



Consecrated Religious in Australian parish life

Thoughts on collaboration in the new millennium

by Rev Benedict La Volpe OFMConv



Fr Benedict La Volpe is a Friar Minor Conventual, and the parish priest of St Joseph's, Springvale in the Melbourne Archdiocese. He delivered this paper at the 2015 national conference in Hobart.

This paper puts together some thoughts on how we as Religious and you as diocesan priests can collaborate, so that together, as Bishop Schneider reminded us, we can show the People of God the way to Heaven. Rather than an academic presentation, I feel this area is better discussed applying theory, more often that not from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996), to practical life, perhaps including a few anecdotes along the way.

Even though this Year for Consecrated Life is “a bit of a fizz,” as we would say colloquially, there are many treasures that can be unearthed. I would like to use this time to show how Religious can be collaborators in the vineyard and how as diocesan priests you may be able to appreciate their presence and make the most of it. My only qualifier is that when I use the word

“Religious” I am generally referring to any member of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

I would like to briefly explain what Consecrated Life is, then look at the role of Clerical Religious Congregations, especially at work in the Parish, and then a reminder of the role of non-ordained Religious men and women and what they can contribute to our Parish life.

1. *Vita Consecrata*

In calling for a Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis enumerated three aims for the year. Firstly to look to the past with gratitude, secondly to live the present with passion, and thirdly to embrace the future with hope.¹ These three aims for this Year of Consecrated Life remind us of

¹ Francis, Apostolic Letter *To All Consecrated People*, 21 November, 2014.

the beauty that has been lived in the past. It also reminds us of a beauty that can be sought today, and hopefully a beauty that will remain — notwithstanding the so-called demise of Consecrated Life in the West.

The very first paragraph in the 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* sets the scene for a current understanding of Consecrated life:

The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus — the chaste, poor and obedient one — are made constantly 'visible' in the midst of the world and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realisation in heaven.²

Consecrated Life is not an appendage to the Church, nor an optional extra, it is part of the living breathing Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* spells this out in the section on the Creed, Article 9: I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church.

Religious life derives from the mystery of the Church. It is a gift she has received from her Lord, a gift she offers as a stable way of life to the faithful called by God to profess the counsels. Thus, the Church can both show forth Christ and acknowledge herself to be the Savior's bride. Religious life in its various forms is called to signify the very charity of God in the language of our time.³

Religious Life is called to be the great witness and icon of the Transfiguration, "The profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the world."⁴

Of course we also need to look at this aspect of Consecrated Life with regards to what we like to call, as Pope Benedict beautifully coined, 'a hermeneutic of continuity.' One of the great Prefects of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, Cardinal Franc Rodé, C.M. pre-

sented a paper to the Religious in the U.S. back in 2009 entitled *From Past to Present: Religious Life Before and After Vatican II*. In it he examines how discontinuity and rupture could lead to continuity and reform for religious in the United States. His Eminence wrote:

"Religious life, being a gift from the Holy Spirit to the individual religious and the Church, depends especially on fidelity to its origins, fidelity to the founder, fidelity to the particular charism. Fidelity to that charism is essential, for God blesses fidelity while he 'opposes the proud.' The complete rupture of some with the past, then, goes against the nature of a religious congregation, and essentially it provokes God's rejection.

I guess when I am speaking of Religious and their collaboration in parishes, for us members of the ACCC, this is the paradigm: "Religious faithful to the Church." Pope Benedict reiterates this in his Message for the 47th World Day of Prayer for Vocations:

The same can be said with regard to the consecrated life. The very life of men and women religious proclaims the love of Christ whenever they follow him in complete fidelity to the Gospel and joyfully make their own its criteria for judgement and conduct. They become 'signs of contradiction' for the world, whose thinking is often inspired by materialism, self-centredness and individualism. By letting themselves be won over by God through self-renunciation, their fidelity and the power of their witness constantly awaken in the hearts of many young people the desire to follow Christ in their turn, in a way that is generous and complete. To imitate Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, and to identify with him: this is the ideal of the consecrated life, a witness to the absolute primacy of God in human life and history.

This need for Religious to be of one mind and one heart with the Church is given to us in *Vita Consecrata*, under the subheading *Sentire cum Ecclesia*.

Of course it was the founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius of Loyola, who coined the phrase *Sentire Cum Ecclesia* ("To think with the Church"). In one section of his *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius describes the

proper attitude that the believer should have toward the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church (13th Rule).

