

CONSECRATED LIFE

Victim of a Provisional Culture/Culture of Materialism

Navya Thattil OSF

Abstract: The author opens her mind in her reflection on the crisis that consecrated life faces today. She points out that it has fallen prey to a 'provisional culture', which in turn has resulted in scandals and bad examples that have surfaced in recent times. The main reason for this misadventure is forgetfulness. This is seen first of all, in the "forgetfulness" of the essence of consecrated person, which is expressed in dissatisfaction in life, adoration of ego, privatization of love and yearning for material goods. Secondly, there is the "forgetfulness" of the essence of institutes of consecrated life, which is the forgetfulness of the history rich in charisms, the traits of which are massive infrastructures, profit orientation and replacement of quality with quantity in vocations. Although the choice of consecrated life involves becoming God's beloved through a total dedication of the person lulled the forgetfulness, Jesus the true treasure is taken away from the centre of life. Hence, the author suggests that consecrated persons need to take a look back, make a "U-turn" and then go forward with hope and joy.

Keywords: Religious commitment, consecrated person, profession, vows, vocation, dissatisfaction, forgetfulness, egoism, maturity, poverty, charism, history, founders, amenities, scandal, perfection, community, appreciation, affirmation

1. Introduction

"I (...) vow to God forever!" is the pronouncement with which consecrated persons affirm their commitment on the day they perpetually commit themselves to God in religious profession. While they pronounce the formula of profession, in the depth of their hearts this is repeated as prayer. However, this sincere profession at times turns to be a burden that cannot be carried any further. Why? How?

The answer for this could be gleaned from the sayings of Pope Francis who stated, “often people say; I’m getting married to the love that lasts, I become a nun, but for a ‘short time ...’, ‘a bit of time, and then I’ll see’, ‘I will be seminarian to become a priest, but I do not know how the story will end’.” This will not work with Jesus! I do not blame you, I blame this culture of the ‘provisional’ that hurts us all, because it does no good: because a final choice today is very difficult.”¹

We witness countless stories of those who become prey to this ‘provisional culture’. What happens to them? Why do they succumb to this sort of a culture? Where can we place the fault? There are numerous stories of those who struggle in consecrated life. Some of them opt for deep discerning prayer, and others are knotted down by bitter and angry episodes. As a consequence, some consecrated persons happen to be sources of scandal and bad examples of groupism, power-hunters, unloving, liars, cranky and some others resort to some sorts of unsocial and unethical behaviours. Among all these, the classical one, which is on rise today, is sexual misadventures.

We would dare to make the remark that with the change of demands in modern societies, a vast majority of the members of the society, not excluding consecrated persons and communities, bear witness to a degenerating value system. However, the scope of the present article is not to explore the possible reasons for these phenomena, but to discover the source behind these occurrences. After conversing with many enthusiastic and ‘dead’² consecrated persons I have been convinced of the fact that “forgetfulness” of the essence of the identity of consecrated persons and institutes of consecrated life have led to this untimely death. Therefore, in his Apostolic letter to men and women religious written in the ‘Year of Consecrated Life’, Pope Francis affirmed the main aim of this year as “to look to the past with gratitude.”³ Assuredly, a look to the past enables consecrated persons to reaffirm their consecrated identity.

2. “Forgetfulness” of the Essence of Consecrated Person

“Come and see” is the invitation that Jesus extended to the two disciples of John the Baptist. This very invitation is extended to

¹Pope Francis to Seminarians and Novices, July 6, 2013, Rome.

²The ‘dead’ here, are those consecrated persons who live as if they are long dead, but hang on to life without any vitality or enthusiasm.

³*L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, Friday, 5 December 2014, 17.

women and men who respond to His call to lead a life of consecration. This invitation to follow Jesus Christ, chaste, poor and obedient through the profession of evangelical counsels is, of its nature, a call to follow a stable form of life. This life of consecration is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit to the Church to enhance her quality of life. It has been considered from the early years of the Church that consecrated life is the school of perfection rather than an exhibition gallery with only masterpieces on display. The imperfect ones are meant to become more and more perfect by their daily perseverance and prayer. In fact, a vast majority continues to observe the lifelong commitment they have made. However, the final goal is not attained by all. Why does a final choice become extremely difficult for many and why do some fail even after the well-considered choice is made? The reason for this failure, in most cases, is forgetfulness of prime motive of the vocation one has received to consecrated life.

