

FRATELLI TUTTI: TO SEE WHAT REALLY MATTERS

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CARD. MICHAEL CZERNY S.J.
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1. A MAP TO ORIENT OUR READING AND LISTENING

Fratelli Tutti is not explicitly addressed to religious men and women, because Pope Francis' intent is not to 'factionalize' the message of the encyclical by specifying its recipients. Rather, he chooses to address all people in order to launch a "new vision of fraternity" (FT 6): to act toward others, near and far, as if we were choosing them as our brothers and sisters and friends. Religious men and women, as members of the People of God, are therefore called upon to contribute to "the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity" (FT 8) with their commitment and in the mission that is theirs.

In this paper I outline, first of all, the essential coordinates of Vatican II's renewal of the consecrated life, and then analyze some of today's challenges to religious that become, in the magisterium of Francis, so many "signs of the times" from which to undertake a renewed understanding and a deepening of the *sequela Christi*.

1.1 Consecrated Life at Vatican II: a Copernican Revolution

In many ways the Second Vatican Council represented a true and proper Copernican revolution for consecrated life. Its decrees went far beyond what had been the hopes and expectations of those directly involved.

Rather than a reform of institutes or an affirmation of the 'superior dignity' of religious life over marriage, the Council Fathers ventured on a completely new path: they redefined religious life on the basis of the category of "consecration," thus laying the foundations for the post-Conciliar development of a "theology of charism" and a "mysticism of the consecrated life."

Lumen Gentium certainly constitutes the watershed and point of no return of this renewed approach, no longer conceived as a disciplinary intervention aimed at producing decrees of “reform,” but directed at placing religious life in a broader and more complete ecclesiological framework.

1.2 *Lumen Gentium*: the Ecclesial Roots of the Consecrated Life

In *Lumen Gentium*, the recovery of the doctrine on the “common priesthood of the faithful” (LG 10) made it possible not only to re-evaluate the importance of the laity, but also to specify the role and mission of religious in the life of the Church.

In the case of religious life, the Council’s argumentation takes baptism as its starting point, as the mystery and fundamental dimension of Christian existence. Then, with the profession of the evangelical counsels, those who consecrate themselves to the service of God in the Church can derive “more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace” (LG 44).

Lumen Gentium (ch 6) lays out four aspects, four distinctive “notes” which underpin the Council’s meditation on consecrated life: ecclesial vocation; human realization; reality and sign; charismatic nature.

1) Ecclesial vocation: by declaring that the mission and spiritual life of religious is “devoted to the welfare of the whole Church” (LG 44), the Council specified their belonging and destination. Consecrated life does not constitute a path of perfection marked by individualism but shows a clear ecclesial rooting. The choice of the evangelical counsels represents for the individual, and for the whole Church, an opportunity for enrichment and a privileged “place” where grace is manifested. Moreover, the Council was keen to emphasize the importance of the experiential and testimonial heritage which the consecrated life brings with it for the Church. Its manifold richness represents a true and proper “spiritual capital” for the members of the various orders, religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, and for “the whole Body of Christ” (LG 43).

2) Human realization: Alongside the concept of the Church as “people of God,” the Council’s Copernican revolution revolves around the recognition of each one’s dignity and rights. This change of view is also reflected in religious life, underlining the “rights” of the consecrated person, such as to education, to psycho-affective maturation, to gender equality, to the enhancement of personal talents, to respect for the person (regardless of the institutional role held). The result is a positive reading of consecrated life which focuses not on the “deprivations” which are required but on the “gain” for those who decide to embrace it (LG 46).

3) Reality and sign: The consecrated life is recognized in its reality as a sign, above all because of the eschatological tension that runs through it (LG 46). If the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience constitute an anticipation of the condition of perfect and definitive communion to which the “children of God” will be introduced in the last times, it is because of the intrinsically relational nature of the vows: religious, by giving themselves to God in this particular way, can acquire a different freedom in the way they relate to themselves, to material goods, and to others. Instead of fleeing from the world (*fuga mundi*) and becoming “strangers to their fellowmen or useless citizens of this earthly city” (LG 46), religious embark on a way of “engaging” with history, of living in time.

4) Charismatic nature: in lieu of the paradigm of renunciation, the consecrated life is seen by the Council as a way of participating in the response of the Christian people to the history of salvation. It is made clear,

however, that the consecrated life does not belong to the institutional structure of the Church, nor does it represent an “intermediate state between the clerical and lay state” (LG 43) but constitutes a special gift with which the Spirit has enriched the Church and characterized her charismatic structure (LG 44).

