

JOHN PAUL II



Consecrated
Life
Vita Consecrata

ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

With Commentary by
Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP

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POPE JOHN PAUL II

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Preface

A few years ago some sisters in my community had a book fair at a nearby Catholic school. One fourth grade boy, looking quite serious, approached the table and asked the sister, “Are you a nun?”

“Yes,” she replied.

He pondered this for a moment and then said, “I didn’t think they existed anymore. I saw one once when I was in kindergarten, but I thought they were extinct by now.”

It may indeed seem like nuns are an endangered species today. But despite this little boy’s assessment, in fact they are not. The Church will never be without sisters, brothers, and members of other forms of the consecrated life. In *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II gives reasons for hope that this life will continue not only to exist in the Church, but also to flourish.

The Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata*, has an important place in the program that John Paul II developed. This document can best be seen in light of the Pope’s double purpose: first, to continue to implement the renewal that Vatican II had called for, and second, to prepare the Church for the third millennium of the Christian era.

From the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II was focused on the new millennium. He wrote, "Preparing for the Year 2000 has become as it were a hermeneutical key of my Pontificate" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 23). John Paul II was convinced that the world was ripe for a new evangelization. He was concerned about the whole world, both those areas in which the Gospel proclamation was still new, and those areas that had formerly been Christian but where many people had fallen away from the practice of the faith. His efforts to implement the teachings of Vatican II were a way of preparing the Church to carry out the new evangelization more fruitfully.

Part of this preparation consisted of the series of synods held on various topics, one of them being the consecrated life. That Synod was held at Rome in October 1994. In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II presented the fruits of the synod to the entire Church. While *Vita Consecrata* can be read with great profit on its own, it can be best understood in the context of his overall teaching. In terms of the consecrated life, that teaching can be found especially in three sources: in the document *Redemptionis Donum (To Men and Women Religious on Their Consecration in the Light of the Mystery of the Redemption)*, March 25, 1984), in the general audiences on consecrated life that John Paul II gave during the Synod (which he mentions in *Vita Consecrata*, no. 13), and in his teaching on the theology of the body. Although the theology of the body focuses especially on marriage, in it John Paul II also gave a shorter but profound teaching on the meaning of "continence for the Kingdom of heaven." Both vocations are

like two sides of the same coin. Both are rooted in what he called the spousal nature of the body and of the human person, and both spring from a complete gift of self. These themes can be found woven throughout the text of *Vita Consecrata*.

Before reading the text in detail, it is helpful to have an overall view of the document. It consists of a brief introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The three chapters focus on consecration, communion, and mission. The first chapter is the most theologically weighty, the most challenging to read—and the most rewarding. John Paul II considers the consecrated life in relation to the Trinity, using the Gospel scene of the transfiguration. In this chapter he makes an extremely profound statement, one that could change our whole way of viewing the consecrated life. Speaking of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, John Paul II says that the way Jesus lived these “appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called *divine*, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit” (no. 18). Think about that—in living as he did, Jesus was living out his relationship with the other Persons of the Trinity. To follow him in this way of life is to be drawn into the communion that he, as the Son, had with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and to be drawn into it in a unique way. That thought alone gives us much to ponder.

In chapter two, John Paul II focuses on communion of life as a way of participating in the wider life of the Church seen as a communion. This “spirituality of communion” (no. 46) is a

challenge to all those in the consecrated life, whether or not they live in a community. It is another way to reflect the Trinity, which is a communion of Persons. As human persons, we are the image of God not only because we are rational beings, with reason and free will, but also because we form relationships with other persons. As John Paul II said in *Redemptionis Donum*, “Vocation carries with it the answer to the question: Why be a human person—and how?” (no. 5). The “how” is closely tied to the quality of our relationships with others. Living in a community offers many opportunities to love and serve them by making a gift of ourselves.

In chapter three, the Pope considers the wide field of mission. The gift of self also extends to others in the wider world. Those in the consecrated life carry out an immense number of works. Mission also draws us deeper into the life of the Trinity even as we are sent out, for the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of mission (no. 72). For those in the consecrated life, mission leads to a spiritual fruitfulness, one marked by the Spirit. While they give up having children of their own, they give life to others in so many different ways. Whether they teach, wipe a tear from a child’s eye, offer a hot meal to a hungry person, or console someone grieving the death of a loved one, consecrated persons witness to the love of Jesus Christ in our midst. In all this, they also witness to eternal life to come, what John Paul II calls the eschatological nature of this vocation. They can bring hope even into seemingly hopeless situations, because they bring the promise of Christ who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6).

