

THE NEED FOR CONSTITUTIONS

Guided by the Spirit of Jesus
to the glory of the Father

By EDWARD MALATESTA

WHenever human beings desire to share the same life-project, a contract or a covenant is necessary. In such a situation, while many life-styles are theoretically possible, the limitations which are a given in every life — individual or collective choices, goals and means — must be taken, which necessarily exclude others. The multiple forms of religious life which exist within the various traditions of the Church are subject to those same human necessities and limitations. The call to consecrate one's life to the service of God and others as a religious, even though it originates in the infinite, transcendent goodness of the Holy Trinity, must be accurately perceived and clearly articulated at each step, if it is to be incarnate in a community of human persons. Religious rules of life and constitutions are intended to communicate the living out of a particular charism, by defining it and describing its implications.

Religious communities, like all other human communities, necessarily experience the tension between spirit and letter. This paper will attempt to reflect on some aspects of this tension, and to suggest ways which may assist religious to live within the kind of fidelity proportionate to the privileged expressions of their charism: an endowment for an ever more sensitive and more generous acceptance of the guidance of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, leading us to reveal the glory of the Father, the ultimate source of every good and perfect gift.¹

The agenda comes from the world

At a recent congress on 'The meaning of human suffering' at the University of Notre Dame, Fr Carroll Stuhlmueller, eminent scholar of the Old Testament and perceptive observer of the contemporary

¹ Jas 1, 16.

Church, offered a reflection very pertinent to our topic. Speaking of the ways in which Israel perceived her vocation at various stages of her history, he pointed out that the people of God read God's call to them most correctly when they were attentive to his action in the events of human history, and in the ways in which these events challenged them: slavery in Egypt, the liberating event of the exodus, exile in Babylon, and the return to Israel.

Our world, on the local, national and international levels, provides the place in which God speaks to us: the place where he speaks to all other human beings. What actually is must be intently listened to, if we are to perceive what can be, might be or should be. Any discussion, then, of the life-style and mission of an individual or a particular group must attend first of all to the historical situation of the world, both at the moment of the initial appearance of a charism, and at each successive moment of its history. There is no guarantee that a community, created under divine inspiration to respond to a particular need, is intended to endure, at least in the same form, in succeeding generations when the original need no longer exists, or is sufficiently met by others. It may be well for the community to disappear, or to be profoundly modified, in the light of a new inspiration from God which is no less genuine than the gift which marked its beginning. We must remain totally free before the Lord, who speaks to us through history. The first commandment enjoins exclusive love for God alone, not for any form of human community, even one consecrated to his service. The hard data of historical circumstances should tell us whether or not a community should exist. The same data will tell us much about *how* a community should exist, when it is clear that it should.

Divine call and human response

God himself is the ultimate source of every good and perfect gift. In his loving care for us, his children, he pours out spiritual gifts with a lavishness that outstrips our fondest hopes, and outreaches our wildest imaginings. His designs anticipate and make possible our response. Precisely because the call to a particular way of religious life is such a precious gift, it should, to the degree that it is correctly discerned, be expressed adequately and specified sufficiently so as to be ever more clearly recognized, known, loved and lived by those who are called to share in it. Only those who correctly perceive and understand a call can respond to it with decisiveness and generosity: and

this not only at the outset of a religious life, but throughout its entire duration.

Indeed, part of the Lord's intention in offering an authentic charism of religious life to the Church is that this be expressed in an adequate human way, so as to evoke a truly human response. A rule of life or constitutions are not superfluous or optional; they are a necessary means in co-operating with the Lord in the fulfilment of his purposes.

Life within the Church

Religious communities are an essential part of our experience of the life communicated to us by the Church, and ordered to her good in the service of God's kingdom in this world. By Church I mean here the entire community of believers, with their various vocations and gifts. Any religious community requires a clear statement of its grace, so that the charism as proclaimed can be discerned, evaluated, approved, sustained, and also protected by the rest of the christian community. Constitutions situate religious communities within the Church and relate them to the Church. Each charism is to be treasured as a good of the universal Church. Whether religious communities flourish or diminish is important to the well-being of all the faithful. One might expect that a more active co-responsibility on the part of various sectors of the Church would favour the development of religious life. The laity and the various groups of ordained ministers — deacons, priests, bishops — could, if properly informed and sufficiently sensitive, render considerable service to the continuing discernment processes of religious communities. Their development is hindered when religious talk only to themselves. We are responsible for the well-being of the entire Church, and the entire body of Christians is responsible for assisting us in our religious life-project.

