

The Renewal of Franciscan Religious Life since Vatican II

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Il rinnovamento della vita religiosa e francescana dopo il Concilio Vaticano II

Miscellanea Francescana 87 (1987): 67-95

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This vast and complicated subject can be approached from several angles and with various objectives. Much depends on what we mean by renewal.¹ A distinction made by the Council may help clarify the terms of our discussion. In speaking of the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis* distinguishes between *spiritualis renovatio* "spiritual renewal" and *opera externa, adaptationes externae* "active ministry, external adaptations" (PC, 2).

¹ Bibliography on the renewal of religious life since the Vatican Council is huge. The following is merely a representative sample: Y. Congar and J. M. R. Tillard, *Il rinnovamento della vita religiosa. Studi e commenti al decreto Perfectae caritatis*, Florence 1968; J. M. R. Tillard, *I religiosi nel cuore della Chiesa*, Brescia 1968; Idem, *Religiosi: fedeltà e rinnovamento*, Assisi 1970; Idem, *Davanti a Dio e per il mondo*, Rome 1975; F. Wulf, *Fenomenologia teologica della vita religiosa*, in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. I, Brescia 1975, pp. 558-604; G. Gozzelino, *Vita consecrata*, in *DTI, Suppl.*, Turin 1978, pp. 25-48; Juan Maria Lozano, *Discipleship: Towards an Understanding of Religious Life*, translated by Beatrice Wilczynski, 2nd ed (Chicago, Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality) 1983, p. 337; T. Matura, *Le radicalisme évangélique et la vie religieuse*, in *NRT* 103 (1981) 175-86; J. Ricick, *I voti. Un tesoro in vasi d'argilla. Riflessioni psicologico-spirituali*, Turin 1983; L. Boff, *Vita secondo lo spirito*, Rome 1984; P. Molinari and P. Gumpel, "La dottrina della Costituzione Dogmatica "Lumen gentium" sulla vita consacrata," in *Vita consacrata* 20 (1985) 815-93; 21 (1985) 1-137; L. Boff, *Testimoni di Dio nel cuore del mondo*, Rome 1985; S. Ardito, "Vita consacrata e vita religiosa nel nuovo Codice di Diritto Canonico," in *Sales* 47 (1985) 529-54; B. Rollin, "Le radicalisme des conseils évangéliques," in *NRT* 108 (1986) 532-54; G. Colombo, "Note e prospettive su l' 'essenza' della vita religiosa," in AA.VV., *Religiosi e Chiesa particolare*, Turin 1986, pp. 205-15; G. Angelini, *Per un chiarimento della vita religiosa*, ivi, pp. 217-39; Guccini L. (ed.), *La vita consacrata a vent'anni dal Concilio*, Bologna 1986.

Spiritual renewal can be understood as a fundamental rethinking and revitalization of the theological and spiritual motives that give birth to the charism of religious life. The council has done this in chapter VI of *Lumen Gentium* (LG).

External adaptations, on the other hand, refer to all those changes in the way of life that are part of the image of a religious. The Council dealt with the theoretical and practical principles behind these changes, especially in the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. According to the council fathers, such changes must flow from a spiritual renewal and endeavor to foster it.

Following the example of the Council, we shall deal with the renewal of religious life mainly from a theological-spiritual point of view. But we shall also mention a few practical consequences for the organization of religious life in its historical and day-to-day reality. Finally, with our theological reflection on religious life as background, we shall offer some thoughts on the Franciscan charism and its expression in today's world.

I. Conciliar Teaching and Postconciliar Theological Reflection

Some Council *periti* maintain that *Lumen Gentium* (chapter VI) and *Perfectae Caritatis* represent an attempt to harmonize various theologies—some of them more traditional, others relatively new. This would explain the somewhat different interpretations of the Council documents together with the variety of theological positions.

A. Basic Concepts

One fundamental element in the Council's teaching is that the theology of religious or consecrated life² forms part of the theology of the church. Even though consecrated life is not an essential element in the church's structure, it is indispensable to her perfection and mission. In that sense it is a structure *within* the church (LG, 44). It imposes itself as a reality on the church who, attentive to the many charisms of the Spirit, welcomes it as a precious gift (LG, 44; PC, 1 and 25). Since it forms part of the theology of the church, the

²We will take "religious life" (including community life) and "consecrated life" to be the same thing, even though according to the documents of the Council and the new Code of Canon Law they are not. In fact LG, 39 states that the evangelical counsels, traditionally considered to be the essential element of religious life, may also be embraced privately or by persons who belong to ecclesiastically recognized institutes that are not explicitly religious. According to the new Code (can. 573, #1), the counsels are constitutive elements of consecrated life. The latter term includes religious institutes, secular institutes and other possible forms of consecrated life that include all the elements listed in canon 573. See Gamberi, *I religiosi nel Codice*, Milan 1986, p. 18.

essential nature of religious life can be understood only if we recall what the Council said about the church.

The church is the People of God, chosen in history by the Father in the Son through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Through her life and witness of faith, hope and charity, the church is consecrated so that she might be the beginning of the kingdom in this world as she guides human history toward God, her Creator and Redeemer (LG, 1-5). As children of God, all believers enjoy the same dignity rooted in their baptism. All are called to the same Christian perfection of love (LG, 9 and 39-42). Within the People of God there is a structural distinction between hierarchy and laity. The mission of the hierarchy is to sanctify and guide the People of God; the laity are to incarnate the values of the gospel within the framework of secular life (LG, 31-33).

Religious life originates and acquires its specific function within these structures of the church. It may be embraced by clergy as well as laity (LG, 43). What is this form of life and what is its proper function according to the Council?

It is a profession or vowed commitment made within the church (who blesses it and exercises a role of supervision) to live according to the evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty and obedience) for the pursuit of perfect charity (PC, 1). It is a commitment to follow Jesus Christ with greater freedom and to imitate him more closely (PC, 1: *pressius*). Those who pledge themselves to this form of life consecrate themselves to the service of God, their highest love, in a new and special way and by a more intimate bond (LG, 44; PC, 1; *Ad Gentes*, 18). This consecration is not different from that of baptism but is a certain particular expression of it. It is rooted in the baptismal consecration of which it is a fuller expression (PC, 5: *plenius exprimit*).

By profession of the counsels, religious desire to derive more abundant fruit from the grace of their baptism. For this reason they renounce not only sin but also the world (or rather, those goods it values) in order to dedicate themselves more closely and exclusively to God (LG, 44; PC, 5).