In this new edition of *Vita Consecrata*, a brief commentary follows each part of the document and includes an invitation to ponder, to pray, and to act.* Many passages in *Vita Consecrata* could be used very fruitfully for prayer and meditation. If you like the Ignatian method of imaginative prayer, you could envision yourself on Tabor with the apostles, contemplate the radiant face of Jesus, and listen for the words he is saying to you. But in whatever way you pray, the words of Saint John Paul offer a sure way to enter more deeply into the life of the Blessed Trinity and to make that life fruitful in whatever mission God has entrusted to you.

* The document has three chapters, each with several parts. The commentary covers each part separately, except where two shorter parts are combined (Chapter 2, parts two and three; and Chapter 3, parts three and four).

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POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC
EXHORTATION
OF THE HOLY FATHER
JOHN PAUL II

Consecrated Life

Vita Consecrata

To the Bishops and Clergy, Religious Orders
and Congregations, Societies of Apostolic Life,
Secular Institutes, and All the Faithful
On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission
in the Church and in the World

CHAPTER I

Confessio Trinitatis

The Origins of the Consecrated Life in the Mystery of Christ and of the Trinity

Icon of the Transfigured Christ

14. The evangelical basis of consecrated life is to be sought in the special relationship which Jesus, in his earthly life, established with some of his disciples. He called them not only to welcome the Kingdom of God into their own lives, but also to put their lives at its service, leaving everything behind and closely imitating his own *way of life*.

Many of the baptized throughout history have been invited to live such a life “in the image of Christ.” But this is possible only on the basis of a special vocation and in virtue of a particular gift of the Spirit. For in such a life baptismal consecration develops into a radical response in the following of Christ through acceptance of the evangelical counsels, the first and essential of which is the sacred bond of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.²³ This special way of “following Christ,” at the origin of which is always the

initiative of the Father, has an essential Christological and pneumatological meaning; it expresses in a particularly vivid way the *Trinitarian* nature of the Christian life and it anticipates in a certain way that *eschatological* fulfillment toward which the whole Church is tending.²⁴

In the Gospel, many of Christ's words and actions shed light on the meaning of this special vocation. But for an overall picture of its essential characteristics, it is singularly helpful to fix our gaze on Christ's radiant face in the mystery of the transfiguration. A whole ancient spiritual tradition refers to this "icon" when it links the contemplative life to the prayer of Jesus "on the mountain."²⁵ Even the "active" dimensions of consecrated life can in a way be included here, for the transfiguration is not only the revelation of Christ's glory but also a preparation for facing Christ's cross. It involves both "going up the mountain" and "coming down the mountain." The disciples who have enjoyed this intimacy with the Master, surrounded for a moment by the splendor of the Trinitarian life and of the communion of saints, and as it were caught up in the horizon of eternity, are immediately brought back to daily reality, where they see "Jesus only," in the lowliness of his human nature, and are invited to return to the valley, to share with him the toil of God's plan and to set off courageously on the way of the cross.

"And he was transfigured before them . . ."

15. And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun,

and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead" (Mt 17:1–9).

The event of the transfiguration *marks a decisive moment in the ministry of Jesus.* It is a revelatory event which strengthens the faith in the disciples' hearts, prepares them for the tragedy of the cross, and prefigures the glory of the resurrection. This mystery is constantly relived by the Church, the people on its way to the eschatological encounter with its Lord. Like the three chosen disciples, the Church contemplates the transfigured face of Christ in order to be confirmed in faith and to avoid being dismayed at his disfigured face on the cross. In both cases, she is the Bride before her Spouse, sharing in his mystery and surrounded by his light.

This light shines on all the Church's children. *All are equally called to follow Christ,* to discover in him the ultimate meaning of their lives, until they are able to say with the Apostle: "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21). But those who are called to the consecrated life have *a special experience*

of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word. For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them *a kind of sign and prophetic statement* for the community of the brethren and for the world; consequently they can echo in a particular way the ecstatic words spoken by Peter: “Lord, it is well that we are here” (Mt 17:4). These words bespeak the Christocentric orientation of the whole Christian life. But they also eloquently express the *radical* nature of the vocation to the consecrated life: how good it is for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! Truly those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as it were caught up in his splendor: he is “the fairest of the sons of men” (Ps 45:2), the one beyond compare.

“This is my beloved Son”: listen to him!

16. The three disciples caught up in ecstasy hear the Father’s call to listen to Christ, to place all their trust in him, to make him the center of their lives. The words from on high give new depth to the invitation by which Jesus himself, at the beginning of his public life, called them to follow him, to leave their ordinary lives behind and to enter into a close relationship to him. It is precisely this special grace of intimacy which, in the consecrated life, makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels. The counsels, more than a simple renunciation, are *a specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ, lived within the Church.*

In the unity of the Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance

“brightens the countenance of the Church.”²⁶ The *laity*, by virtue of the secular character of their vocation, reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word particularly insofar as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the world, the foundation and measure of the value of all created things. *Sacred ministers*, for their part, are living images of Christ the Head and Shepherd who guides his people during this time of “already and not yet,” as they await his coming in glory. It is the duty of the *consecrated life* to show that the Incarnate Son of God is *the eschatological goal toward which all things tend*, the splendor before which every other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart. In the consecrated life, then, it is not only a matter of following Christ with one’s whole heart, of loving him “more than father or mother, more than son or daughter” (cf. Mt 10:37)—for this is required of every disciple—but of living and expressing this *by conforming one’s whole existence to Christ* in an all-encompassing commitment which foreshadows the eschatological perfection, to the extent that this is possible in time and in accordance with the different charisms.