Life and love

The choice of a particular form of religious life means the choice of one way of loving God and other people during our little lives upon this earth. Any motive other than love would be an inadequate foundation upon which to build a religious life. Fear of God and his judgment, flight from the spiritual dangers inherent in other forms of life, search for spiritual security — to mention only a few of the motives which may be, at least in part, grounded in religious faith

— can, when rightly understood, contribute to one's choice to enter a religious community; but they cannot give it sufficient grounding. Religious are meant to be lovers, impassioned lovers of God and of his people; and they seek in a religious community radical means for loving in a way that cannot otherwise be satisfied. Such love should motivate one's initial acceptance of a way of life and its privileged formulation in a rule or constitutions. It should, through the years, sustain the initial commitment through the adaptations and applications that time and circumstances necessarily occasion. Love should preside over the initial formulation of a community's way of life, animate the acceptance of such formulation, and determine any modifications that times and circumstances may necessitate.

Signposts in the quest for God and the service of others

At the present time, because of the largely unavoidable turmoil that has characterized the last twenty years of religious life, many older religious have a nostalgic longing for more 'law and order'. The middle-aged are usually wary of formulations of any kind; they have suffered from too much authoritarianism. The young, on the other hand, often sincerely seek guidance and precision amidst the babel of opinions which clamour for their attention and allegiance. The time is ripe for map-makers, for those who are able, in the light of past and present experience and with an eye to the future, to chart a course that can be followed with confidence. It seems providential that precisely at this time many religious communities are drafting or revising their constitutions. It can never be said, arbitrarily, that the time for experimentation is over. Continually changing circumstances, especially in the rapid pace of events which characterizes our modern age, challenge us to ever new responses. Indeed, life itself is a constant experiment: every day, even in the midst of routine, brings something new to the attentive heart. And yet, whilst we try to be on the alert for the new and different, we need at the same time to be firmly rooted in a value-system that gives substance to our lives. If we are to find a personal interior unity, a focal point for our perceptions, a goal for our choices, and a firm foundation for change and adaptation, then we need clearly-defined values; to which we adhere as consistently as human frailty allows.

A rule of life or constitutions provide signposts along our way to God. Deprived of such help, we are without direction, without grounds upon which to stand when faced with new choices: victims of every wind that blows, of every passing fad and fashion. Enriched

by such a gift, we can, with our companions, pursue our course resolutely and securely.

Wisdom and law

A rule of life and constitutions are therefore law in the strictest and richest sense of the term: namely, guidelines produced by the prudent exercise of right reason, for the pursuit of a goal within human society. In the case of religious life, law should proceed as well from reflection influenced by a faith-filled reading of the signs of the times, and a contemplation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus, in the Scriptures, in the tradition of the Church. The basic legislation of a religious community is then a privileged expression of christian wisdom, that connatural knowledge of God and his ways which is the fruit of loving communion with him and with his people. In God's providence, some formulations of religious law have stood the test of time throughout many centuries, and serve as models even today: for example, the Rules of Benedict, of Basil and Francis, and the Constitutions of Ignatius of Loyola.

Other documents, if they are to merit the name of law that is wisdom, as these models do, should take account of the experience of earlier generations, the needs of the moment, the entire content of the christian faith, and ordinary common sense. When it truly expresses wisdom, religious legislation will be loved, esteemed and observed. Religious should be able to be proud of their documents. This will surely be the case when they can see reflected in their legislation the spiritual gifts operative in the foundation of the community, throughout its history and in the present. Those who have an authentic vocation to a definite community should be able to see themselves, their experience and their aspirations in the words that community uses to express itself.