Number 46 of *Vita Consecrata* sums up everything I have aforementioned.

A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion ... The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension. ... In founders and foundresses we see a constant and lively sense of the Church, which they manifest by their full participation in all aspects of the Church's life, and in their ready obedience to the Bishops and especially to the Roman Pontiff. ... They are examples which consecrated persons need constantly to recall if they are to resist the particularly strong centrifugal and disruptive forces at work today. A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops, an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God by all consecrated persons, especially those involved in theological research, teaching, publishing, catechesis and the use of the means of social communication. Because consecrated persons have a special place in the Church, their attitude in this regard is of immense importance for the whole People of God. Their witness of filial love will give power and forcefulness to their apostolic activity which, in the context of the prophetic mission of all the baptized, is generally distinguished by special forms of cooperation with the Hierarchy. In a specific way, through the richness of their charisms, consecrated persons help the Church to reveal ever more deeply her nature as the sacrament 'of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind.'⁵

Please excuse the very long quotation, but this is the Church's Magisterium, a teaching that exhorts Religious to work in the Church, for the Church and with the Church. There is no Magisterium that allows Religious to be lone Rangers, to invent their own form of Religious Life nor to divorce themselves from the true worship of the Church.

2 John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, no. 1.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 926.

4 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 15.

5 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 46.

2. Religious priests in parishes: living the religious charism in the daily life of our parochial setting

I would like to open this section with a blast from the past! Namely, that often quoted great document of Vatican II, the Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*:

All presbyters, both diocesan and religious, participate in and exercise with the bishop the one priesthood of Christ and are thereby constituted prudent co-operators of the episcopal order.⁶

The onus is then on us Religious in numbers 33 and 34:

All Religious have the duty, each according to his proper vocation, of cooperating zealously and diligently in building up and increasing the whole Mystical Body of Christ and for the good of the particular churches.⁷

Religious priests are by consecration assumed into the responsibilities of the presbyterate so as to become themselves the prudent co-operators of the episcopal order. Today they can be of even greater help to bishops in view of the greater needs of souls. Therefore, they can be said in a real sense to belong to the clergy of the diocese inasmuch as they share in the care of souls and in carrying out works of the apostolate under the authority of the prelates.⁸

Dear brothers, Religious priests are not given to dioceses simply to fill in parishes that cannot be staffed by the diocesan clergy. No, they are called by their very vocation to work for the *cura animarum*. This cooperative way forward is also given to us in *Christus Dominus*:

A well-ordered cooperation is to be encouraged between various religious communities and between them and the diocesan clergy. There should also be a very close coordination of all apostolic works and activities which especially depend upon a supernatural attitude of hearts and minds, rooted in and founded upon charity.⁹

Call to communion

So what is this cooperation that the Church call us to, both Religious and diocesan priests? *Vita Consecrata* points us in the right direction:

Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective Institutes are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve. (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11)¹⁰

Communion – brotherhood – should be the first area of cooperation between Religious and diocesan priests. A communion based on mutual respect, and a mutual mission: the up building of the Kingdom of God.

Religious priests who work in parishes live in a situation where they are a Father to their community – ie: the parish – just as the secular clergy are, yet they are also brothers to each other in their respective religious communities. It is true that there are usually three or more religious men living in community, depending on their Congregation's Rule, and so it can be "easier" in a sense for religious priests to both work in the parish and live religious life as well. This of course is not always the case! Living religious life – or rather men living religious life – can bring with it a whole set of problems, community dynamics, etc., that can make life difficult! I mention this because at times there can be a sentiment amongst secular clergy that we religious have it easy because of numbers. But it is often the same clergy who would quickly add that religious life is definitely not for them!

How religious clergy can serve their brothers in the diocesan presbyterate

Religious clergy should not just supply Mass, they are called by the Church to provide the richness of their spiritual *charism*, translated throughout confession and spiritual direction and providing assistance to the secular clergy. There should be something different about us religious priests to provide a place where the diocesan clergy feel free to come to us

for confession, for spiritual direction, for a kind word, for friendship! We are, yes the same in the priesthood, but as religious our formation in the Congregation's charism, history, spirituality is a gift that we give back! Hopefully religious priests are able to translate this, notwithstanding the many demands on them in their parishes.