By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, “that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world.”²⁷ By embracing *chastity*, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the Only-Begotten Son who is one with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30, 14:11). By imitating Christ’s *poverty*, they profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father and gives

everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn 17:7, 10). By accepting, through the sacrifice of their own freedom, the mystery of Christ's filial *obedience*, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the one who delights only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34), to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything.

By this profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that *confessio Trinitatis* which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being.

I. In Praise of the Trinity

"A Patre ad Patrem": God's initiative

17. Contemplation of the glory of the Lord Jesus in the icon of the transfiguration reveals to consecrated persons first of all the Father, the Creator and Giver of every good thing, who draws his creatures to himself (cf. Jn 6:44) with a special love and for a special mission. "This is my beloved Son: listen to him!" (cf. Mt 17:5). In response to this call and the interior attraction which accompanies it, those who are called entrust themselves to the love of God who wishes them to be exclusively at his service, and they consecrate themselves totally to him and to his plan of salvation (cf. 1 Cor 7:32–34).

This is the meaning of the call to the consecrated life: it is an initiative coming wholly from the Father (cf. Jn 15:16), who asks those whom he has chosen to respond with

complete and exclusive devotion.²⁸ The experience of this gracious love of God is so deep and so powerful that the person called senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating his or her life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future, and placing them in his hands. This is why, with Saint Thomas, we come to understand the identity of the consecrated person, beginning with his or her complete self-offering, as being comparable to a genuine holocaust.²⁹

“Per Filium”: in the footsteps of the Son

18. The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6), calls all those whom the Father has given to him (cf. Jn 17:9) to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. But of some, those called to the consecrated life, he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. Mt 19:27) in order to live at his side³⁰ and to follow him wherever he goes (cf. Rev 14:4).

In the countenance of Jesus, the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) and the reflection of the Father’s glory (cf. Heb 1:3), we glimpse the depths of an eternal and infinite love which is at the very root of our being.³¹ Those who let themselves be seized by this love cannot help abandoning everything to follow him (cf. Mk 1:16–20; 2:14; 10:21, 28). Like Saint Paul, they consider all else as loss “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ,” by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as “refuse,” in order that they “may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8). They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life. This leaving of everything and following the Lord (cf. Lk

18:28) is a worthy program of life for all whom he calls, in every age.

The evangelical counsels, by which Christ invites some people to share his experience as the chaste, poor, and obedient one, call for and make manifest in those who accept them *an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him*. Living “in obedience, with nothing of one’s own, and in chastity,”³² consecrated persons profess that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection. His way of living in chastity, poverty, and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called *divine*, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the *objective superiority of the consecrated life*.

Nor can it be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in *Christ’s mission*, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God’s plan by the total gift of self. Every mission begins with the attitude expressed by Mary at the Annunciation: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

“In Spiritu”: consecrated by the Holy Spirit

19. “A bright cloud overshadowed them” (Mt 17:5). A significant spiritual interpretation of the transfiguration sees this cloud as an image of the Holy Spirit.³³

Like the whole of Christian life, the call to the consecrated life is closely linked to the working of the Holy Spirit. In every age, the Spirit enables new men and women to recognize the appeal of such a demanding choice. Through his power, they relive, in a way, the experience of the Prophet Jeremiah: “You have seduced me, LORD, and I have let myself be seduced” (Jer 20:7). It is the Spirit who awakens the desire to respond fully; it is he who guides the growth of this desire, helping it to mature into a positive response and sustaining it as it is faithfully translated into action; it is he who shapes and molds the hearts of those who are called, configuring them to Christ, the chaste, poor, and obedient one, and prompting them to make his mission their own. By allowing themselves to be guided by the Spirit on an endless journey of purification, they become, day after day, *conformed to Christ*, the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord.

With penetrating insight, the Fathers of the Church have called this spiritual path *philokalia*, or *love of the divine beauty*, which is the reflection of the divine goodness. Those who by the power of the Holy Spirit are led progressively into full configuration to Christ reflect in themselves a ray of the unapproachable light. During their earthly pilgrimage, they press on toward the inexhaustible source of light. The consecrated life thus becomes a particularly profound expression of the Church as the Bride who, prompted by the Spirit to imitate her Spouse, stands before him “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27).

