from a variety of social milieux or among those enjoying greater cultural opportunities.

solution has the double advantage of giving expression to the total and irrevocable gift of the young professed, as well as to the freedom of the community to advise his withdrawal, should it become clear that a serious obstacle stands in the way of the subsequent perpetual commitment, this time without conditions. This conditional profession has the merit of being none the less permanent; it does not lead to re-considerations which are retrograde steps, involving as they do fresh consultation and discussions. It is true, of course, that such an engagement supposes both a maturity in the candidates and conscientiousness on the part of those who bear the responsibility for the Institute and the admission of candidates.

Once this form of perpetual profession is accepted, it would seem that profession in the sense of a canonical bilateral engagement could well be postponed to ensure that definitive admission into the Institute comes at the end of a fairly long and ordered progress.

THE COMMUNITY

Community and interior life

It is evident from *Perfectae Caritatis* that the council intended renewal to be communitarian. The decree asks for a greater participation of all members in the life of the Institute and in its apostolic action. It asks that they be more fully informed by superiors, since participation is hardly possible without such information. The equality of rights and duties which applies to all christians is commended to religious Institutes. Particular emphasis is laid on the suggestion that the distinction of grades in women's Institutes should be suppressed.

This communitarian renewal, if it is to be authentic, must be founded on the interior life. The community united in the name of Christ will not build itself up in charity without fraternal prayer as a sign and expression of personal prayer. It is this charity which provides the real foundation of the Lord's presence among those who come together for his sake and in virtue of his call; for Christ to be present among christians it is not enough for them simply to be together.

New approaches

As with every other aspect of renewal in religious Institutes, the new community dimension is seen to a large extent in terms of reaction against the past, when 'common life' was imposed on all by law, and in many Institutes was interpreted in terms of vigilance and control rather than of communion, mutual assistance, collaboration and concerted action. It is against such a conception of common life that chapter delegates have reacted in the strongest way; so much so that in their concern to renew fraternal life they have in some cases, and against all expectations, destroyed the community of life completely, breaking it up and making it almost impossible to live.

There is a general revulsion against a life which had nothing fraternal

about it, where brotherhood was frozen into the formalities of regular observance (nothing was more painful in the past than the leisure activity known as 'community recreation'). Here the realities of life inevitably took an individualist form owing to a degree of regimentation wholly inconsistent with the establishment of a truly human community. And today it is the human – and sometimes all too human – dimensions which are most in evidence; whereas the concern of the council was to emphasize the fact that a religious community is a brotherhood united in the name of the Lord, in the bond of a common call and for the sake of a common mission.

The search for a new conception of community has produced certain tendencies which it will be well to examine. The community, sometimes described in idealized terms of intelligible and authentic witness, is often presented as the place of sharing.¹² Its objective should be to promote fraternal union by means of the *révision de vie*. It should conform to a more human measure in order to be less 'anonymous'. The norm of its poverty should consist in giving a less 'capitalist' impression than that conveyed by the imposing edifices of education and charity in which religious formerly lived. With principles such as these for a basis, attempts are being made to form small groups in apartment dwellings, outside the large community, apart from the common work and even without taking part in it. Work in some other institution, private or official, is preferred on the grounds that it is more human and apostolic. In order to be more like their neighbours, religious go in search of professional work outside the congregation, in the lay and even non-christian milieu, and with an increasingly close involvement. All this of course demands small communities where members live in greater freedom, where one enters or leaves at will, which rapidly become little more than dormitories; until in the end the life of brotherhood is completely lost.

There are some who consider this secularization of the religious life indispensable, in order to achieve a meaningful witness, to secure the necessary adaptation to a changing world and to prepare the way for the Church of tomorrow – which in its turn will be a secularized Church.

Small or large communities?

If these various trends are carefully examined, it becomes clear that not all of them are evangelical in any true sense, and that in many cases the gospel is being invoked to provide a cover for ideas and values which are basically alien to it. Moreover, in authorizing the break-down of larger communities, (admittedly by way of experiment), the chapters left completely out of account certain traditional values of religious life admittedly difficult to evaluate; but their loss is already making itself felt. The formation of more restricted groups has not always had the effect of producing a more truly fraternal type

¹² We have already drawn attention to the ambiguity of the 'quest for the intelligible', as though the authentic life of faith were or could be meaningful for all without the grace of illumination.

of community. Life together has turned out to be more difficult under such circumstances; and this even in cases where the group was initially constituted on the basis of free choice and affinity. It is an arrangement that leads easily to the ostracism of those with difficult temperaments, the ones not easy to get on with, or the old. The fact needs to be faced that selfishness is not an individual quality merely; it is practised in groups, and certainly finds embodiment in certain of the more committed and homogeneous 'fraternities' or 'sororities'.

