

The Bishop and Consecrated Life: A Necessary Link?

BASIL COLE, OP
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, DC

LAST YEAR, I attended a lecture by a prominent bishop who spoke on the “New Evangelization.” While he did not think there was much that was “new” in the concept of evangelization, he did wax eloquent about the importance of the apostolate of the laity and its special place in bringing Christ to the marketplace. During the question- and- answer period, however, someone posed an interesting challenge to the bishop.

The Problem Posed

While we are familiar with the image of the two lungs of the Church (East and West), so necessary for her, could we not say that for the apostolate or ministry in the Church there are not only two lungs, but three: members in Holy Orders, lay ministry, and the apostolate of the consecrated person, ordained or not? Further, the questioner wondered out loud why the American bishops spoke boldly for the right to life and against the culture of death, when before their very eyes they can also see that the consecrated life of sisters and brothers is dying in this country. Why do they not do more to promote this “culture of supernatural life” other than saying nice things about sisters and brothers? Should not the bishops, above all, be doing something to stave off the clear and evident decomposition of religious orders, congregations, and societies?

The Bishop’s Response

Oddly enough, the bishop responded by saying that bishops do not understand consecrated life. The bishops are happy when sisters and brothers teach in their schools and work in their hospitals or rest homes,

but feel incapable of doing or saying anything significant with regard to the religious life, since they do not live it themselves.

Be that as it may, John Paul II wrote an entire apostolic exhortation on the consecrated life (*Vita consecrata*) in 1996, which flowed from the discussions of a synod of bishops held in Rome on the subject. And while I am certain that the bishop's remarks were innocent enough, they do reflect a certain superficiality with regard to the life of consecrated persons. For the vocation of religious is vastly more than the works they do, just as the ministry of the bishop is beyond the sum of his scheduled appointments. The bishop's facile remarks bespeak an deeper confusion of the nature of the religious life and the episcopacy, both of which St. Thomas Aquinas called "states of perfection."

St. Thomas Aquinas: Not Yet Outdated

Although the Church's documents no longer cite St. Thomas on the "state of perfection," or what it means to grow in divine love, his treatment is still relevant in many ways, applies to the episcopal ministry, and also helps in understanding *Vita consecrata*.

In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas states that the order of the episcopate pertains to the state of perfection, not as one being perfected as in religious life, but as one perfecting others, especially dioceses;¹ and so the bishop should possess a certain plenitude of Christian virtue. Instead of professing vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for his own salvation, the bishop receives ordination or a consecration for the salvation of the souls under his care. Speaking about infused charity, Aquinas writes the following:

He [Paul] says, therefore: I say that whether we be beside ourselves, it is for God; or whether we be sober, it is for you, that is, for your benefit. The reason for this is that the love of Christ controls (presses) us to this. He says "presses" because it is the same as stimulates. As if to say: the love of God, as goad, stimulates us to do what charity commands, namely, to procure the salvation of our neighbor: "those who are led," that is, stirred, "by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8:14); Its flashes are flashes of fire (Song 8:6).²

Charity, therefore, has liberty as to its moving cause, because it works of itself: "The charity of Christ presseth us" spontaneously, to

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 184, a. 5; cf. q. 185, a. 1, ad 2.

² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., no. 181, www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Aquinas-Corinthians-Sec2.pdf.

work (2 Cor 5:14). But it is a servant when, putting one's own interests aside, it devotes itself to things beneficial to the neighbor.³

Before looking at the teaching of the Church on the evangelical counsels for bishops, in order to situate the reality and efficacy of the counsels, it is necessary to look at some important texts of Thomas concerning the call to activate divine love or infused charity in one's life, in order better to understand his teaching on the counsels.