Therese of Lisieux identified her vocation in these words: "My vocation is love." Likewise, every individual who opted for consecrated life have made such an option based on their conviction. Each consecrated person has something central to his/her vocation or had a fire that motivated him/her to choose consecrated life. Most of the consecrated persons have entered into consecrated life with pure and holy intention.

What is the essence of consecration? Or what does it mean by consecrate oneself to God? 'Consecrated' means 'set apart', 'reserved exclusively for' and 'possessed totally by God.' Consecration also expresses 'our place, our special role within and our special value to the vast community of God's people, Christ's Body'.⁴ The term "consecration" could be applied to the act of dedicating and setting apart somebody/something for a special or sacred purpose. In the case of a person, it is the act by which one is separated from the world and dedicated to the divine.⁵ Assuredly, the choice of consecrated life involves a total dedication of the person.

Consecration is a human action in response to the divine invitation. It is expressed on the human side by a free self-surrender. It is a covenant of mutual love and fidelity. One could consider consecration

⁴Mary Ingeborg, "Visible of Invisible Divine Presence" in James Downey (ed.), *Religious Life: What the Church Teaches*, Bombay, St. Paul Publications, 1986, 43-44.

⁵Peter E. Fink, "Consecration" in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Pennsylvania, Westminster Press, 1983, 119.

as inscribing 'God's signature on specific persons'. When they bear God's signature they become God's possession. Hence, the identity of a consecrated person becomes the identity of God. Therefore the essence of our vocation is 'to become God's possession' or to 'to become God's beloved'. God gives the signature only to those persons whom God chooses through Jesus Christ. The realization of this fact will oblige the consecrated persons to lead a life of holiness as Jesus lived.

This yearning for a life of holiness, however, is often threatened by the disruptive forces of human fragility. Indeed, the consecrated persons are human beings, prone to make mistakes, but these mistakes should not become convenient forgetfulness of the essence of consecrated identity. On the day of their consecration, the consecrated persons had passionately chosen a life 'lived in accordance with or in imitation of Jesus Christ'. Accordingly they are supposed to have fixed their workouts, the stuff they will read, and decide the kind of people they associate with. After all, the profession of evangelical counsels presupposes some sort of accepted behavioural pattern from consecrated persons. Wherever they are and whatever they do should reflect their consecrated identity. Their life should reflect a commitment beyond the requirements of baptism, but it does necessarily encompass the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience that are at the heart of consecrated life.

The forgetfulness of the essence will automatically lead to forgetfulness of the personal identity of the consecrated persons. Thus they habitually tend cling to or become victims of 'this material culture or culture of competence and accumulation'. In the following paragraphs, we shall discuss some of the visible traits of this rupture.

2.1. Dissatisfaction in Life

The Pope stated: "We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere."⁶ This is because "The primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives, because men and women are made for God, and their hearts are restless until they rest in him."⁷ As consecrated persons their primary goal is deep union with God. No amount of things can bring contentment to the consecrated persons. Only God can bring it to them; only through genuine and profound

⁶*L'Osservatore Romano*, 17

⁷*Vita Consecrate*, No. 27.

relationship with God through personal prayer and meditation, the consecrated will find satisfaction in life. Often they mouth the prayers printed in books or the breviary. Yet lack of aptitude for prayer life leads to disappointments in life. Ostensibly, many consecrated persons walk around as "chillies in the vinegar."⁸ Inner joy and contentment becomes a mirage in the life of some of them.

2.2. Adorers of Egoism

"In professing obedience, religious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God."⁹ However, in order to find fulfilment in life, some modern psychologists and sociologists suggest nurturing of the will or ego of individuals. In order to fulfil the desires of ego and to project themselves, even religious fall into the track of culture of competence, their consecrated status notwithstanding. Sometimes this competence to excel remains only in the realm of self appreciation, or self affirmation, or self satisfaction. However, in this pursuit, consecrated persons often forget to compete in practicing virtues. Frequently, it leads to forgetfulness of prime virtues like honesty, sincerity, accountability, openness, availability and so on. Therefore engrossed by this culture of competence, consecrated persons regard the failures/mistakes in life as doom. Henceforth for them, the only solution to such situation is 'running away from life', or 'running away from consecrated life'.

2.3. 'Privatising' of Love

The evangelical counsel of chastity assumed by consecrated persons does not demand from them an isolated life, rather a life that should be lived in relationship with one another. However, in the present scenario, consecrated persons tend to get tangled with some persons, positions or things. Consequently, a relational life without 'being tangled' by it becomes impossible in their lives. The Pope states: "But the vow of chastity and the vow of celibacy does not end at the time of the vows, it goes on... A path that is mature, mature, mature..."¹⁰ Many consecrated persons consider celibacy as a licence to live a self-centred life and to exhibit an immature way of behaviour as some bachelors (youth) in the world. The example of a normal family is an

⁸Pope Francis to Seminarians and Novices, 6 July 2013, Rome.