1.3 *Perfectae Caritatis*: Called to “spread the Kingdom of God”

In 1965, barely a year after *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s reflection on the consecrated life was enriched by the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the appropriate renewal of religious life.

The decree first makes explicit the Christological foundation of religious life (PC 1) and indicates the following of Christ as the “supreme rule” and the “fundamental norm” (PC 2a) which governs it. Its primary purpose is the desire for a more intense communion with Christ, from which derives the determination to “cooperate in the work of redemption and to expand the kingdom of God” (PC 5).

The multiple forms of consecrated life – contemplative, active, monastic, and lay religious life (PC 7-11) – show with how great a “variety of gifts” the Spirit embellishes the Church, making her appear “like a bride adorned for her husband” (PC 1).

For this reason, the decree recommends that each institute acquire knowledge of its own historical component, that is, the recovery of “the spirit and the aims proper to the founders,” to attune the original charismatic intuition to “the present circumstances of this world” (PC 2).

The decree is also structured by the renewed awareness matured by the Council Fathers with respect to “common life.” What binds religious together is love for God, and this unity becomes a sign that “manifests the coming of Christ” (PC 15). Indeed the very fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of life in common, since it is from fraternity that “great energy for the apostolate emanates” (PC 15).

1.4 *Evangelica Testificatio*: the “charisms of founders” past and present

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* of 1971, Paul VI sought to respond respectfully and gracefully to the climate of “anxiety” (ET 2) that followed the Second Vatican Council, suggesting work on the correct hermeneutic of its declarations on religious (ET 6).

The Pope reiterates the importance of rediscovering the “charism of the founders” (ET 11), because on its identification depend those “fundamental options” which make it possible “continually ... to revitalize external forms” (ET 12).

It is also interesting that Paul VI chose to include, in relation to the vow of poverty, a reference to the preferential option for the poor made by the Council (LG 8; GS 1). Responding to the “cry of the poor,” to their “appeal as God’s privileged ones” (ET 17), becomes a constant call to love and to shun selfishness, for conversion of mind and heart and “for liberation from all temporal encumbrances” (ET 17). Religious are called to live poverty as a choice of precariousness, of temporariness, making their own the condition of the Son of Man who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:59).

1.5 Consecrated life: the Path of Uncreated Beauty

The 1974 Synod of Bishops was also decisive in guiding the renewal of the consecrated life. The bishops emphasized the essential missionary character of the Church and the duty of each member to bear witness to Christ throughout the world. Later, Paul VI used the Synod's propositions in drafting the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

In those years the Church was going through various vicissitudes, especially because of the tensions that had arisen among religious and institutes. There were two opposing tendencies: those who would have wished consecrated life to return to conservative positions, and those who hoped that the impulse for innovation would not be exhausted.

The election of John Paul II as bishop of Rome on 16 October 1978 inaugurated a new phase in the renewal of consecrated life, characterized by an effort to codify the theological, ecclesial, and orientating insights of the Council.

The growing numerical and institutional crises of consecrated life; the emergence of phenomena that required an intervention by the Holy See (such as the commissioning of the Jesuits and Carmelites or the special commission for the U.S.A.); and the concerns aroused by liberation theology and the involvement of religious in revolutionary activities—convinced the pope of the need for a return to a firmer “sense of the institution.” While on the one hand the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law in 1983 effectively put an end to the period of conciliar experimentation, there was on the other a desire to give new emphasis to the theology of special consecration.

Thirty years after *Perfectae Caritatis*, the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) represents a certain point of arrival in the journey made by the Church after the Council.

Vita Consecrata, a vast and rich document, is full of most original insights. The Exhortation seems guided by the intention to develop more adequately the pneumatological implications of the *sequela Christi* brought about by the choice of the evangelical counsels. In fact, it states that “the call to the consecrated life is intimately related to the work of the Holy Spirit” (VC 19). The Gospel account of the Transfiguration (VC 15) is taken as the biblical icon which illuminates religious life and enables it to be appreciated as a *philokalia*: the Holy Spirit overshadows consecrated persons, makes them perceive the divine grace and beauty which radiate from the humanity of Christ.

The responsibility of participating in the Church's evangelizing mission is also placed in a pneumatological perspective, pointing out that “the first missionary task of consecrated persons is towards themselves, and they fulfill it by opening their hearts to the action of the Spirit of Christ” (VC 25).

