Landas 25 (2011) 183–190

THE THOUGHT OF BENEDICT XVI ON CONSECRATED LIFE

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Premises

Source Material

In asking myself what could be the thought of Benedict XVI regarding consecrated life, I searched the Vatican website and I decided to study the six (6) speeches of Benedict XVI for the Feast of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem (February 2).[1] There are other sources[2] that I could have considered in writing about the thoughts of Benedict XVI on this theme but, for reasons of similarity of occasions when Benedict XVI shared his

[1]It has been fifteen years now since Blessed John Paul II in 1996 designated this date as the World Day of Consecrated Life.

[2]There are addresses to the participants of the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (September 27, 2005), to men and women religious of the Diocese of Rome (December 10, 2005), to Canadian Bishops (May 11, 2006) and to the General Superiors (May 22, 2006). One may check references to consecrated life in his Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), in a homily at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York (April 19, 2008), and so forth.

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thoughts on this regard, as well for the sake of consistency of literary genre with which he addressed his audience, I thought to limit my study to these six addresses (February 2, 2006 to 2011).

In two of these six documents, mention is made regarding the threefold purpose for giving specific attention to consecrated life, namely: 1) to praise and thank the Lord for the gift of consecrated life, 2) to promote knowledge and appreciation of it among the People of God, and 3) to invite all those who have dedicated their life totally to the cause of the Gospel to celebrate the marvels the Lord has worked in them.

Literary Genre and Context

The six addresses made so far by Benedict XVI on consecrated life consist of three Homilies (during the Mass of 2006 and during Vespers of 2010 and 2011) and three Addresses in the special Audiences of 2007, 2008 and 2009. In all six occasions the addressees are the men and women of consecrated life and the members of the various Societies of the Apostolic Life.

Church events like the Synod on the Word of God (2008), the Year of St. Paul (2009) and the Year for Priests (2010) served as a backbone of the Holy Father's reflections in the years mentioned above.

Scriptures, Tradition and Magisterium

In his writings, the Holy Father has always relied on the three sources of Christian faith and so, theology.

Benedict XVI founds his reflection extensively on Sacred Scriptures. Due to the context of a Mass homily for the year 2006, the Holy Father dwelt on all liturgical readings offered for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord: Book of the Prophet Malachi, Psalm 24, Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Luke. However, in the succeeding addresses, he would return only to the Gospel reading, particularly by analyzing the attitudes of the main characters (Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna) and referring these to the theme of consecrated life.

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In 2009, being the Year of St. Paul, he used the letters of the great Apostle of the gentiles, namely: the First and Second Letters to the Corinthians, the Letters to the Galatians and to the Philippians, and the First Letter to the Christian community of Thessalonica.

Another source of the Holy Father's faith reflection is the Church's Tradition, expressed in the liturgy of the Presentation of the Lord and witnessed by the lives of the Founders and Foundresses of the Religious Orders. He also used a number of the Church's Magisterium, starting with the Vatican II document on Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, his immediate predecessor's Encyclical letter, *Vita Consacrata,* and his own Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*. Other Church teachings on which he based his addresses come from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: "The Service of Authority and Obedience" and "Starting Afresh from Christ."

The Identity of Consecrated Persons

Dedication to God

In the light of the Child Jesus' dedication to God in the Temple on the fortieth day since his birth, the Holy Father holds that the essence of the consecrated life is the "concrete dedication of the consecrated persons to God and to their brethren." Because of this, consecrated life is an eloquent sign of the presence of God's Kingdom, a way of living and of working that vividly expresses one's full belonging to the one Lord. In placing oneself without reserve in the hands of Christ and of the Church, consecrated men and women are "[w]atchmen among the People of God who perceive and proclaim the new life already present in our history."

Spiritual Yearning

In the light of Simeon and Anna's longing to see the Lord, Benedict XVI states that consecrated persons are they "who make this spiritual longing their own in a definitive way, who have one

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expectation which is 'that God reign in our will, in our hearts, in the world'." Simeon and Anna profess in their lives that someone "in whom burns a unique thirst for love which can be quenched by the Eternal One alone." Their examples proclaim to the world that God is the Lord of life and that his "steadfast love is better than life." Consecrated life, therefore, bears witness to the world that there are persons "who live a total and definitive, unconditional and passionate response to God, because in choosing Christ, they let themselves be conquered by him without reserve."

The Evangelical Counsels

In the light of the Year of St. Paul, the Holy Father sees in the great Apostle of the Gentiles one whose life was "inspired by the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience."

Benedict XVI qualifies the life of poverty in a twofold direction: a) for the sake of the Kingdom, that is, as a "guarantee of a Gospel proclamation carried out totally gratuitously," and b) for the sake of the people, that is, as an "expression of concrete solidarity to his brethren in need."

For him, the life of chastity also has the same twofold direction: a) to God, as a "gift of one's heart to the Lord in an undivided manner" and b) to one's neighbor, as a "service to one's brethren with even greater freedom and dedication."