⁹*Perfectae Caritatis*, No. 14.

¹⁰Pope Francis to Seminarians and Novices, 6 July 2013, Rome.

inspiration, where each one cares for the other, no privatising of love, no hidden agendas to safeguard the position one holds.

2.4. Yearning for Material Things

“With regard to religious poverty it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior's will, but members must be poor both in fact and in spirit, their treasures being in heaven (cf. Mt 6:20)... they should banish all undue solicitude...”¹¹ Most of the time, by embracing consecrated life, people choose a path to a richer and more comfortable life. Assuredly, due to their formation received in places with every convenience, the religious tend to look for easier options and more comfortable zones in life. The promise in vow to observe the evangelical counsel of poverty at times becomes an anchor for comforts and conveniences of life as “one of the surest ways of never being poor is to make the vow of poverty.”¹² As a result, in many cases, the best electronic gadgets, the best clothes and the best comforts, are enjoyed more by consecrated persons than their counter parts in world. In order to procure these, consecrated persons conveniently forget the obligations of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. Lulled by material things, Jesus the true treasure, is taken away from the centre of their life.

If we make an analytical study on the life of consecrated persons, we could narrate volumes on draw backs of consecrated persons. However, this does not mean that there are no authentic consecrated persons. It is the virtuous life of those living and those who went before them, which makes consecrated life still an attractive life for many young women and men.

3. “Forgetfulness” of the Essence of Institutes of Consecrated Life

Pope Francis said: “All our institutes are heir to a history rich in charisms. At their origins we see the hand of God who, in his Spirit, calling certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church.”¹³ Any institute of Consecrated life has a history, a history which is founded on charism – Spirit of God. Hence, the Apostolic

¹¹*Perfectae Caritatis*, No. 13

¹²Joe Mannath, *Radical Love: A Path of Light*, New Delhi, CRI House, 2014, 30.

¹³Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter to Men and Women Religious for the Year of Consecrated Life,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17.

Constitution *Lumen Gentium* affirmed "Consecrated life is a gift bestowed on the Church by the Holy Spirit to enhance her quality of life."¹⁴

Over the course of centuries, the manifestation of the richness and varieties of the gifts of the Holy Spirit gave way to various forms of consecrated life in the Church in order to manifest the infinite richness of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ and to help the Church in fulfilling her responsibilities in accordance with the exigencies of different times and places.¹⁵ Pope Paul VI remarks that it is the variety of forms that gives each institute its own individual character by which the supreme rule of following Christ according to the teaching of the Gospel is fostered in a unique way.¹⁶ Consecrated life had its origin in the desire to pursue holiness of life. "Whether typical or atypical there is only one place for the legitimate birth of Institutes: the fertile womb of Mother Church. It is the Apostolic See that confirms the journey."¹⁷ Since consecrated life is a gift of God to the Church, the Church has given juridical recognition to this way of life. Within the bosom of the Church, consecrated life continues to grow in different modes and shapes.

All the institutes of consecrated life exist "to translate the Gospel" in accordance with the needs of the time. Hence, the Church approves the original intention and thoughts (mind) of a founder or foundress of a given religious congregation. The sound tradition of each institute confirms this truth. Pope Francis once again confirms it while he observed: "Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging."¹⁸

These facts reveal that institutes of consecrated life are not like any other co-operative movements, or trust, or firm, or societies. The fundamental aim of any institute of consecrated life is not to establish educational institutions, or to run hospitals, or to dispense aid to the poor, or to administer farms but to be the place where one can practise and translate the gospel, live the teachings of Jesus Christ. However, in the quest of re-reading the charism of the founder or foundress,

¹⁴*Lumen Gentium*, No. 44.

¹⁵Pius Nguyen Dan, *The Spiritual Patrimony of an Institute of Consecrated Life*, Romae, Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, 1989, 130.

¹⁶Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica testificatio*, 29 June 1971, No. 12.

¹⁷E. Sastre Santos, "On Church Approbation of Religious Institute and of Their Rules and Constitutions," *Consecrated Life* 21 (1999), 148.

¹⁸Pope Francis, "Apostolic Letter to Men and Women Religious for the Year of Consecrated Life," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17.

interpretations often favour vested interests as like any other co-operative movement, or firm.

