

## **In the World without Being of the World The Stances of Consecrated Life**

Pope Paul VI wrote in 1964: “The Church, as everyone knows, is not separated from the world, but lives in it.” However, he also pointed out that Christians have the duty to live in the world without being of the world, in keeping with the prayer of Jesus for His disciples: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” (John 17:15-16) And the Church adopts this prayer as its own. (*Ecclesiam Suam*, n<sup>os</sup> 42 and 62) These words of Paul VI express the tension which has been inherent in Christianity since its beginnings. It is a tension between belonging and identification with this world, between taking a critical distance vis-à-vis certain values termed “worldly” in a negative sense when judged in light of the heavenly world and adopting the values of the Reign of God.

This relationship with the world, sometimes affirming and sometimes critical, provides an interpretive key which helps to understand the evolution of religious life and, more generally, the diverse forms of consecrated life as we know them today. It is to this particular reading of history that you are invited.

Our starting point is the following: we will consider the “world” as an object before which we situate ourselves. Using a spatial analogy, it seems possible to draw out six ways of describing our relationship with the world. Each one has its highlights but none is exclusive. In reality, these stances or positions that we adopt vis-à-vis the world occur always in combination, with stronger or weaker accents depending on the eras, the contexts, the persons and the ecclesial groups concerned.

### **Withdrawal from the World**

From the very first centuries of Christianity, a group of Christians, women and men, chose to live in the tension: they were in the world but at the same time they fled from it, whence the Latin expression *fuga mundi*. When we speak of flight from the world, we refer to a very ancient stance. It is that of the first monks and nuns who withdrew to the Egyptian deserts to live intimately with God through solitude and prayer. That was undoubtedly their primary motivation. Along with this radical desire to live for God alone, however, they also desired to live an authentic Christian life.

The Church of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was well established in the world. The era of persecutions was over. Little by little, Christians were finding a place in society. The Church became institutionalized and the original spirit, that of Jesus and of the first Christian communities, was weakening. The first monastic institutions, the *lavrās* and the monasteries, saw themselves as a critical alternative to the world and to the Church: to the world which threatened fidelity to the Gospel but also to the Church which was sometimes too complicit with the powers of the world. Withdrawal into the desert, later symbolically expressed by monastic cloister, constituted for many the true ideal of Christian life.

This alternative Christianity, while profoundly ecclesial, developed at a distance from the world without ever being totally cut off from it. In fact, the monastic desert was, paradoxically, a place often visited, even prized. The wise sayings or *apophthegms* of the Fathers and Mothers of the desert were considered gems of spirituality sought out by many Christians living outside the

monasteries. Very early, monasteries were also implanted in the heart of the cities. The desert moved, and the monastic enclosure acted as boundary.

With the appearance of the canonical and mendicant orders in the Middle Ages, the ideal of the desert, without disappearing, was combined with the ideal of the journey. The enclosure became apostolic. Monks left it to preach the Gospel. This shift became even more pronounced in the 16th century with the appearance of apostolic orders and congregations, then the appearance of male and female societies of apostolic life and, finally in 1947, with the approval of secular institutes.

However, contrary to what we might think, the progressive insertion of religious in the activities of the world through works of charity and evangelization in distant lands maintained something of its original spirit. Prior to Vatican Council II, for example, entrance into religious life, even if it were apostolic, was understood intellectually and spiritually as a “death to the world.” This way of thinking had different accents depending on the institutes.

The Council helped Christians in general and religious in particular to develop a more favorable stance in relationship with the world. One only has to reread the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, *The Church in the Modern World*, to be convinced of this, or *Lumen Gentium* which states: “Let no one think that their consecrated way of life alienates religious from other men or makes them useless for human society.” (n. 46) At the same time, *Perfectae Caritatis*, the conciliar decree on the renewal and adaptation of religious life, continued to refer to renunciation of the world (n. 5a). The same concept is inscribed in Church law governing religious institutes – whether they be contemplative, mixed or integrally apostolic. It states that “the public witness to be rendered by religious to Christ and the Church entails a separation from the world (*a mundo separationem*) proper to the character and purpose of each institute.” (Code of canon law, can. 607) In short, withdrawal from the world continues, even today, to be a critical stance characteristic of consecrated life, and more specifically of religious life.