Life according to the evangelical counsels leads to growth in love. Thus those who have chosen it are united more closely to the church and her mission (LG, 44).

As a sign within the church and the world for believers and non-believers (LG, 46), religious life: a) reveals more clearly the heavenly goods already present in history; b) proclaims to the world the resurrection and the glory of the age to come; c) is a closer imitation and abiding reenactment in the church of the form of life of Jesus while on earth; d) manifests and recalls in a special way the transcendence of the kingdom, the one thing truly necessary more

than all earthly things (LG, 44). It bears witness in a special way to the primacy of the spiritual—love for the God who has first loved us, love as the vital force behind the evangelical counsels (PC, 6).

It is in this context that the Council spells out the deeper meaning of the three counsels and the common life that forms their setting. Chastity makes us freer for God; it is a sign of love for Christ and his church; it has a high human value, which must be preserved through fraternal love (PC, 12). Poverty means to follow Christ who was poor; it is essential to an authentic search for the kingdom. Religious must bear collective witness to poverty; it must be interior as well as exterior (PC, 13). Obedience means to follow Christ in such a way as to be conformed more fully to his obedience (LG, 42) and be totally available for the kingdom (PC, 14). Common life is a manifestation of the coming of Christ and a source of tremendous apostolic power; it is nourished through prayer and a sharing of the same spirit through daily conversion (PC, 15).

The sign value and special witness of religious life may be clearly seen if they are compared to that of the laity. The latter are called to bear witness and be signs of the coming of God's grace and its transforming power in the world. Religious, on the other hand, bear witness in a splendid and unique way that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes (LG, 31; but see LG, 36 which says that the laity also are witnesses in the world to the spirit of the beatitudes).

This statement is the justification for another. Consecrated persons, although separated to some extent from the world (depending on the nature of their institute), are not strangers to the world and its problems. In Jesus Christ and from the perspective of the kingdom they love those who are working to build the earthly city. As religious with their own special form of witness, they cooperate spiritually—and even materially—so that the builders of the city may not labor in vain but direct their efforts toward God, the *unum necessarium* (LG, 46; PC, 5).

The Council summons religious to spiritual renewal precisely in order that, true to their identity, they might bear witness within the church and the world. The principles of this renewal are these: a) The supreme norm must be the *sequela Christi* according to the gospel (PC, 2a); b) The spirit and aims of the founder and the sound traditions of the institute must be recovered (PC, 2b); c) Religious life must be lived in the context of the life of the church (PC, 2c); d) Religious must be open to the problems of the church and world in which they live and work (PC, 2d). For this reason they should strive diligently throughout their life to perfect their spiritual, doctrinal and technical culture (PC, 18).

As for the relationship between religious life and Christian perfection, the teaching of the Council is this. Christian perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and neighbor, is the goal to which the Holy Spirit is leading all Christians, no matter what their state in life. Vowed life according to the counsels, undertaken by believers within the church, possesses a special radiance and efficacy by reason of its achievement. This is the meaning of the terms that occur frequently in the Council documents: *intimior consecratio* "deeper consecration" (AG, 18); *plenius exprimit* "shows more clearly" (LG, 42); *pressius sequuntur* "follow more closely" (LG, 44).

B. Postconciliar Thinking

Since the Council, theologians have reflected on the nature and function of the charism of religious life. They have interpreted and commented on the Council documents and at times gone beyond them. Not everything written is of equal value; a good deal is debatable and provisional. In any case, it is important to see where they have focused their attention and contributed toward helping religious live their vocation with greater awareness and commitment. The view of the Council is obviously the official view of the church. However, it can be better understood and lived by taking into account the contributions of subsequent theological reflection.

1. *Reconsideration of the biblical and theological foundations of consecrated life.*

Vatican II states that life according to the counsels is based on the teaching and example of Christ and is commended by the Apostles and church Fathers (LG, 43). Basing themselves on a careful rereading of the New Testament and the tradition of the church, some contemporary exegetes and theologians believe that this statement needs clarification. New Testament passages traditionally offered as scriptural basis for the establishment of religious life as a particular form of the Christian life do not seem to support such a statement unless certain distinctions are made. (The most important texts are: Mt 19:16-22, poverty; Phil 2:6-11, obedience; Mt 19:10-12, celibacy for the kingdom; 1 Cor 7:25, virginity).

According to some exegetes, the only charism that is based explicitly on the gospel and that has been lived in the Christian tradition in a community setting is celibacy (see Mt 19:10-12).

The essential points of this new reading of the scripture texts may be stated as follows. Gospel passages that refer to the "counsels" do not aim to establish a special form of life for a group of persons in the church; rather, they express values that are proposed to all Christians. In this sense the counsels are virtues. All Christians are called to live according to the spirit of the counsels (see 1 Cor 7:29ff) in such a way that they would be able to renounce everything

(marriage, self-determination, possessions) should this be required by the absolute demands of the kingdom in their life.³

This new reading of the texts does not jeopardize the fact that the origins of consecrated life, a constant reality in the life of the church since the beginning, lie in the gospel—in the many gospel passages that involve an absolute demand (e.g. Lk 14:26, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father..., " Mt 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount). Consecrated life as lived in the church down through the ages originates in this call to radicalism accepted in faith. Tillard says: "It is not a matter of choosing this or that text, one or the other "counsel," but of a certain reading of the overall message of the gospel. This leads to a zeroing in on the radical dimension that is part of every Christian's acceptance of the gospel and a living of our common call in an energetic and decisive manner."⁴

Thus religious life, as it has existed in its many forms in the church, is based on the gospel in the sense that it is a choice of life in which the radical demands of the gospel become the norm. This gospel radicalism is institutionalized and publicly accepted before the church and the world. God as Absolute, Jesus Christ and his kingdom, humanity which is to be saved in and through Christ—these are perceived and chosen as the "all" with respect to which everything else is "nothing." Through this choice, the counsels (which have meaning and value for *all* Christians) are radicalized, carried to the extreme. The New Testament provides models for such a choice: first of all Jesus, whose total option for the kingdom made him totally available, poor and celibate; then the group of disciples who followed him along the way.

