**Consecrated Life and Formation Today in a Secularized World:**

**The North American Context**

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Many challenges face the prospect of living the consecrated life in today’s North American context: how to deal with the many facets of secularized culture in which we live, how to preserve the integrity of the vowed life in the life of the community and in the personal lives of its members, how to form members in the various stages of initial and ongoing formation—to name but a few. In this essay, we will layout the general contours of these challenges and seek to provide some practical suggestions for future growth.

*Secularized North America*

As a valued offspring and important contributor to Western civilization, today’s secularized North American context has been described in terms of “a pluralism that is simultaneously postmodern, secular, and liberal.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It is postmodern in that it has an underlying suspicion of modernity’s exaltation of reason. It is secular in that it has lost its sense of the sacred that arises from a deep personal and communal faith. It is liberal in that it makes individual autonomy the ultimate value to be preserved in society at all costs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

From this description, there arises a relativistic outlook on life, one that denies the existence of truth outside of a person’s subjective experience. In other words, in today’s secularized North America there is not one Truth, but many truths vying for prominence in the political-social-economic arena. Tolerance is the value that supposedly holds everything together in such a society. Theoretically, each position has an equal footing in this relativistic and pluralistic society. One wonders, however, how such tolerance can be sustained in an environment where, instead of listening to one another, competing voices struggle in a fight for ultimate dominance. In their quest for prominence and political power, each side engages in hand-to-hand verbal combat by demonizing the other to gain popular support and even stooping to the level of creating Fake News. Hence, we have the rise of the so-called culture wars in North America that have led to hard-fought battles regarding to such basic questions as religious liberty, the dignity of the human person, care for the environment, and the right to life.

The Catholic Church has a response to each of the characteristics of this pluralistic worldview. In contrast to postmodernism, it values and promotes the use of reason, while recognizing its limitations as a final arbiter of truth. In contrast to secular culture, it fosters a sense of the sacred that underlies all reality and underscores the importance of faith as the key factor sustaining such an outlook on reality. In contrast to the liberal stance, it limits individual autonomy according to the needs of the common good and promotes a fundamentally different outlook toward freedom, what Servais Pinckaers calls the difference between the “freedom of indifference” (individual autonomy) and the “freedom of excellence”(virtuous living in the Truth).[[3]](#footnote-3) It also warns against what Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in his homily at the Conclave before being elected Pope calls the “dictatorship of relativism.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The Church, in contrast to this postmodern, liberal, and secular mindset, emphasizes a genuine pluralism of peoples rooted in the love of God, the common good of humanity, and the dignity of the human person.

Given the above, it is clear that, even when confronted with the secularized outlook of today’s North American culture, the Church must remain faithful to the commission given it by Christ to preach the Gospel to all the corners of the earth. The question before us now is: How should the Church proceed and what specific role do members living the consecrated life have to play in it? To answer this question, it is important to look at the various ways in which Christians in the past have interacted with the various cultures in which they were living.

*Christ and Culture*

Almost seventy years ago, the great Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr identified five ways in which Christians typically interacted with the culture of their day.

First, there is “Christ *against* culture,” whereby Christian placed themselves squarely at odds with the evils surrounding them by cutting themselves off from the world in order to preserve the purity and integrity of the faith. The early monastic movement of *anachoresis*, or retreat from the world, would be one example of this approach.

Second, there is “Christ *of* culture,” whereby Christians, unlike those who retreat from the world, seek to accommodate themselves to the surrounding culture, while at the same time affirming their Christian identity. The twelfth-century theologian Peter Abelard and the ethics he developed in his *Scito te Ipsum* represents a mannered attempt make peace with the world, while all the while seeking to affirm one Christian identity.

Third, there is “Christ *above* culture,” whereby Christians view Christ as the higher reality and hence someone who can place himself at the very center of the cultural reality and bring about a synthesis of Christianity and the culture of the day. Medieval Christendom is perhaps the example par excellence of this approach.

Fourth, there is “Christ and culture *in paradox*,” whereby Christians find themselves in tension with the exiting culture, at one and the same time, both *in and out of* relation toit. This tension expresses itself in a kind of dualism. Martin Luther’s understanding of the Christian being both in the world and out of it, both thoroughly sinful, yet justified by faith, would be an example of this approach.