The second part of the document focuses on the value of the consecrated life as a sign and instrument of communion.¹ In particular, community life is proposed as an “eloquent sign of ecclesial communion” and a “theological space” in which to experience the Risen Lord (VC 42). For this reason, religious men and women should appear in the eyes of the world as “experts in communion” (VC 46), as sharing faith and daily life with others makes them “witnesses and builders” of unity.

It is in the context of this articulated reflection on the vocation and mission to communion, to think with the Church (*sentire cum Ecclesia*), that we find another original indication of the Exhortation: the invitation to establish closer and more incisive relationships of exchange and collaboration with the laity (VC 54). Their collective contribution is indispensable for religious in “making a more effective response to the great challenges of our time” (VC 54).

The last part of the document is an appeal to religious to become witnesses of charity: in the promotion of the dignity of the person (VC 82); in the service to life (VC 83); to the truth (VC 96); to culture and communication (VC 97-98); and to dialogue (VC 100–3). With these clear socio-pastoral guidelines, we conclude our review of the Council’s impact on religious life down to our own day.

2. THE TEACHING OF POPE FRANCIS TO RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN: A READING OF FRATELLI TUTTI FOR THE CONSECRATED LIFE

I now point out some cornerstones of Pope Francis’s teaching to religious, focusing on *Fratelli Tutti* as in today’s subtitle: “To see what really matters.” Many of the insights that structure *Fratelli Tutti* coincide with the words addressed by the pope to religious in various circumstances, creating a hermeneutical circle that allows one to read each in the light of the others.

In the characteristic way that Francis speaks to religious, one perceives his personal experience as a religious, as a Jesuit. Yes, he takes realistic snapshots of the most urgent problems; he also shows that he knows, in depth, the most hidden fragilities and the latent riches.

His experiential reading, therefore, sets out to identify practical trajectories for coming out of the impasse: to emerge from self-isolation in order to encounter the world, especially in its realities of suffering and poverty. This is where Pope Francis locates the possibility of redefining the charismatic nature of the life and mission of consecrated persons.

2.1 Testing the “Charisms,” Starting Again from the “Mission”

In 2014, on the fiftieth anniversary of *Perfectae Caritatis*, Pope Francis convoked a Year of Consecrated Life, in order to “propose again to the Church as a whole the beauty and preciousness of this special form of *sequela Christi*.”² From the outset, it became clear that the anniversary would not merely be a celebration but was meant to reflect on the relevance of consecrated life and the challenges it must face in the third millennium.

In order to show fidelity to the mission entrusted to them, in the diversity of charismatic expressions willed by the Spirit, religious must become missionaries in the contexts to which they are destined by the spirit of their institute: “All forms of consecrated life, each according to its characteristics, are called to be in a permanent state of mission.” The secret to making charisms bear fruit lies in courageously confronting them with present realities, with history, with the experience of the men and women of our time.

A renewed impetus in the mission also preserves religious from falling into that dangerous “temptation of survival”⁴ that can “sterilize” consecrated life. Clinging to survival transforms religious into fearful, reactionary disciples, and deprives charisms of their creative force, inducing them to defend “spaces, buildings, or structures, rather than making new processes possible.”⁵

This defeatist posture is “the spiritual euthanasia of a consecrated heart,”⁶ a mere “*ars bene moriendi*.”⁷ Such counter-testimony is manifested in tiredness, routine, internal divisions, seeking power, and unwise governance. Instead, religious must resume walking in the Lord, fix their gaze on him, “embrace the future with hope.”⁸

Francis’s appeal is heartfelt: “Do not be closed in on yourselves, do not be stifled by petty squabbles, do not remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems and proclaim the Good News.”⁹

Advancing along paths of hope (FT 55) is the “strategy” of the believer. It is the only way not to let oneself be engulfed by anxiety, by the difficulties of the moment.

2.2 Witnesses of encounter, creators of dialogue

It is possible to escape from the narrow confines of the present: enough to turn once again to Christ and “open oneself to the daily ‘havoc’ of grace.”¹⁰ Christ is the newness that makes all things new, as Francis repeatedly says, and whoever crosses his path cannot remain the same as before. One understands, in this sense, the centrality accorded to the category of encounter in the pope’s theological thought: in it the conciliar lessons on the primacy of divine election, on the universal call to holiness (LG 40) are summed up and reposed.

