

YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

A Moment of Kairos

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Abstract: The author makes a reflection on religious life in the light of the declaration of the Year of Consecrated Life and notes that it ushered in a *kairos* in religious life, which calls for an assessment and planning to set consecrated life in the direction that Vatican II has opened for the Church. He makes a detailed survey of the three objectives outlined for the Year of Consecrated Life by Pope Francis. The first objective of grateful remembrance includes a review of one's personal call, history of the congregation and the impact of Vatican II. Secondly, a life with hopeful passion enables one to have a passion for Christ, which is the essence of consecrated life and compassion for humankind as the mission of the consecrated. The compassion is shown crossing various frontiers, which demands a strong faith and courage. Finally, hopeful embrace of the future calls for a review of the present crisis and an action delineating a path of hope in consecrated life. The author concludes his reflection presenting Chavara as a true model of consecrated life whose major contribution to consecrated life is his pioneering and prophetic way of life by listening to three voices: the voice of God, the voice of the people and the voice of the Church.

Keywords: *kairos*, spiritual awakening, religious commitment, history, consecrated person, joy, vocation, dissatisfaction, response, charism, mission, *margas*, founder, Vatican II, detachment, perfection, disciples, laity, compassion, community

1. Introduction

The Year of Consecrated Life proclaimed by Pope Francis starting from 30 November 2014 and ending on 2 February 2016 is an opportune time, a *kairos*, a providential time to understand the true identity and relevance of consecrated life in the Church and in the present world. It is also a providential time because two consecrated persons of Indian Church: St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St

Euphrasia Eluvathingal are canonized saints on 23 November 2014 and placed before us as models to emulate. The Year of Consecrated Life marks the golden jubilee of *Perfectae Caritatis*, a decree on Religious Life, and *Lumen Gentium*, a constitution on the Church, which had ushered in a *kairos* in religious life. This *kairos* calls for an assessment and planning to set ourselves in the direction that the Council has opened up for the Church.

The Year of Consecrated Life is expected to make a significant impact in the consciousness of the consecrated persons and its institutional existence. The spiritual awakening among the religious this year should result in awakening the world. The providential time that we are in, beckons us to be prophetic in our being as well as in our apostolates. The three objectives outlined for the Year of Consecrated Life by Pope Francis and Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are gratefully remembering the past, living the present with passion and embracing the future with hope. This article highlights these three objectives in the present context of consecrated life in India.

2. Recounting History with Gratitude and Joy

History is not merely a collection of facts but a movement of life with full of meaning. Recounting the history of our call to consecrated life, to the congregation to which we belong and the impact of Vatican II on consecrated life will provide a right orientation in life. The trademark of religious according to Pope Francis is joy. He is a joyful and cheerful person who attracts everyone even at his advanced age. His expectation from the consecrated persons, first and foremost, is that they should “know and show” their life to be truly happy and fulfilled. He says: “I want to say one word to you and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always joy!”¹ Therefore, the primary questions the religious should pause to themselves in this Year of Consecrated Life are: Am I happy to be a religious? What is the source of this happiness: call or career? The source of joy for the consecrated persons should be the call rather than the ministry.

Recounting the history of one’s call to be human, to be a consecrated person can fill one with a sense of gratitude and joy. St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a man of joy and a grateful heart. In his

¹Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, “A Message from the Teachings of Pope Francis,” 1.

book *Atmanutapam* (Compunction of the Heart), Chavara expresses his inner feeling of deep gratitude to God for letting him be born in a noble, middle class family. He writes: "You graciously made me neither too rich nor too poor! That is the reason why I am so happy today!"² He recognizes the Lord's blessings in the Sacrament of Baptism through which he was raised from the status of a creature to the status of a child of God. Through baptism, he now belongs to the Kingdom family, the family of God. He praises God with joy for his spiritual birth by baptism: "Oh! Merciful God, bathing me in the baptismal water, you cleansed me of the original sin, freed me of all fear, and adorned me with the beauty of grace and virtues... Through baptism you made me your child, and extended to me the bliss of salvation in heaven."³ He expresses gratitude for his parents who taught him to utter the holiest of names and who entrusted him to the care of Mother Mary. He acknowledges the personal love of God: "You did look on me with tender care and tended me with unstinted love" (Canto 1:31). He also recollects with joy and gratitude the call that he received from God to priesthood at a young age: "As I thus reached the age of ten, you out of great kindness called me! Within me I am deeply convinced of it. Otherwise I would not come to this [state of life]!" His spiritual journey starts with the soul breaking forth into a fountain of gratitude which keeps him always joyful in his life and mission.

2.1. Call to Consecrated Life

Consecrated life is not a choice or a career but a call by God. There is no other motivation for a person to enter the consecrated life than the call he/she has received from God. Jesus says to each one of us: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). The statement reminds us that the vocation to consecrated life is always an initiative of God. Pope Francis says: "In calling you God says to you: 'You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you'. Jesus says this to each one of us! Joy is born from that!"⁴ A call means, Pope says, "continuously making an 'exodus' from yourselves in order to centre your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with St Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but

²*Atmanuthapam*2:68-96 in *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol. II (Ernakulam, 1982), 8. (Henceforth abbreviated as CWC II).

³*Atmanuthapam*1:33-42; CWC II, 2

⁴Pope Francis, "Meeting with Seminarists and Novices" (Rome, 6 July 2013).

Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20)."⁵ The constant awareness of the call initiated by God can make us always grateful and joyful.

