

Christian Spirituality and the Evangelical Counsels in Consecrated Life

di Rangarirai Mutanga, O.Carm

Introduction

Consecrated life has had considerable contribution to the witnessing to the need to answer God's call to live a life of holiness. Yet it has not been immune from negative criticisms from within the Church as well as from without. With rising secularism, hedonism and atheism, militant and passive, some people are questioning the relevance of Christianity let alone religious life. The challenging contemporary situation has dampened the faith of some people. There increasingly arise the need to offer a credible example of how to radically live the Christian life. One of the ways of doing so is through consecrated life. As such there arises a greater need to re-visit and re-enlighten again the essence of consecrated life. The clarification of the constant elements of its theologico-spiritual nature equips one with appreciation of the depth of the solid and living witness that consecrated persons are called to bear in their own lives. All people are called to embark on this journey but not necessarily as consecrated people who profess the evangelical counsels. As such spiritual advancement and conscious gospel-inspired efforts towards union with God in holiness is the message that consecrated life proclaims to the world. Without understanding the underlying theology of consecrated life, there is a risk of expecting what is not expected from it, or at worse, not valuing it for what it really is and thus missing the message proclaimed. There is need to re-visit and appreciate the spirituality expressed through the evangelical counsels. As such, the objective of this paper is to explore consecrated life and try and discover how it brings out, in active and living witness, the depth of Christian spirituality at least as it is understood under the banner of Catholic theology. The paper begins by briefly looking at the nature of Christian spirituality before exploring the way consecrated life seeks to make a dynamic living of Christian spirituality.

Christian Spirituality

Christian spirituality holds a central position in Christian life. But what is Christian spirituality? In his book *Christian Spirituality*, Alister E. McGrath gives a basic definition of Christian spirituality: 'Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith'¹. In other words, Christian spirituality encompasses the way in which individuals or

¹ A.E. MCGRATH, *Christian Spirituality*, 2



groups strive to concretize their relationship and experience of the presence of the living God².

Christian spirituality stems from the relationship of love that God has for all humanity from the beginning of creation. By creating man in his image and likeness, *imago Dei* (Gn 1,27), God aimed to establish a relationship of love with his people. In a logical sense, being created in the *imago Dei* necessarily points to an establishment of a relationship: 'If human beings exist in the "image of God," it follows that a potential for a relationship exists between individual human beings and God'³. This relationship was marred by man's sins but God, in his merciful love continuously called man to repentance and holiness (2 Cr 7,14; Ez. 18,32; Joel 2,13; Is 55,7). Through the establishment of covenants and through the words of the prophet down through the Old Testament times, God never ceased to call his children back to communion with him. Gradually he revealed himself as a loving God who relates with his people in a relationship described in marital terms (Eze 16, 8-14, 59-60; Is 54,5; Ger 31,32). From this it becomes clear that God loved his people collectively, and he also called each individual soul to communion with him, an expected a response to this love in faith and obedience⁴. Clearly God's desire for communion with souls is ingrained in the history of salvation.

Turning to the New Testament, the pivotal point to note is that the New Testament brings about the fulfilment of the law in Jesus Christ⁵. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, true God and true man⁶, is the Word who became flesh (Jn 1:14), and it is through him that humanity is brought to communion with the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. In *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition* Jordan Aumann describes communion more clearly:

Christ is the realization and the fulfilment of all that has been promised and signified by the word and action of God in the history of salvation from Adam to the last of the prophets. Christ is, therefore, the embodiment of authentic spirituality and, quite logically, from our point of view the spiritual life must be a participation in the "mystery of Christ." Consequently, Christ is for all times – yesterday, today and forever – and any attempt to construct a spirituality that is more "more contemporary" or "more up-to-date" is purely an illusion⁷.

The explanation above clearly shows that Christian spirituality is more authentic if it seeks to be faithful to the person of Christ as revealed in the Word of God.

Describing the role of Christ in bringing up souls to the level of relating with God, Aumann further explains:

The very mystery of the Word made flesh indicates to us how we are able to participate in the mystery of Christ. The Word condescended to "humanize" himself, so to speak, by assuming human nature, but in so doing, he elevated that nature to the supernatural order by "divinizing" it through its union with the divine Person⁸.

