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Mary T. Brien

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Incarnation
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Exegesis and Incarnation

Towards Recovering a biblical Perspective on Consecrated Life

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It is common knowledge that Consecrated Life/Religious Life as a valid vocational path is questioned in our world today. It is questioned by non-believers, as one would expect. It is also questioned by believers and by some well-meaning Catholic Christians. For example, when a young lady known to me left her well-paid job recently to join a contemplative community, many of my friends thought it a waste of a life! “After all, couldn’t she do more for society by joining a missionary or ministerial group where she could make a difference in people’s lives as a teacher or social worker or medical professional?” And the same questioners say to me: ‘What are you doing, Mary, in Presentation, that you could not do better, or at least just as well, if you were less restricted?’ I smile, evading a lengthy answer that might be better suited to another time and place. But it sets me thinking about those two sample responses as significant pointers to some of the issues surrounding the specific identity of consecrated life within the panorama of Christian callings today.

I suspect that such responses are representative of a wide section of public opinion, within and beyond Christian circles, at the present time. At one level, they both make a plea for ‘usefulness’ to society as governing criterion; at another level, they both overlook what is at the heart of consecrated life. There is no reference to ‘vocation’ or to ‘calling’ or to the faith-dimension involved. On the positive side, the fact that consecrated life raises questions today is reassuring. Any radical form of Christian living is meant to raise questions. The day when this ‘life-form’, which we call Consecrated Life¹, does not raise questions is the day when it will have lost its power to attract.

1 Sandra Schneiders uses ‘life-form’ as designated descriptor of consecrated life. See Sandra Schneiders: *Finding the Treasure* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist), 2013, xxiii.

Mary T. Brien is a Presentation Sister of the South-West Province, Ireland. She is currently a lecturer in Sacred Scripture at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

EXEGESIS AND INCARNATION

A NARRATIVE OF HEROIC PROPORTIONS

Taking ‘usefulness to society’ as a desirable component of ministerial consecrated life (and there are some valid reasons for doing so), inspiring examples exist on our doorstep. If Irish social history is invoked, a narrative of heroic proportions emerges. Consecrated women and men have laid the foundations of educational, medical and social services in Ireland, beginning with Nano Nagle in the eighteenth century.² Practically every town and city in Ireland is witness to this fact. Visionary people who followed Nano Nagle - Edmund Rice, Catherine McCauley, Mary Aikenhead - and many others like them - established schools, colleges, hospitals, refuges, and services long before the state got involved. They did what needed to be done, in response to the Spirit’s leading, and they did it generously from their own resources, sometimes supported by voluntary contributions or family funds. Followers of these heroic women and men managed and staffed institutions and outreach services, worked long hours in difficult conditions and, until relatively recent times, received no financial support from central authorities. Many of these pioneers died young of malnutrition and of tuberculosis. A visit to a convent or monastery graveyard, noting the early ages at which many died, can be instructive. The full extent of this voluntary contribution by Religious Congregations has yet to be researched, properly documented and publicly acknowledged. But the facts speak for themselves.

One might expect such a narrative of heroism to inspire new vocations to consecrated life in one of its ministerial forms. Not so, according to statistics. The argument works in reverse. Now that the state has largely assumed responsibility for the services formerly provided by ministerial religious communities, the question becomes: “Why might anyone consider joining a religious community today, when it is possible to do all the good that the religious sisters, priests and brothers once did, or even to do better than they did, and get paid for it, without any of the restrictions imposed by religious rules or the hardships of yesteryear?” Surprisingly, this line of thinking has taken hold in families, church circles and even in some religious communities today. Again, the narrative revolves around *usefulness*: since the state now provides the services once rendered by ministerial religious congregations, there is no need for such ministerial vocations today or into the future. The corollary then becomes a plea for phasing out, for

2 While exemplars such as Margaret Ball (d.1584) and others died as martyrs two centuries earlier because of their stance on Catholic education, their efforts did not result in a formal change to the system. Nano Nagle is usually credited as pioneer of a system of Catholic education in defiance of the Penal Laws.