The great commandment of the spiritual life is to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and body and love one's neighbor as one's self. But what does this mean? We find Thomas answers in many places, but especially in a little-known tract on charity where the Common Doctor says:

[It] must be said that when it is written, *Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart*, this is understood to be a precept according to which the totality excludes everything that prevents a perfect adherence to God; and this is not a precept, but the end of a precept. For us this does not mean that we should do it, but rather that we should tend toward it, as Augustine says. (ad 1)

In this life, however, God cannot even be wholly seen or loved according to the first or second way [that is, beatific vision or loved consciously each moment of our life here on earth], for He is not seen through his essence, nor is it possible for man living in this life that his affective power be perfectly directed toward God without interruption. Nevertheless, God is wholly loved in some way by man in this life according as there is nothing in his affective power contrary to the divine love. (ad 5)⁴

This however is a bare minimum. As one grows in ever greater adherence to God, one lives more and more under the influence of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, urging one to better choices. As Aquinas says:

If by the perfect you mean religious or bishops who, as such, are called perfect by reason of their external state of perfection then it must be denied that these are bound to the better good simply on account of their external state. For as such they are bound only to those things which the vows and care of souls demand. But if you refer to those Christians who are perfect on account of their interior perfection of charity, then it must be admitted that the perfect of this category are bound to the better good by an interior law which urge after the

³ Aquinas, *In Gal*, v. 13–15, lect. 3, in idem., *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Press, 1966).

⁴ Aquinas, *De caritate*, 10, ad 1 and 5, in Aquinas, *On Charity*, trans. Lottie. H. Kendzierski (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1960).

manner of an inclination; so to those better goods which they can fulfill according to the measure of their perfection, they are bound.⁵

Furthermore, as one becomes more open to the inspirations that come from the presence of the Holy Spirit, then better goods are inspired and are inclined to be instantiated:

It is, then, the distinguishing mark of the sons of God, to be carried forward by grace to better things, without waiting for counsel. This impulse of grace is alluded to in the Prophet Isaiah (59:59), "When he shall come as a violent stream, which the spirit of the Lord driveth on." St. Paul teaches us that this impulse of grace is to be obeyed. "Walk in the Spirit," he says, (Gal 5:16), and again, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal 5:18). . . . Now, the Holy Spirit gives his revelations, not only by teaching man what he ought to speak, but by suggesting to him what he ought to do. When, therefore, a man is inspired by this Holy Spirit to enter religious life, it is his duty to follow the inspiration at once, without waiting to take counsel of human advisers. This is shown us by the words of the Prophet Ezekiel (1:20), "Whithersoever the spirit went, thither, as the spirit went, the wheels also were lifted up withal, and followed it."⁶

One notices how the role of the Holy Spirit goes beyond what is merely reasonable. He continues to develop this idea:

Interior inspiration has efficacy to enable those to whom it is vouchsafed to accomplish great deeds. We read in the Acts of the Apostles, that when the disciples were gathered together the Holy Ghost, coming upon them, made them to speak of the wonders of God. The Gloss, says, on this passage, "The grace of the Holy Spirit of God knows no obstacles." . . . He who hesitates to obey the impulse of the Holy Spirit for the sake of taking counsel, either knows not this impulse, or else resists it.⁷

Just as nature has its inclinations towards certain goods, goals, or ends, St. Thomas teaches that infused charity and grace have their inclinations toward supernatural goods, that is, the love of God directly and our neighbor. The law of love is such that one must never stifle authentic inspirations, especially inspirations suggesting acts or ways that are not strictly matters of precept, but matters of supererogation, or the achievement of better moral goods. Sometimes, one forgoes doing what is abstractly taken as a better good because prudence dictates that in actuality, a greater good

⁵ Aquinas, *I Quodlib.* 14, 2.