Francis highlights how the vocation to the consecrated life does not arise from a shrewd cost-benefit calculation but is a free gift that springs from the overabundant love of God and arises from “a life-changing encounter.”¹¹ Precisely for this reason, it is vital to always return to the sources and “to retrace in our mind the decisive moments of encounter with him, to renew our first love.”¹²

Mindful of the past and grateful for it, confident of the future and open to hope, religious must “live the present with passion,”¹³ that is, without turning their eyes away from the tragedies of a wounded and lost humanity. In societies that seem to foster the clash between different cultures, in which social coexistence is compromised by inequalities and the systematic abuse of the weakest, “consecrated men and women are called first and foremost to be men and women of encounter.”¹⁴

In light of *Fratelli Tutti*, this means collaborating in the creation of social bonds characterized by friendship and fraternity, acting in the fabric of civil coexistence as a link among the various different subjects who make it up.

Promoting a healthy culture of encounter is the prerequisite for achieving a social pact in which no one is denied rights and opportunities (FT 216–21). Religious, then, become artisans of a culture of encounter whenever they stand in defense of human rights and oppose the “throwaway culture” (FT 19)

In *Fratelli Tutti*, the theme of migration receives careful analysis. Francis does not hesitate to say that the adherence by Catholics to various forms of nationalist and xenophobic ideology is irreconcilable with an authentic believing life (FT 39). Attitudes of closure and intolerance make communication more difficult and hinder encounters between residents and newcomers.

The task of religious is to facilitate lay people to get personally involved in the existential stories of men, women and children forced to flee.

Here is an urgent commitment to formation: to accompany the passage from a conception of society in which the foreigner is discriminated against, to an understanding of social coexistence in which full citizenship is guaranteed to all, helping those who are called upon to welcome them to go beyond their prejudices and preconceptions.

Charity, which is always “capable of incorporating all these elements” (FT 165), thus becomes key to sustaining integral human development.

2.3 Fraternal Life in Community: a Prophetic Sign of Unity in Difference

The theme of fraternity constitutes one of the main threads that run through the magisterium of Pope Francis. Consider *Evangelii Gaudium* (ch 4), in which the social effects of a joyful proclamation of the Gospel are made explicit, or *Laudato Si'* (ch 5), which identifies areas of dialogue for a world that is more just towards people and more respectful of creation.

Set within the horizon opened up by these magisterial documents, *Fratelli Tutti* refers directly to the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together and therein finds its formal basis for reflecting “together.” This represents an epochal turning point in the promotion of interreligious dialogue, as well as a milestone in the construction of a world that is more fraternal and more united.

Therefore, the programmatic value of *Fratelli Tutti* is to be found in the firm decision to follow up and implement the teaching of the Council: universal fraternity and social friendship are for today’s world a “sign of the times” (GS 4). The message of the Encyclical aims precisely at launching a “new dream” (FT 6) for humanity: to act towards others, near and far, as if we were choosing them as our brothers and sisters and friends.

In this worldwide “new dream”, consecrated life takes on a specific value: to show the joy and beauty of fraternity, to experience and transmit the “mystique of living together” (EG 87). It reveals all its prophetic power, as a “sign” because it is from life in common that “the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ”¹⁵ shine forth, and the dream of a new humanity is already being realized.

The significant reality of consecrated life finds in fraternity the prophetic anticipation of a world in which unity is achieved while safeguarding mutual differences. True fraternity does not homogenize but allows

us to remain ourselves together with others (FT 100) and to discover that it is not possible to do without the others. Religious must witness to this safeguarding of diversity, of the plurality of cultures and identities; witness to the fraternity that aspires to universality, not as abstract, but as already a reality in their communities and works.

Hence the urgent call to safeguard fraternal life, preserving it from “criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility” (EG 100).

What Francis recommends to everyone applies above all to consecrated persons: dialogue, as a means of seeking the truth together and knowing it in its effective objectivity, overcoming every kind of “appropriation” that limits it to a single point of view (FT 206); kindness, as an attitude of respect and a determination not to hurt others (FT 223); and sincere, honest confrontation in community, learning not to impose one’s own opinions or to relativize those of others (FT 224).

In the light of the *Fratelli Tutti*, finally, intergenerational communication in community can become a practical horizon in which to exercise the evangelical style of relating to others and give the world a convincing witness of communion.

In the Encyclical, the pope notes the generalized lack of confidence in long-term planning. He expresses concern for the new generations. It is mainly the young who are conditioned by the distrust of those who preceded them towards planning the “common good.” A sort of disconnect takes place, an interruption, between the goals set by past generations and the ambitions with which young people tend to imagine the future.

Francis recommends that religious should seek in common life a fruitful exchange between young and old, avoiding “generational differences.”¹⁶ Religious communities favoring fruitful communication between the different generations of their members can teach a great deal to new generations.