The Word and words

The origin of every christian religious community, both in the East and in the West from the fourth century until the present day, has always been grounded in a particularized response to the person of Jesus Christ as revealed and contemplated in the Scriptures, in the Church and in the world. The formulation of every way of religious living is an attempt to put into human words a response to the person and call of him who is the Word incarnate of the Father. One of the marvels of the christian experience is the fact that Jesus

Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever,² continually reveals himself in new ways and evokes new responses of love and service in the christian community. New conditions, new experiences, new insights require and therefore should inspire new words from the religious community which wishes its language about itself to reflect adequately the current phase of its life. The presence in its midst of the risen Jesus, who continually pours out his own Spirit upon each and all, offers the strongest grounds for hope that renewal is indeed possible: but on his terms and not on ours.

If both what a community says about itself and the way it lives express faithfully the presence and activity within it of the risen Jesus, those who are drawn by him to such a way of life will see him reflected in the community. It is reasonable to expect that new members will be drawn to those communities which have authentically responded to the incarnate Word by their words and their actions.

Spirit and structure

At times, the Holy Spirit of God is invoked in opposition to structure, his charisms are set against law, and fidelity to his alleged inspirations is judged to be in proportion to the distance from any form of institution. It is certainly true that the Holy Spirit does not inspire formalism, authoritarianism or empty conformism. But because he is creative and life-giving, the Spirit of God always acts upon matter and within bodies, whether they are physical or moral. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the first Adam became a living person, the second Adam was conceived, exercised his ministry and was raised from the dead. Similarly the christian community, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was modelled as a mediator of God's pardon and the bearer of many gifts for the praise of God and the service of others.

The presence and activity of the Holy Spirit within a religious community will be manifested — among other things — by the structures chosen by the community for its internal life and for its ministries. No community can have an existence worth the name without some organizational structures in the lives of each member and of the entire body. Anarchy and disorder as well as apathy and laxity are signs of death. One of the purposes of a rule of life and constitutions is to provide for those forms of expression of the religious life that allow it to exist, to grow and to bear fruit.

² Heb 13, 8.

Structures in a community that actually do favour such life and development are a sure sign of the Holy Spirit.

Fidelity and freedom

Mature religious who have for a long time lived according to the spirit of their vocation reflect the complementary values of fidelity and freedom in a way that arouses admiration and imitation. It may seem at first sight that these qualities are opposed. On the contrary, fidelity cannot exist without freedom. The faith-filled living in harmony with the spirit of a specific religious community, within those limitations endemic to every stage of its development, presupposes a gradual personal appropriation and assimilation of the group's charism, a progressive fashioning by the Holy Spirit of every aspect of one's life, a growing receptivity to the action of God. The 'place' of such a complete, generous and docile response can be no other than the 'heart', that core of the personality where one encounters the Lord, where a free response is given to him as the One who is the source and goal of every other value.

Total openness to the invitations of the Lord, whatever their consequences, presupposes a depth of commitment synonymous with the unconditional response to the grace of one's religious vocation. Normally, the freedom to respond to the Lord fuses with the freedom to live according to this call. As long as a person remains a religious, the obligation is in terms of fidelity to the grace of a particular vocation. Such fidelity looks *first of all* to the spirit behind the letter of formulations, to the intentions of those responsible for the authentic interpretation of a community's charism; but it also sees the letter as one amongst other privileged expressions of the Spirit. Freedom, therefore, comprises fidelity to the spirit and to the letter as well as an openness to the Spirit, source of the spirit and the letter, who leads a community into ever new ways.

Tradition and openness

One of the greatest challenges to religious communities today is to establish a harmony between openness to what is new and the preservation of authentic tradition. Our times offer this challenge to the entire Church, and within that context to religious communities. It would be naïve to think that a religious community can solve its problems adequately without an objective re-reading in faith of the community's history. Among other benefits, history reveals the response given to questions raised in the past, how the community

adjusted to new circumstances, and so on. A knowledge of tradition prepares a better understanding of the present, mediates decisions and confirms them. Those solidly grounded in tradition are the ones who should be the most open to new developments. An appeal to tradition should be neither a flight from the present nor a search for security at all costs, but rather a quest for light in which to judge the present.