This act of elevation to the supernatural order enables humanity to participate in the life that Christ shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit⁹, and its genesis is from the sacrament

² A.E. MCGRATH, *Christian Spirituality*, 3; T. CARSON – J. CERRITO, ed., *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, no. 13. 433

³ A.E. MCGRATH, *Christian Spirituality*, 41

⁴ J. AUMANN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 9

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 578

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 464-69; *Ibid.*, 480-82

⁷ J. AUMANN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 10

⁸ J. AUMANN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 11

⁹ J.-H. NICOLAS, *Catholic Dogmatic Theology: A Synthesis. Book 1: On the Trinitarian Mystery of God.*, 369



of baptism through which individuals participate in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ¹⁰. The participation in the life of the Trinity is the essence of Christian spirituality; it is through union with the Son that a relationship of love with the Father is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit¹¹.

It is vital to note, from what has been discussed above, that spiritual life is a life-long journey towards union with God. And, since this discussion involves consecrated life in the Catholic Church, it is important to add one more definition that brings a Catholic understanding of what has been discussed above. William Resier gives a Catholic definition of spirituality: “Spirituality” refers to the unfolding, day by day, of that fundamental decision to become or remain a Christian which we make at baptism, repeat at confirmation, and renew each time we receive the eucharist¹².

From such understanding of Christian spirituality, it is clear that the relationship with God calls for repentance, forgiveness and transformation of individual human life so that life is lived in holiness (Mt. 3,1-12; 5,48; Mc 1,15). In other words, Christian spirituality makes a clear demand for the transformation on human way of living. God’s injunction that all should be perfect after him resound through the whole spirituality enterprise: It is ‘a dynamic revolution, a law of constant progress in one’s relationship with God’¹³. It is a journey for every believer in Christ and along this journey the Church, his body, is a necessary institution.

God calls all people to communion with him and people respond to his call through living the spiritual life. In the Church, there are different ways of responding to God and of embarking on this spiritual quest for union with him. Consecrated life, through the living of the evangelical counsels, is one of the ways through which certain individuals respond in a more radical way to the call to communion with the Father, through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit: ‘Though all Christians are called to practise the evangelical counsels in their own way, within this general vocation, religious attend to it while following Christ in a special way’¹⁴. Having established an understanding of Christian spirituality, focus is shifted to consecrated life and its spirituality is explored.

Nature and Spirituality of Consecrated Life

Consecrated life, which involves the profession of the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity, stems from baptism and desires to live the Christian life in a more radical way. In *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II describes consecrated life in a brief and clear way:

In the Church’s tradition religious profession is considered to be a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received at baptism, inasmuch as it is the means through which the close union with Christ already began in Baptism develops in the gift of a fuller, more explicit and authentic configuration to him through the profession of evangelical counsels. This further consecration, however, differs in a special way from baptismal consecration, of which it is not a necessary consequence. In fact, those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit’s gift, the chastity appropriate for

¹⁰ J. AUMANN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 11; *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, 168; *Ibid.*, 265; *Ibid.*, 537

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, 234

¹² W. REISER, *Looking for a God to Pray to: Christian Spirituality in Transition*, 2

¹³ J. AUMANN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 14

¹⁴ J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 249



their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness which is the perfection of love¹⁵.

From this understanding, it stands clear that the way of consecrated life is a more radical way of coming to communion with the Father by following and serving Christ in the Church which is his body and has strong inspiration from the Gospel. Joseph Xavier, in his article *Call of Evangelical Counsels*, explains: 'this form of Christian life is all about the Gospel and it draws inspiration from it'¹⁶. This is made effectively possible by the contemplative dimension inherent in consecrated life¹⁷.

What makes consecrated life unique is the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience for the sake of the Kingdom of God¹⁸. Since these three evangelical counsels are key features of consecrated life¹⁹, it logically means the spirituality of consecrated life is hinged upon these three counsels. As such, it is important to discuss each of them and bring out the underlying spirituality.