While making his observation on one of the established religious orders, a lay Catholic leader said the founders seem to be the only persons who lived a holy life, because all others are busy making profits. Many lay people both Catholics and non-Catholics challenge the religious or even excel them in establishing educational institutions, in running hospitals, and in bringing aid to the poor. Then, it is high time we had an evaluation of the essence of each institute or the purpose its existence. Why do the institutes of consecrated life exist? Are the members convinced of the mission and vision of the institute? What makes them to invite young men and women to join their Institute? The answer to these questions will necessarily remind them of the need of the finding the lost essence of their institute and rejuvenating it.

4. The Visible Traits of the Forgetfulness

Following are a few visible traits of the 'forgetfulness' of the essence of institute of consecrated life.

4.1. Massive Infrastructures

The place of residence or the locus of mission of many of the consecrated persons could be identified by the huge infrastructure. Most often those infrastructures do not match the ordinary life situations of people around them. The very appearance of institutes of consecrated life itself serves as a counter-witness to the motive of the institute. Although consecrated life is a life chosen by the people who desire to live in imitation of Jesus, the poor, meek and humble, often they are considered to be in the wealthier stream of society.

4.2. Profit Orientation

Some of the missions undertaken by at least a minority of the institutes of consecrated life aim at profit. Money has become an unavoidable factor in the society. However, the life, which institute has opted for, or the mission, which it invites the young to join, is not a profit making one. The mission should be the outcome of their pursuit to live the charism of the founder or foundress. "Our founders and foundresses shared in Jesus' own compassion when he saw the crowd who were

like sheep without shepherd."¹⁹ Could the people recognize this compassion in the mission the consecrated persons accomplish?

4.3. Quality versus Quantity

Today the lament of all the institutes of consecrated life is about the 'lack of vocation'. Often, to the vocation camps organized by various dioceses, representatives of different institutes are invited. There, each of the representatives introduces her/his institute as a 'medical representative' who comes with beautiful promises or like MBA students who come to you to sell various products. Everyone portrays her/himself in all colourful and decorative ways. Hardly anyone dares to exhibit the essence of or the original purpose of the institute. As a consequence, the quality of the vocation decreases and the quantity increases. This paves the way for the consecrated people to bear a counter-witness to Jesus' teachings. Joe Mannath is right in his comment and he notes that "the real issue is whether it attracts, nurtures and sends forth outstanding, God-filled human beings whose lives make a cynical world stir up and take notice."²⁰

The essence of each institute of consecrated life remains the same, i.e., the mind of the founder. One may exhibit the essence according to the need. The analogy of the wine and the skins would be in place. The wine may be preserved in new or old wine skins; no one can change the 'wine-ness' of the wine. If it loses 'wine-ness', it is no longer wine. The same principle can be applied to the institutes of consecrated life too.

5. Conclusion

"To hold new wine one must not be afraid to discard the old wineskins, not renewing habits and structures that no longer correspond to what God asks of us today in order to help his Kingdom move forward in the world."²¹ These words of Pope Francis are a 'wake-up call' to all the consecrated ones to remember and live the true essence of consecrated life both in personal and institutional level. Often the consecrated life is portrayed in the image of heavenly colours, speaking in all truth rightly and eloquently of its excellence.

¹⁹Pope Francis, "Apostolic Letter to Men and Women Religious for the Year of Consecrated Life," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17.

²⁰Joe Mannath, *Radical Love: A Path of Light*, 87.

²¹Pope Francis to the Plenary of the Congregation for men and women religious, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, Friday, 5 December 2014, 23.

However, side by side with its excellence, consecrated life is confronted today with unresolved questions, some of them inspired by the evangelical image of salt: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" (Mt 5:13). As a result, the very existence of consecrated life becomes a burning problem in today's world.

At times consecrated life is regarded as a farce. It is disastrous if on the day of their consecration, the so-called consecrated persons recited the formula of consecration without anything particular to commit themselves to, or without any clarity about what their priorities and core values. This year, being the year of consecrated life, seminars, classes and renewal programs are organized. There are a lot of inputs given for all those who have consecrated themselves to God. Often they are overfed with inputs with no time left for reflection. Consequently no conversion - 'turning back' occurs in the individuals. Pope Francis asks men and women in consecrated life to "wake up" and "to look to the past with gratitude."

