Column: Consecrated Life

The Task Before the Current Generations

by Susan Rose Francois, C.S.J.P.¹

Those of us who are privileged to be living consecrated life in 2015 walk in the footsteps of great men and women of faith who sought to follow Jesus in a particular way. Some, like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila, are well known and beloved Saints for the universal church. Others, like Margaret Anna Cusack (Mother Francis Clare), who founded my religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, are perhaps less well known.

Nonetheless, upon reflection, it becomes clear that these founding and reforming men and women not only have much in common, but they also have much to teach us today. Each was nourished and challenged by a personal relationship with God, mediated through the prayer and sacramental life of the church. Each answered the call to “translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church.”²

These founding and reforming people, of course, attracted others who were also called to this unusual way of life. Whether a religious family is 100 or 1,000 years old, the generations presently living consecrated life benefit from the courageous risks undertaken by every preceding generation. We have much to be grateful for, and for this reason Pope Francis names the first aim of the Year of Consecrated Life as an opportunity “to look to the past with gratitude.”³

Yet that alone is not enough. Like the generations before us, we must also listen attentively to the call of the Gospel today. In his second aim for the year, Pope Francis calls on consecrated persons to “live the present with passion.”⁴ The language he uses is very strong. He asks us to reflect on whether we are really open to the challenge of the Gospel, which “demands to be lived radically and sincerely.”⁵ As consecrated persons living in the midst of an increasingly polarized society, “we are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters.”⁶

From my perspective as a younger religious, born after the Second Vatican Council, a key gift of this time is the unique mix of experiences brought by the current generations in consecrated life. Most of my sisters in community entered prior to the renewal. Thus, they have experienced a way of life that is very different in form and

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² Francis, Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life (November 21, 2014), no. 1.

³ Francis, no. 1.

⁴ Francis, no. 2.

⁵ Francis, no. 2.

⁶ Francis, no. 2.
function from the community life we live today. Yet, it is also true that the present dynamic way of life which attracted me in the first decade of the twenty-first century is a direct result of their response to the Council. In faith, they “undertook a fruitful journey of renewal which, for all its lights and shadows, has been a time of grace, marked by the presence of the Spirit.”

My elder sisters in community cannot help but live the present with a passion informed by their experience of renewal. At the same time, younger religious, who look with gratitude and awe at the experience of renewal as history, bring our own experiences and perspectives. The presence of this unique mix of generations in religious life today presents both a unique opportunity and a sacred responsibility. Pope Francis encourages younger religious to use this year of consecrated life as a time to be “actively engaged in dialogue with the previous generation.” In this way, younger religious will be “enriched by their experience and wisdom, while at the same time inspiring” the older generations by their “energy and enthusiasm, to recapture their original idealism.”

A central task before the generations presently living consecrated life is to be a bridge from the time of renewal to a sustainable future. Indeed, the third aim for this year outlined by Pope Francis is to “embrace the future with hope,” for it is this hope which “enables consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future.”

The reality of diminishment and demographic change poses a definitive challenge for today’s generations. Hence, contemplating our preferred future is ripe with paradox. The choices we make today will necessarily impact the sustainability of consecrated life tomorrow. Yet, Pope Francis also rightly cautions us not to “yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency.”

The historic founding and reforming persons were not concerned with numbers, but rather the central task of translating the Gospel. Not only that, they “allowed themselves to be translated.” The present generations are also called “to be retranslated ... [as we move] into an open, unpredictable, and uncontrollable future.” The call to be a bridge from renewal to a sustainable future for consecrated life requires letting go, creativity, and courage.

In closing, I offer two voices from the history of my religious community that seem very appropriate for this moment. The first was written in 1969 by Sister Eleanor Quin, CSJP: “I think religious life will dwindle down to a nucleus and from that nucleus will emerge leadership for a new type of religious life that will be free to concentrate wherever needed.” It seems as if we are just living into this reality today.

The second was written by Mother Francis Clare in a general letter to her new congregation in 1887: “We are beginning a new Order. We want brave, noble, large minded, courageous souls...”

May the current generations living consecrated life be brave, noble, large minded, and courageous as we build the bridge to a sustainable future for the generations to come.

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7 Francis, no. 1.  
8 Francis, no. 3.  
9 Francis, no. 3.  
10 Francis, no. 3.  
12 Hanvey, 39-40.  
14 Margaret Anna Cusack (Mother Francis Clare), General Letter to the Congregation, April 1887.