Finally, there is “Christ, *the transformer* of culture,” whereby Christians engage the surrounding culture, affirm what is good in it, reject what is evil in it. In doing so, they seek to act as a spiritual leaven that raises society to new heights. The documents of the Second Vatican Council and Pope Saint John Paul II’s emphasis on the new evangelization would represent, at least in theory, this transformative approach to the Church’s attempt to engage the world around it.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This cursory look at Niebuhr’s five models gives us a useful metaphor for understanding how the Church should act in the context of today’s secularized North American context. We should note, however, that the Church today is itself deeply divided in North America between traditionalists and progressives, globalists and nationalists, conservatives and liberals. It is fair to say that the Church itself has been deeply influenced by the society in which it finds itself and that, despite the good intentions of the Second Vatican Council, it is in danger of succumbing to the secularizing tendencies surrounding it. Although the Church may be called to be a transformerof the world around it, in the North American context it runs the risk of itself becoming deeply secularized. Although this may not be so in its official statements, it is certainly true in the outlook of many who fill the pews and especially in those who, because of the scandals in recent decades, have lost confidence in both the institutional Church and its leaders and, as a result, have ceased practicing the faith altogether. Hence the rise of the sociological group called the “Nones,” that is, people who identify with no organized religion whatsoever but consider themselves deeply spiritual and seeking ultimate meaning in life.

What is more, it would be a mistake to think that those living the consecrated life have been immune to the forces outlined above. On the contrary, they are equally divided between traditionalists and progressives, globalists and nationalists, conservatives and liberals. In varying degrees, they themselves have been influenced by the secular culture around them, some so much so that they themselves have become skeptical of reason, lost a sense of the sacred in their lives, and place the value of individual autonomy above all else. What is more, it is fair to say that in today’s pluralistic environment within the Church, they have, in all likelihood, employed with varying degrees of success each of the five outlooks described by Niebuhr, with some members possibly employing more than one in varying circumstances. Questions arise. How can consecrated life live in today’s secularized North American context? What approach(es) should it take? And what does it mean for the initial and ongoing formation of its members? There are no easy answers to such questions.

*Consecrated Life in the North American Context*

One way of looking at the pluralistic nature of the today’s Church in North America (and it’s impact on consecrated life) is to gage it against Cardinal Avery Dulles’ classic work on the models of the Church. Crafted in the mid 1970s, Dulles writes about five distinct yet interrelated models present in the Church of his day and which, to a large extent are also present in our own: (1) the Institutional model, which focuses on the hierarchical structures making up the Church’s governing body, (2) the Mystical Communion model, which emphasizes the deep spiritual unity throughout history and beyond of the Church the purgative, militant, and triumphant, (2) the Sacramental model, which looks to the Church as a visible sign and instrument of Christ’s redeeming grace, (4) the Church as Herald model, which highlights the prophetic call to proclaim the Good News to the four corners of the earth, and (5) the Church as Servant model, which views the mission of believers as one of serving the needs of their community and all people in need, especially the poor and marginalized.[[6]](#footnote-6)

More often than not, a variety of these models can be at work in any particular historical epoch, in any specific community, or in any individual person. That is to say that, in any given instance, a variety of models may be at work at any level of the Church’s makeup and that when juxtaposed with one another in this way, may also provide a deeper sense of the Church’s nature, identity, and mission. To be sure, the same can be said for communities of consecrated life or in individual community members. The possibility that one or more of these models may be operative at any one time in its historical circumstances provides religious with a unique moment of decision in their lives. Either they can seek common ground and live together in peace in what Pope Saint John Paul II referred to as a “spirituality of communion,”[[7]](#footnote-7) or they can vie with one another for theological and spiritual prominence and face the possibility of a gradual disintegration of the very nature, purpose, and evangelizing mission of consecrated life. When living in a secularized North American context, the way forward for them must involve a combination of intense prayer and discernment, inner personal and communal reflection on the meaning of consecrated life, and a critical analysis of how a renewal of its internal structures and missionary outreach can impact the secularized culture in which they live. Although the path ahead will be difficult, we must recall that the crosses we bear are rarely without their share of difficulties and that they become easy only when carried with humble faith in Christ. Even in our present circumstances, there is much that inspires hope.

Some thirty years ago Patricia Wittberg provided an interesting tool for helping members of consecrated life (and members of religious congregations in particular) to pave the way forward in confronting the challenges of secular culture. She identified three approaches to religious life that either had continued or developed in the wake of the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

The first, the intentional model, controls every aspect of community life from when they get up in the morning, to the clothes they wear, to the food they eat, to when they pray, to what they do during the day, and to when they go to sleep. The strength of this model is that that it gives a very strong and unified corporate witness. Its weakness is that it can be harmful to the individual’s personal identity and stunt in him or her mature, authentic growth.