Consecrated life is a call and response, a response to a call of love. In this Year of Consecrated Life, we need to re-read our own personal story of response to God's call and to scrutinise it in the light of his loving gaze. Since God has not revealed his total plan for calling us, we need to listen constantly and do his will faithfully. The joy of a consecrated person depends on fulfilling the purpose of God's call, that is, mission. This call is not a privilege or a preference over others, but existence for others. The ultimate aim of any call by God is mission. The mission of consecrated persons is a radical way of living one's baptismal identity as a child of God, a Spirit-filled person and a member of the Church concretely and publically. Consecrated life is a deeper consecration and a special expression of Christian life begun in baptism. The mission to which the religious are called is ultimately the continuation of Jesus' own mission. Hence, *Vita Consecrata* says: "The task of devoting themselves wholly to mission is therefore included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life" (VC 72).

Consecrated persons are called and sent by God. The phrase, "I am sending you" is the heart of the prophetic call (Ex 3:10; Jer 1:7; Ez 2:3ff). The theology of calling and sending on a mission can be seen clearly in the opening verses of Jeremiah: "The word of Yahweh was addressed to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations'" (Jer 1:4-9). In the New Testament, calling and sending is one of the great themes. John the Baptist is sent to prepare the way for the Saviour (Jn 1:6-8). Jesus Christ is the One who is sent par excellence. He confirms that he was sent to proclaim the Good Tidings of the Kingdom of God (Lk 4:43). In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says: "God sent his Son into the world, so that through him the world might be saved" (Jn 3:17). Jesus was always aware of being sent by the Father for a mission. When the disciples asked Jesus to eat, he responded: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). The consciousness

⁵Pope Francis, "Address to the Participants at the Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General" (Rome, 8 May 2013) in: AAS 105 (2013), 460-463.

of being sent by God was fundamental to Jesus' life and activity.⁶ It is this consciousness of being sent by God that restrained him from claiming anything for himself. He always sought and did the will of the Father in everything. "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (Jn 7:16). "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6:38). "The Son can do nothing on his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 5:19). The identity of a consecrated person is that of "being in mission."

The consecrated persons are called by God in order "to be with him, and to be sent out" (Mk 3:14), to abide in Jesus and "bear much fruit" (Jn 15:5). The joy of the consecrated persons depends on the integration of these two dimensions of life: connectedness and fruitfulness like branches in the vine, listening and doing the will of God like Mother Mary (Lk 8:21) or a man who built his house on a rock (Mt 7:24-27). Chavara was a contemplative in action. It is his intimacy with God that prompted him to call God "appa" and express his intense desire to see God. He belonged to the Lord totally and completely as his name "Kuriakose" stands for as 'one who belongs to the Lord. 'He was able to testify with confidence at his deathbed that he never lost his baptismal grace of union with God. Chavara was a man who integrated *bhakti marga*, *jnana marga* and *karma marga* in life.⁷ Thus he experienced real joy in life and shared that joy with others through different ministries in which he was involved.

2.2. Recounting History of the Congregation

Consecrated persons are called to a particular religious congregation in the Church, therefore, they need to be grateful to the founder/foundress who took the risk to listen to the voice of the Spirit and respond creatively to it according to the signs of the times. They are constantly called to return to the origin of the congregations, the original inspiration the founder/foundress had in order to rise with vitality in the present times. Pope Francis points out three advantages of recounting the history of the congregation to which we belong. They

⁶Mathew Vellanickal, "Evangelization in the Johannine Writings," in *Good News and Witness*, ed. L. Legrand, J. Pathrapankal, and Mathew Vellanickal (Bangalore: ATC, 1973), 137.

⁷Joseph Pathrapankal, "An Iconoclast in His Own Right," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015), 236.[Henceforth abbreviated as *Life and Legacy of Chavara*].

are, preserving our identity, strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. Recounting history “calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities. In this way, we come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it encountered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted.”⁸ Returning to the footsteps of past generations doesn’t mean a blind following of their life-style and activities. *Vita Consecrata* speaks about creative fidelity on the part of today’s members who are “invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world” (VC 37).

Every founder or foundress shared in Jesus’ own compassion and sought in different ways to be at the service of the people. By reading the signs of the times, with the eyes of faith each congregation responded creatively in countless new ways and brought newness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of the society. In this Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis challenges every consecrated person as well as every congregation to examine whether “our ministries, our works and our presence consonant with what the Spirit asked of our founders and foundresses? Are they suitable for carrying out today, in society and the Church, those same ministries and works? Do we have the same passion for our people, are we close to them to the point of sharing in their joys and sorrows, thus truly understanding their needs and helping to respond to them?” (YCL I.2). The assessment of the present situations and returning to the source of our congregation should inspire us with the same generosity and self-sacrifice which guided our founders to keep alive the charisms by inculturating them according to the signs of the times and placing them at the service of the Church.

Every congregation is composed of human persons who enjoy considerable amount of freedom. Therefore, looking back to the past of the congregations, we may encounter cases of inconsistency, of human weakness and even a neglect of some essential aspects of the charism. We need to acknowledge our weaknesses with humility for not interpreting and following the charism according to the signs of the

⁸Pope Francis, “Pope’s Message for the Year of Consecrated Life,” No. I.1. [Henceforth abbreviated as YCL].

times, for projecting the image of the consecrated persons as good administrators and managers of institutions, for fostering narrow and domestic interests, for lack of compassion and solicitude for the poor, for not speaking out for justice and the defence of human rights, for lack of inculturation efforts, and lack of understanding, reconciliation and collaboration with the followers of other faiths. These negative aspects of our history should not dishearten us but call us to purify unceasingly and follow the path of penance and renewal (LG 8). This path of renewal and conversion is a "pass over" with Christ to the poor, to Indian cultures and to other religions. Every congregation must go through a *kenosis*, a Christ-like self-emptying, a dying to self which brings fullness of life.