The same Spirit, far from removing from the life of humanity those whom the Father has called, puts them at the service of their brothers and sisters in accordance with their particular state of life, and inspires them to undertake special tasks in response to the needs of the Church and the world, by means of the charisms proper to the various institutes. Hence many different forms of the consecrated life have arisen, whereby the Church is “adorned by the various gifts of her children . . . like a bride made beautiful for her spouse (cf. Rev 21:2)”³⁴ and is enriched by the means necessary for carrying out her mission in the world.

The evangelical counsels, gift of the Trinity

20. The evangelical counsels are thus above all *a gift of the Holy Trinity*. The consecrated life proclaims what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness, and his beauty. In fact, “the religious state reveals the transcendence of the Kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things. To all people it shows wonderfully at work within the Church the surpassing greatness of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit.”³⁵

The first duty of the consecrated life is to *make visible* the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world. To people’s astonishment they respond by proclaiming the wonders of grace accomplished by the Lord in those whom he loves. To the degree that

consecrated persons let themselves be guided by the Spirit to the heights of perfection, they can exclaim: “I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendor; I am taken outside myself as I think of myself; I see how I was and what I have become. O wonder! I am vigilant, I am full of respect for myself, of reverence and of fear, as I would be were I before you; I do not know what to do, I am seized by fear, I do not know where to sit, where to go, where to put these members which are yours; in what deeds, in what works shall I use them, these amazing divine marvels!”³⁶ The consecrated life thus becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty.

Reflection of Trinitarian life in the evangelical counsels

21. The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. They are in fact an expression of the love of the Son for the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. By practicing the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person lives with particular intensity the Trinitarian and Christological dimension which marks the whole of Christian life.

The *chastity* of celibates and virgins, as a manifestation of dedication to God with *an undivided heart* (cf. 1 Cor 7:32–34), is a reflection of the *infinite love* which links the three Divine Persons in the mysterious depths of the life of the Trinity, the love to which the Incarnate Word bears witness even to the point of giving his life, the love “poured into our

hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren.

Poverty proclaims that God is man’s only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ who, “though he was rich . . . became poor” (2 Cor 8:9), it becomes an expression of that *total gift of self* which the three Divine Persons make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death.

Obedience, practiced in imitation of Christ, whose food was to do the Father’s will (cf. Jn 4:34), shows the liberating beauty of a *dependence which is not servile but filial*, marked by a deep sense of responsibility and animated by mutual trust, which is a reflection in history of the loving *harmony* between the three Divine Persons.

The consecrated life is thus called constantly to deepen the gift of the evangelical counsels with a love which grows ever more genuine and strong in the *Trinitarian* dimension: love *for Christ*, which leads to closeness with him; love *for the Holy Spirit*, who opens our hearts to his inspiration; love *for the Father*, the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life.³⁷ The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life.

Even *fraternal life*, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity. It proclaims *the Father*, who desires to make all of humanity one family. It proclaims *the Incarnate Son*, who gathers the redeemed into

unity, pointing the way by his example, his prayer, his words, and above all his death, which is the source of reconciliation for a divided and scattered humanity. It proclaims *the Holy Spirit* as the principle of unity in the Church, wherein he ceaselessly raises up spiritual families and fraternal communities.

Consecrated like Christ for the Kingdom of God

22. The consecrated life, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, “constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church”³⁸ of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme consecrated one and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples (cf. Mt 4:18–22; Mk 1:16–20; Lk 5:10–11; Jn 15:16). In the light of Jesus’ consecration, we can see in the initiative of the Father, the source of all holiness, the ultimate origin of the consecrated life. Jesus is the one whom “God anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38), the one “whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world” (Jn 10:36). Accepting his consecration by the Father, the Son in turn consecrates himself to the Father for the sake of humanity (cf. Jn 17:19). His life of virginity, obedience, and poverty expresses his complete filial acceptance of the Father’s plan (cf. Jn 10:30; 14:11). His perfect offering confers an aspect of consecration upon all the events of his earthly existence.

Jesus is *the exemplar of obedience*, who came down from heaven not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him (cf. Jn 6:38; Heb 10:5, 7). He places his way of living and acting in the hands of the Father (cf. Lk 2:49). In filial

obedience, he assumes the condition of a servant: he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7–8). In this attitude of submissiveness to the Father, Christ lives his life as a virgin, even while affirming and defending the dignity and sanctity of married life. He thus reveals *the sublime excellence and mysterious spiritual fruitfulness of virginity*. His full acceptance of the Father’s plan is also seen in his detachment from earthly goods: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). *The depth of his poverty* is revealed in the perfect offering of all that is his to the Father.

The consecrated life truly constitutes *a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting* as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren. It is a living tradition of the Savior’s life and message.