The life of 'brotherhood', which the members of these groups had set out to live, has often proved illusory. Their apartments have become little more than dormitories. It has proved difficult even to share out the domestic chores.

The greatest lack in many of these groups has been the Lord himself: a place for recollection in the eucharistic presence, or for a common worship which could be held without disturbing the neighbours. Prayer in many cases has had to be totally hidden and solitary, and in a place unsuited to the purpose. Only the occasional celebration of mass by a priest friend brought a more spiritual note to this community life which gathered together people consecrated to God but altogether too absorbed by the demands of daily work to be able to pray fittingly. Again, the small numbers of these groups deprived them of much of the assistance available in larger communities: each member had to do for himself what in a normal community is in the order of specialized services, often confided today to lay people in order to leave the religious free for more apostolic work.

This is not to say that the experience of small groups cannot prove extremely useful for the religious life. Perhaps a little paradoxically, it has had the effect of making the modern religious more conscious of the total self-denial of so many religious who for more than a century have *had* to live in groups of two or three in rural areas. We are now all of us in a better position to realize the extent of their problems: solitude, clashes of temperament, fatigue, lack of relaxation, difficulty in prayer, a liturgy without uplift or beauty, a degree of common life allowing of little or nothing in the way of privacy, especially when the house is too small or the places of work separated from one another and at too great a distance from the community house. We begin to understand the hardships endured by so many sisters who in the past were obliged to live and work on their school premises, spending most of their free time there, even Sundays.

For all their desire to live like other people in an ordinary milieu, these limited groups do not possess many of the things that contribute to the balance of ordinary family life: the relaxations, the leisure activity open to people in the world not committed to the life of the counsels, whatever their social class. A prayerful atmosphere is a prerequisite for fidelity to God and the apostolate, especially where, even in their free time, members of the group exercise a more exacting form of apostolate than the political commitment or missionary work of a dedicated layman.

Again, many and varied experiences in group living bring into prominence two things: the fact that community is not identical with common life, and that neither in itself means 'communion'. Furthermore, the secular Institutes with the isolated lives their members lead, and those apostolic orders with a tradition of purely personal assignments and individual pastoral responsibilities have long realized that living in the same house and regular conventual life are not essential to this element of communion, which can well be fervent and vital without the obligatory ties of life together under the same roof and in the sharing of a common table. To impose this form of common life on every Institute of apostolic life or on every group or house of an Institute would be a mistake. Where this has happened in the past, it was in many cases against the clearly expressed wish of the founder. A further point which deserves mention is that the common, regular life was always more strictly understood in the case of women religious; just as contemplative women have been bound to a more rigorous enclosure than that of monks today and nuns in the past. The religious priest or missionary must frequently leave his home base, take on responsibilities that come not from his Institute but from God alone, be involved in a variety of relationships with the people to whom he is dedicated, and be familiar with periods of absence from home made necessary by his work: periods which themselves give expression to the missionary character of his vocation.

Without condemning or decrying these various types of small communities, it must be admitted that they tend to run into very serious difficulties, which are aggravated by the fact that those who make up these groups were little prepared for what they were going to meet. A movement back to the larger polyvalent type of community is already noticeable in the more recent tendency to form small groups around a common house or an institution which provides their place of work or field of apostolate.

Certainly, there are other experiments which hold out better chances of success. These are founded on a more adequate spiritual preparation – a new vision of the way in which a genuine charity can be lived out concretely. This is true for those 'week-day' groups which consist of individuals from different Institutes who join together in specialized pastoral service. After several years of experience, some of these have achieved results comparable to those in recently founded Institutes, where this type of fraternal life is a dominant characteristic of their apostolic charism.

However, the new groupings, centred around an academic or medical centre, need to realize that the criticisms levelled against them are often justified: even if they live among the less well to do they sometimes give scandal by the standard of their own comfort. Life on a budget is unrealistic if the budget can always be augmented from the common fund. Some forms of witness to poverty are illusory because based on fictions. It is common knowledge that religious who live on their salaries can always appeal to their Institute for help in difficulty. Indeed, if certain forms of group living bring an experience of poverty, it is a poverty they impose on

themselves, without any of the insecurity of real poverty: as an experiment in human relations rather than a social reality.

