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TESTIMONY OF THE FAITHFUL ON CONSECRATED LIFE*

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I had been asked to share my personal experience on the influence/impact of Vatican II on my consecrated/religious life. Having entered the religious life a few years after Vatican II, the changes were only starting, and so there were a lot of remnants of the pre-Vatican II religious lifestyle. Our ministry was more confined to the retreat house, and there were still a lot of monastic elements like the emphasis on common chanted prayer, silence, scheduled adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, and less contact with people from the outside world except with those who came to the house to make retreats or when a Sister had to go to the doctor. The retreats given in the Cenacle were the preached retreats given by a priest (usually a Jesuit), and the Sisters were just expected to have individual conferences with assigned retreatants, usually women. However, all throughout there were also the individually directed Ignatian retreats given by the Sisters to other religious.

In the past, the Cenacle ministry of education in the faith was conducted in the house—giving retreats and teaching catechism. The change of orientation which Vatican II ushered in—opening up to

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the outside rather than keeping ourselves separate from the world—challenged us to go out to where people were. We were constantly reminded that "entering the convent" (as most people would still say) does not mean leaving the world!

Vatican II influenced the prayer life of the Cenacle Sisters. There was greater emphasis on one's personal relationship with Jesus, the "love affair of a religious" as one of our older Sisters used to remind the younger Sisters. The practice of monastic common prayer began to give way to more creative and meaningful ways of praying together. The Sisters learned to do real faith sharing in community. This has become an essential binding force for promoting communion in community as contrasted to the former emphasis on uniformity. Community structures became more fluid as we struggled to balance our threefold mission of prayer, community, and apostolic service. Thus, it became mandatory that one grew into personal maturity since this was necessary for personal and communal discernment in living the choices of our consecrated life.

This change in direction had a direct consequence on the way we did our ministry. No longer were we confined to the retreat house. We began to go to where people were and where our ministry was needed—to parishes, homes (for home retreats), schools, formation houses, seminaries, convents, and other retreat houses to conduct retreats and seminars on psycho-spiritual formation. We no longer limited our clientele to "lay and religious women"; we became available to different kinds of people (women and men, lay, religious, priests, seminarians, students, young, old, straight or otherwise, etc.)—anyone who was seeking God in their lives.

As a Cenacle Sister caught up in this, I was challenged to keep "reinventing" or reinterpreting the Cenacle mission in the locality where I found myself. Retreat work, which is an expression of education in the faith, is our way of evangelization.

Some years ago, the apostolic nuncio for China asked the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia (ICLA), where I was teaching, to conduct an investigative survey of the needs of local religious women in

China. There was an observed influx of Chinese Sisters coming to the Philippines to study. This was when the Chinese government started to allow priests and religious to study abroad. I was sent by ICLA to conduct the survey.

I had mixed feelings when I first visited several congregations of women in four provinces in China over a period of three weeks. I was appalled to see some of their living conditions, with their walls pasted with old newspapers to protect them from the harsh winter cold. Some of the convents looked like old garage structures. I was touched to hear about their incredible stories of mission, while at the same time feeling incensed that they were being used as cheap labor for the Church, without the benefit of adequate human and religious formation. Many of them did not have an adequate understanding of their religious vocation, much less understand their Christian vocation. These were moving experiences for me, encountering so many women desiring to serve the Church yet given very little or no preparation or education for the life and mission. But God was there.

The results of the survey significantly impacted the discernment for our small region to embrace the China mission. Since the Chinese Sisters were already coming to the Philippines for theological studies, we thought of providing the Sisters holistic formation and integration before they returned home. But our small number of Cenacle Sisters in Asia (never going beyond 25!) and our lack of proficiency in the Chinese language limited our capacity to be the direct evangelizers. Now, we have a Philippine-based China mission effort in the form of our 10-month residential formation program. To date, we have already included Sisters coming from other repressed Asian Churches such as Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia. We also have opportunities to follow-up on those who have gone through our program. How we are engaged today in the area of "education in the faith" is certainly very different from the way we ministered before the Vatican II Council. There have been a lot of "moving out of the box"—a daring to go out into the deep. Even the document from our last General Chapter has affirmed our "daring to go out."

In my years of Cenacle religious formation, I also grew up with the paradigm of retreats conducted in the Cenacle retreat house with what we call the particular Cenacle "flavor" providing a prayerful and beautiful space to encounter God. Responding to the calls in the greater "world," I found myself having to let that go if needed.

A few years back, one of my former students, a priest belonging to the underground Church, invited me to give a retreat to the clergy of his diocese in China. There were 21 of them, including a few who were preparing for the diaconate. At that time, the Cenacle had just begun going into China to conduct modular courses for local women religious. I welcomed the opportunity to be of service to the Church of China. I had expectations that the retreat was going to be held in some convent or retreat house. But that was not the case—the priests were able to arrange as retreat venue an unfinished three-storey house that the owners abandoned when they moved to the city. The second floor had a living room which was converted into a chapel where the conferences and communal/personal prayer were held. There was another big room that accommodated ten priests and on the third floor there were two big rooms that accommodated the rest of the eleven retreatants. Even I had to share the room with the two local Sisters who took care of cooking and cleaning for us, as well as providing a bucket of water for the day's use for each person (because there was no running water in the building). As the retreat was held in November, cold weather was already setting in.

This building was in the middle of a seemingly abandoned farm in a rural village far from civilization. Stacks of old tires, old rotting hardware, and other stuff surrounded the house. There was no place to walk around, no typical retreat atmosphere. We did not have any choice but to be confined to the building for our sessions, prayer, liturgies, and meals during the 6-day retreat.

I had planned to give them time for personal prayer, to walk around and enjoy nature, but that plan had to be abandoned as there really was no place for them to walk around. There was no surrounding beauty for their eyes to feast on. I found out that this retreat had a number of

"firsts" for them: first time to be guided by a woman religious, first time to have a quiet retreat, and first time to learn to pray with Scripture.

Despite the seemingly herculean limitations, God's grace was poured out upon them in abundance. At the end of the retreat, they commented that that was their very first time to experience the power of God's Word in their lives through Scripture prayer and to experience solitude of the heart. It was deeply consoling to witness God's grace working each day in each one.

Reflecting on the journey of consecrated life in the context of the continuing challenges of Vatican II, there are some gold nuggets of truth that I have received:

1) Without a personal relationship with Jesus in prayer, we lose the power of the prophetic edge of our consecrated vocation.

2) Our prophetic spirit cannot be awakened unless we are immersed in the life of the people in a particular place and time, enabling us to interpret the concrete situation in contemplative stance before the world in the light of God's dream for people and the whole of humanity.

3) Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one's capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for one's authentic self. In the past, external structures were given emphasis in formation and religious lifestyle. With all the changes and challenges after Vatican II, internal structures in formation and the living of one's consecrated vocation have to be given greater importance.

4) The situation of our world and the constant search for God that lies in the human heart are challenging us to be true to the nature of our consecrated life as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Confronted by the present reality of our world, by our society, by our church, we can only give witness to our life as prophets and mystics if we respond to God's constant invitation to become spiritual adults capable of contemplation and discernment and

attentive to the presence of the sacred in our own inner journeys, in the lives of others especially the poor and the marginalized, and throughout creation. Recognizing contemplation as a way of life for the whole Church, we see our communities and ourselves as centers of spirituality and places of encounter with the living God, enabling us to "weave" the various "threads" that form our response to the call of mission.