2.3. The Impact of Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council was undoubtedly, a historical turning point in theological reflection on consecrated life. After the Council, consecrated life undertook a fruitful journey of renewal by the guidance of the Spirit. There were 20 councils before Vatican II but no Ecumenical Council had ever spoken at such a length and with such a depth of the role of consecrated life in the Church. Pope John XXIII, the architect of Vatican II, referred to the Council as a "new Pentecost."⁹ It was a new Pentecost in consecrated life too because the Spirit moved all the religious congregations to respond to the signs of the times and bring an up-to-date renewal in life and ministry. It was believed that councils were called when a heresy was breaking out. At the time of announcement of Vatican II, there was no heresy afflicting the Church rather everything was going on well with the centralization of power and papal infallibility defined at Vatican I. Nobody except Pope John seems to have been thinking of a new council. In his opening address on October 11, 1962, Pope John remarked, "The decision to hold an ecumenical council came to Us in the first instance in a sudden flash of inspiration."¹⁰ He was impelled by the Holy Spirit.

For consecrated life, Vatican II was a Pentecost because it initiated an immense process of renewal. There was a radical shift from the traditional understanding of religious life which was based on two foundations: flight from the world and call to perfection. The original

⁹James S. Torrens, "Admiring Cardinal Suenens," *America* 174, 20 (June 22, 1996) 3.

¹⁰John XXIII, "The Council – At the Threshold of a New Era: Address of Pope John XXIII at the Opening of the Council," *The Pope Speaks* vol. 8, 3 (1963), 209.

inspiration to enter the consecrated life was centered on the desire to withdraw from the world to lead a life of prayer and austerity thus ensuring the salvation of one's soul because the traditional theology had made a separation between the earthly life and eternal life. Eternal life was viewed as the authentic life and the earthly life was seen as a stage-setting where people were put to the test so that their eternal destiny might be decided. The secular world is seen as evil and the religious world is regarded as the real world, hence, the religious left the secular world and retired to the desert, monastery or convent. This is the so-called '*fuga-mundi*' or flight from the world. Until Vatican II, theology of religious life advocated flight from the world and detachment from all that is of the world.

The second foundation of religious life was the call to holiness by means of the fulfillment of the evangelical counsels. Later, it came to be considered as a "state of perfection."¹¹ The ascetical achievements became the criteria for holiness and salvation. Such an understanding of religious life brought a two-tier model of Christian existence in the church. The Religious were called to a state of life dedicated to a striving after perfection which was qualitatively different from and higher than the ordinary Christian who is content with striving after salvation. The religious followed Christ by observing the counsels and the ordinary Christian by keeping the commandments.¹² The proof text quoted for it from the New Testament was Matthew's story of the call of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22). This text is not a distinction between 'precept Christians' and 'perfect Christians' but about "the radical nature the faith required from anyone who wishes to embrace the 'perfection' which is to be found uniquely in the following of Christ."¹³ "The only qualitative distinction known by the NT is between those who believe and those who do not believe."¹⁴

A shift of perspective from the narrow juridical and ascetical ways of thinking to the biblical vision and from exclusively personal sanctification to salvific mission of the Church has taken place after the Council especially in its decree on the "Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life." Religious life is presented dogmatically rather than

¹¹Marcello Azevedo, *Vocation for Mission: The Challenge of Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 3.

¹²George Soares-Prabhu, "Prophetic Dimension of the Religious Life," *CRI Bulletin* (December 1986), 2.

¹³Francis J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets: A Biblical Model for the Religious Life* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1980), 12.

¹⁴Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets*, 8.

canonically in the sixth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. Two insights from the Council teachings have had a foundation-shaking impact on the life of religious. The first is the universal call to holiness in chapter five of *Lumen Gentium* and the second is the Council's reversal of the adversary stance of the Church in relation to the Modern world in *Gaudium et Spes*.¹⁵

The council found the existing categories of states of perfection unacceptable and the doctrine of holiness in the Church was rewritten in terms of the universal call to Christian perfection. *Lumen Gentium* explicitly affirms that all Christians (secular and religious) are called to 'fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity', and one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God (LG 39, 40). With this teaching, Vatican Council buries once and for all some of the strongly held concepts of religious life, the specially privileged way to perfection.

Religious justified their self-understanding as those Christians who most totally and radically renounce the world and separate themselves from it even physically as implied in their frontline position in the Church. This separation has taken various forms in the course of history ranging from the actual flight from the city to the desert in the fourth century and to the distance created by means of practices such as dressing differently, living in convents, and following a life pattern that could not be assimilated into ordinary contemporary life.¹⁶ Since the Council has reversed the adversary stance of the Church in relation to the world, religious have left with no option but to immerse themselves into the world as radical disciples of Jesus. It is not a renunciation of the world but a call to live in communion with others and to build communities of freedom, fellowship and justice. Religious are called to commit themselves to being in, with, and for the world in solidarity with all people of goodwill, Christians, the followers of other religions and even non-believers.

The effect of the two insights of Council given above had far-reaching consequences and raised many questions like: What constitutes religious life? What is the identity and mission of religious? The Council repeatedly stresses that "the following of Christ as proposed by the gospel is the fundamental characteristics of religious life" (PC 2). The world has become both the framework within which

¹⁵Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 23-24.