⁶ Aquinas, *Apology for Religious Orders*, pt. 2, ch. 9, p. 427.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pt. 2, ch. 9, p. 429.

will not emerge but only insufferable problems or difficulties. Nonetheless, prudential choices based solely on reason and faith can be unduly influenced by one's weaknesses and the dregs of past sin, thus making it difficult to be fully objective about what is best here and now. As such, many acts of supererogation are omitted when they should not be. Often these occasions of "stifling the spirit" come about because of the entanglements of material possessions, anxieties in marriage, pigheadedness, or willfulness. These choices consequently make it difficult to listen to the quiet inspirations of the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus gave us the counsels in the first place: if lived, to produce the ready spirit of listening to the Word of God echoing in one's being. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it:

The evangelical counsels manifest the living fullness of charity, which is never satisfied with not giving more. They attest its vitality and call forth our spiritual readiness. The perfection of the New Law consists essentially in the precepts of love of God and neighbor. The counsels point out the more direct ways, the readier means, and are to be practiced in keeping with the vocation of each:

[God] does not want each person to keep all the counsels, but only those appropriate to the diversity of persons, times, opportunities, and strengths, as charity requires; for it is charity, as queen of all virtues, all commandments, all counsels, and, in short, of all laws and all Christian actions that gives to all of them their rank, order, time, and value.⁸

The evangelical counsels are helpful because they facilitate a readier spirit to follow the gospel of charity. In Aquinas's work, *Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections*, he summarizes reasons of fittingness for the Incarnation, giving us a glimpse into the problems of growing in virtue when he states in chapter seven:

First of all, we must observe that Christ assumed a human nature to repair the fall of man, as we have said. Therefore, according to his human nature, Christ should have suffered and done whatever would serve as a remedy for sin. The sin of man consists in cleaving to bodily things and neglecting spiritual goods. Therefore the Son of God in his human nature fittingly showed by what he did and suffered that men should consider temporal goods or evils as nothing, lest a disordered love for them impede them from being dedicated to spiritual things. Thus Christ chose poor parents, although perfect in virtue, lest anyone glory in mere nobility of flesh and in the wealth of his parents. He led a poor life to

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1974, quoting St. Francis de Sales, *Love of God*, 8, 6.

teach us to despise riches. He lived without titles or office so as to withdraw men from a disordered desire for these things. He underwent labor, thirst, hunger, and bodily afflictions so that men would not be fixed on pleasure and delights and be drawn away from the good of virtue because of the hardships of this life. In the end he underwent death, so that no one would desert the truth because of fear of death. And lest anyone fear a shameful death for the sake of the truth, he chose the most horrible kind of death, that of the cross. Thus it was fitting that the Son of God made man should suffer and by his example provoke men to virtue, so as to verify what Peter said (1 Pet 2:21): “Christ suffered for you, and left an example for you to follow in his steps.”⁹

The goods that we absolutely need are supernatural, the bodily goods we need are relatively necessary and means for helping us, however, they can become disproportionate, unreasonable, or absolutized due to the effects of original sin influencing decisions for the worse. Here enters the counsels which that can aid us temporarily or permanently if we vow and live them and make spiritual goods predominant in daily life.

A Review of Pope John Paul II's Teaching on Consecrated Life

At this point, I will compare what the papal Magisterium teaches about religious life and then what the late pope taught about the bishops to make an important linkage.

Vita consecrata is very clear concerning the nature of the consecrated life. It has a certain mysterious way of bringing the kingdom of heaven down to earth:

As a way of showing forth the Church's holiness, *it is to be recognized that the consecrated life*, [original emphasis] *which mirrors Christ's own way of life*, [emphasis added] *has an objective superiority* [original emphasis]. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church's purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity. The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved, and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (cf. Mt 22:30). The Church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, and rightly considers it the “door” of the whole consecrated life. (no. 32)

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections*, trans. Joseph Kenny, O.P., www.diafrica.org/nigeriaop/kenny/rationes.htm.