Vita Consecrata makes this point:

Because of their supra-diocesan character, grounded in their special relation to the Petrine ministry, they are also at the service of cooperation between the particular Churches, since they can effectively promote an 'exchange of gifts' among them.¹¹

The charisms of the consecrated life can greatly contribute to the building up of charity in the particular Churches.¹²

How secular clergy can serve their religious priest brothers

This exchange of gifts can be seen in real terms between religious and diocesan clergy. I mentioned already what religious priests can bring with them. But this exchange shows that diocesan clergy can also contribute so much to us religious.

On a personal level, I arrived at St Joseph's, Springvale, nearly six years ago. I was an assistant priest for four years in my former parish in northwest Sydney. My PP there was a good man, a good priest and a good religious. But let's just say he had a unique style in communicating the 'management' of a parish. Thanks be to God, when I arrived at Springvale, firstly I had a very supportive community of friars, and a guardian (local superior) who had the friary's *horarium* ticking like clockwork. At the same time, I had support from local clergy with a great knowledge of parish life, such as Fr Walshe, Fr Pritchard and Fr Cartwright. These men and others, including Fr Shadbolt here, were able to show me, literally, how to be a PP; how to administer the school (something not done in NSW); how to deal with certain characters. These diocesan clergy exchanged their gifts of experience, knowledge and wisdom with me. This is the Church's Magisterium seen in action.

6 Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*. 28 October 1965, no. 28.

7 *Christus Dominus*, no. 33.

8 *Christus Dominus*, no. 34.

9 *Christus Dominus*, no. 35.

10 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 47.

11 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 47.

12 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 48.

We often only speak about having to form foreign clergy so as to allow them to understand the local parochial culture. But these needs are as pressing for local religious clergy as they are for foreign secular clergy!

Notwithstanding what we read earlier in *Christus Dominus* I don't think that ordinaries (ie: bishops) are cognisant of our lack of experience and knowledge regarding parochial management. In accepting our nomination as parish priests or assistant priests in parishes, they often assume we have had the same formation as their seminarians would have had – including that all important pastoral year, something I never had the opportunity to undertake.

Religious in the diocese

The Church's Magisterium reminds us:

Bishops are asked to welcome and esteem the charisms of the consecrated life, and to give them a place in the pastoral plans of the Diocese. They should have a particular concern for Institutes of diocesan right, which are entrusted to the special care of the local Bishop...

A Diocese which lacked the consecrated life would not only be deprived of many spiritual gifts, of suitable places for people to seek God, of specific apostolic activities and pastoral approaches, but it would also risk a great weakening of that missionary spirit which is characteristic of the majority of Institutes.¹³

In his pastoral charity [the Bishop] will therefore welcome the charisma of the consecrated life as a grace which is not restricted to any one Institute, but which benefits the whole Church. Bishops will thus seek to support and help consecrated persons, so that, in communion with the Church, they open themselves to spiritual and pastoral initiatives responding to the needs of our time, while remaining faithful to their founding charisma. For their part, consecrated persons will not fail to cooperate generously with the particular Churches as much as they can and with respect for their own charisma, working in full communion with the Bishop in the areas of evangelization, catechesis and parish life.¹⁴

Religious, and more particularly here,

¹³ *Vita Consecrata*, no. 48.

¹⁴ *Vita Consecrata*, no. 49.

religious clergy, do have a role in the diocese and in parish life. There would be many who would argue that we are simply here in an auxiliary role. But the Church calls us, indeed *mandates* religious to work closely with the diocesan structures as part of it, not simply as bystanders. I don't think this is a great problem in Australia. But having had a good experience of the Church – or rather of my Order – in the U.S., Italy and Poland, I see this as a great problem where religious and diocesan clergy look upon the other with suspicion and at times disdain. The Church's teaching on this collaboration is not just for us here, but needs to be heeded by all religious and secular clergy throughout the world.

Religious promote priestly vocations

One last area of collaboration in this section before speaking briefly on the role of religious men and women in general, is that of *vocations*. Believe it or not, religious promote vocations to the diocesan priesthood.

From my own experience, our three parishes of Kellyville, Springvale and Warrawong have certainly generated vocations to the diocesan priesthood. The witness of the priest-friars in these areas has encouraged young men to discern their vocation to the diocesan priesthood. We are not there to compete with the diocese but rather called to nurture vocations for the greater glory of God and not ourselves!

I would hope that diocesan clergy too when they note a vocation in a young man may be discerning enough themselves to see that perhaps the diocesan life is not for this young man and he may be more suited to community life — not, as I've heard, and certainly not from the good men in this room, that this young man is perhaps not so academically inclined and so he may be more adept to consecrated life! We may be simple, but hopefully the great academic history of religious shows that we too can read a book!!!