¹⁶Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 25.

meaning is to be achieved and the locus of whatever salvific action religious intend to undertake.¹⁷ The following of Jesus is the special “profession” of religious life (PC 5) or their particular vocation (PC 8) whereas all Christians are called to follow Jesus through their professional life. While lay people are ordinary mediators between God and human, the consecrated persons are professional mediators because they are called and trained for it.¹⁸ The consecrated persons have two professions: religious profession and secular profession. The secular professions like teaching, nursing etc., are secondary compared to the religious profession. The latter must flow from the first. The difference is that lay people are professional teachers who are also mediators while consecrated persons are professional mediators who are also teachers. What makes the consecrated different from others is their closeness to God and closeness to the people. When Jesus entered the synagogue of Capernaum and taught, he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes (Mk 1:22). The source of his authority was his oneness with God (Jn 10:30).

Today, with a changed conciliar understanding of consecrated life, the flight from the world has given way to a prophetic presence, and the commitment to strive after personal perfection has become a commitment to the transformation of the world.¹⁹ *Vita Consecrata*, the official document on Religious Life interprets the teaching of Vatican II in terms of prophetism. “There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent declaration to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life” (VC 84). The consecrated persons have to be grateful to the Council for giving a sound biblical and theological vision of consecrated life.

3. Living the Present with Passion and Compassion

Grateful remembrance of the past leads us to live the essential aspects of consecrated life with passion – passion for Christ and compassion for humankind. The word passion has twofold meaning: love and suffering.²⁰ The real love is not self-contained but it goes out of itself and enters into others who are faced with poverty and oppression. The

¹⁷Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 24-26.

¹⁸Felix Podimattam, “Spirituality of Consecrated,” *Sanyasa*, X, 1 (2015), 55.

¹⁹Schneiders, *New Wineskins*, 99.

²⁰C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 110-111.

love has to be transformed into suffering, if it has to be a genuine love. Therefore, passion means suffering love. God deals with this world passionately, loving it and suffering for it. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only son..." (Jn 3:16). God loved the world "so much" means without limits and conditions, without strings attached to it. To love someone so much means to suffer for that person by giving oneself. God loved the world by parting with his son. Jesus loved the humanity by suffering for the salvation of human beings. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Passionate love for Jesus must motivate the consecrated persons to have the compassionate love for human beings which involves suffering and risk.

3.1. Passion for Christ: The Essence of Consecrated Life

Consecrated persons are called to follow Jesus passionately. *Perfectae Caritatis* states that every form of consecrated life has been born of the Spirit's call to follow Jesus as proposed by the Gospel (PC 2). Even though all baptized are called to follow Christ, the religious are called to make Christ the essence of their lives. Pope Francis reminds the consecrated, "For the various founders and foundresses, the Gospel was the absolute rule, whereas every other rule was meant merely to be an expression of the Gospel and a means of living the Gospel to the full" (YCL I.2). The founders and foundresses made Jesus their ideal and was united with him in such a way that they were able to say with Paul: "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21). Consecrated life is an invitation to incarnate the Good News, "a call to take up his way of life, to adopt his interior attitude, to allow oneself to be invaded by his Spirit, to absorb his surprising logic and his scale of values, to share in his risks and his hopes."²¹ The consecrated are called not just to read and meditate on the Gospel but to live radically and sincerely by making it the "manual" for daily living.

To follow Jesus with passion means to leave everything behind and focus on Jesus alone. Half-hearted love is not passion but an adulteration, a desecration of true love. There is no 50-50 in following Jesus because a halved heart, a heart cut in two is a dead heart. Only a heart that pulsates with life or beating in full is capable of loving. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut 6:5). This "all" your heart, soul

²¹Pope Francis, "Homily at the Holy Mass with Bishops, Priests, Religious and Seminarians on the XXVIII World Youth Day," Rio de Janeiro, 27 July 2013.

and strength has the same meaning as the world “full.” Loving God must be a full-hearted act. Therefore, in his message, the Pope invites the consecrated to ask themselves: “Is Jesus really our first and only love, as we promised he would be when we professed our vows? Only if he is, will we be empowered to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path” (YCL I.2).

Chavara, the first indigenous consecrated of India, was a man of passion for Christ. His biographers point out that even before he was physically strong to lift the missal he used to serve at Mass which shows his zeal to dedicate his life to the service of the Lord.²² He chose his motto as “The Lord is my portion.” Fr Leopold, who was his special spiritual director, commented: “As would be endorsed by many of his colleagues still alive, Father Kuriakose was zealous in the service of God without any consideration for worldly achievements.”²³ He used to spend hours lost in meditation. He was a mystic who never lost the baptismal innocence. *Atmanutapam*, one of Chavara’s own writing displays his childlike sensitivity and vulnerability to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Mother, the Virgin Mary. It is a key to understand his passion for Jesus Christ. It portrays the mystical height of his oneness with God, his ardent longing for the vision of God. It is his passion for Christ that led him to spread the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, 40-hour adoration, rosary, preaching on Sundays, etc.

3.2. Compassion for Humankind: The Mission of the Consecrated

If one’s passion for Jesus does not result in compassion for humankind, it loses its twofold meaning of loving and suffering. The one who experiences the divine within oneself, feels the divine presence vibrating in all beings. Such an expansion of consciousness makes one resonate compassionately with every being. While pity works out of subject-object relationship, compassion works out of subject-subject relationship and feeling of togetherness. It is this awareness of togetherness that urges us to rejoice at another’s joy and to grieve at another’s sorrow. The root of the word “compassion” is from the words *cum patior* meaning to suffer with, to share solidarity with. Therefore, compassion includes a disposition of solidarity toward the neighbour’s sufferings, the action of entering into the context of that suffering as one’s own and a commitment to

²²K. C. Chacko, *Lead Kindly Light: A Voyage to the Saintly Life and Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Kochi: A Beth Rauma Publication, 2014), 49.