Furthermore, each institute possesses its own charisms, which are of great benefit to the particular diocese in which they live, and without them the particular Church is lacking in fullness or completion:

The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it *eloquently expresses her inmost nature as "Bride."* In the consecrated life, the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world finds fresh enthusiasm and power. There is a need for people able to show the fatherly face of God and the motherly face of the Church, people who spend their lives so that others can have life and hope. The Church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God's grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel. The whole Church finds in her hands this great gift and gratefully devotes herself to promoting it with respect, with prayer, and with the explicit invitation to accept it. It is important that bishops, priests, and deacons, convinced of the evangelical superiority of this kind of life, should strive to discover and encourage the seeds of vocation through preaching, discernment, and wise spiritual guidance. All the faithful are asked to pray constantly for consecrated persons, that their fervor and their capacity to love may grow continually and thus contribute to spreading in today's society of the fragrance of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 2:15). The whole Christian community—pastors, laity, and consecrated persons—is responsible for the consecrated life, and for welcoming and supporting new vocations. (no. 105, original emphasis)

Vita consecrata, in asserting that the consecrated life is founded upon the very life of Jesus Christ, awakens religious to see that divine love must be made tangible so that others can see Christ in them proportionately:

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 realization in heaven. (no. 1, original emphasis)

The Counsels Are Not the Ends but the Means of Growing Towards the Ultimate End, Union with God

St. Thomas reminds us that the purpose of the evangelical counsels is to facilitate growth in faith, hope, and charity, together with the moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance (*ST* I–II, q. 108, a. 4).

Vowing to live these counsels is not an end in itself, but also pertains to another counsel as well. Everyone, however, is summoned to live the spirit of the counsels although without necessarily assuming the responsibilities in fact as vowed religious. As the *Catechism* puts it:

Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every disciple. The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails, for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life, the obligation of practicing chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty, and obedience. It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognized by the Church, that characterizes the life consecrated to God.¹⁰

From the very beginning of the Church there were men and women who set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely, by practicing the evangelical counsels. They led lives dedicated to God, each in his own way. Many of them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families. These the Church, by virtue of her authority, gladly accepted and approved. (no. 918, emphasis added)

What is understood here is that these counsels, while not obligatory in themselves, aid the growth in charity when practiced either for a time or for life. They help overcome obstacles that can arise from the use of certain human goods: self-determination, material things, marriage, and family life. As great as they are, these natural goods can occasion a lessening of the desire for God, prayer, and affective love of God and neighbor, because weakened human nature can pursue them too ardently or unreasonably. And the disordered desire can get in the way of striving to love Jesus Christ above all other loves (although not to the detriment of reasonable lesser loves). Correcting this, the *Catechism* teaches:

Besides its precepts, the New Law also includes the evangelical counsels. The traditional distinction between God's commandments and the evangelical counsels is drawn in relation to charity, the perfection of Christian life. The precepts are intended to remove whatever is incompatible with charity. The aim of the counsels is to remove whatever might hinder the development of charity, even if it is not contrary to it.¹¹

This succinct treatment of the counsels needs to be concluded by looking at the spirit of poverty, again taking our cue from the *Catechism*:

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 915, emphasis added; cf. *Lumen gentium*, nos. 42–43; *Perfectae caritatis*, no. 1.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1973, emphasis added; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST II–II*, q. 184, a. 3.

Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them “renounce all that [they have]” for his sake and that of the Gospel. Shortly before his passion, he gave them the example of the poor widow of Jerusalem who, out of her poverty, gave all that she had to live on. The precept of detachment from riches is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

All Christ’s faithful are to “direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in their pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by an adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty.”¹²

Clearly these paragraphs of the *Catechism* do not dictate that everyone to make a vow of poverty and renounce property. Rather, they require that everyone has a spirit of poverty, which is a detachment or freedom from the unruly desire for material things in themselves or as ends in themselves. Finally it demands a willingness to alleviate the sufferings of others with one’s own goods, as occasion arises.