Seriously though, as the Jesuit Fr Hardon wrote so beautifully:

The Eucharist is also the best way to recognise vocations. Show me a man or woman devoted to the Eucharist and I

will show you a person who is an apt subject for the priesthood or the religious life.¹⁵

Discern well for the sake of the candidate, not for the sake of a perceived decline in vocations to the diocesan priesthood, which as we are seeing is not so in decline any more. Religious clerical congregations faithful to the Church, with a clear *sentire cum ecclesia*, are in great need for the very renewal we are seeing in our diocesan seminaries!

3. The value of religious sisters and brothers in our parishes

In general terms I have looked at the Magisterium of the Church regarding the collaboration of religious in the pastoral setting and a closer look at religious priests in parishes. Now I would like to briefly outline the great role that non-clerical Religious can have in our parishes as well.

Firstly the great witness of prayer of religious. In seeking God first in their lives they can be a great help to the many parishioners who are in need of seeing this witness of prayer. Parishioners are inspired by the communal nature of religious in the parish, of the mystique of what life is like 'behind the convent walls.' They are also edified by the *horarium* that religious live. I know my own parishioners are always taken aback to know we friars actually spend several hours each day in prayer in our friary chapel. Most think that the only 'church time' we have is when they see us celebrating Mass in the church.

Another area of collaboration is religious brothers' and sisters' participation in the sacred liturgy. Now I believe, like most of you, of the role of the priest in the liturgy! I'm not quite sure the sizes of your parishes but I look after a parish where our weekday Masses number anywhere between 150-300 people, and our Sunday count is somewhere near 2600 people. We do have to use extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, even with three of us friars living in my community. I will always ask any religious present to help first. I

¹⁵ John Hardon, 'The Eucharist and Vocations,' 1980.



Sr Acacia MC congratulates Fr Francis Denton after his priestly ordination at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, last July.

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would hope for the same in most parishes, but this is not always the case. Sometimes anyone but religious are asked to help with the distribution of Holy Communion. Having a visible religious in this context can assist in upholding the sanctity of the Eucharist. I firmly believe religious should be asked before laity in this role.

The role of religious in being present for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament should also be emphasised. Are they invited? Are they given the idea that their presence can help with the spiritual formation of the whole parish and inspire so many others to do the same? Are Religious rostered in the Parish's ministry? Always ask them first. This increases the visibility of religious, and can inspire vocations to religious life as long as they are in the habit.

Regarding the habit I quite like what I read in an article in *Religious Life*:

The religious habit instructs the observer that there is more here than meets the eye. This person, this religious, is a professed collaborator with God. The habit says that this person is a channel

of God's grace... The religious habit tells the onlooker that, all things being equal, this man or woman is a sign of God's mysterious ways in our midst.¹⁶

People respond positively to seeing the habit in their parishes. Because they do not see it too often, they are often curious about what the habit is, why it looks the way it does and by personal experience, are always eager to ask "Father/Sister/Brother, aren't you hot in that?!"

Apart from the parish's sacramental life, another area we can encourage the collaboration of religious is in catechesis. Older clergy and not so older clergy have all benefitted from teaching religious. Now days this is the exception rather than the norm. It is up to us to encourage new beginnings. Religious sisters or brothers teaching catechism, RCIA, adult faith formation, going into the classrooms, youth apostolate, visiting the elderly, childcare – this can all be part of the new evangelisation, which we do read in *Vita Consecrata*:

16 M. Habiger, *Religious Life*. Jan/Feb 2012.

If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to challenge by the revealed word and the signs of the times.¹⁷

This can also be experienced with religious providing spiritual assistance to groups, the Legion of Mary, etc. With their ecclesial identity religious help to keep things 'on the rails' so to speak, in communion with the Church, which means that as a PP you do not have to worry! Sometimes we see with the laity internal fighting over leadership, and lack of cooperation and obedience to the PP and the Church. Religious can be a bridge in this regard. They can be your eyes and ears in these situations.

Women religious also have a way of helping the parish priest in areas that at times may be delicate. Again looking to *Vita Consecrata*, the Holy Father reminds us:

17 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 81.