Similarly, the life of obedience has a multi-pronged direction: a) God, "doing God's will as a sacrifice that found favor with God," b) Mission, "daily pressure of an anxiety for all the churches as the motivation, shaping and consummation of one's life," and c) Communion, "to wholly belong to Jesus in order, like Jesus, to belong to all, [that is,] to be Jesus for all: *I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some*."

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The Essence of Life-Witness

Beyond the exercise of the evangelical counsels, the Holy Father emphasizes the distinct place of life-witnessing at the core of a person's consecration by God. S/he is a "Gospel witness," that is, "a response without reserve to the initiative of God who has consecrated you to Him with a special act of love." He maintains that consecrated persons "offer a supreme and faithful witness of love of God and brethren. So saying, consecrated life is to "make a gift of one's own charism and to witness in the first place to the greatest charism which is charity."

Referring to the Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church in October of 2008, Benedict XVI points to the "witness to the importance of placing the Word of God at the center of all things." He stresses that this entails a "following of Christ without compromise as presented in the Gospel." Thus, consecrated life stands as a "witness towards an even greater fidelity to the Gospel," just as every founder/foundress of all orders of religious life has been inspired by a Gospel image and/or teaching of Jesus Christ and rooted his/her life to its *sequela*.

The Core-Ministry

If today's corporations insist on staying in their core competency, the Holy Father highlights what should be the main competency of men and women of consecrated life. They are those in whom "the fascination of the truth of Christ and the joy that derives from love for him" shine forth.

The main task of consecrated life is to witness to the "fact that God is love and that to love him is sweet." It is to manifest as well

> the vital importance of the Word of God: recalling that all Christians are brought together by the Word, to live of the Word and to remain under its lordship. Consecrated persons involve themselves in the Church's task of evangelization when they take the role of a much-needed incentive towards greater fidelity to the Gospel: becoming an eloquent, albeit often silent, proclamation of the Gospel.

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In the Church, moreover, they show that the "greatest charism is charity which consists in the reciprocal seeking of God and man," "to the love that attracts them to each other," "to the special mercy of the Lord in which human beings find their salvation,"

> to the unbounded generosity and love of God: that superabundance of love that is an incentive to "lose" one's life in response to the superabundance of love of him who first "lost" his life for us, and ultimately, to the primacy of God, passion for the Gospel practised as a form of life and proclaimed to the poor and the lowliest of the earth.

Models of Consecrated Life

Personages in the Presentation at the Temple and St. Paul

Mary and Joseph in their observance of the Law are presented by the Holy Father "as living in accordance with and complying with the Law" as well as persons who are "listening attentively to the Word." Simeon and Anna are characterized by their "longing to see the Messiah," and in "looking for the redemption of their people." They are those whose "life [is] totally consecrated to the Lord." The qualities describing these four personages are models of consecrated life.

The same can be said of St. Paul who is the "father and teacher of those called by the Lord."

Mary

The Holy Father reserves to Mary the title of model par excellence for the consecrated life.

She is a "Most holy and consecrated Woman" (2006); she is *Totapulchra* and Teacher (2007), and "Protection" (2008).

Mary is the Consecrated one, Woman, the "Yes," our Mother, heavenly intercessor (2009), and in the light of the evangelical counsels, she is "Virgin, poor and obedient, totally dedicated to us because she belongs totally to God."

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She too is the Mother of the Church, a school of motherly Help, the "Hear I am," and the "Fiat" (2010) and the Virgin (2011).

Conclusion

In these six addresses, we may say that the Holy Father sees consecrated life in three icons.

To be Light

This comes "from Christ, shining on Mary and Joseph, on Simeon and Anna, and through them, on everyone." To be light has the purpose to shine "for the spiritual journey, that is '*philokalia*'—love the divine beauty, [and be that] reflection of the divine goodness shining forth in the face of Christ."

To be Prophet

Consecrated life is a "gift of the Holy Spirit, foreseeing Christ's destiny of death and Resurrection." It is "born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his Word in the different circumstances of history." Prophetism consists in "displaying the Gospel and the Kingdom as already alive and present in one's daily experience on the roads of humanity."

To be Wisdom

Consecrated persons profess "a life completely dedicated to listening to and proclaiming his Word." In this way it is a "visible sign of this search for the face of the Lord and of the ways that lead to the Lord—witnessing to the task at once joyful and laborious, of the diligent search for the divine will."

A Prayer to the Blessed Mother

The last of the six discourses declares Benedict XVI's personal prayer to the Virgin who is poor and obedient, thus:

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O, Mary, Mother of the Church,
I entrust all consecrated people to you,
that you may obtain for them the fullness of divine light:
may they live in listening to the Word of God,
in the humility of following Jesus, your Son and our Lord,
in the acceptance of the visit of the Holy Spirit,
in the daily joy of the *Magnificat*,
so that the Church may be edified by the holy lives
of these sons and daughters of yours,
in the commandment of love. Amen.

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