In order to be aware of the essence of consecrated life both in personal and institutional level, they need to reflect on what God is asking of them today. All are aware that consecrated life has fallen victim of a provisional and materialistic culture whereby an authentic consecrated life happens to be a mirage to some. In order to rejuvenate the lost vigour, to remember the essence and to regain the saltiness, the consecrated persons need to take a look back, make a "U-turn" and then go forward with hope and joy.

CHALLENGES TO CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY

“Seeing Differently in Order to Wake Up the World!”

George Pattery SJ

Abstract: With the help of the example of Chavara, a man like us, the author places before the reader the challenges to consecrated life today and invites to see differently in order to wake up the world. He suggests the way to celebrate sainthood: begin to see the world differently as saints did, and thus wake up the world. Everyone longs for a spiritual connection for true fulfilment and for new forms of spiritual existence. This spiritual longing forms a network more powerful than the high-speed internet connections. The religious today should incarnate in the spiritual crib of this universe. In Indian Church, they face three challenges when they begin to see differently and perceive the fundamental goodness of all: continuous transformation into an ever-beckoning and ever-receding God, interdependent and integrated way of seeing and relating to the entire world, to be on the frontiers to see differently. In conclusion the author sees in Chavara, a paradigm of consecrated life of his time and delineates the lessons that Chavara teaches us today.

Keywords: Hierarchy, clergy, laity, religious, community, fulfilment, mystery, profession, mission, satisfaction, disciples, discernment, seeker, humility, creation, universe, communion, consumerism, poverty, prophesy, freedom, frontiers, pedagogy, fanaticism, power, Eucharist, memory, Rites, Churches

1. Introduction

The example of Fr Chavara shows that as a man like us, he strived to delve deep into the infinite possibilities that were open to him just as he is gifted to us by the same Lord. We shall therefore remain challenged by his examples. Not so long ago, some in the hierarchy of

the Church concluded that there are only two categories of people in the Church: the clergy and the laity. We have come a long way in a short time recognizing the importance of apostolic religious life in the Church – a Francis Effect! And we are glad that Chavara, a religious is proposed as an exemplary life.

How do we celebrate sainthood? Saints are celebrated when we begin to see the world differently as they did, and thus wake up the world. Seeing differently is no easy task. Our usual seeing is through ‘furtive glance, blank gaze and non-present elusive, role performance and ritual avoidance.’ We see in order to fulfil our role of ‘looking’. In our seeing of each other we seem to reaffirm that we are alienated from the rest. Our individual and social presence is always mediated through class, caste, religious, legal, family systems and expectations that amount to infinity of macro-micro systems. All these systems and structures are inviting or containing us within the system, often not for real and genuine seeing and relating that is fulfilling. Genuine relating with everyone calls for seeing them as fundamentally related, not as alien.

We have inherited a kind of social life that has a legacy of social alienation perpetuated by many historical forms; rather than forming into genuine social movements and systems, we form ‘imaginary group identities’ providing substitute connections and community. We live by the ‘inflated balloons’ of patriotism, nationalism, ethnic purity, gender identity, caste groups, church communities, purity of Rites, allegiance to our congregations etc. These belongings in a sense numb us into sleep, escaping true belonging and genuine recognition. The imaginary is projected as ‘real’; the constructed identities seal off true identity and desire for recognition.

In this process of belonging to the imagined groups, we tend to demonize the other - the Jews, the blacks, the dalits, the Hindus, the Muslims, the women, the non-believers, the pagans etc. They seem to threaten the illusory unity of communion. On the one hand, we refuse to realize the limitations and artificiality of these imagined groups; on the other, we refuse to recognize the inherent infinite goodness of every human being and human groupings that try to transcend themselves to greater communion. The goodness that we perceive in the face of every new born baby, is the real and the fundamental. Soon that goodness is classified into systems and structures of caste, colour, creed, family, nationality, religion etc. We get so accustomed to them that we feel that is the real way. “Look at child’s way of being, in the full eyes, in the spontaneity of its gestures, and reaching out, in the

search for the other's loving gaze and embrace and its willingness to make whatever meaningful sound we make ('language') to be with us."¹

Everyone, irrespective of religion and nationality, longs for spiritual connection for true fulfilment. Everyone searches for new forms of spiritual existence. There is a network of spiritual longing existing, more powerful than the high-speed internet connections. The religious and the consecrated persons are the ones who can and should detect and connect with this spiritual web. The religious should feel at home with all the seekers. Martin Luther's phrase: "Love correcting that which revolts against love" should guide us, the consecrated ones. We need a movement for 'social consciousness in the world that recognizes the spiritual longing and universal well-being'. "The potential for dialogue is enormous as we begin to realize that what unites us under God is far more powerful than what divides us. Our patriarchal, tribal inheritance has left us fragmented and confused. Incarnational wholeness was never so urgently needed."² The religious today should incarnate in the spiritual crib of this universe.