²³Chacko, *Lead Kindly Light*, 51.

overcoming the cause of the suffering itself. Through the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus insists that compassion involves action and not mere sentiment (Lk 10:35). The feeling of compassion in Jesus always gave rise to an outward act of succour. His compassion urged him to heal the blind (Mt 20:34), to cleanse the leper (Mk 1:41), to teach the ignorant (Mk 6:34), to raise the dead (Lk 7:13), and to feed the hungry (Mt 15:32). Whenever Jesus saw suffering people he was shaken and his heart was moved and resulted in action.

Religious have taken up various ministries like education, health, social work, developmental projects, etc. to show the compassionate face of Jesus to others. This ministry involves a relationship in which Jesus manifests his compassion through our face as well as dealings, and the people clearly see that face in us, in our presence, in our words and in our dealings with them. If that is so, where is the face of Jesus manifested, if and when they cannot see our face in our schools, hospitals and other centres of our ministry? Where is the personal relationship, if and when we do these ministries by appointing people of other religions in our schools and hospitals? Are we not acting like NGOs who organize the personnel and run educational and charitable institutions? Somehow our institutions fail to become carriers of compassion anymore. Compassionate love should move us to action, impelling us to struggle against suffering and injustice. Jesus expects the religious to be the compassionate face of God turned towards humanity. This image of the compassionate God has to be presented in India.

Chavara's passion for Christ led him to have the compassion for humankind irrespective of caste, creed and gender. It is this compassionate love that made him a prophet of his time. He acted boldly in the oppressive situations faced by the poor and dalits in the society by opening a Sanskrit school to empower the people to understand and internalize the soul of India and a home for the destitute (*upavisala*) at Kainakari in 1869 which was a haven for those who had been suffering under the weight of helpless old age, abject poverty, ailment and rejection by family and society. He acted prophetically during the turbulent period of the Roccas schism in the Syro-Malabar Church. His prophetic ministry is visible in the field of education, family, theological formation, print media, social work and empowerment of women. He interpreted the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and responded creatively with a sense of justice. Thus he was able to wake up Kerala Church as well as society through his innovative and creative ways of responding to the signs of the times.

In this Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis invites all consecrated persons to “wake up the world” through prophetic witness and prophetic community. He says: “Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious; it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you.”²⁴ To be prophets means “demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection.” Prophets are the people who know God and His people, who have the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events; who are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice and who have no interest other than God. The consecrated are called to be a prophetic sign and witness in the place where they live and to the people for whom they have consecrated themselves.

Vita Consecrata states: “There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent declaration to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life” (VC 84). Religious belong to the Church and from the heart of the Church they act out their lives as prophets. J.B. Metz has strongly emphasized this prophetic function of religious life in the Church. He says: “Religious orders and communities have something like an innovative function for the Church. They offer productive models for the church as a whole in the business of growing accustomed to living in new social, economic, intellectual and cultural situation. Furthermore, religious orders at the very last have a corrective role: the function of redressing the balance. They are a kind of shock therapy instituted by the Holy Spirit for the Church as a whole.”²⁵

The Pope says: “Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side” (YCL II.2). Prophetic witness demands the consecrated to be in the existential peripheries, frontiers as Jesus and every founder and foundress did. According to Benedict XVI, frontier implies “geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to

²⁴ Antonio Spadaro, “Wake up the World!”: *Conversation with Pope Francis About the Religious Life*, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/I), 5 (English translation by Fr. Donald Maldari, S.J.).

²⁵ J. B. Metz, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church* (London: Burns & Oates/Paulist Press, 1978), 24.

reach."²⁶ New frontiers exist everywhere, and our mission in the frontiers is to open passes and of building bridges between those who live on one side of the frontier and those who live on the other. The frontier is everywhere – in cyber space, in the homes that have been broken by separation or misunderstanding and in the midst of the secularized post-modern world where people have lost all hope in life, where the abandoned children and young people without a future, where the elderly, sick and abandoned without a helping hand, where men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine, and anywhere the joy and peace of the Good news is still not felt. In a concrete way, it may be welcoming refugees and poor and finding creative ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach others how to pray. The consecrated must live "at the edge of the society to challenge it, at the bottom of the society to comfort it, at the epicentre of the society to challenge it."²⁷

God calls the consecrated persons to go to such frontiers and the mode of proceeding is to trace the footprints of God knowing that the Spirit of Christ is at work in all places and situations.²⁸ Discerning frontiers require creativity, daring and great humility. Crossing frontiers demands a strong faith, courage, openness to others, a willingness to take risks and the ability to adapt the message of Christ. The frontier ministry must begin from the heart and involve in study, research, entering into the life of the people, solidarity, empathy, inculturation, and respect for others. It must be person-centred rather than project-oriented. The future of the consecrated life lies in the periphery, in the frontier zones. Therefore, Pope Francis urges the consecrated to "leave the nest" and approach the stories of the men and women of our times in the light of closeness and encounter. The consecrated requires to strip away the seeming assurance that the structures give and focus on their true strength that is God. Pope says that the structures are certainly necessary and important but should never obscure the one true strength it carries within: God.²⁹

The consecrated persons wake up the world not only through prophetic witness in the frontiers but also through prophetic

²⁶Pope Benedict XVI, "Allocution to the Delegates of GC 35," 21 February 2008. Quoted in "Beyond Frontiers, Deep and High, Near and Far," *Review for Religious* 69.3, 2010, 240.

²⁷John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2000), 138.