This new manner of presenting the gospel basis for religious life has prompted theologians to shift their emphasis from the counsels to the radical choice of faith underlying them. Contemporary theology tends to see religious life as a project of radical gospel living embodied in the intention to live the evangelical counsels in a manner that is radical, permanent and public. The project embodied in this intention places religious in a state where they can more easily respond to the gospel call to perfection.⁵

The witness of a life according to the evangelical counsels, embraced in radical form in religious life, is simply the concrete expression of a radical choice for the kingdom. Its aim is to assure the authenticity of this choice and

³See Tillard, "Consigli evangelici," in *NDSpir*, Rome 1979, pp. 245-49.

⁴Ibid., p. 249; see also J.M. Lozano, *La sequela di Cristo*, passim.

⁵F. Wulf, *Fenomenologia religiosa*, pp. 589-90.

to safeguard its radical nature. That is why theologians today prefer to speak of one vow instead of three—one religious vow seen as a total consecration of self within the church to Christ and the kingdom. The three traditional vows are consequences, concrete expressions in the life of the person thus consecrated to God. They help to direct the three basic dimensions through which human beings come to self-realization: personal freedom; the body as a means of communion and pleasure; possessions, which are an opening to the world and dominion over it and a source of power over others.⁶

L. Boff writes: "The vows contribute to the essence of religious life no new theological content. They serve only to show in detail the total consecration to God, through which we strive to make God, and not ourselves, the Lord and absolute God of our own lives in all their manifestations, especially in those areas related to the three axes around which human life revolves."⁷ He also says: "The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience detail the total self-giving of the person to God and translate into human terms the totality and the radical nature of that gift."⁸ Boff believes that the main crisis faced by many religious lies not in the difficulties involved in remaining faithful to their vows, but in the absence of an absolute in their lives, something capable of transforming reality and unifying all the other elements of their experience.⁹

In this new description of the essence of religious life, two things stand out. First there is the faith dimension, the radical faith underlying the religious choice. The vows are not simply *means* or ascetical acts. Their value lies in the fact that they are expressions of a radical faith choice in a person's life. They are ways through which this choice for the kingdom is embodied. Those persons and things not chosen are "regained" from the standpoint of radical faith and love for the kingdom of God.¹⁰

⁶In this area, see especially L. Boff, *Vita secondo lo spirito*, Rome 1984, pp. 89-103; see also Tillard, *Davanti a Dio*, p. 367ff. See also G. Gozzellino, "Vita consecrata," in *DTI, Suppl.*, p. 36: "With regard to the essential identity of consecrated persons, there is today a view that looks beyond the counsels to a radical project, charismatic in nature, of which the counsels represent one aspect."

⁷Op. cit., p. 102 [English translation by Robert Fath].

⁸Ibid., p. 95.

⁹Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰Juan Maria Lozano writes: "The Council also establishes a close relationship between consecration and the profession of the 'counsels.' Going deeper, we might say that it is the *sequela Christi*, the adherence to Christ in his entire devotion to the Father, that consecrates a life. The three counsels of later tradition are nothing more than the specific traits embodying such a life, and the necessary means for attaining the complete freedom to live it. They orient all of life toward God. For this reason they are effective means for attaining the perfection of charity. The objective orientation thus achieves subjective communion" *Discipleship: Toward an Understanding of*

Contemporary theology also insists strongly on the value of *koinonia*, that is, common or fraternal life. The latter is seen as an important (although not universal or strictly necessary) consequence of a person's radical, permanent and public choice of the kingdom. Theologians point out that in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as in the entire Christian tradition, one of the fundamental aspects of this choice is the desire to share one's life project and witness to it in the company of others. Religious fraternity or community is a sign and living expression of the church as a *koinonia* of disciples called to live the kingdom in the spirit of reconciliation and love.¹¹

2. *The value of religious life in the context of the overall mission of the church.*

Contemporary theologians have taken seriously the task of developing the Council's vision of consecrated life as an integral part and clear sign of the church's life and mission.¹² Religious life is seen as a limited but *special* way of expressing the life and mission of the church and the Christian vocation. Although it does not embrace the entire evangelical or ecclesial experience, religious life is nevertheless a clear and important part of them. As a sacrament or "memorial" of these realities, it signifies and expresses: a) *their transcendent dimension*: the gratuity of God's grace by which the church herself lives through faith; b) *their eschatological dimension*: hope for the fulfillment of the Messianic blessings which are already present in history, although not in their definitive form.

Thus the ecclesial dimension of consecrated life is seen to complement that of the laity. The latter are called to permeate the structures of this world with the spirit of the gospel and the gifts of the Spirit. Their witness is primarily an ecclesial witness to the incarnation. Religious are called in a special way to bear witness to the utter gratuity of God's grace, by which the whole church lives, and to the hope that the blessings of the age to come will be fulfilled. Although the latter are already present in history, they will be completely realized (and in a certain sense surpassed) in the world to come.

Contemporary theologians, although they stress the ecclesial function of religious life (as a sign of the transcendence of grace and the salvation to come) and acknowledge its role as a sign of detachment from the structures of the world, prefer to avoid the ambiguous expression "flight from the world." Even though religious, in a certain sense, are not *of* or *for* the world (its structures

Religious Life, 299-300.

¹¹In this area, see Tillard, *Davanti a Dio*, p. 206ff; see also Lozano, 201-223, op.cit., pp. 223-47.

¹²What follows is a summary of the reflections of the authors of the works listed in n. 1.

and their use), they are nevertheless *in* the world and work for its salvation. Their separation from the world does not mean flight or uninvolvedness. Religious distance themselves from the world in order to return to it and serve it from a particular standpoint: its transcendent salvation in God, the Absolute and *unum necessarium*, and its future salvation, to which their form of life bears witness. Religious make an active commitment to see to it that the good of humanity as willed by God through Jesus Christ is rooted in the present world.

3. *Relationship between vocation and religious vocation.*

Religious life has its own special character. As a charism, it is complementary to the non-religious vocation (whether clerical or lay). But is it the state of Christian perfection? This is not an idle question, for it can help religious to clarify their identity and the meaning of their choice. Postconciliar theology has examined this question explicitly.

Even before the Council there was a reappraisal of the religious and theological value of "life in the world." The Council confirmed this when it stated clearly that all Christians are called to the evangelical perfection of charity by their baptism (LG, 41 and 42). Therefore, use of the term "state of perfection" to describe the vocation reserved to those who have chosen religious life, is highly debatable. The Council uses the traditional expression "institutes of perfection" three times in passing (SC, 98, 101 [2] and LG, 45). Some commentators say that in the documents devoted to religious life the expression "state of perfection" has been avoided since it might be ambiguous.¹³ But we should note that *Lumen Gentium*, 42 says: "[Religious] subject themselves to human beings for the love of God, thus going beyond what is of precept in the matter of perfection, so as to conform themselves more fully to the obedient Christ." This seems to refer to a state of Christian life marked by observance of the counsels (here obedience), over and above the precepts that are imposed on all. It is to be regarded as a "state of perfection," a way to attain complete conformity to Christ, who is the model and source of Christian perfection.