Vita consecrata gives another clear summary of the ultimate goal of consecrated life from which it is easy to understand why there are struggles to live the Gospel as fully as possible even with the aid of the evangelical counsels:

It is the duty of the *consecrated life* to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the *eschatological goal towards which all things tend*, the splendor before which every other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart. In the consecrated life, then, it is not only a matter of following Christ with one’s whole heart, of loving him “more than father or mother, more than son or daughter” (cf. Mt 10:37)—for this is required of every disciple—but of living and expressing this *by conforming one’s whole existence to Christ* in an all-encompassing commitment which foreshadows the eschatological perfection, to the extent that this is possible in time and in accordance with the different charisms. (no. 16, original emphasis)

Thus the consecrated life involves a total self-donation to God for the future, not by mere episodic choices, but by vows to be exercised continuously until death.

The three vows whether lived in a community or as a consecrated virgin give a certain stability to the process of conforming one’s whole being to Christ with a serious commitment that binds in the future as well as the present:

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2544–45, quoting *Lumen gentium*, no. 42.

By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, “that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world. “By embracing *chastity*, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the Only-Begotten Son who is one with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30, 14:11). By imitating Christ’s *poverty*, they profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn 17:7, 10). By accepting, through the sacrifice of their own freedom, the mystery of Christ’s filial *obedience*, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the One who delights only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34), to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything. By this profound “configuration” to the mystery of Christ, the consecrated life brings about in a special way that *confessio Trinitatis* which is the mark of all Christian life; it acknowledges with wonder the sublime beauty of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and bears joyful witness to his loving concern for every human being. (no. 16, original emphasis).

John Paul fleshes out these commitments in greater detail, and teaches that the life of the evangelical counsels bypasses the goods of marriage and family life, and embraces a greater good allowing the consecrated person more freedom for prayer, self-denial, and surrender to the providence of God in the little details of life.

The Counsels and the Bishop

With this understanding of evangelical counsels, we can now turn to the question of the bishop’s role vis-à-vis the counsels. *Vita consecrata* again provides some directions: “Sacred ministers, for their part, are living images of Christ the Head and Shepherd who guides his people during this time of ‘already and not yet,’ as they await his coming in glory” (no. 16).

In the apostolic exhortation, written by John Paul on the ministry of bishops (*Pastores Gregis*, 2003), he further instructs bishops on their responsibilities to the Church, and also on who they are and on those responsibilities fostering perfection in their special vocation. We find the following sober statement about their ordination in *Pastores Gregis*:

For bishops the call to holiness is inherent in the sacramental event that stands at the origin of their ministry, that is, their episcopal ordination. The ancient *Euchology of Serapion* formulates the ritual invocation of the consecration thus: “God of truth, make thy servant a living bishop, a holy bishop in the succession of the holy Apostles.” *Since episcopal ordination does not infuse the perfection of the virtues*, “the bishop is called to pursue

his path of perfection with greater intensity so as to attain to the stature of Christ, the perfect Man.” (no. 13, emphasis added)

Here the pope teaches that episcopal ordination does not make one holy automatically, rather the bishop must actually pursue the perfection of charity with greater intensity than others. The supernatural dignity of episcopal ordination is one reality; deep intimacy with God coupled with moral uprightness is another. While they should go together, because of human weakness they do not always coalesce. Hence the same *Pastores Gregis* goes on to say:

Mindful, therefore, of his human weaknesses and sins, each bishop, along with his priests, personally experiences the sacrament of Reconciliation as a profound need and as a grace to be received ever anew, and thus renews his own commitment to holiness in the exercise of his ministry. In this way he also gives visible expression to the mystery of a Church which is constitutively holy, yet also made up of sinners in need of forgiveness. (no. 13)

Holiness, therefore, does not necessarily mean that a person is rendered impeccable or incapable of sinning. For impeccability comes either with the beatific vision or mystical marriage, the highest degree of union with God in this life according to Sts. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

The Special Calling of the Bishop

Nevertheless, the bishop has a very high calling beyond the ordinary:

The specific spirituality of the bishop, as the synod fathers repeatedly emphasized, is further enriched by the bestowal of that grace inherent in the fullness of the priesthood which is given to him at the moment of his ordination. As a pastor of the flock and servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in hope, *the bishop must become as it were a transparent reflection of the very person of Christ*, the Supreme Pastor. In the Roman Pontifical this requirement is explicitly mentioned: “Receive the miter, and may the splendor of holiness shine forth in you, so that when the Chief Shepherd appears, you may deserve to receive from him an unfading crown of glory.” (*Pastores Gregis*, no. 13, emphasis added)

This image of Christ is a goal of the bishop; it may not be realized at the beginning of his ministry but should be ever more fully realized as he grows in the grace of his consecration. It is not easy to change one's life from being a parish priest to being a bishop of a diocese. The lack of experience, however, should challenge the bishop to rely more on the grace of God and not his natural talents. *Pastores Gregis* challenges him even more:

The faithful ought to be able to contemplate on the face of their bishop *the grace-given qualities which in the various Beatitudes make up the self-portrait of Christ*: the face of poverty, meekness, and the thirst for righteousness; the merciful face of the Father and of the peaceful and peace-giving man; the pure face of one who constantly looks to God alone. The faithful should also be able to see in their bishop the face of one who relives Jesus' own compassion for the afflicted and, today as much as in the past, the face filled with strength and interior joy of one persecuted for the truth of the Gospel. (no. 18, emphasis added)

If such a goal does not frighten those who yearn to become bishops, then the next paragraphs should cause some kind of trembling:

To all his disciples, and especially to those who while still on this earth wish to follow him more closely like the Apostles, the Lord proposes the way of the evangelical counsels. In addition to being a gift of the Holy Trinity to the Church, the counsels are a reflection of the life of the Trinity in each believer. This is especially the case in the bishop, who, as a successor of the Apostles, is called to follow Christ along the path leading to the perfection of charity. For this reason he is consecrated, even as Jesus was consecrated. The bishop's life is radically dependent on Christ and *a completely transparent image of Christ before the Church and the world*. The life of the bishop must radiate the life of Christ and consequently Christ's own obedience to the Father, even unto death, death on a Cross (cf. Phil 2:8), his chaste and virginal love, and his poverty which is absolute detachment from all earthly goods. (no. 18, emphasis added)

Here in this passage, one can see why St. Thomas says that the bishop is in the state of perfection as perfecting others by reason of his consecration. He perfects others by his teaching, preaching, and writing as well as his decision-making or governance. He gives example by his public witness to the Eucharistic adoration, standing up against immoral teachings and the like. Finally he shepherds his priests by his encouragement, correction, and educational guidance through on-going formation.

Continuing in the same article, *Pastores Gregis* shows the bishop how important the counsels are to his life:

In this way the bishops can lead by their example not only those members of the Church who are called to follow Christ in the consecrated life but also priests, to whom the radicalism of holiness *in accordance with the spirit of the evangelical counsels is also proposed*. Indeed, this radicalism is incumbent on all the faithful, including lay people, for it is "a fundamental, undeniable demand flowing from the call of Christ to follow and imitate him by virtue of the intimate communion of life

with him brought about by the Spirit.” (no. 18, emphasis added)

The Bishop's Obedience to the Successor of Peter

In this reading of *Vita consecrata* and *Pastores Gregis*, it becomes clear that if a bishop does not understand the role and purpose of the consecrated life of religious, then he will likely not understand the role of the evangelical counsels in his own life. He becomes simply a minister, a functionary, a CEO rather than the mirror image of Christ. To avoid such a desecration of the nature of the episcopacy he is called to, *Pastores Gregis* teaches about the relationship of the counsels to the bishop. Concerning obedience, it states:

By taking on these very human features of Jesus, the bishop also becomes the model and promoter of a spirituality of communion, carefully and vigilantly working to build up the Church, so that all that he says and does will reflect a common filial *submission* in Christ and in the Spirit to the loving plan of the Father. As a teacher of holiness and minister of the sanctification of his people, the bishop is called to carry out faithfully *the will of the Father*. The bishop's obedience must be lived according to the example—for it could hardly be otherwise—of the obedience of Christ himself, who said that he came down from heaven not to do his own will, but rather the will of the One who sent him (cf. Jn 6:38.; 8:29; Phil 2:7–8). (no. 19, emphasis added)

The reader should notice that obedience as submission is the basis for promoting communion. Continuing in the same article, the divine plan is also at the root of communion:

Walking in the footsteps of Christ, the bishop is obedient to the Gospel and the Church's Tradition; he is able to read the signs of the times and to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Petrine ministry and in episcopal collegiality. . . . The fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders which he has received puts him in a special relationship with the Successor of Peter, with the members of the college of bishops and with his own particular Church. He must feel committed to living intensely this relationship with the pope and his brother bishops in a close bond of unity and cooperation, and thus *conforming to the divine plan* which willed to unite the Apostles inseparably around Peter. This hierarchical communion of the bishop with the Supreme Pontiff strengthens his ability to make present, by virtue of the Order he has received, Jesus Christ, the invisible Head of the whole Church. (no. 19, emphasis added)

Yet the bishop does not simply wait for his “marching orders” from the pope; he must also take initiative for his own diocese from the Holy Spirit's inspirations. For this reason, obedience implies listening:

As a model of attentive listening, the bishop will also strive to understand, through prayer and discernment, the will of God in what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Through the evangelical exercise of his authority, he will be ready to dialogue with his co-workers and the faithful in order to build effective mutual understanding. This will enable him to show a pastoral appreciation of the dignity and responsibility of each member of the People of God, fostering in a balanced and serene way their spirit of initiative. The faithful should be helped to grow towards a responsible obedience which will enable them to be actively engaged on the pastoral plane. Here the exhortation which Saint Ignatius of Antioch addressed to Polycarp remains timely: "Let nothing be done without your consent, but do nothing yourself without the consent of God." (no. 19)

The Bishop's Poverty

Pastores Gregis proceeds to a treatment of poverty and the life of the bishop, exhorting him to poverty in spirit and in fact. By use of the phrase *vir pauper*, *Pastores Gregis* dares the bishop to follow in the spirit of Francis of Assisi:

The synod fathers, as a sign of collegial unity, responded to the appeal which I made at the opening Mass of the synod that the *evangelical Beatitude of poverty* should be considered an indispensable condition for a fruitful episcopal ministry in present-day circumstances. Here too, amid the assembly of bishops there stood out the figure of Christ the Lord, "who carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression," and who invites the Church, and above all her pastors, "to follow the same path in communicating to humanity the fruits of salvation."

Consequently, the bishop who wishes to be an authentic witness and minister of the Gospel of hope must be a *vir pauper*. This is demanded by the witness he is called to bear to Christ, who was himself poor. It is also demanded by the Church's concern for the poor, who must be the object of a preferential option. The bishop's decision to carry out his ministry in poverty contributes decisively to making the Church the "home of the poor."¹³

Living a life marked by poverty of spirit and fact, the bishop is not ruled by the opinion of others, and he is freed from an over-dependence upon being esteemed by others. *Pastores Gregis*, article 20, explains why:

On the bishop's part, this calls for complete trust in the providence of the heavenly Father, an open-hearted communion of goods, an austere way of life, and continuous personal conversion. Only in this way will he be able

¹³ John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis*, no. 20, quoting Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, no. 8.

to share in the struggles and sufferings of the People of God, whom he is called not only to lead and nourish but with whom he must show fraternal solidarity, sharing their problems and helping to build their hope.