Obedience

Christian spirituality involves a life of obedience to the Father in imitation of Christ who was obedient to the Father even unto death (Fil 2,5-8). Evangelical obedience follows in the same steps more radically as it involves sacrificing one's own freedom and choosing the true freedom that comes from Christ whose true freedom was to do the will of the Father (Gv 3,4; 6,38; Eb 10,5.7)²⁰. Evangelical obedience is lived in discerning the will of God individually as well as a community²¹. As such, through living in obedience of the Father under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the possibility of advancing along the spiritual journey and living a fully-surrendered life is thus made possible. All this is directed to living a life of union with God in love. The Carmelite Constitutions explain this point more eloquently:

It involves a constant and profound process of transformation in order to internalise the will of God which is always creative and life-giving, so that we may not only freely choose to act in accordance with the divine commandments, but being purified we may adhere more and more fully to the God who loves us²².

Christian spirituality involves the witnessing dimension. Evangelical obedience, being one of the radical ways of living Christian spirituality, will not be without the witnessing dimension. By living evangelical obedience, consecrated persons challenge the distorted notions of obedience and freedom that the world is constantly presenting. It challenges people to always base their decisions and mode of life on listening the Word of God and discerning his will so as to be his instruments in the transformation of individuals and communities as well as the structures that affect human life in all its aspects²³. If there is communal discernment and conformity to the will of God, humanity will then live in harmony and the structures of the kingdom of God are established among the people of God, and they too will have the freedom to live Christian spirituality without crushing hindrances.

¹⁵ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 30

¹⁶ J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 249

¹⁷ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 17; *Ibid.*, 72; *Ibid.*, 79; P. PAUL VI, «Perfectae Caritatis», 5

¹⁸ P. PAUL VI, «Evangelica Testificatio», 8; *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, 915

²⁰ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 22; J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 248

²¹ «The Carmelite Constitutions», 48

²² «The Carmelite Constitutions», 49

²³ P. PAUL VI, «Evangelica Testificatio», 24; P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 22; *Ibid.*, 62; *Ibid.*, 91



From the explanation above, it is clear that the ultimate aim of obedience is not a mere observation of set down rules and statutes, or is it merely to cultivate oneness in community. Although these are important, they are means to an end, and the end is union with God in love through obedient abandonment to his will.

Poverty

With regards to Christian spirituality, detachment from certain attachments is indispensable. Christ himself asked this of his disciples (Mt. 10,37-39; 19,27; Mc 10, 21; Lc 12,15; 8,24-34)²⁴. In the same vein evangelical poverty is taken in imitation of the poor Christ who, though he was rich, became poor to enrich us with his poverty.²⁵ As they imitate Christ in his poverty, consecrated persons seek to detach from worldly possessions so as to be attached to God and to accept his plan for the salvation of souls.²⁶ In their quest to imitate the poor Christ, consecrated persons are able to practice self-abnegation in humility so as to eradicate self-centeredness and egotism through their earthly pilgrimage. This in turn opens their hearts and eyes to see and feel with the eyes and heart of Christ in the sick, the weak and in those who are poor not by any choice of their own: 'evangelical poverty impels a follower of Christ into practical solidarity with those for whom poverty is not a matter of virtue but the condition of life and situation exacted on them by society'²⁷. Regarding the same point Pope Francis in his *Address to the International Union of Superiors* brings the point against the evils of self-centred hearts:

Poverty teaches solidarity, sharing and charity, and is also expressed in moderation and joy in the essential, to put us on guard against material idols that obscure the real meaning of life. A poverty learned with the humble, the poor, the sick and all those who are on the existential outskirts of life. A theoretical poverty is no use to us. Poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ, in the humble, in the poor, in the sick and in children²⁸.

By living evangelical poverty, consecrated people preach against the unjust structures in the society and encourage the transformation of hearts²⁹. The purpose of all this is to aid union with God through self-emptying and divorce from earthly attachments so as to be readily available to God's transforming love³⁰. Living evangelical poverty should ultimately lead to union with God in love, and this is the goal of Christian spirituality.