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saying that consecrated life has had its day, closing convent and monastery doors, refusing new entrants and ‘making space for the new to emerge’ (a vague phrase which has gathered much traction in current conversation on the ‘vocations crisis’ and which merits some unpacking). In a word, the message reads: Convents and monasteries are not needed anymore. Consecrated life is for archiving, not for serious consideration as a viable way of living the Christian life.

One further dimension of the ‘vocations crisis’ is worth mentioning. It feeds into the narrative. It is one which is rarely mentioned or pursued, even in research-based analyses of the issue. It is the *parallel crisis* in vocations to Christian marriage and family life. Statistics show that in Ireland, between 1986 and 2011, there has been a 360% increase in the number of co-habiting couples. This means fewer married couples. The percentage of church marriages (Roman Catholic) in the total population in 2018 was 47.6%. The percentage of broken marriages between 1986 and 2011 was 500%. The number of single-parent families has grown much faster than the number of two-parent families and the divorce rate among married couples and co-habiting couples continues to rise.³ Other factors, such as the numbers of Catholic voters in the Republic of Ireland who voted for abortion and for same-sex marriage in recent referenda, and the numbers of declared Christian families who no longer attend church or support it in any meaningful way, confirm the thesis that a ‘vocation crisis’ applies in Christian marriage and family life also. This is not a comforting message. But it is highly relevant to the topic under discussion.

BACK TO BASICS!

To be baptized into the Christian community is to be gifted with the life of faith, with participation in the life of the Risen Lord. This means being established in a vital relationship with God in Christ, a relationship which colours every aspect of one’s life, investing every action or happening with eternal value. It is pure gift – ‘new creation’ – to be treasured and nurtured in every way possible, whatever one’s situation and for the whole of one’s life. It may be understood as a way of seeing and hearing and responding which is ‘beyond’ the mundane, which is ‘tuned in’ to another reality – the voice of God. The baptismal rite, by the anointing of the senses, proclaims this important aspect of the sacrament. It opens up an infinite horizon. Baptism initiates one into a relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is profound, foundational, transformative. That relationship is nurtured in Christian family

3 See the breakdown of CSO figures as offered by Iona Institute, www.Ionainstitute.ie

life and in Christian community through personal response to the inspiration of the Spirit, through Word and Sacrament, through communal struggle and communal celebration, through self-gift in love and service, through prayer, practice of the virtues and through understanding of, and allegiance to Christian creed, code and cult. The vocation of the baptised person is to make *visible* in the world the life of the risen Lord. What a vocation! Little wonder that Pope Leo the Great could exclaim with astonishment, “Christian know your dignity!” This primary baptismal vocation is fundamentally and vitally related to any consideration of what we currently call the ‘vocational crisis’, whether in Christian marriage, priesthood, vowed life or singleness

RE-DISCOVERING ‘A CULTURE OF VOCATION’

For baptised persons who take their identity seriously the choice of a way of life – whether to marriage, singleness, priesthood or vowed life – is a matter of *discernment*. This means, in practice, tuning in to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit regarding one’s calling. This is hard work, because prayer is hard work. Discovering the many ways in which God reveals God’s own self and God’s designs for one’s life is an exciting journey. It may be long and dark and tortuous for some. For others it will be clear and compelling. In all cases it means discovering one’s vocation, talking and thinking vocation language. “To what way of life am I called? How do I know?” These are deep questions that touch the core of who we are as persons and they have vital links with our own deepest desires. Very often discerning persons discover that God’s call to them corresponds with their own deepest desire. Today there are programmes and courses and resources that help in the very important process of seeking out God’s designs for one’s life. Thanks to the insight given to St Ignatius of Loyola for the Church in the sixteenth century, it is possible to ‘read’ one’s calling from God by a simple process of discernment. It is possible for any serious seeker to search out through prayer and discernment the direction in which God is leading each one. But it cannot happen outside of the domain of faith. It presumes a heart and mind open to divine invitation. It presupposes ‘a culture of vocation’, with relevant support in family, parish and Christian community.

DISTINCTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

The Apostolic Exhortation known as *Verbum Domini* (in English, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2010) presents a credible way of understanding and distinguishing at least

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some of the variety of callings within the baptismal kaleidoscope. This 84-page document, which includes a bibliography, is written in a fresh and informal style. It situates all Christian vocations, whether to marriage, singleness or consecrated life, within the realm of encountering the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. For example, Sections 75-85 deal with the biblical formation of Christians, the Word of God and vocation, ordained ministers and the Word of God, the Word of God and consecrated life, the Word of God in marriage and family life. All genuine responses to the Word of God whether in marriage, ordained ministry, singleness or consecrated life, are portrayed as interpretations of the Gospel. The Christian spectrum of vocation offers the possibility of many distinctive interpretations of the Good News. Within this theological framework, vowed life is presented as a viable and publicly professed interpretation of the Good News of Jesus, as a way of making the Gospel visible and 'readable' in the world. The vowed life is actually described as 'a living exegesis' of God's Word.

Number 83 of *Verbum Domini* reads

It (the vowed life) is born from hearing the Word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life...A life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience thus becomes a living 'exegesis' of God's Word.

That is an *astounding* statement about consecrated life, as encouraging as it is challenging. Encouraging, because it clarifies things! It gives a clear rationale for a way of life which is often misunderstood. Challenging, because, according to *Verbum Domini*, the call to vowed life is an invitation to become 'a particular reading of the Gospel'.

To express it differently, those who are vowed to the following of Christ in celibacy, poverty and obedience are, by that very fact, *distinctive interpretations of the Gospel*. Christian marriage is, of course, another distinctive interpretation of the gospel, as is the single life of any baptised Christian. The baptismal call to holiness remains foundational for all interpretations of the Good News. Each interpretation is distinctive. There is no hierarchy and no competition.

INTERPRETING THE GOSPEL

If the issue of vocational discernment is lifted above and beyond immediate utilitarian considerations, consecrated life is judged for its intrinsic value as a specific interpretation of the Gospel.

For example, a person discerning a call to consecrated life will firstly ask how s/he is hearing God's call to the *Sequela Christi* in lifelong celibacy, simple lifestyle and shared accountability in community. Within that framework (an interpretation of the life of Jesus) a variety of services may be discerned, depending on one's gifts and the needs of neighbours in a specific time and place. But the identity of the vowed life as a particular 'reading' of the life of Jesus (a particular 'take' on the Gospel) ought to be the central concern, and this as response to a special, divine invitation. Otherwise, ministerial consecrated life runs into an identity crisis around 'usefulness' or 'relevance' in a world of competing needs. Vowed life, considered solely in terms of service to society, cannot and does not seek to compete with privately funded NGOs or state-sponsored development programmes. It is not, primarily, about providing useful service, although service to neighbour will be an essential component of vowed life, whether contemplative or ministerial, because love of neighbour is at the core of the Gospel. Consecrated life, in its varied forms and expressions, is about making the Gospel visible, tangible and accessible in our current church and world. Viewed in this way, it is a fruitful 'breaking open' of the Word of God, a presentation of a specific version of the Gospel for people to read, an exegesis or interpretation of the Word which raises questions and translates into a particular type of Christian witness.

EXEGESIS – WHOSE BUSINESS IS THAT?

One could be forgiven for thinking that exegesis is the business of biblical scholars and preachers and perhaps for some folk who live in the ivory towers of academia! The word itself comes from a Greek word *exegesis* – and its corresponding verb *exegesethai*, meaning 'to extract the significance of something', or to draw out its meaning. As we know, *everyone* who reads or proclaims the Word of God intelligently, everyone who teaches or preaches with a text from Sacred Scripture, everyone who listens or ponders the Word in prayer is, by doing so, an exegete. He or she is drawing out the meaning of a particular text, relating it to everyday life – the life of yesterday and of today. In one sense, we do it all the time. And, of course, the Word of God is always and everywhere relevant, if only we interpret properly, because Jesus Christ is the Word of God and the revelation of God – 'yesterday, today and forever' (Heb13:8). And, apart from a few superficial publicity-grabbing movies, nobody today, scholar or saint or artist, will deny that Jesus lived differently: He was celibate for the whole of his life, yet he loved beyond measure; he was poor and he

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chose to live simply as a travelling teacher; he was obedient to the Father in everything, whatever the cost. He was certainly *counter-cultural*, by first-century Middle Eastern standards and, even more strikingly, by twenty-first century standards.