Postconciliar theologians have taken basically three positions on this matter. We summarize them here:

- a. Religious life is life according to the evangelical counsels. These form the basis of a special form of Christian life, the life of perfection,

¹³In this area see, for example, Lozano, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-72.

spiritually superior to that of the ordinary Christian, which is life according to the commandments. It is *the* state in which Christian perfection is attained. It seems that this position, which might be called "maximalist," is no longer to be found in theological writing. But it lives on in popular preaching.

- b. There is a single call to Christian perfection. It is common to all and consists essentially in the life of love. There are various ways to reach it, according to the variety of charisms given by the Spirit, but no one way is better than the others. Thus there is not *one* state of Christian perfection that is reserved for religious. Rather there are different ways of reaching the one Christian perfection of love. All believers, irrespective of the form of life they choose based on the inspiration of the Spirit, have the same chance of reaching the perfection of love. Everyone sets out for the same goal with the same possibility of reaching it.¹⁴ We might call this position "minimalist."
- c. As the Council itself emphasizes, the call to the gospel perfection of love is a single call shared by all. For this reason, the attainment of Christian perfection is not linked to a single form of life. Nevertheless, there are individuals who experience the radicalism of the gospel as a question summoning them to focus their complete attention on God and the kingdom by following Jesus Christ. Consequently they decide to "not choose" everything else, legitimate and positive though it may be. Such individuals find themselves in a situation that in itself facilitates this response of love for God and neighbor, which is the goal and content of Christian perfection to which all are called to aspire.¹⁵ We might call this position "moderate."

This, it seems to us, is the essence of what the Council documents have to say (LG, 42 notwithstanding) on the common Christian vocation and religious life according to the counsels.

¹⁴This seems to be the opinion of T. Matura, *Le radicalisme évangélique et la vie religieuse*, in *NRT* 103 (1981) 175-86; see also idem., *Il radicalismo evangelico*, Rome 1981, pp. 238-53. Exegetical foundation for this position can now be found in N. Baumert, *Ehe und Ebelosigkeit im Herrn. Eine neue Interpretation von 1 Kor 7* (Forschung zur Bibel, 47), Würzburg 1984, p. 576ff. A presentation of the results of this work is given by M. S. Zimmermann, "Jeder, wie Gott ihn anruft." Ein neues Verständnis des Apostels Paulus, in *GL* 58, 6 (1985) 455-59.

¹⁵This entire question is well covered by Lozano, op.cit., pp. 39-72.

II. Toward a Renewed Presence of Religious Life

The Council taught the church to look beyond her inner life to the world outside. With her ministries, gifts and charisms, she is sent to lay the foundation of the kingdom of God in history and lead the world to it under the reign of Christ. In other words, the church is sent to serve the world and guide it toward its true and final destination. *Gaudium et Spes* was an example of this openness. For the church it meant the beginning of a new kind of presence in history, which has led her to rethink the entire question of evangelization.

Given the church's new style of presence to the world, theologians have also reconsidered the biblical and dogmatic foundations of consecrated life. They have tried to offer practical suggestions and directions so that consecrated life might become a more transparent sign to the modern world with its ideologies and practices.

Every serious discussion of the subject begins with a look at the contemporary scene—a field in which the gospel witness of consecrated life must be sown. Unfortunately, limitations of space prevent us from analyzing the currents of contemporary culture. Our approach instead will be to recall the basic values of consecrated life as we attempt to show their relevance for today's world.

1. Consecrated life is sustained by belief in the unconditioned absolute: God and the kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Religious are persons of radical faith who have abandoned themselves to the risk of faith. Indeed, their form of life has meaning only in the context of a radical faith choice for the kingdom.

That such a choice has an existential, witness and missionary value is evident. Belief in God as an option and foundation for one's life is in crisis today. Most people, it seems, wish to define their existence and history in terms of principles that are purely empirical or materialistic. In such a world, consecrated life must be seen as a radical choice of faith for God, the unconditioned Absolute, the *unicum necessarium*, the totally Other. Consecrated life, which is essentially life "before God" (Tillard),¹⁶ must call to mind this Mystery, point to It and bear witness to It.

2. Today more than ever, consecrated life must be seen as a radical following of Christ, a form of witness that looks continually to the gospel in order to draw from it the radical demands of Jesus and live them in today's world.

¹⁶See also G. Gozzelino, *Una vita che si raccoglie su Dio*, Turin 1978.

Consecrated persons with their form of life must be guides and leaders in showing people how to return to the gospel as a way of life today. Therefore, the renewal they are called upon to accomplish must not dilute the gospel radicalism of their lives, but rather make it more apparent.

3. In order to renew itself, consecrated life must take seriously its special form of witness within the church, which is sent to the world. This applies not only to the universal church, but also to the local church which makes present the ministries and charisms of the universal church in a particular place.

We have seen that consecrated life is a special form of witness within the church in view of her mission. It bears witness to the transcendent and gratuitous nature of God's salvation and its future fulfillment, in view of which religious have "not chosen" other positive values of this world.

The church urgently needs this form of Christian witness today. In a world where people tend to be closed in on themselves and define the meaning of human life and history solely in terms of their work; in a world where hope in the future is either dismissed outright or else reduced to the everyday and pragmatic, the witness of consecrated life as a sacrament or sign of the gift from on high that urges us to a greater future seems to be most timely and necessary.¹⁷ For this reason religious, keeping in mind the seriousness of the mission they have received, must renew the reasons for their presence and activity.

As specialists of God and prophets of the good things to come for this world, they must endeavor to make this special mission of theirs known in a secular and consumer society—a society resigned to the petty, the everyday and the unheroic—a society torn apart by a crisis of ideals.

4. Consecrated life does not mean flight from the world. Religious separate themselves from it somewhat in order to return to it as radical witnesses of God's grace and the fulness of salvation awaited in hope. They also commit themselves to do their part to plant the seeds of the Messianic age and the kingdom of God, which is the reign of God in this world and the salvation, progress and liberation of humanity. This means they must have a feeling for the world, especially for the lot of the poor, the weak and the marginalized, who are special objects of Christ's favor and privileged members of the kingdom. Although different institutes can do this in different ways, all must do it with a style of life different from that of the laity.