## **Above the World**

A second stance: consecrated life above the world. Not only did persons committed to consecrated life consider themselves intellectually, spiritually and concretely “outside” the world, the state of life itself marked by the profession of the evangelical counsels has also long been understood as a “state of perfection” superior to other forms of Christian life, especially marriage. Ecclesiology before the Vatican Council II insisted strongly on the societal aspect of the Church: a hierarchically constituted body where states of life and ministerial functions occupied pre-determined ranks. Religious life in itself occupied a privileged place. Its perfection resided in the means to holiness which it promoted and in the eminent sign of the primacy of the divine to which it was a privileged witness. Religious life, and more broadly the diverse forms of consecrated life, stood in some way above the *mêlée*, in the Church as well as in relation to the world.

Concerning the relationship with the world, we have already shown the shifts that occurred with Vatican Council II. The reciprocal relationships between the states of life within the Church, combined with certain ministerial functions, had to be rethought. Chapter five of *Lumen Gentium* best expresses the shift from a hierarchical notion of vocations to that of complementarity among them. The sign value of religious life is maintained throughout the teachings of the Council. Religious life has a particular function within the Church. However, the central affirmation is that in the Church all are called to holiness: “It is expressed in many ways in individuals who, in their

walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others.” (n. 39 *Lumen Gentium*) While maintaining the uniqueness and the mission of religious or consecrated life in the Church and in the world, it is from now on within a non-stratified framework that the identity of professed life has to be rethought.

### **In the World and at the Service of the World**

It is evident that the Church is in the world. It is also evident that persons in consecrated life are inserted in the world in their own way. After all, we only leave the world when we die! However, an additional point must be considered: the Church and religious life are at the service of the world. In his first public address, Pope Francis wished to see the Church become a Church of the poor and for the poor.

A few decades before, the theologian Yves Congar had published a book entitled *Pour une Église servante et pauvre* (translated by Jennifer Nicholson: *Power and Poverty in the Church*). The idea is the same: The Church is called by the Lord to be in the world and at its service. The cover of Congar’s book features a picture of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, for he came not to be served but to serve. If, as we have shown, insertion in the world requires a critical stance, this stance must never be far from the icon of the Servant Christ. This stance has been abundantly illustrated by many persons in consecrated life who have been attentive to the miseries of the world in the course of history.

### **Vis-à-Vis the World**

The three previous stances already contain implicitly the next three stances. The first situates consecrated life vis-à-vis the world in a face-to-face critique which is also prophetic. In the biblical tradition, the prophet is the one who denounces, challenges and, at the same time, announces and proposes an alternative vision. From this perspective, it is possible that persons in consecrated life find themselves in the position of challenging the world in the very name of their faith and of the charism which they embody. Certain radical actions such as the preferential option for the poor and the excluded concretize this attitude. In addition, the three important gospel values which characterize consecrated life, chastity, poverty and obedience, shock and challenge the established order.

### **Following the World**

If consecrated life can be identified with prophecy, it can also be marked by cowardice. To bend the knee before the world is not the stance of Servant, but may be submission to the idols of the world. Consecrated life might follow the world and be controlled by it. Worldliness in consecrated life acts like gangrene: it eats it up from the interior to the point of making it insignificant. By this very fact, it is condemned to die or it is challenged to reform itself. There are many examples of this in history.

### **Ahead of the World**

Finally, always within the context of prophecy, consecrated life can announce and implement viable alternatives for the Church and for the world. In that case, it is ahead of the world and leads it. For example, could not our intergenerational and intercultural communities be considered laboratories for humanity on the world stage? That is one of the topics of the next

General Assembly of the CRC: *Beyond Frontiers: A Call to Transformation*. The different stances of consecrated life that we have described could be considered a first step in the coming reflections.

### **Questions for Reflection**

- 1) With which one or which ones of the six stances presented do you identify personally?
- 2) Given the spirituality and mission of your institute, in which stance do you find yourself?
- 3) Which one of these stances challenges you to change your vision and action?

*Rick van Lier, OP*  
rick.vanlier@ipastorale.ca