The person who is truly open will be receptive to the signs of God's presence and activity, not only in the contemporary moment of history but also in the past. It takes a firm faith to discover without anxiety the same Lord acting in the past and in the present, while he invites us to the future. 'God is greater than our hearts';³ it would be foolish to refuse to be led by him along fresh paths, as human history moves ever more rapidly into new stages of advancement or decline. There is only one Lord of history; it is him alone that we should seek at every phase of our existence. He himself has given us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to decide, and hands to work. He who has begun his work in this world from the first moment of creation will carry it through to the very end of time and into eternity. Past, present and future belong to him; it is ours to be led by his good Spirit to seek, find and serve him wherever he invites us. We need not fear the past, present or future; rather, commending ourselves and others to his unfailing mercy, we should humbly recognize reality just as it is, ready to learn and to teach, to be forgiven and to forgive, prompt to advance, and yet to recognize as far as possible the full measure of the distance that we and others have already travelled.

The healing of memories

In a recent, deservedly popular book we may find an important application to the experience of all religious with regard to the authoritative documents of their communities.⁴ Many of them have unpleasant memories of at least some aspects of their constitutions and rules. Certain formulations may have been presented as sacrosanct, even though they represented a narrow vision expressed in outdated language. Facets of religious life rightly considered very important today may have been totally overlooked or superficially treated.

For a community to proceed to the revision of its constitutions and/or rule of life with serenity, confidence and enthusiasm, it is necessary

³ 1 Jn 3, 20.

⁴ Cf Matthew and Dennis Linn S.J.: *Healing of Memories* (New York, 1974).

that the memories which cause bitterness, frustration and despair be recognized and healed. The persons responsible for past limitations in the community's concepts, language, customs and actions, with the consequent ill-effects upon generations of religious, must be held in our thoughts and hearts, and there treated with compassion and forgiveness. The Lord's hand must be seen even in the suffering caused by human failures; for he alone can bring good out of every event and circumstance to those who love him.

The composition of new texts should be seen not as a revenge taken against those who preceded us, or as a long awaited opportunity to repair the errors of the unenlightened, but rather as a form of collaboration with the Lord, who lovingly invites us to the next positive step in the forward movement of our community. Ignatius of Loyola's golden rule, of interpreting as favourably as possible the statement of another, can lead us to discern the part of truth in every attempt to formulate a religious way of life, and thus enrich our own perceptions and expressions.⁵ The more our memories are healed, the more we can draw out of our storehouse good things both new and old.⁶

Faith-sharing

The constitutions or rule of life of a community mediate the faith-vision of its founder to subsequent generations. It is out of the religious experience of a founding group of persons, drawn by the Lord for a common purpose, that the first authentic texts were composed. The developing life of the community needs the forum of faith-sharing to keep the charism alive, and to find new ways of living and expressing it. Such a forum structurally assures at least the possibility of exploring together as a community the spiritual gifts which characterize the members both in the past and in the present. Faith-sharing also includes conscientization and discernment regarding the obstacles and difficulties in living out the community's ideals and hopes.

Faith-sharing should take place at every level of a community's existence. Major superiors and local superiors with their respective councils, delegates in chapters or regional meetings, local communities, groups of friends: all these are helped in their interaction with one another through the 'spiritual exercise' of faith-sharing in a prayerful atmosphere of mutual frankness, trust and love. When it is entered

⁵ Cf Exx 22.

⁶ Cf Mt 13, 52.

on with some regularity and depth, faith-sharing provides an effective means for mutual knowledge and continued individual and community growth, in the contemporary living out of the charism of a christian religious family.

Authority and obedience

It is impossible and unnecessary in the context of the present reflection to engage in a discussion of the various ways of understanding and living religious obedience. I merely suggest that faith-sharing seems to me to find a particular and indispensable application in the relationships between each member of a religious congregation and those who have the ministry of exercising authority in the community.