¹⁷ See the booklet by J.B. Metz, *Tempo di religiosi?*, Brescia 1975.

5. Commitment to today's largely secularized world must be expressed in various ways, depending on the various forms of witness that are a response to the signs of the times. Here are some examples.

- a. In an age and society captivated by the superficial, religious are called to bear witness to the "deeper dimension" (P. Tillich) which alone can give meaning to human achievement. In an age and culture that are secularized, they are called to bear witness to the truly sacred, which is not in doubt since it is part of the mystery that represents the deepest and truest meaning even of the secular.
- b. In an age and society overly concerned with efficiency, utility and production, they are called to bear witness to the value of the gratuitous, the gift of self in love, and the values of joy, sharing and celebration. They are called to be special witnesses to the fact that *being* is a greater source of human happiness and fulfillment than either *having* or *consuming*.
- c. In a socio-historical context that absolutizes what is relative (at least on the practical level), religious, with their radical choice of God and the kingdom as the only Absolute, are called to unmask and denounce human idolatry for what it does and produces in history.
- d. At a time in history when people are warning of the negative aspects of the cult of reason and searching for ideas, cultural models and prophets to help them reverse an attitude toward nature that is leading to ecological catastrophe, religious are called upon by their very life of separation to be the prophetic catalysts for a positive, joyful and contemplative approach to reality.

6. Religious life has usually meant life in fraternity, the witness of common life with its human and Christian value. Today, more than ever, religious must be aware of this great value they have and proclaim. Solitude, selfishness, the pursuit of self-interest, the death of human relationships—these are the real wounds afflicting today's society. Although there exists in our time a deep desire for communication, there is in fact widespread skepticism about the possibility of human communication—the possibility of living in a relationship of true friendship and communion.

Against this cultural background, consecrated life, as life in fraternity and an expression of the church's communion, is called to be a witness to the hope and freedom Christ came to bring. Religious, whose fraternal life is centered on faith in God and radical commitment to Jesus Christ and the kingdom (made possible by the liberating practice of the religious vows), can demonstrate the real possibility of a life of genuine, deep communion.

However, consecrated life can bear witness to this value only if it is seen as a fraternity in which different individuals choose to live together in order to achieve a common life project recognized in faith as proposed by Christ. In such a fraternity individuals are welcomed in their diversity; they are quick to forgive one another and seek reconciliation in the God who welcomes, forgives and brings back to life through the grace of the Spirit.

True fraternal life must be built on the foundation of these goals and values. Wulf says it best:

Religious orders, even though they describe themselves in a great variety of ways and propose for themselves very specific tasks, are nevertheless a community of brothers and sisters who, united in the strength of the same gospel call, present themselves as witnesses to the kingdom of God.

Koininia (being one in Christ) can still involve imperfections. But the fact that individuals of very different origins and backgrounds can come together independently of the bonds of kinship or earthly interests and remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and hardships involved in common life—this is already itself a clear sign of something higher that transcends the world. We need only recall the many base groups of recent years founded on common objectives that were of a human or political nature and how they failed.¹⁸

Recourse to scientific findings (such as those of psychology and sociology) in order to gain a better understanding of community life, define it more exactly and create more credible forms is very useful. But we must remember that these findings are not always completely “scientific” or neutral when it is a question of values. Often their conclusions presuppose a concept of the human person and community that is not in accord with gospel values.

That is why such findings need to be used critically when it is a question of building or improving community life. The ultimate criterion for the meaning and organization of religious life in fraternity must be the gospel precept of love expressed in sacrifice. This is the criterion by which to judge the ideals proposed by the human sciences—the dignity of the individual, the right to self-fulfillment etc. Not that these ideals are always at odds with the demands of the gospel. But if they are, religious must always look to gospel values as their ultimate and supreme norm.

The standards of the gospel can seem “foolish.” But it is the foolishness of a loving God who in his crucified Son has revealed the logic of a self-emptying

¹⁸Op.cit., p. 599.

love that seeks the other in order to establish communion and create fraternity.

7. Today more than ever, fraternal life must be conceived and organized around the two poles of the *individual* and the *community*, even as it constantly strives to maintain the necessary balance between the two. This task is neither easy nor free of tensions.

The individual, with his or her gifts of nature and grace from the Spirit who allots to each one (see 1 Cor 12:11), must not be compromised, much less annihilated by life in community. God has a plan for each of us; God asks for something from each of us by which he enables us to reach fulfillment as individuals. The value of the individual ranks high today, and rightly so, for its theological roots are deep.

However, individuals have freely chosen to live in community in order to participate with others in the service of the kingdom and achieve self-fulfillment in their vocation in the company of others.

Such a commitment calls for renunciation and sacrifice, a search for the common good, sharing, harmony and collaboration. Life in fraternity with its demands stands as the other pole to be respected. Perhaps it seems to inhibit spontaneity and free development. But if it is lived in a mature way, if it is understood and loved, free from the temptation to unhealthy self-affirmation, it fosters growth in understanding and love for others and deepens personal growth.

It follows from this that in order to safeguard and promote the value of common life, individual initiatives must be reconciled within the fraternity. What is sought and pursued as a community must prevail over personal inclinations, initiatives and decisions. The same Spirit who apportions, says St. Paul, gives for the good of all (see 1 Cor 12:12ff).

III. The Charism of St. Francis and Realization of the Franciscan Charism

In our discussion of this topic, we must be careful to show its connection with what we have already said. As Franciscans we are consecrated persons. The connection, though intrinsic, is insisted upon in the Council documents, the Code of Canon Law and in modern exegetical reflection on the theology of consecrated life.

The Council notes that the various forms of consecrated life in the church are a source of her enrichment (PC, 1). Institutes must preserve their identity, rediscovering it and keeping it alive through contact with the spirit and goals of their founder and the sound traditions of their history (PC, 2b).

The new Code of Canon Law confirms this (can. 578).

Theological reflection today is more attentive to the subjective and/or group dimension, to the mystery of salvation and the experience of faith. It tries to provide a rationale for the plurality and originality of religious experience, especially in the case of founders and the religious families that draw inspiration from them.