He will carry out this service effectively if his own life is simple, sober, and at the same time active and generous, and if it places those considered least important in our society not on the fringes but rather at the center of the Christian community. . . . In this perspective of sharing and of simplicity of life, the bishop will administer the goods of the Church like the “good head of a household,” and be careful to ensure that they are used for the Church’s own specific ends: the worship of God, the support of her ministers, the works of the apostolate and initiatives of charity towards the poor. (emphasis added)

The Bishop’s Life of Chastity

Finally, the bishop is reminded that through the counsel of chastity, he too must become filled with affective love for the Church, both particular and universal, and for all consecrated persons:

“Receive this ring, the seal of fidelity: adorned with undefiled faith, preserve unblemished the Bride of God, the holy Church.” These words of the Roman Pontifical urge the bishop to realize that he is committed to mirroring the *virginal love of Christ* for all his faithful ones. He is called above all to foster relationships inspired by the respect and esteem befitting a family where love flourishes, in accordance with the exhortation of the Apostle Peter: “Love one another deeply, from the heart, for you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet 1:22–23).”

While exhorting Christians by his example and words to offer their bodies as a living and holy sacrifice pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1), the bishop must remind everyone that “the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31), and that it is our duty to “wait in joyful hope” for Christ’s return in glory (cf. Tit 2:13). In his pastoral concern he should be *especially close with paternal affection to all who have embraced the religious life in the profession of the evangelical counsels* and who offer their valuable service to the Church. He will support and encourage priests, who, called by God’s grace, have freely assumed the commitment of celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven, and remind himself and them of the *evangelical and spiritual grounds of this choice*, so important for the service of the People of God. In the reality of the Church and the world today, the witness of chaste love is, on the one hand, a form of spiritual therapy for humanity and, on the other, a form of protest against the idolatry of instinct. (no. 21, emphasis added)

As the virtue of chastity grows, this counsel fills the bishop with a merciful and patient generosity towards all the people who are under his care.

Like a father of a family and a husband with his wife, this man looks to his flock not only as a businessman or a builder, but as a man deeply convicted about the salvation of souls. With warmth and certainty, he leads people away from the idols of power, riches, and pleasure to seek the supernatural goods of God with vigor and to use the natural goods of this world according to reason and faith. The call to holiness preached by the bishop absolutely requires the help of the evangelical counsels known and lived from the depths of his being.

The counsels serve as remedies from the threefold concupiscence of avarice, lust, and pride because they check these desires from becoming the dominant motives of the spiritual life and they enslave the human person. Celibacy equates to liberty from sexual desire in order to cleave to a Person, Jesus Christ. The bishop's life lived in this counsel makes him live as a person for others, pointing them to rise beyond the created goods of this life to the divine life. Even for the married, chastity enables them to rise above sexual pleasure either as an end in itself or an addiction, to become integrated with a graced friendship of self-giving to the spouse. The spirit of poverty withdraws the bishop from the excessive preoccupation with material goods and worries about them for love of God. In this way, it allows him to teach his flock to lead lives of greater detachment from worldly goods and to worry less about tomorrow's needs. This in turn enables them to find the real treasure of life, a deep trust in God's providence, without neglecting life's necessities. Obedience for its part is the highest counsel because it imitates Christ's obedience to the Father. As the bishop obeys the laws of the Church and teaches the orthodox faith in accord with the papal Magisterium, he submits his will to another sacred source, leading him to grow in humility of mind and heart. Here too, the bishop acts as an example for the faithful to live lives of obedience and faithful assent to the Church's teaching. Together, the three counsels ready everyone, the bishop, clerics, the laity, the religious, for living a very intense divine love as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Therefore, the bishop would do well to study and understand the life of vowed consecrated persons to aid him in living the counsels. In this way he will more readily grow in holiness himself and lead the faithful to that same holiness with and under his guidance. The truth of the evangelical counsels, when at least lived in spirit and in fact, when called for in the lay state of life, will set each and all free from selfishness, illusion, and mediocrity. Jesus was truly a great friend to reveal and teach us about these three counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. N.V