In groups where brotherhood is fully lived, it has been possible to discover the profound bond which unites those whom God calls together either for divine praise or for apostolic action. Some groups have in a measure relived the experience of the first beginnings of a new foundation. They have experienced a growth which makes it impossible for them to confine what they have discovered to the limits of a restricted group; they feel the need to share their discovery with other groups; so that, as numbers increase, groups are once more drawn together, more by faith than by contact, more by the spirit than by direct presence. It has always been the mark of a charism in the Church to be willing to renounce a certain initial intimacy in order to extend into new foundations. The grace received in the beginning is thus strengthened and purified in a sustained living faith and a wider charity. To put it another way, the Lord whom one had known as present from the outset, becomes the living corner-stone of the community; and this less through immediate fraternal ties which must appear to become more fragile in being extended, than through an ever more interior reference to the one who is always the same – Jesus Christ. It is when a group loses this faith in Christ that it begins to break up. When it finds him in brotherhood, it becomes centred anew on him who is always the beginning and the end of our life and action.

In the assurance found in this sort of group-experience, a number of religious have returned to the larger community, thereby accepting for their own group the further stages of a normal growth. The presence of the spirit is always communicative. In some cases, this is the effect of an individual sharing his own gift; it sometimes happens that the coming or going of one individual alters the entire community. In other words, the key to the meaning and value of small communities is not a matter of numbers and structure; its success is much more a matter of gift and grace, fidelity to Christ and openness to his Spirit.

On the other hand, other groups look back on a painful experience, and their very failure has afforded them new insight into the possibilities inherent in a larger community: the witness of consecrated life, a richer liturgy, a more sober life-style, a more effective use of time, the interplay of different personal gifts, the possibility of groups on a basis of spiritual affinity, professional work, or, in international communities, on the basis of nationality or language. It is worth remembering in this connection that St Benedict himself made allowance, in his monasteries gathered together under a single abbot, for *doyennés*, small groups of brethren confided to the care and direction of one of the elders, a monk of greater experience or one particularly endowed for the task.

Lastly, many of the small communities have become sensitive to the criticisms that their experiment has provoked among the laity. They occupy apartments which would be better left to families and others in need of

accommodation. The difficulties of the group are sometimes all too evident, especially when members talk about their problems among the neighbours. Members exploit too freely the opportunity of spending their evenings in the intimacy of a neighbouring family where their presence is sometimes an embarrassment. Their witness does not come across with a clarity that many expect of religious, to whom they look for a public testimony of consecrated life. Scandal is given by unnecessary expenditure, waste of time, the purely fictitious poverty of those for whom living on their salary means having more than they had before, or who know that they can always count for material assistance on the community they have abandoned.

The role of the superior

Some fraternities have given us the opportunity to discover anew the role of the superior: in charge in the group, without dominating the persons who comprise it, the superior can make decisions in the absence of members of the community at work. Too much time is lost in many communities by lengthy negotiations over points of detail. The superior should be seen, once again, as the confidant of his brethren; if he possesses the charism he can be their spiritual guide, exercising his charge with discretion and with an attention to the workings of grace. He will fulfil these roles more effectively, of course, if he is not an overburdened administrator, a businessman or a manager.

There are groups which have sought to suppress the role of superior completely; in doing so many of them have eliminated an element of brotherhood itself. Where all is shared, where *révision de vie* and exchange in community are the main vehicles of discussion, a personal dimension is wanting. There are matters which require individual discussion, in an atmosphere of discretion and confidence; they cannot be communicated to the group without injury to individuals or the community itself. It is true, however, that many of these ventures into democracy were experiments that had to be made in order to recover the meaning of the different 'ministries' of fraternal life, a meaning which had worn so thin as to have become almost lost. And if today this meaning can be discovered anew, the renewal of the larger communities will certainly be furthered.

These few remarks do not of course exhaust so immense a subject as that of community life. Their purpose has been simply to offer an assessment of experiments and initiatives which, if not in every instance satisfactory, have promoted the recovery of central values and underlined the urgency of that renewal which makes the difference between a functional group and a truly living and fraternal one.