In light of these considerations and based on what we have said about the renewal of religious life, we shall present our reflections under two general headings. First we shall attempt to isolate the essential elements of the charism of St. Francis as founder, to the extent that this can be done through a careful reading of his experience and Christian witness. For this we shall make use of his writings, the biographies etc., read with a critical (but not supercritical) eye. Then we shall attempt to suggest how this charism and its various elements can be relived in the context of renewed Franciscan life today.

A. *The Charism of St. Francis*

Let us begin by distinguishing between the *founder's charism* and the *charism of founder*.

The founder's charism refers to men and women founders of religious orders and their entire experience of the mystery of God, Christ, humanity in God etc. But it also includes their personal gifts and other elements that are unique and unrepeatable.

By charism of founder we mean their experience (of God, Christ, humanity in God etc.) insofar as it is the basis for the spirituality and Christian witness of the institutes founded by them—abstracting from their personal gifts and other elements that are unique and unrepeatable.¹⁹ The latter is our special concern here.

The charism of Francis the founder (and therefore the specifically Franciscan form of consecrated Christian life)—in what does it consist?

Scholars of the Franciscan movement have enumerated the basic elements of Franciscan life. Let us recall the conclusions of some of them. Esser maintains that the Franciscan archetype includes the following basic elements: penance; life according to the gospel; apostolic preaching; life of most high poverty; life in Christian fraternity.²⁰

Iriarte suggests these elements: to follow the teachings and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ; the love that is God; to love God with a pure heart and

¹⁹To illustrate the specificity of this charism F. Ciardi has written his excellent book, *I Fondatori uomini dello Spirito. Per una teologia del carisma del Fondatore*, Rome 1982; see especially pp. 373-91.

²⁰K. Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press) 1970, pp. 203-251.

mind; the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ; the way of simplicity; fraternity; loving obedience; an apostolate of penance by example, in the style of the *jongleurs* and with a missionary spirit.²¹

The fundamental characteristics listed by Schmucki are essentially the same as those already mentioned.²² But it seems to us that these studies simply list the elements of Franciscan life with no attempt to show their closer relationship. We believe that this needs to be done, since they are elements of an experience based on *an intuition that creates structure and unity*. They are perceived and lived with distinctive emphases and nuances and in that sense are Franciscan. Unless we attempt to show their closer relationship, we cannot grasp their distinctiveness. That is what we shall try to do in what follows.

1. Francis had a vivid awareness (after some initial doubts) that he was sent to work within the church for the kingdom (see 1Cel 21-23; RegNB XVI; XXI; Letters). This explains his apostolate of itinerant missionary preaching. For that reason *mission* is an essential element of the Franciscan charism (see also RegNB XXIII, 22).

2. Francis received his mission while listening to the *gospel*. After 1209/1210 it was his one constant point of reference. His simple, direct and literal approach to it left him open to receive its radical message. For Francis, the gospel was Jesus speaking, acting, living, inviting—here and now. He proposed “to follow Jesus Christ,” “to follow his footprints.” Francis was the *homo evangelicus*.

3. Francis accepted the *entire* gospel as a rule of life. Unlike other contemporary preachers, orthodox and heretical, he did not focus exclusively on those texts having to do with poverty. He wished to practice its total message. Nevertheless, if we look carefully at his observance of the gospel and his following of Christ, we are led to conclude that he lived and experienced its message from a certain point of view—a *fundamental experience* that enabled him to grasp its essential unity and meaning. Francis, the Poverello, saw the entire mystery of Jesus Christ as an expression of the love of God that becomes poor and humble, a love that strips and empties itself in order to communicate itself completely. Thus it inspires a response of total love, of which poverty and humility are the signs and prerequisites.

²¹L. Iriarte, *Vocazione francescana*, Milan 1975, pp. 12-237.

²²O. Schmucki, “Fundamental Characteristics of the Franciscan ‘Form of Life’” in *Greyfriars Review* 5 (1991), 325-366.]

For Francis, the Incarnation meant that the King of heaven had become poor and humble (see 2EpFid 4-5; 2Cel 199). The life of Jesus was a life of poverty and humility (see RegNB IX; RegB VI; UltVol). The death of Jesus was the ultimate expression of a love that becomes poor and humble in order to give itself.

Francis certainly knew that not everything in the gospel is reducible to poverty. But he was inclined to reread it all from the point of view of love that becomes poor, empties and humbles itself (see LaudDei 4: God is humility), in order to communicate itself and create community on the deeper level of self-giving freedom. All this calls for a response of radical love, a love that includes poverty, humility and the gift of self—a love that leads to communion free of all barriers.

We can see this as a leitmotif running through the Admonitions. Even though their subject matter varies, a common thread runs through them all: self-stripping as a means and expression of radical love.

This is what Francis understood by "the poor and humble Jesus." In him God, in the person of the Son, has come to show and offer us a pure and unconditional love, a love that is stripped of all save itself. This love calls us to respond in total love (stripped of everything, nothing withheld) for the Father/the Trinity. Jesus, poor and humble as a man, is not only a *sign* of God's love but also the *way* for our response.

4. Francis's experience of God's love for us in Christ enabled him to see God (the Father/the Trinity) as love, as goodness that gives without measure. It enabled him to praise God as Creator ("Most High, all-powerful, good Lord") and Redeemer/Sanctifier. It enabled him respond to that love by acknowledging the primacy of God and by choosing God as his All. This he expressed in his choice of absolute poverty (see RegNB XXIII).

A radical love that chooses poverty and humility in order to possess the God who is perfect goodness and love—this response of Francis led him to regard his whole life as a pilgrimage toward complete possession of the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ ("pilgrims and strangers:" RegB VI). He saw it as penance, or rather an unwavering commitment to the kingdom. This is the basis for all Franciscan penitential preaching and witness.

5. Francis's relationship to the gospel and to the poor and humble Jesus determined the direction of his mission in the church and to the world: to proclaim the gospel and bear witness to it by a life of absolute poverty or minority ("Let them be the lesser ones:" 1Cel 38; RegB XII; RegNB IX, 1ff; UltVol; Test).

According to Francis, his followers are to be lesser ones: a) in their secular occupations (they are not to be in charge); b) in their apostolate (they are to offer their services without claim); c) in their unwavering submission to the bishops and priests; d) in society let them be the lesser ones and be subject to all (RegNB VII, 2)—in other words they are to avoid all social status.

This style of life applies to both the individual and the fraternity. For Francis, the witness of minority was to have a prophetic, utopian function. It must direct the church and all humanity to God as the All, the Future, the One who gives true meaning and hope to Christian life (For the theological and eschatological value of minority, see RegNB XXIII, 22).