²⁹Pope Francis, "Meeting with the Poor Assisted by Caritas," Assisi (Perugia), 4 October 2013.

community. Pope Francis invites the consecrated persons to offer a concrete model of community life and be “experts in communion” because we are living in a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression and where inequality abounds. Communion is lived first and foremost within the respective communities of each Institute by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing each one’s gifts. Communion in the communities has become all the more important today because the religious communities are becoming increasingly international and intercultural. Since the members in the community are from different cultures, there is a need to enable each member to say freely what he or she thinks, to be accepted with his or her particular gifts, and to become fully co-responsible. The Pope reminds the consecrated that there is no place for criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility in our houses but follow the path of charity which entails mutual acceptance and concern, practicing a communion of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction and respect for those who are weak.

Community is the first and most believable gospel that we can preach in today’s world. Community is different from groups. A group is a collection of people doing the same thing or who happens to be in the same place at the same time. But the community is defined by the quality of presence among the members of a group. A consecrated community is born when members are called by God and make the conscious decision and commitment to give the gift of caring and nurturing presence to each other. What sustains the community life or caring presence to each other is communication. We are living in a global society which has accomplished the fast exchange of messages and information but not true communication. The lack of communication, the caring and nurturing presence are causing problems in the consecrated community. The Pope wishes that every community of the consecrated be family, not a Purgatory. He says: “There are and there will be problems but like in a family, with love, search for a solution with love; do not destroy this to resolve that. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart. And a sign of this is joy.”³⁰ Conflicts often block the communion in communities and these conflicts are inevitable. If the community is truly living, sincere and honest in relationships, conflicts are bound to happen. It is part of life. Pope Francis says: “Something is missing

³⁰Pope Francis, “Address to the Cloistered Nuns,” Assisi (Perugia), 4 October 2013.

from communities where there is no conflict. Reality dictates that there are conflicts in all families and all groups of people. And conflict must be faced head on: it should not be ignored. Covering it over just creates a pressure cooker that will eventually explode. A life without conflicts is not life." The Pope suggests that conflict must be approached with spiritual counselling, with Eucharistic tenderness which helps us not to mask conflict but to confront it like people. He cautions us that we should never act like managers when dealing with conflicts but involve the heart.

4. Embracing the Future with Hope and Courage

When there is no hope for the future, life becomes completely meaningless. Hope is the very essence of human existence. It is not a commodity that people either have or do not have. Hope is not something that we expect to come in future but something that is based upon the present circumstances. Hope is an attitude and outlook that influences and shapes all human experiences and activities. We Christians await the future of life, a life that has always been and will always be a gift of God, not simply another life. We religious are required to bear public witness to the hope that is in us (1Pet 3:15). Hope arises out of certain dissatisfaction about the status quo. It is an active response to the negative experiences of life. The present state of consecrated life is often described as a crisis, a crisis of identity and commitment.

4.1. Crisis in Consecrated Life

The crisis in consecrated life is due to external forces and internal forces. The external force for the crisis is post-modernism and its values. The post-modern world is market-oriented where everything, even people are measured and evaluated according to utility and profitability. The main concern of the people today is profit. The human body is treated as an object, machine, whose life process can be interfered with and controlled for benefit. Human body has become a commodity to be used, abused and trampled on. This utilitarian outlook stands in direct conflict with the universal values taught by the Church and the Church controlled institutions. There is no absolute truth in the post-modern world. Therefore the age-old orthodox and authoritarian structures of control are collapsing. People do not want to be told what to believe and what to do. The consumer society is promoting a culture of individualism and subjectivism.

There is no place for sacrifice and renunciation. All these values of the consumer society are affecting or causing tremors in religious life too.

The internal reason for the crisis in consecrated life is the loss of the spiritual base. There is an erosion of gospel values and lack of vibrant spirituality among the consecrated. Religious are called to follow Jesus whose life was revolved around God-experience and human concern. Every founder/foundress considered the ministry as a means to share his/her experience of God. Since consecrated life is a call from God, listening and doing His will is the very foundation of Christian life as well as consecrated life (Mt 7:24; Lk 6:47; 8:21). Crisis in consecrated life results in doing things without listening to God and listening to people. The community prayers lack spirit and enthusiasm. There is no life in the way the liturgy is celebrated and prayers are recited. Religious communities must be a spiritual power house. Without prayer, consecrated life fails in community life, personal life and miserably in its witnessing through the apostolate. The concern of the major superiors is having or doing rather than being. Therefore, people look at the consecrated as social workers, managers and administrators rather than spiritual persons. They do not come to the consecrated to receive guidance into God-experience or interior wellbeing. They see our consecration as half-hearted and our commitment as cold and lukewarm. In the past, the authority in consecrated life was looked at from a spiritual perspective as the one who mediates the will of God but today the focus is not on the position but on the person on the chair.

There is a sharp decline in vocations and an increasing number of dropouts which have caused pessimism and gloom about the future of the congregations. The post-modern values of individualism, consumerism and subjectivism are influencing the formees of consecrated life to plan and prepare for a particular ministry which would bring them security, recognition, popularity, a degree and influence in the Church and the society. Lack of creativity, vision and passion in ministries do not give ministerial satisfaction. Our traditional ministries like educational institutions and hospitals are taken over by others in spite of the fact that big talents occupy the administrative seats.

Community life is threatened by a culture of individualism, subjectivism, craving for absolute freedom and hectic personal activities of apostolate which brings glory to oneself. Most of the community members work outside the community for different kinds of apostolate from morning to late evening. Many religious who work

abroad and serve in foreign mission territories, mostly alone for years, find it difficult to integrate themselves in the community. There is no warmth in relationship or caring and nurturing presence among the members in the community. Party spirit, rivalries, quest for power and control of others rule the day. There are also groupings in the community on the basis of region, language, ethnicity, etc. This leads to the vice of offering undue favours and inordinate patronage to personal friends and relations who supported one to come to power. Jesus came to build up a communion that is perfect, free from all types of alienation. There is an evident atmosphere of lack of joy and of vibrant life in our communities. The community life has become dry and routine because of religious formalism. Today the relationship in religious communities is reduced to task-oriented roles. It has to be complemented by a relationship-oriented approach by means of 'Eucharistic Table, Dialogue Table and Dining Table' in the community.