TO BE/ TO BECOME THE EXEGESIS!

To do exegesis is one thing. To *be*, or to *become*, the exegesis is quite another! There's the rub! The vowed life, in the words of *Verbum Domini*, is 'born of the Word of God'. It presumes the gospel as first 'rule of life', as life's primary project. But the message from *Verbum Domini* goes beyond this: It announces that daily living of the vowed life is, by its very nature, an exegesis of the Word of God. In other words, a life of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience is a proclaimed and visible interpretation of the Word. It says to the world: 'This is a demo!'. Celibacy 'speaks' and announces the life and love of Jesus. So does evangelical poverty! So does evangelical obedience! If understood correctly, this means that lived religious profession is *one* powerful way of explicating, or clearly bringing out the meaning of Sacred Scripture, particularly of the New Testament, since we are New Testament people. It is one current way of saying who Jesus is today! It is one answer, but only one, to the universal cry, "We want to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). This may seem a rather ambitious and novel way of considering vowed life, perhaps (a critic may argue) informed by a blindness to the failures and flaws of human nature in historical settings. It most surely offers a sky-high challenge to those within religious communities and to enquirers. But it corresponds with the biblical roots of consecrated life and with official Church teaching.

EXEGESIS AND INCARNATION

It may have been usual in the past to think of exegesis as the business and the preserve of academics in theological institutions. But there are various kinds of exegesis – various ways of interpreting a sacred text so that its meaning becomes apparent. The work of biblical scholars (exegetes in the traditional sense) is a vital service to Church and society. It is simply irreplaceable. It is more needed today than ever before. But that academic service of interpreting can and ought to be *supplemented* by other forms, notably by those which 'translate' the sacred message into readable forms in stone, like the Irish High Crosses, on canvas, in stained glass and mosaic and tapestry. More importantly, the Word, once become Flesh in Mary's womb, calls out for flesh and blood exemplars,

in all cultures and in all walks of life. This is one reason why our Church needs saints. We want to catch a glimpse of dimensions of the Gospel that may escape our most exhaustive studies. Exegesis and Incarnation go hand in hand.

THE FOUNDING CHARISM

Each founder of a Religious Congregation or Institute, in his/her time, caught a particular glimpse of the Gospel and was gifted with ways and means of incarnating that vision in the existing culture. In that sense, each Congregation represents ‘a specific interpretation of the Gospel’- a particular refraction of the light of Christ beamed on a current reality. Discovering and re-incarnating that original vision is a vital and ongoing task for members of religious communities. There is no limit to the number of ‘specific interpretations of the Gospel’ that may emerge, but they will be new, while in harmony with the original vision. Likewise, there is no limit to the number of interpretations that may evolve within and beyond existing interpretations, because the Spirit’s creativity is inexhaustible. This is another way of saying that Consecrated Life invites to endless Spirit-led incarnations, each of which will proclaim, and make ‘readable’, a specific version of the Good News of Jesus. To say that Consecrated Life has ‘had its day’ is to put limits on the power of God’s Spirit at work in human history, inspiring ongoing exegesis and incarnation.

Transparency. At the present time, we are in a state of crisis and shame. We have seriously clouded the grace of the Christ-mission. Is it possible for us to move from fear of scandal to truth? How do we remove the masks that hide our sinful neglect? What policies, programmes and procedures will bring us to a new, revitalised starting point characterised by a transparency that lights up the world with God’s hope for us in building the reign of God?

- SR. VERONICA OPENIBO SHCJ, ‘Openness to the World’ in *Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church*. Dublin: Veritas. 2019. p. 110.