The consecrated people face three challenges in Indian church when they begin to see differently and perceive the fundamental goodness of all.

2. Continuous Transformation into an Ever-Beckoning, Ever-Receding God

Religious life is an invitation to enter upon a journey of seeking and finding an ever-giving and ever-receding God. The consecrated person enters upon a process of joyous seeking the Lord who is seeking him/her. It is an invitation to sell off and follow; it is a challenge not to be afraid; it is me, says the Lord, at the beginning and the end of search. Jesus of the Gospels invites the consecrated person to undertake a journey into the unknown through the known paths in order to surpass them. Holiness of life is an invitation to the infinite possibilities that are open to us. It is a journey into the ever-deepening, bottomless bottom of the unfathomable and incomprehensible mystery called God. Jesus invites us to be perfect as His Father is.

¹Peter Gabel, *Another Way of Seeing*, New Orleans, Louisiana: Quid Pro Books, 2013, 1-12.

²Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Incarnation: Some Evolutionary Thoughts*, <http://www.diarmuid13.com/christian-life-essay-1>, 12ff.

Is consecrated life today more of 'settling down, rather than journeying'? From the novitiate onwards to the final profession, it is a staged and pre-determined number of steps – almost an automatic passing off the stages that are well-defined and minutely planed. In fact the final profession is perceived as the last step. It is originally meant to be the step towards greater availability to the demands of the mission, deeper commitment to the poor through poverty and deeper purposefulness and single-mindedness in delving deeper into the mystery of God. However, in today's consecrated life, final profession gives an identity card that one acquires to settle down into a role and function that is to be performed with greater or lesser satisfaction.

The invitation of Jesus to throw the net into deeper waters (Lk 5:4) is conveniently forgotten to fish in the shallow waters of personal comfort and social approval. At best, consecrated life is reduced to climbing the ladder of recognition than the total abandonment into the ever-seeking God. In the complex world of religions and pseudo-religiosity of South Asia, the challenge for consecrated life is to be on the path of seeking, and join in the seekers on a pilgrimage without borders. The risen Lord is breaking open the frontiers of the tomb of the past to open up a womb of joy and love of a definite future. Are we - the religious and the consecrated today - symbols of Easter pilgrims or Emmaus disciples, or rather do we resemble a secure and settled down group content with the minimum?

Speaking on discernment, in his interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Pope Francis said:

For him (Ignatius) it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely. I was always struck by a saying that describes the vision of Ignatius: *non coarctari a maximo, sed contineri a minimo divinum est* (not to be limited by the greatest and yet to be contained in the tiniest – this is the divine).³

This maxim in a sense explains the two reference points in spiritual discernment: God is the ever-greater one and that he is labouring in everything/everyone in this world. One is therefore invited to discern this ever-greater one constantly at work in every soul and in everything. This makes one humble, bold and seeking. One is a permanent seeker of the ever-seeking, ever-coming God. Pope Francis added: 'That means being able to do the little things of every day with a big heart open to God and to others.' God is contained in the tiniest;

³Pope Francis: *Interview to La Civiltà Cattolica*, 30 September 2013.

and the consecrated person is in perennial search for that God who is at work in everything and in everyone.

Pope Francis invites us in his Christmas message to fight against the ailment of closed circles.

The ailment of closed circles: when belonging to a group becomes stronger than belonging to the Body and, in some situations, to Christ Himself. This sickness too may start from good intentions but, as time passes, enslaves members and becomes a 'cancer' that threatens the harmony of the Body and causes a great deal of harm – scandals – especially to our littlest brothers.⁴

True religious obedience is to listen to the murmurings of the unfathomable mystery called God and let oneself be transformed.

3. Inter-Dependent, Integrated Way of Seeing and Relating to the Entire World

The second challenge for the consecrated person is to place oneself in the web of life. Of the 13.5 billion years that the universe has evolved, the humankind has journeyed only a tiny bit of time of 7 million years. It simply reveals the fact that the human is not the centre of the universe. We are part of an organic holon movement; we are part and whole at the same time, an inter-dependent and inter-related being. Everything is related to everything else.⁵ Even the flutter of a butterfly causes ripples in the rhythm of the universe. Our attitude to the universe and the earth should be one of relatedness with reverence and humility. We are invited to walk gently and live humbly on this earth. This different way of seeing the world implies that we are invited to relate to the universe; we are not placed here to consume it.