6. This relationship to the gospel, this experience of the poor and humble Jesus who gave an example of radical love by his own self-emptying, also determined the pattern of relationships within the fraternity Francis saw growing up around him. Relationships were to be fraternal and spiritual (in the Spirit) but, above all, marked by service. The ministers (as followers of Jesus the servant) must serve the brothers. The brothers must wash each other's feet; they must love each another with a love that is self-emptying, always ready to accept despite difficulties or differences (see RegNB VI; RegB X; Admonitions).

This pattern of fraternal gospel relationships, characterized by minority, was revolutionary compared to relationships in the church and in the monastic tradition (where the monks were expected to kiss the abbot's foot). Francis wanted the ministers to be servants. It was his belief that this pattern should be extended beyond the Order to the church and society—as a prophetic sign and a poignant witness.²³

Francis's commitment to peacemaking, reconciliation and tolerance among people takes its meaning from this context. It is a call to renounce arrogance and serve one another in and for the Lord who emptied himself and became poor for our sake—the Lord who in his poverty invites us to become poor, to renounce pride and selfishness in order to create a true community of love.

²³A number of scholars (A. Rotzetter, D. Flood, E. Leclerc and others) maintain that the fraternal lifestyle of the "minors" was supposed to and did in fact exercise a utopian, prophetic and thus critical function in the church and society. It proposed to define relationships among people along the lines of the "democratic" aspirations of the communes, but based on the gospel and characterized by communion. This was opposed to the vertical structures of feudal society, which had been copied to a great extent even by the church. See the recent study by Stanislaus da Campagnola, "Francis of Assisi and the Social Problems of His Time" in *Greyfriars Review* 2 (1988), 133-44.]

According to Francis, true peacemaking can take place only if individuals practice a certain "poverty of rights." Joined to this must be a humility that accepts others with a pardoning and reconciling love. Herein lies the logic of his preaching of peace and reconciliation on the level of personal, social and international relationships (compare his behavior toward the Muslims with that of the Crusaders).

7. This relationship with the poor and humble Jesus of the gospel also lies at the heart of Francis's joyful and simple experience of life and death. He saw Jesus primarily as poor and humble and as such the way that leads to God; he experienced God as supreme love, the future and hope of humanity. This enabled him to discern the true meaning of earthly life with its joys and sorrows—and death, too, whom he called sister.

8. The poor and humble Jesus, the way that leads to God, the One who inspired Francis to strip himself of all things in a radical prophetic gesture, is also the One who enabled him to adopt a certain attitude of detachment toward nature. Because of this he was led to renounce all forms of manipulation/exploitation and adopt instead a "friendly," fraternal and contemplative attitude. Francis saw nature as a divine gift to contemplate and take delight in—a way to grow in the praise of God, its Creator and bountiful Lord.

These, in summary, are the different elements that flow from the one, fundamental, global, complex experience that we generally refer to as the charism of Francis, founder of the Franciscan movement: apostolic mission, the following of Christ in a life according to the gospel, the experience of God as love and goodness; mission characterized by minority; preaching of peace; joy and simplicity in life and death; a "friendly," contemplative attitude toward nature.

Our attempt to discern the roots of these elements in an original and fundamental intuition (the poor and humble Jesus as an expression of the radical love of God and the way and model for our radical response of love) may seem forced, but we do not think so. It enables us to see the structure and inter-relationships between the many aspects of Francis's Christian experience, making them clearer and easier to understand.

B. Realization of the Franciscan Charism in Today's World

Franciscans are religious in today's church and world. But they are also followers of Francis. Let us see, then, how they might live the Franciscan charism against the broader background of the mission of religious in the church and world today. Our observations will be based on what we have said about the charism of consecrated persons, their mission today, and the distinctive elements of the Franciscan charism.

1. *Mission.* According to *Lumen Gentium*, every Christian has a mission; religious have a special mission in the church and for the world. We know from the history of the Franciscan movement that St. Francis felt himself sent to the church and society of his day. Franciscans, who are not only consecrated Christians but also followers of the Poverello, receive from him and the tradition of the Order a special mission, approved and recommended by the church. This mission must be guided and nourished by the spirit of their founder. That is why the key element in Franciscan consciousness today must be mission as perceived and embodied in the Christian life of Francis of Assisi. Awareness of mission must be the moving force for Franciscans. It must make them itinerants (though not necessarily from place to place); it must fill them with apostolic zeal, eager to offer their gifts to the world. They need to find ways to do this, taking into account present ecclesial and cultural realities. The reason ways are often not found is because the inner fire is lacking—a fire that only a lively awareness of mission can give.

2. The central theme of contemporary Christian life and reflection is *the following of Jesus Christ in a life according to the gospel*. Since this is the essence of what it means to be a Christian, it must also be central in the life and witness of the followers of Francis, who was called the *alter Christus*.

But in following Christ with the man from Assisi, Franciscans have something special to offer.

As they carry out their mission, whether as Christians or as consecrated religious, Franciscans are guided by the Christ of the gospel and are open to the people of today. In other words, they have two points of reference: the Christ of the gospel (here they must pay attention to what scripture scholars have to say about the person and work of Jesus) and the people of today (their lives and problems). But in focusing on the Christ of the gospel and contemporary humanity, they neither forget nor neglect their own spiritual tradition. They are sustained by St. Francis, whose fundamental experience of Jesus Christ colored his experience of God, humanity and the world. Above all, they make use of the Franciscan Sources. These provide them with a particular vantage point for understanding the mystery of Christ—a vantage point that is rooted in Francis and that must become theirs if they are to be Franciscan followers of Christ today.

Franciscans will bear witness to Christ today by exploiting Francis's fundamental experience of the poor and humble Jesus. They will live and proclaim God's radical love in Christ for the world, which calls for a response of radical love for God in Christ by a total self-stripping that celebrates God's dominion and points to God as the supreme value. Francis, a poor and humble follower of the poor and humble Jesus, teaches Franciscans to go beyond sterile

pauperism (as seductive today as ever) and to witness by their lives that the poverty, humility and minority of Jesus Christ (and their own) flow from and are expressions of a radical, total love for God and for the world and its people, the recipients of God's love.