Chastity

The evangelical vow of chastity is taken with the view of imitating Christ in his chastity so as to be more closely united with him. As is the case with marriage, or even more so, consecrated chastity mirrors more perfectly the union that exists between Christ and his bride, the Church: 'consecrated chastity evokes this union [between Christ and his Church] in a more immediate way and brings that surpassing excellence to which all human love should tend'³¹. So evangelical chastity is professed in view of striving to love God more fully and loving others with the love that comes from experiencing the love of God (Mc 12,29-

²⁴ J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 247

²⁵ P. PAUL VI, «Perfectae Caritatis», 13

²⁶ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 22

²⁷ J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 252-253

²⁸ P. FRANCIS, «The Address», 1

²⁹ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 36

³⁰ «The Carmelite Constitutions», 56

³¹ P. PAUL VI, «Evangelica Testificatio», 13



31). Embracing chastity is an expression of the desire to own and interiorize the pure love for God and seeking union with him, as is explained more clearly in *Vita Consecrata*:

The chastity of celibates and virgins, as a manifestation of dedication to God with an undivided heart (1Cor 7: 32-34), is a reflection of the infinite love which links the three Divine Persons in the mysteries of the depths of life of the Trinity, the love to which the Incarnate Word bears witness even to the point of giving his life, the love “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren³².

Consecrated chastity frees one to have an undivided focus in advancing in the love of God and his people; it is a gift that God gives in love and for the sake of love:

The chastity "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12) which religious profess should be counted an outstanding gift of grace. It frees the heart of man in a unique fashion (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all men³³.

As a form of witness, evangelical chastity presents before the world a living example of how to strive for holiness to which all have been chosen and called (Ef 1,4; 1Pt 1,15-16; 2Tm 1,9). The contemporary world is increasingly moving away from modesty. Social media is enormously fuelling hypersexual behaviour³⁴ in people, especially the youths, with the consequences being rampant immorality, marriage and family breakdowns only to mention a few. Chastity comes in as a counter-witness to all this, and presents living examples of how all people, whatever their state in life, can and should embark on the way towards holiness³⁵. What evangelical chastity effectively does is to show humanity that, albeit human weakness, cooperation with the grace of God can enable it to advance in the quest for union with him in holiness. Regarding this, Pope John Paul II explained:

The reply of consecrated life is above all in the *joyful living of perfect chastity*, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition. The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God. This testimony is more necessary than ever today, because it is so little understood by our world³⁶.

Chastity is thus a visible witness of God's call to holiness and a living example of how people should be committed to striving to attain it with the help of God's grace in union with Christ. In *Evangelica Testificatio* of Pope Paul VI this point is also expressed more clearly:

Chastity is decisively positive, it witnesses to preferential love for the Lord and symbolizes in the most eminent and absolute way the mystery of the union of the Mystical Body with its Head, the union of the Bride with her eternal Bridegroom. Finally, it reaches, transforms and imbues with a mysterious likeness to Christ man's being in its most hidden depths³⁷.

Since Christian spirituality aims at deepening one's experience of God's love through imitating Christ in his virtues, including being chaste, it becomes clear how evangelical chastity is a more radical way of striving to make this a reality.

³² P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 21

³³ P. PAUL VI, «Perfectae Caritatis», 12

³⁴ P. PAUL VI, «Evangelica Testificatio», 13.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, 2348-2350

³⁶ P. JOHN PAUL, «Vita Consecrata», 88

³⁷ P. PAUL VI, «Evangelica Testificatio», 13



Synthesis

This discussion can be brought down to a few key points which are worth repeating. Christian spirituality, lived dynamically through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience is another way of living Christian spirituality. The evangelical counsels are as a way of responding to God's call to holiness and offers those called to such life an opportunity to freely devote themselves to working for the kingdom of God thus coming to union of love with him. Each of the evangelical counsels aims to foster this spiritual union with the Father through Jesus Christ in the working of the Holy Spirit. Each of the evangelical counsels offers a witness to all God's people to listen and discern God's will for their lives as individual and as communities/families, to detach from the controlling power of worldly material possessions and to attach themselves to the love of God, as well as to live a life of chastity.

It is important, however, to note that the evangelical counsels do not work in isolation. The fact that they are professed together points to the unity of the usefulness that they each have along the spiritual journey; it is one spiritual journey and not three. Living prayerfully the values they hold leads to a more intimate, selfless union with God and a selfless life of service to others especially the marginalised of the society. And this is clearer way of living the Gospel in this present world: 'It is one of the practical ways of being a missionary in the modern world. That is to say, it has an important witnessing value'³⁸.