In his Apostolic Exhortation '*Evangelii Gaudium*,' Pope Francis speaks pointedly against a consumerist way of living, with an economy of exclusion and an idolatry of money (EG 52-55).⁶ Today everything comes with a price tag and is commercialized. Instead, the religious are challenged to lead a life of 'giftivism' believing that the universe and everything in it are gifted by a loving God as Pavi Metha would want us to remember.⁷ The religious are invited to live a

⁴Pope Francis. *Christmas Message to the Vatican Curia*, December 2014.

⁵Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ, Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, NY: Orbis, 2011, 17f.

⁶Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican (24 November 2013).

⁷Pavi Metha, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_QLGvp_stI&sns=em;
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_QLGvp_stI&ns=em.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_QLGvp_stI&ns=em;)

counter-cultural living, not because they are rebellious, but because they see everything as gifted into existence; that everything is inter-related; that the humans are custodians of God's creation. It is a created world and hence it is already consecrated. The basic goodness of the universe as creation of a loving and gifting God impels us to receive all, and to relate with everything in gratitude as Eucharist.

The created and the incarnated universe exude a sacramental character that invites a sacred relationality. The best of the religious tradition always spoke of a mystical approach where the wholeness of the reality guided the individual choices and dealing. Every act of consumption should enable greater communion. The level and the degree of consumption do not define our being; rather it is measured by our capability for communion. Consumerism leads to our 'having' that results in individualism and commercialization. The consecrated people should proclaim a new type of relationality that is respectful, that excludes none and that communes with the whole.

The vow of poverty implies a relatedness and inter-dependence that resembles the whole universe and places us in loving relationship. Rather than rejoicing in inter-dependence and inter-relatedness with all that builds up communion, are the religious today finding themselves more and more 'isolated selves'? Such isolation leads to the disease of accumulation. Pope Francis in his Christmas message (2014) spoke of "The disease of accumulation: when the apostle seeks to fill an existential emptiness of the heart by accumulating material goods, not out of necessity but simply to feel secure... Accumulation only burdens and inexorably slows down our progress."

Often the eagerness and enthusiasm to protect property, belongings, rights, privileges and earnings of the religious manifest marks of 'possession and consumption' that in turn tell upon the quality of consecrated life. Accumulation burdens us rather than freeing us for greater communion. It instils in us a consumerist attitude to everything and everyone and deprives us of a sacred relationship with all and everything. Poverty invites us to a chaste relationship with all; poverty and chastity are two sides of the same coin of sacredness of relationship.

4. To Be on the Frontiers to See Differently

In his Letter on Consecrated Life, Pope Francis says: "I am counting on you 'to wake up the world', since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. This is the priority that is needed right now: 'to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious

must never abandon prophecy."⁸ In the same Letter, he mentions that the religious are expected "to come out of themselves and go forth to the existential peripheries: 'Go into all the world'." He implies that the religious will be prophetic when they move to the frontiers of life today - the existential frontiers where the excluded, the marginalized, and the people on the periphery are found - the abandoned, the homeless, the other of all categories. Pope Francis adds: "The consecrated people are able to move to frontiers because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side". Then he adds: "So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create 'alternate spaces', where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive".

To be religious today implies therefore the following four stages: i) to be prophetic, which means ii) to be on the frontiers; iii) which implies to be free and finally iv) these results in creating alternate space. To be on the frontier, to be with the boundary-people means to identify with those who have no power. It is to conceive of power as relationship. That is the Gospel pedagogy. The religious are invited to enact radically this gospel pedagogy - to be with the powerless in order to share with them true power of God.

The true disciple is not called to worship God or Jesus - in any guise resembling kyriarchal Lordship or imperial status. Christian discipleship invokes a countercultural stance of denunciation and renunciation of all that smacks of earthly power in any shape or form. Power is in the process of being dethroned. The pyramid is collapsed into a circle. And from within the concentric web a new counterculture of empowerment is re-versioned and reborn. It will not be about proclaiming Christ in any king-like status or structure, but rather becoming Christ to others in a collaborative reconstruction, devoid of all the trappings of earthly power and glory.⁹

The crises in the church today of sexual and financial scandals, manifest that the real crisis is that of exercising power. We have

⁸Pope Francis: *Letter on the Year of Consecrated Life*, Vatican, 29 November 2014.