There is a crisis in values among religious today, the crisis of efficiency versus effectiveness. Pope Francis reminds the consecrated to be watchful and alert because there is "the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in your own strength" (YCL II.3). In competing with other institutions, we go after efficiency but lose the very purpose of the Christian institutions, that is, effectiveness, a change of heart and a change of evil structures. The Pope emphasizes that the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods but on the eloquence of our lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full (YCL II.2). Professionalism or careerism is affecting the commitment to the ministry and the relationship with people. Addiction to power and authority, autocracy and mitigated-dictatorship has tarnished the nobility of consecrated life. People showed respect and affection toward the habit of consecrated persons but today the focus is on the person who wears habit. In the past the focus was on what you know and what you do but today people look at what you are.

Another area of crisis is the relation between hierarchy and the consecrated persons. There must be a healthy relationship between the consecrated and the hierarchy for the effective mission of the Church. When religious communities live out the prophetic dimension of consecrated life there will be tension between religious communities and the institutional Church, which is part of prophetic vocation. This normal and healthy tension keeps both the Church and the religious

community alert and alive. Unless the official Church learns to show a matching “courage to receive new gifts” there is always the danger that this healthy tension will be dissolved, and the vitality of the Church will suffer, and its prophetic voice be stilled.³¹ Today in some cases, consecrated life is totally controlled by the hierarchy to meet its needs. What is at stake here is the charism and the prophetic voice and witnessing of the consecrated persons, their legitimate autonomy and freedom. Remembering his own experience as a bishop, Pope Francis shares: “If the religious decide one day to withdraw from one of their works due to a lack of manpower the bishop often finds himself suddenly left with a hot potato in his hand.” Acknowledging the ignorance of some of bishops about the charisms and works of religious, the Pope admits: “We bishops need to understand that consecrated persons are not functionaries but gifts that enrich dioceses.”³² Religious emerge in the Church in order to respond to the signs of the times, to fulfil the vacuum in the Church and to challenge the distortions and corruptions in the institutional church.³³

The present scenario in India points to the challenging days ahead for Christians. The present political state of India is a *kairos* for Indian Christians. Christianity remains still a tiny minority in India because Christians were welcomed in India and there was no opposition. The more persecution, suffering and attacks on Christians, the more the faith will be deepened, true witness will take place and Christianity will influence and flourish.

4.2. Path of Hope in Consecrated Life

Pope Francis says that it is precisely amid these uncertainties, crises and challenges that “we are called to practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history” (YCL I.3). Our hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust (cf. 2 Tim 1:2), the One who tell us “Do not be afraid,” “the Lord is with you,” “the Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the One for whom “nothing is impossible” (Lk 1:26-37). Our hope is directed to God. The object of hope is God and we hope in God. But hope is often experienced when we offer room to and making room for others, especially those who differ from us, those on whom we want to

³¹Soares-Prabhu, “Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life,” 18.

³²Antonio Spadaro, “Wake Up the World,” 12-13.

³³Kuncheria Pathil, “Challenges to Consecrated Life Today,” *Vidyadeep Journal* 3, 2 (December 2013), 58.

close the doors and say, "There is no more room in the inn!" Our tendency is to share space only with those with whom we feel comfortable. Despite globalization, a tendency exists among some people to consider those with different cultures, religions, languages as threats. As we eliminate others from our lives, the others are also eliminating us. This results in mutual exclusion. Every person encountered is a potential source of hope. This is the hope which enables the consecrated to keep going.

Pope Francis points out certain measures that need to be taken by the consecrated to move forward with hope. 1) Clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light (cf. Rom 13:11-14) and keep awake and watchful. 2) Step out more courageously from the confines of respective Institutes and work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action because no one contributes to the future in isolation but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion (YCL II.3). 3) Engage in dialogue between the young and the old in the congregations for the mutual enrichment; the young enriches by the experience and wisdom of the old and the old by the energy and enthusiasm of the young ones. "In this way the entire community can join in finding new ways of living the Gospel and responding more effectively to the need for witness and proclamation" (YCL I.3). 4) Streamline the structures, repurpose the large religious houses for works which better respond to the present demands of evangelization and charity and adjust the apostolates to new needs like welcoming refugees, finding creative ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach others how to pray (YCL II.4). 5) Come out of oneself and one's own problems and go to the existential peripheries and proclaim the Good News to find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love. 6) Be prophets by offering "alternate spaces" like monasteries, communities, centres of spirituality, schools, hospitals, family shelters, where the Gospel values can thrive (YCL II.2). 7) Live the charism of the congregation energetically and reinterpret it culturally because charism, the Pope says, "is not a bottle of distilled water."³⁴

5. St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Model of Consecrated Life

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a hidden treasure in the Indian Church. Neither the Church nor the society of today has realized and recognized the enormous contributions of Chavara. Consecrated

³⁴Antonio Spadaro, "Wake Up the World," 6.

persons are called to be prophets and pioneers rather than builders, administrators and care-takers of the established institutions. Chavara is a true and ideal model of consecrated life today. His major contribution to consecrated life is his pioneering and prophetic way of life by listening to three voices: the voice of God, the voice of the people and the voice of the Church.