In the *Year of Consecrated Life* (30 November 2014-2 Feb 2016), Pope Francis, led the whole Church in re-looking and appreciating the life and witness that consecrated life gives in the midst of the Church and the world. Inviting consecrated people to wake up the world, he exhorted them to go back to the sources of their charisms and re-vitalise the spirit of their founders, applying it to this present world³⁹. Common to all groups of consecrated people is the desire to come into communion with the Lord and to experience his presence through prayer, community and service. Although there are different expressions or charisms, the necessity of embarking on the spiritual journey of life looms very large. Without spirituality, any action that is done by consecrated people, and equally by all Christians, degenerate into mere social service, devoid of the spirit of Christ.

The world needs people who pray. Through the evangelical counsels, consecrated life in the Church gives a good example of such through the presence of the contemplative dimension that is found in it⁴⁰. The world needs people who transform the world by translating or joining their contemplation to service or mission. Consecrated persons are aided to do this more effectively through their faithful living of the evangelical counsels. In all this interplay between contemplation and service, it is important to note that the objective is the same objective that Christian spirituality has in one's soul as well as in other people's souls, that is, coming to the union of love with the Father, through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Church. From this flows the desire to establish structures that favour human dignity through challenging and unjust and unholy social and political structures and systems that drain dignity of the people of God.

As new challenges such as secularism, hedonism and relativism prop up in different forms and intensities in today's world, one can appreciate the work the Church is doing in aiding spiritual growth of its people. Yes, the Church may be growing in the developing countries resulting in increasing numbers of members joining consecrated life, but more

³⁸ J. XAVIER, «Call of Evangelical Counsels», 250

³⁹ P. FRANCIS, «Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People», 1-2

⁴⁰ D. WATKINS, «Pope at Audience»



needs to be done especially in developed countries to increase and aid spiritual growth of individuals and communities. Christians who deepen their spirituality have a powerful capacity to transform the world to be a better place. The same need goes to all people especially powerful and influential Christians; these have power to effect decisions that aid the dignity of the people of God. And they can effectively do so if they aim at the same values that consecrated people preach through the evangelical counsels. If all Christians from all walks of life focus on faithfully living their spirituality, the world will surely become a better place, and the presence of the Lord will be better felt.

Conclusion

This paper has explored Christian spirituality and how the goal of Christian spirituality is more radically expressed and lived in consecrated life. The discussion has explained the importance of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience in aiding union with God in love as well as in giving witness to the gospel-inspired values in the world. The proposition that is given is that all Christians in all states of life should be assisted more to understand and live, proper to their state of life, the same values that the evangelical counsels highlight. For such to be effective, the continual deepening of spiritual life in people's hearts should be done in all places by those with the charism of caring for souls. This is a growing and an ever-urgent need especially as many evils besiege the Church and the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUMANN, J., *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, London 1985.

CARSON, T. – CERRITO, J., ed., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Washington (DC) 2003^{2nd ed.}

FRANCIS, P., «Address of Pope Francis to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superior Generals (i.u.s.g)».

——, «Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People».

JOHN PAUL, P., *Vita Consecrata*.

MCGRATH, A.E., *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction*, Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass 1999.

NICOLAS, J.-H., *Catholic Dogmatic Theology: A Synthesis. Book 1: On the Trinitarian Mystery of God.*, Washington (DC) 2022.

PAUL VI, P., *Evangelica Testificatio* [accesso: 1.1.2023],

https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio.html.

——, «Perfectae Caritatis».



REISER, W., *Looking for a God to Pray to: Christian Spirituality in Transition*, 1994.

WATKINS, D., Pope at Audience: Contemplative prayer 'a guide along path of love' - Vatican News [accesso: 6.1.2023],
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/pope-francis-general-audience-contemplative-prayer-action.html>.

XAVIER, J., «Call of Evangelical Counsels», *VJTR* 79 (2015) 245-258.

Catechism of the Catholic Church., Città del Vaticano : 1994.

«Constitutions of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel 2019», 2021.