Those charged with the responsibility for making decisions regarding the life and ministry of an entire community and of the individuals within it, both by confirming and ratifying inclinations, proposals or decisions reached by its various members, and by initiating new courses of life and service, in order that the community may function with authentic fidelity to its charism as it should be lived out in any given time and place, have an *absolute* need for an intimate knowledge of the persons whom they have been chosen to lead and guide. A particular form of faith-sharing should characterize the dialogue between each member of the community and the one who holds the position of authority. Both need the ability to communicate honestly in a spirit of faith, trust and love, if religious obedience is to be possible, and a community to be truly alive. Religious superiors need to be more than mere administrators in a secular sense. Indeed to administrate in a religious way — which is their task — they should possess the qualities required by such exchange. If they do not, and if they are unwilling or unable to acquire or to use such qualities, they should be removed from office as soon as possible, since they cannot govern in a religious way. Similarly, members of the community who cannot communicate with their superiors on a religious level — and this does not necessarily mean a 'manifestation of conscience' in the technical sense of the term as it is practised in the Society of Jesus — should be helped by every means to do so. Exceptional situations can and do arise because of personality clashes and so on; but it would be highly undesirable for someone to be consistently incapable of faith-sharing with every person in authority.

Communication is the art of sharing life together, and faith-sharing is one of the highest, most satisfying and most inspiring forms of communication. The constitutions of a community will be lived

out satisfactorily only when the members can communicate in this way with those who have special authority and responsibility for preserving, interpreting and adapting the spiritual heritage entrusted to them with the persons called to live that heritage in the present.

Contemplation and discernment

The quality of faith-sharing among the members of a community, and between the members and those in authority, will be determined by the quality of each one's contemplation and discernment. The value of the dialogue between two or more religious persons always depends upon its spiritual depth. That is why the atmosphere surrounding deliberation upon the original composition, subsequent revision or continuing interpretation of a community's basic documents must be one of serious individual prayer and discernment.

The prolonged contemplation of the person of Jesus our Lord, especially as he is revealed to us in the gospels, in the tradition of the Church, and in the people and events of our own day, remains the never-failing source of new understanding of him and of his ways with us, of ourselves and of our response to him. Such contemplation, and the discernment of the spiritual movements which it evokes, provides the insight and strength which are clearly needed to perceive and generously to respond to the meaning of a particular religious vocation in the world of today and tomorrow.

Decision and action

Contemplation and discernment necessarily look towards decision and action. Even very prayerful persons may fail to take the step from discernment to decision or from decision to action because of psychological and/or spiritual weakness. Fear is one of the most common sources of refusal to decide or to act. Much suffering, especially in the form of disappointment, discouragement and frustration has been occasioned in religious communities and in the Church at large, because of the failure to make decisions or to act on them as circumstances require.

The process of revising constitutions, and their constant interpretation and adaptation, includes imaginative decisions and courageous action. One may safely say that many areas of contemporary catholic life lack creative imagination, whilst all around us people and events are crying out for fresh approaches. It may indeed be the case that some communities will know no end to their 'vocation crisis' until they solve their own internal crises of lack of creative response to new

international, national and local situations. Generally speaking, the best contemporary youth will be drawn and led by the Holy Spirit only to those communities which have encountered and followed his inspirations regarding their own authentic renewal according to the gospel: a renewal flowing from prolonged contemplation of the person of Jesus, mature discernment, imaginative decisions and courageous action.

Perseverance until the end

The experience of the last twenty years has taught us with compelling force that religious communities can be renewed only by those who persevere in them, and weather the storms that have characterized this challenging period of our history. Those who correctly discern their call to a specific community, the real viability and the possible continuance of that community, and their own responsibility to share the task of bringing their religious family into the future, merit every form of support and encouragement from the rest of the Church. The precise labours of revising constitutions entails much patient research, prolonged study, wide consultation and frequent meetings, with the give-and-take implied in all this. Partial and final results must be submitted to discussion and put to the vote, and ultimate approval sought from the competent Church authorities. Each of these steps can occasion disappointment and set-backs; but they can equally bring encouragement and final agreement.

The goal we seek in the whole process can serve as an adequate stimulus for perseverance at every step of the way: a more accurate grasp in faith of the nature of a religious community and its meaning in the world of today and tomorrow, an adequate and attractive expression of this charism which provides the community with a source of inspiration, a norm for day-to-day living, a bond of unity in the Spirit.

The demanding work of creating a mirror in which a community may recognize its own likeness as a reflection of the risen Lord Jesus, will certainly assist that community to experience within itself the reality of Paul's words:

... we all reflect as in a mirror the splendour of the Lord; thus we are transfigured into his likeness, from splendour to splendour: such is the influence of the Lord who is Spirit.⁷

⁷ 2 Cor 3, 18.