3. *Witnesses and prophets of God the Absolute.* Religious today must be qualified and radical witnesses of the Absolute in human life—for believers and non-believers alike. Franciscans bring to this witness the distinctive elements they have received from their founder and the tradition of the Order. Careful reading of the Franciscan Sources (especially the *Earlier Rule*, the prayers of Francis, the *Canticle of the Creatures*, etc.) can help them to discover and assimilate these elements: God the Absolute, the *unicum necessarium* who is Father; the Trinity who alone is good, who is love, who creates and governs all things with goodness, who is the source of life and joy for all creatures; the love that is to be praised and thanked in word and work (see especially the last part of RegNB XXIII). These are the elements to be accentuated by Franciscans as they bear witness to the God who is absolute and to be loved above all things. This is particularly true given today's atheistic or agnostic ideologies—which are either unrealistically optimistic (Marxism), hopelessly pessimistic (nihilism), or defiantly skeptical (secularism). In such a cultural climate Franciscans must be convinced witnesses of the God who is humanity's mystery, its supreme and only good—the God who makes the human heart dance and sing, even amid trials and uncertainties, because he is the “Most High, good Lord,” the hope and glory of all humanity.

4. *Minority.* Today's followers of Francis live as religious in the church and the world, but they make their contribution and fulfill their mission as minors. How can they live this dimension of the Franciscan charism, so dear to their founder? History shows how hard it is to be lesser ones.²⁴ We have seen the different ways in which Francis, as the sources tell us, bore witness to this value and urged its observance. Here are some suggestions for its implementation today.

- a. Minority and efficiency (even for the sake of the kingdom) are not the same thing; the former must not be traded for the latter.
- b. Living with or among the “lesser ones” does not in itself make us lesser ones.

²⁴On this subject see D. Del Rio, “La fatica de essere ‘minori’” in *AA.VV., Francesco e altro*, Rome 1977, pp. 81-122.

Franciscans must ask themselves this question regarding their identity: "Am I a 'lesser one' as defined by the society and culture in which I live and am called to witness?"

- c. Minority must be lived in the church. This should prompt us to challenge positions, attitudes and forms of service within the community of faith. Minority should inspire us to do what others are unwilling to do, to cover areas that are left open, to take on thankless jobs in the church.
- d. Minority must be lived in society. Solidarity with the "lesser ones" matters far less than being a lesser one oneself. For Franciscans, a life of minority in society should mean, at the very least, detachment and willingness to share what they have in a spirit of service. Minority must serve as a constant challenge to their normal, quiet life.

Nor should we forget the eschatological meaning of such a life. Consecrated life is already in itself a sign of blessings to come. Franciscans, who are lesser ones by the will of Francis, must bear witness to these blessings in a unique way. Sustained by their experience of the poor and humble Jesus, they must be signs of the primacy of God and his love—signs of hope in the God who is the supreme good and sole future of human beings (see RegB VI; RegNB XXIII, 22).

5. Nearly every form of consecrated life in the church has *fraternal life* as a unifying element. Franciscans, in their role as consecrated persons, are called to a life of fraternity. However, drawing upon the example of Francis and the early Franciscans, they must emphasize certain elements in their life of fraternity today. For them, fraternal life is based on the experience of a love that, because it is poor and self-emptying, is able to create true communion; a love that is discerned in the mystery of Christ and thus in the very behavior of God; a love that has no limits. The fraternal life that flows from all this is marked by humility, acceptance, forgiveness and communion. Pride is renounced and service of one another becomes a concrete expression of fraternal love.

Careful reading of the Franciscan sources (including the *Fioretti*) will introduce us to this particular experience of fraternal life.

This experience/witness must extend beyond the fraternity as a prod to the church and society. That was Francis's wish. Fraternal life, as a life of radical reconciliation, as service and acceptance in a love that is poor and humble, has an undeniable prophetic significance. It must dictate the style of Franciscans' commitment to the church and society, their judgment, their tackling the problems of peace, disarmament, international relations, etc. With the same prophetic spirit that characterized the behavior of Francis in the presence of

politicians, popes and crusaders, their words and lives must always point to a dimension beyond. If their bearing is as poor and humble as that of Francis, they can be agents of encounter, peacemaking and reconciliation. They are called to make more room for utopia and less for "realism."

6. *Joy in simplicity.* All religious, by reason of their special form of witness and their radical being "before God" who is the *unicum necessarium* and true hope of humanity, must bear witness to these values before others. But the followers of Francis have received from his charism a special legacy in this regard. This is especially true in our day, when the celebration of pleasure is tinged with deep sadness and quiet feelings of emptiness and unease. Meditation on the Sources will provide Franciscans with effective incentives, ideas and imagination. It will enable them to witness before others by their life and behavior to the joy that is found in simplicity (see RegB III, 10-11).

7. *Gratuitousness.* By their choice of life, religious are called to be detached and non-manipulative with respect to things. The history of monastic life contains eloquent examples of this. Franciscans, as followers of the man from Assisi, have inherited from him a truly unique attitude toward things—one that is "friendly," contemplative and fraternal (see especially the *Canticle of the Creatures*).

People in our industrial society hunger for this type of relationship with the world around them. Consequently, Franciscans have a powerful and prophetic responsibility in this regard. Some things in the life of Francis are, of course, unrepeatable. But others are part of his charism of founder and as such must be exploited by his followers in their own lives.

Franciscans, inspired by their founder and moved by the hopes and longings that fill the hearts of so many people today, are called to renew the "friendly" and contemplative witness of Francis toward nature. They must make their own contribution toward improving the quality of life—something that is earnestly desired by all.²⁵

To conclude: drawing from Francis's style of life, Franciscans today must live the values of the Christian and consecrated life in their own particular way. This will assure them of their place in the church and lead them to offer their gifts to a world that eagerly awaits them. We need only recall the esteem,

²⁵For the material in nos. 6 and 7, see L. Boff, *Francesco d'Assisi. Un'alternativa cristiana*, Assisi 1982; A. Merino, *Umanesimo francescano. Francescanesimo e mondo attuale*, Assisi 1984, especially p 204ff; Stanislaus da Campagnola, *L'amore della natura in Francesco d'Assisi*, in *Rivista di biologia* 75 (1982) 375-84.

admiration and love that St. Francis enjoys today among believers and non-believers alike.

St. Francis belongs to all people. It often happens that Christians, both lay and religious, (and even non-Christians such as Ghandi) prove to be more "Franciscan" than his own followers. This ought to shake them up. It ought to move them to allow themselves to be questioned by him and become involved in his witness to Christ—and, through it, to God and all humanity.