2.4 A Challenge for Consecrated Life: Inculturation of the Faith

The last chapter of *Fratelli tutti* is dedicated to religions and the decisive contribution they can make—all and together—in building universal fraternity and defending social justice (FT 271).

Because of the wealth of experience and the treasures of wisdom and spirituality that they have accumulated down the centuries, religions have the right and the duty to intervene in social dialogue and public debate. Their voice must be appreciated and heard as much as that of business, politics and science (FT 275).

The unique contribution of religions to today’s culture consists in their constitutive openness to transcendence. In the “spiritual capital” (LG 43) handed down by the charismatic wisdom of religious life, we can recognize an irreplaceable service to the world: showing filial awareness, that is, recognizing ourselves before God as sons and daughters of one Father. This can sustain and hasten the realization of peace among all.

The contribution of religious to the Church's mission of evangelization and dialogue is fundamental, but today more than ever the real challenge facing them is to participate actively in the inculturation of the faith.

On the one hand, overcoming the identification between Western culture and the Catholic Church, addressed in *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 42), has made it possible to rethink the *forma ecclesiae* as unity in difference, in the manner of Trinitarian persons. On the other hand, it is true that the Church after Vatican II has shown a certain resistance to implementing this important principle.

For Francis, the Revelation of God reverberates in every people, just as light refracts on the surface of a polyhedron (EG 235). Every cultural identity is "flesh" in which the Word of God unveils the face of the Father. The Final Document of the Synod for the Amazon states firmly that it is necessary to reject "every colonialist-style evangelization" and to recognize that "seeds of the Word are already present in cultures" (55). Francis explains that unity is not uniformity, but a "pluriform harmony" that assumes differences and values partiality, because "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (FT 78).

For the pope, it is not just a matter of knowing others better, but of reaping what the Spirit has sown in them as a gift for us as well (EG 246). The service to the evangelization of culture cannot do without religious, because their presence on the ground and in context is indispensable for developing enculturated theology by processes of thematization and systematization of lived pastoral intercultural experience.

In fact, the way in which a people through its cultural traditions expresses an ethos, that is, a global sense of life and death and a sapiential perspective on God and humanity, serves as a prerequisite for the proclamation of the Gospel. Faith does not offer a predetermined cultural model, nor does it juxtapose itself with the cultures it encounters. Faith informs them from within, precisely from that ethical-anthropological-spiritual core that is essentially theirs.

The task of religious in mediating is both delicate and necessary: to enter into the life of a people, first of all, to approach its customs and traditions with respect; to learn to know their cultural ethos, being near day by day and participating discreetly; and then to make explicit those contents and those sensibilities that allow the Christian message to take root and manifest all the regenerative power of God's Revelation in Jesus Christ.

Religious therefore have an essential task of developing contextual theology: to interpret the faith and to discern the contents of a people's ethos so as to forge theological categories with which to proclaim Revelation from the perspective of that culture. As the vocation so the theology are "decentralized": an exodus from the self, a giving of oneself without reserve in becoming receptive space for the other, following the upsetting logic of the Incarnation of the Word.

- ¹ In it we hear the echo of the statements made in the document *Fraternal Life in Community* (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, “*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*,” (2 February 1994)).
- ² Pope Francis, “[Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life](#)” (30 November 2014).
- ³ Pope Francis, “[Homily for the XX World Day of Consecrated Life](#)” for the Conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life (2 February 2016).
- ⁴ Pope Francis, “[Homily for the XXI World Day of Consecrated Life](#)” (2 February 2017).
- ⁵ Pope Francis, “Homily for the XXI World Day of Consecrated Life.”
- ⁶ Pope Francis, “[Address to Participants in the Conference Organized by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life](#)” (4 May 2018).
- ⁷ Pope Francis, “[Homily for the XXIII World Day of Consecrated Life](#)” (2 February 2019).
- ⁸ Pope Francis, “[Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life](#),” 3 (21 November 2014).
- ⁹ Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” 4. ¹⁰ Pope Francis, [Homily for the XXII World Day For Consecrated Life](#) (2 February 2018).
- ¹¹ Pope Francis, “Homily for the XX World Day for Consecrated Life.”
- ¹² Pope Francis, “Homily for the XXIII World Day for Consecrated Life.”
- ¹³ Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” 2.
- ¹⁴ Pope Francis, “[Homily for the XX World Day of Consecrated Life](#),” for the Conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life (2 February 2016).
- ¹⁵ Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” 4 (21 November 2014).
- ¹⁶ Pope Francis, “[Homily for the XIX World Day for Consecrated Life](#)” (2 February 2015).