

Francis Speaks Firmly and Directly to Vowed Religious

Introduction

In doing a simple word search of the term “consecrated” in *Evangelii Gaudium*, I was struck by the negative tone found in more than one reference to vowed religious. By way of example, consider the following:

Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity... (EG 78)

One needs to examine the context for this and similar comments (for example, EG 100 and 107). About one-third of the exhortation is spent on a kind of informal “diagnosis” (EG 108) outlining the symptoms of an ailment that prevents the Church from being true to its mission.

The Problems Faced by Religious Life Today

The very stability of religious orders with their on-going commitment to a particular apostolate constitutes at the same time their great value to the Church and the threat they pose that Pope Francis so clearly lays out. The “success” of a Catholic college or health care facility carries with it a risk of institutional stasis and a lessening of evangelical fervor. Simply put, how does a well-attended and well-funded Catholic institution evangelize? Or, is it drifting “...into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk.” (EG 207)

Turning from the institutional to the personal, Francis castigates those of us who have become comfortable in the stability afforded by our communities. One’s free time becomes paramount in a tepid and privatized spirituality that puts a premium on a narrowly-defined orthodoxy:

A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. (EG 94)

The malaise is not doctrinal but rather pastoral and is marked by a deadening inner orientation that Francis terms “spiritual worldliness.” Whether in the form of a “practical Gnosticism” or a “promethean neo-Pelagianism,” its effects are troubling. His conclusion is succinct and devastating: “In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others.” (EG 94)

Amid such joylessness, how do religious and indeed the Church as a whole (re)discover the joy of the Gospel?

Church and Sacrament

A preliminary question is necessarily ecclesiological: What does it mean to be Church? For Francis, one cannot separate the Church’s nature from its activity: “By her very nature, the Church is missionary.” (EG 179) I would term it a *sacramentality in action*. The ecclesial reform that Francis envisions leads one to surmise that for him, religious life is as much about “doing” as “being.” It would seem that we are coming to the end of a problematic comparison of “states of life.” The eschatological witness of religious life is now subordinated to its participation in the missionary dynamic of the Church. We are called to be Spirit-filled evangelizers who both pray and work. (EG 262)

Having completed his diagnosis, he proposes a treatment in order that the Church may regain her spiritual health. Among many different approaches laid out in *Evangelii Gaudium*, I would suggest

that there are two by which in virtue of their special consecration, vowed religious can share in the identity of “missionary disciples.” (EG 120)

I. A Renewed Relationship with Others

Evangelization, or as Francis terms it, “sharing the joy of the Gospel” needs to be preceded by a ministry of presence. Being with others in the many challenges they experience introduces yet another form of sacramentality:

The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (Ex 3:5). (EG 169)

In this quiet presence, those whom we first must accompany are the economically marginalized. “We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor.” (EG 48) Our solidarity with them includes an embrace of popular piety that constitutes a *locus theologicus* of primary importance. “Only from the affective connaturality born of love can we appreciate the theological life present in the piety of Christian peoples, especially among their poor.” (EG 124)

Fundamentally, our work of evangelization with the poor entails an inversion of roles, for as Francis states: “We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.” (EG 198) Lest we romanticize this approach, *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us that the option for the poor is a theological rather than a sociological category. Not only were the poor the first recipients of the Good News, today they present to us the face of the suffering Christ.

II. A Renewed Relationship with the World

This new theological orientation provides a lens through which we can examine the world as defined by culture, geography and economy. In our relationship with the poor, we are moved to acknowledge the priority of the social function of property over its ownership and use by individuals. (cf. EG 189) This most controversial section of the exhortation leads Francis to suggest all kinds of practical consequences:

This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use. (EG 192)

Conclusion

Viewed in light of these renewed relationships, evangelization takes on a very different character. While most religious in the Church are women, Francis’ invitation to discover “...a Marian ‘style’ to the Church’s work of evangelization” (EG 288) may be particularly apt for both men and women religious.

Perhaps missing in *Evangelii Gaudium* is the notion how vowed religious have a particular way of sharing in the mission of evangelization. We need to go back to *Perfectae caritatis* to recall how consecrated men and women witness to an explicit ecclesial relationship, making their ministry “... a holy service and a work characteristic of love, entrusted to them by the Church to be carried out in its name.” (*Perfectae caritatis* 8)

Bearing in mind Francis’ caution about theologians about being content with a “desk-bound theology” (cf. 133), let me conclude with his exhortation that all evangelizers may find in the sufferings of others the very wounds of the Saviour.

“Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of

others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people." (EG 270)

In such a powerful human encounter, wonderfully complicated and wonderfully fulfilling, as one religious speaking to his brothers and sisters in the consecrated life, Francis invites us to encounter God.

Questions:

1. In faithfulness to Christ, how is the Spirit calling my community in its congregational commitments to particular ministries?
2. How are we discovering the *art of accompaniment*?
3. How do we experience a "Marian style" to evangelization?

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