Chavara constantly listened to the voice of God. He had a thirst or longing to experience God which is evident in his books *Atmanuthapam* (Compunction of the heart) and *Dhyanasallapangal* (Meditation Colloquies). His most intimate feelings of God are expressed in them in a childlike innocence and addressed God as *appa*. He was burning with zeal for God which helped him to preserve the grace received in baptism until death. His intense craving for God is obvious from the choice of the three words he used to name monastery – they are *tapasubhavanam* (house of penance), *darsanaveedu* (house of vision) and *beth rauma* (house at the top). He realized that India's true treasure lies in her minds of spirituality. He became an expert in God experience through his meditation and hours of prayer in kneeling before God. His help was sought by the bishop, priests and laity for spiritual guidance on various occasions. In spite of his manifold social responsibilities, he was always available for spiritual guidance. He was sought by the people not for material help as we see today but for spiritual help. He became a spiritual force in the Church. What is at stake in consecrated life today is this thirst for God and hunger for prayer.

Chavara listened to the voice of the people. His ministry was not project-oriented or ego-centered but people-oriented. He looked at the people not with the eyes of discrimination in the name of religion or caste but with the eyes of God and loved everyone as children of God. His thirst for knowledge made him multi-lingual, handling seven languages. He made use of his vast knowledge at the service of the people through writings and by opening educational institutions. He expressed his views to Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli: "It is my dream to give good education to the Syrian Christians of Kerala, as well as to the other people – basic education for all; higher education for at least a few. If people learn English, it would open a wider world for them."³⁵ As Vicar General of Syrian Christians he sent out a circular to all the Syrian Christian churches to launch a school attached to every parish church

³⁵Cited in Benoy P. Jacob, "Multifaceted Life of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara," in *The Life and Legacy of Chavara*, 23.

and to admit all children irrespective of religion, caste or creed. His inclusive vision and approach is evident in his decision to start the Sanskrit school, the parish schools and *pidiyari* system for giving lunch to poor children in the school.³⁶ Listening to the voice of women, he dared to start a religious congregation exclusively for women in a highly patriarchal society in order to empower them and bring a transformation in the society. Listening to the voice of the poor and the elderly, he started *upavishala*. He had a holistic vision with regard to the development of the whole person and of every person. The ability to discern the signs of the times and the courage to respond creatively to the needs of the people is what required of consecrated life today.

Chavara listened to the voice of the Church. His thirst for unity made him an obedient son of the Church. There are many incidents in the life of Chavara which prove his readiness to obey the Church rather than execute his own plans. While St Chavara was supervising the construction work of the monastery at Mannanam, Archbishop Francis Xavier transferred him to Pallipuram in order to obstruct the work at Mannanam. He obeyed the bishop and went to Pallipuram and took charge as vicar. He listened to the voice of the Church when Kerala Church was hit by Roccas schism. Chavara took the leadership to fight against Roccas faction by travelling widely and exposing the lies of Roccas to the people.³⁷ Chavarul is an evidence of his sincere love for his parishioners in which he instructs them regarding daily home routines including daily prayers and code of conduct for upbringing of children. Realizing the need of the Church, he took steps to make annual retreats compulsory in the parishes, to introduce 40 hour adoration, First Friday observance and rosary to Mother Mary among the people.

Chavara was from an ordinary background but he made a difference in whichever field he touched. He is a versatile genius who gave remarkable leadership in the fields of religious life, education, print media, language studies, literature, empowerment of women and family life. He is a man of humility and openness who never had any ambition of projecting himself or seeking positions and recognitions. He was always ready to sacrifice for the common good. His unique contribution to consecrated life is the integration of *bhakti marga*, *jnana marga* and *karma marga* in his life. The blending of prayer and work in consecrated life which has become something impossible today is

³⁶M. Gopinath, "The Saintly Entrepreneur," in *The Life and Legacy of Chavara*, 199.

³⁷Benoy P. Jacob, "Multifaceted Life of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara," 19-20.

made possible by Chavara. In spite of being a social reformer, builder, educationist, writer, he was known among the people as a spiritual leader and that is the reason he is a saint today.

6. Conclusion

This Year of Consecrated Life become an authentic *kairos*, a time rich in God's grace, a time of transformation when we show concern for the needs of the world and become docile to the promptings of the Spirit. The Year of Consecrated Life invites the consecrated persons to experience joy by looking back to the story of one's call and response with gratitude, living the present with passion for Christ and compassion for humankind and embracing the future with hope. True joy is paschal joy, a joy in the midst of suffering. It is rooted not in our secular profession or achievements but in what Christ has done. The experience of joy is not an option or a choice for the consecrated persons but an imperative because the consecrated are called to be with the Lord in the Spirit. Joy cannot be achieved but only received because it is a gift of the Spirit (Rom 14:17, 15:13; Gal 5:22). The experience of joy should become an encouragement to act now concretely to share God's prophetic mission to the world. Sharing the joy with others prophetically by going to the frontiers is the mission of the consecrated today. Mother Mary is a perfect model of consecrated persons who experienced joy and went in haste to the mountains to share the uncontainable joy she held in her womb to Elizabeth.

The future of consecrated persons in India depends on who we choose to BE, where and among whom we choose to live and what we choose to do. The concern of the congregations should not be the preservation of the institutions but the preservation of the fire to inflame the hearts and sentiments of the members. Let this Year of Consecrated Life become an occasion for recognizing and valuing the consecrated life within the Church, not only for the wonderful work done by the consecrated persons but for their greatly needed charismatic and prophetic presence. Amidst all the challenges and crises, there are many signs of hope and vibrancy in the consecrated life, especially in their growing openness to mission *ad gentes* and a willingness to move into new and frontier missions, in their rising awareness of and action for justice, peace and integrity of creation, in their direct involvement with and for those who are poor and marginalized, and in their efforts to nurture better integration and harmony among all people.