The Church depends a great deal on consecrated women for new efforts in fostering Christian doctrine and morals, family and social life, and especially in everything that affects the dignity of women and respect for human life.¹⁸

We shouldn't underplay the role religious women can have fostering a culture of life in our parishes.

This is juxtaposed by a story I heard recently. One of my parishioners was telling me about her aunt, a nun, who is a missionary in the Philippines. Her apostolate is to work among the prostitutes of Manila. I was quite edified to hear this, until the parishioner told me, yes "my aunt does her best to go into the chemists and pharmacies to buy condoms for these ladies!" My face and heart dropped at this. Firstly that this parishioner thought her aunt was doing something heroic, but more because of the anti-witness of her aunt, a religious sister, in her very important apostolate. Not at all what no. 58 of *Vita Consecrata* notes!

Speaking earlier about the role of religious clergy, I mentioned the role of friendship. This again is an important role of all religious in the parish setting. One of our American friars, speaking at the Institute for Religious Life in Chicago, noted that:

Consecrated persons can imitate John the Baptist friendship of the Bridegroom by the friendship, prayers, encouragement and hospitality for Christ the Bridegroom in priests.¹⁹

Trustworthy religious can be not only co-workers, but also brothers and sisters in the true sense of the word, whom you can turn to and trust in times of both joy and sadness, good times and bad! Remember that religious face their own struggles in living their consecrated and community life and therefore can not only be a solace and comforting ear but also offer practical advice and spiritual counsel. This is particularly true of spiritual motherhood: as celebrate men living chastity we need wholesome feminine nurturing. Often it's a wise nun who can offer good motherly/

18 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 58.

19 Institute for Religious Life, 13 March 2010.

womanly advice to a priest, just as a mother might to her son. I'm sure many a priest has benefited from a good meal and the fraternity of religious sisters and brothers! This area of friendship, camaraderie, trustworthiness, spiritual motherhood, brotherhood is a real and worthwhile area that should be further developed within our own communities.

Spiritual motherhood is also seen and appreciated by parishioners. To tell a positive story: we had the Little Sisters of the Poor give a presentation at our parish. It elicited a very positive reaction. There was a particular response to their spiritual motherhood. No special collection was taken up, but just by standing outside the church as people left, they netted a huge sum as people recognised and wished to support the goodness of their apostolate. We've all been to nursing homes where religious sisters are still involved in the assistance of the elderly. There is a tangible difference between a Nazareth House and a Southern Cross!

It is important to support orthodox religious, especially in the role of pastoral associate. Not only will parish and clergy benefit, but it will also help religious to have a more secure standing in the community and thus help strengthen their influence. Archbishop Chaput noted a few years ago:

Consecrated persons make a life rooted in the Beatitudes visible and real to the whole Church. That's why they remain so vital to the mission of the entire community of faith – especially in times of confusion; especially today.²⁰

In our parishes we need to continually show the people the value of Consecrated Life. Yes many parishes have pastoral associates – or as they call them in the U.S., 'ecclesial lay ministers.' One of my confreres, Br Louis, tells me the story of when he was ministering in a Californian parish, and the local 'ecclesial lay minister' told Br Louis, after Brother tried to explain a doctrinal point to her, that "we are equal."

"No," Brother told her, "you are a parish manager, a pastoral associate. That is not a state of life. You are not consecrat-

20 Charles Chaput, Jul/Aug 2010, 17.

ed!" He added, "you can always hand in your notice and go and work at K-Mart!!! Consecrated persons are consecrated 24/7!"

As St Pope John Paul II told us religious during his 1986 visit to Australia:

Of all the tasks facing you, there is surely none so urgent as learning authentic witness to your personal love of Jesus Christ above all else. This is at the heart of your religious identity.

Let us not forget the great witness of the contemplative life in our parishes also. The prayer of these women and men support the parish in ways beyond measure. Let us never complain about having to get up early to celebrate Holy Mass for them!

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my talk quoting another important document for Religious, *Perfectae Caritatis*, the document on the renewal of Religious Life the Council decreed in 1965.

The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church, must be advanced according to the following principles . . .

c) All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church's undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social.²¹

At the end of the day dear brothers, we are all called to have the smell of the sheep! We are all called to witness to the risen Christ. We are all called to be counter-cultural. We are all called to bring Christ back to the centre of our Church. How we do it depends on how we are called.

There is a lot that has been done, and as St Francis reminds us: *fratres dum tempus habemus operemur bonum*. Brothers, while we have time let us do good!

21 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*. 28 October 1965, no. 28.