⁹Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory: A Rediscovery of the Revolutionary Jesus*, NY: Crossroad, 2011, 21-22.

forgotten the Gospel way of exercising power. The logic of domination, violence, reward and punishment that prevails in the everyday world is challenged and replaced by a new logic, the logic of grace, compassion and freedom. This takes us immediately to the powerless, those excluded from the circle of power.

Religious fanaticism that is so visible today is not for preserving faith or safeguarding reverence for God. It is to manipulate the sacred in order to usurp power. Such religious fanaticism is found everywhere. The call of the consecrated life today is to bear witness to a new way of being a community, a fresh way of exercising power. We are challenged to respond to religious fanaticism of every kind, within the church, among the religious congregations, among religions and sects. The response of a consecrated person to religious fanaticism is to be manifested in the way we exercise power - the Gospel mode, devoid of all trappings of earthly power and status. That is the real test for us today. 'Jesus was a fierce critic of the prevailing power structures, but that dangerous Christian memory has been largely suppressed and ignored.¹⁰ The religious today are challenged to retrieve the Gospel way of compassion and mercy, a different way of exercising power, and thus to align with the powerless.

Regarding the challenge that the consecrated once face today, Raymundo Panikkar once said:

The great challenge today is to convert the sacred bread into real bread, the liturgical peace into real political peace, the worship of the Creator into reverence for the Creation, the Christian praying community into an authentic human fellowship. It is risky to celebrate the Eucharist. We may have to leave it unfinished, having gone first to give back to the poor what belongs to him.¹¹

In any case, in India we do not even celebrate Eucharist together. Preservation of our identities and purity of Individual churches, and the implied power structure are more important than becoming a table-fellowship of compassionate community of service.

For Jesus, there seems to be no doubt about the fact that the table always had to be open. Nobody, for any reason, was to be excluded. From the highways and byways all are brought in till the banquet hall is full. Prostitutes, sinners, tax-collectors, the outcast and marginalized of every type were welcome. Not merely were they

¹⁰O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 7.

¹¹Quoted by O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 110.

the beneficiaries of some new bold hospitality, but it seems they were the ones who had the primary right to be at table with Jesus.¹² The parables and miracles and teachings of Jesus contained a dangerous memory, a subversive act upon the power structure; we have domesticated them to suit our constructed, imagined communities that are closed circles. This is the 14th ailment that Pope Francis spoke of the Vatican curia that we all participate in; that we referred to earlier. Can the consecrated people today form themselves into ever-widening and open circles that can embrace the goodness of the Lord wherever, whenever and however it is found? That will be radical living of the gospels.

It seems that the gospel of joy and its challenges become less significant than the preservation and protection of the purity of the Rite and its privileges; the mission-command to go to the existential frontiers of world, especially to the migrants, the poor and the excluded becomes less urgent than the conquest of territories and recapturing of peoples in the name of individual churches. It is a subtle form of *ghar vapasi* and re-enforcement of an ideology, rather than a service of faith. Rather than challenging this ideological war of expansionism, even the 'consecrated people' are engaged in this intra-ecclesial colonialism. Pope Francis says: "I am counting on you 'to wake up the world', since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy... a religious must never abandon prophecy."¹³ Today we, the consecrated people, rather than creating alternate spaces for those on the margins, we are occupying the central space and struggling to preserve it at all costs.

5. Conclusion: Chavara, a Paradigm of Consecrated Life of his Time

In conclusion, we relate the above three features to Chavara. In his own way, he saw more than others did, sought after the ever-greater One, and felt the impelling of the Spirit to strive for more personal sanctity, and for living the religious way more intensely. In spite of being victim of his time, he saw his belongingness beyond the immediate community, and proposed a self-effacing community, living for others. Within the world-view in which he lived and in the context of his time, he was eager to reach out to the people on the periphery, especially the existential peripheries of the poor, the unlettered and the neglected.

¹²O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 96.

¹³Letter on The Year of Consecrated Life, II.2.

The lessons that Chavara teaches us today are the following: The consecrated people should never abandon the path of seeking and searching the unfathomable mystery called God and rediscovering new consciousness in and through the Holy Spirit. The consecrated people should perennially try for refreshing kind of relationship with all and with everything, respecting the sacredness of all that is, and bearing witness to the new communion with everything in the Risen Christ. The consecrated people should be permanently at the frontiers, with the prophetic contestation of power itself that poses the greatest challenge to the joy of the Gospel and decode the process of marginalization to make the gospels real Good News for the frontier people.