The bureaucratic model, by way of contrast, organizes the community’s identity around the work it does and gives its members ample personal time during their off hours for tending to their private personal pursuits. The strength of this model is its flexibility and efficiency in its orientation toward mission and the apostolate. Its weakness lies in the subtle dilution of its corporate witness and the community’s counter-cultural witness.

The associational model, instead, is described as “a group of persons who have invested a certain amount of their resources in the attainment of some common goal or objective, but who retain more personal autonomy and competing loyalties than would be possible in the intentional community.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Loose-knit ties that gather them around a common spiritual outlook hold them together. The strength of this model is that it optimizes the personal freedom of its members and allows them to work toward their common goal in a way that best suits their own personalities and individual needs. Its weaknesses are a tendency toward individualism, a lack of community, and loss of a strong sense of corporate identity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Wittberg concludes that the best way for religious congregations to forge a future would be for them to incorporate aspects of each of the three models’ strengths. That is to say, they should make an effort to project a strong corporate witness, emphasize flexibility and efficiency in the apostolate, and foster a sense of personal dignity that allows for mature development and authentic freedom.[[10]](#footnote-10) The question before us now is: How can this be done?

*Living in the Gap*

What follows are some general reflections on how communities of consecrated life can live out their commitments in today’s secularized context of North America.

1. *Honest Assessment*. Communities of consecrated life first need to assess the extent to which they have already been influenced by the secular world around them. Questions arise. To what extent do they suspect the role of reason as a building block for a society based on the dignity of the human person and the common good? To what extent have they lost their sense of the sacred and the role of faith in their communal and personal lives? To what extent have they allowed the quest for personal autonomy interfere with their living out a true freedom based on the virtuous life? How do they understand the way or ways they should relate to the surrounding culture? What models of Church do they exhibit? What kind of community do they embody? What combination of these various models are at work in the daily lives of its members? Progress can be made only after a thorough and honest assessment of their current state of life has been made.

2. *Vision and Reality*. After this honest assessment, these communities need to get back in touch with the vision that inspired them and look at the various ways in which they have fallen short. In a secularized world such as the one found in North America, there is a slippery slope the ideal and the real, one that fosters thoughtless compromise and subtly merges vision into the reality to the extent that the former ultimately disappears. Rather than striving to live up to an authentic vision of consecrated life, individual members and, in some cases, entire communities can easily accommodate themselves to their secularized environment and settle into a life of carefree comfort and compromise. No sincere candidate would ever wish to join a community that offers little or no corporate witness, presents itself as a bureaucratic workplace rather than a vibrant community of believers, or offers no sound counter-cultural witness to the world around them.

3. *Living in the Gap*. Once the gap between vision and reality has been recognized, these communities need to identify concrete communal and personal strategies that will help them narrow the distance between them. Their present structures of communal and personal living need to be critically evaluated and adapted to the needs of the present. Each community needs to ask itself on a regular basis if together they are gradually narrowing the gap between vision and reality or allowing it to grow. Consecrated life cannot properly engage the secular culture around it if it does not have a deep sense of the vision that has brought its members together and an awareness of its need fundamental need for daily conversion. In response to the secular environment in which they live, consecrated communities are called to base themselves in a spirituality of communion dedicated to Jesus Christ. It should be one that fosters a healthy understanding of the reciprocity faith and reason, nurtures a deep reverence for the sacred, and promotes an understanding of freedom that leads a person to what is authentically true, good, holy, and even beautiful.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Some Practical Suggestions*

Here are some concrete suggestions for communities of consecrated life wishing to engage the secular culture of North America. Especially in their programs of initial and ongoing formation, communities of consecrated life could implement a variety of innovative changes:

* They could dedicate themselves to rediscovering for themselves, the faithful, and those who have been estranged from the Church a deep sense of the sacred. They could do so by adapting concrete practices of liturgical and popular devotion structured into the daily routine of communal and personal life to the needs of the day. Such adapted practices could include such things as a emphasis on the role silence in the sacramental mysteries (especially the Eucharist), daily common meditation, a personal holy hour, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Marian devotions, a weekly review of life, examination of consciousness. Adapting such practices to the needs of secular society requires imagination, creativity, and a desire to meet people where they are.
* They could focus their apostolic work on outreach to the poor and marginalized, protection of the unborn, and care for the environment. At the same time, they should recognize that work is an important but not defining part of their mission. The community needs to find ways of identifying itself as a family knitted together by a common purpose. They need to identify with one another outside the workplace (e.g., small group sharing, common prayer, retreats, and recreation).
* They could find ways of fostering personal maturity and responsibility in service of the community and to the overall common good of society (e.g., actively promoting the need for spiritual direction among its members, encouraging a weekly day off, making regular sabbaticals available, encouraging projects of personal apostolic interest).
* They could encourage members to develop the skill of active listening that encourages authentic dialogue with those of differing points of view (e.g., train their members in an approach to spiritual direction that reaches out to members of other religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions).
* They could try to identify ways in which they can offer a counter-cultural witness to the surrounding culture (e.g., adopting apostolates that challenge the postmodern outlook of suspicion of reason, loss of the sense of the sacred, and autonomous freedom).
* They could examine the ways in which in which technology and social media can be used not only to interact with but also to transform the world in which they live (e.g., creating blogs, websites, and massive open online courses that show how the secular outlook influences everyone in North American culture, even themselves, and that offer ways of looking beyond it).
* Finally, they could promote their corporate identity by wearing the religious habit at appropriate moments (at least in liturgical functions) and adopt some external symbols representing that identity (e.g., a pin, a cross, a special shirt) to be worn by members even when they are not specifically engaged in the official apostolic work of the community.

These practical suggestions, while by no means exhaustive, outline just some of the ways that communities of consecrated life can reorient their lives in a way that would enable them to reach out to the secular world around them. The present situation calls for a strong sense of community and corporate identity, a profound sense of apostolic purpose, and even deeper desire to meet people where they are and help them to take the next step toward true and authentic freedom.

*Conclusion*

In secularized North American society, people have access to the richest products and most advanced technologies the world has ever produced. At the same time, they find themselves increasingly isolated from one another and often bereft of family and community ties. In such a context, communities of consecrated life present an enigma to postmodern liberals when they live the vowed life in such a way that fosters genuine relationships of friendship among its members and by offering them the Gospel message of God’s personal love for each human being as a way of filling the void of the secularized soul.

For this reason, programs of initial and ongoing formation for communities of consecrated life need to foster authentic experiences of communal living that radiate a deep sense of belonging to a loving personal God who assures them of his love, gives them hope in something beyond the present world, and offers them faith in God as the key that unlocks the door to true happiness. Formators involved in such programs should seek a proper balance between the communal and the personal and do so in a way that preserves the community’s common corporate identity yet allows for authentic personal growth and development.

This challenge may seem daunting and perhaps even overwhelming. At the same time, we may draw comfort from two important realities. First of all, North American culture is not yet completely secularized. If care is not taken, however, it may be well on its way of becoming so. As human persons, we have a deep longing for transcendence. Although this desire may become numbed, no cultural ideology, not even postmodernism, can completely stamp out our desire for something beyond ourselves. We, in other words, are hardwired for God and nothing can change that reality. As Pope Emeritus Benedict puts it, “Let us put it very simply: man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Finally, it is important to remember that God is actively at work in the world and accompanies us as we confront the current crises both within the Church and in the secular environment in which we live. We are called to live in hope and to trust that the God will use us to bring good out the evil that surrounds us and help us to be instruments of society’s gradual (and final) transformation. As Pope Francis himself reminds us: “Our hope as Christians is strong, safe and sound on this earth, where God has called us to walk, and it is open to eternity because it is founded on God who is always faithful.”[[13]](#footnote-13) So may it be. Thus may it come to pass.

*Reflection Questions*

* To what extent has your community been influenced by the surrounding secular culture?
* How does your community presently relate or react to the surrounding secular culture?
* What models of Church does your community currently promote?
* In what sense is your community intentional, bureaucratic, or associational?
* How does your community live in the gap between vision and reality?
* What are the positive and negative elements of the surrounding secular culture?
* How can your community reach out to the people of North America?

1. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, *Biomedicine and Beatitude: An Introduction to Catholic Bioethics* (Washington, D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 249 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 249-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, *Homily* (Mass “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice,” April 18, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), 45-229. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Image Books, 1974), 39-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (Apostolic Letter on the New Millennium, January 6, 2001), nos. 43-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patricia Wittberg, *Creating a Future for Religious Life: A Sociological Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 11-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 140-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For more on this process, see Dennis J. Billy, *Living in the Gap: Religious Life and the Call to Communion*, 2d ed (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* (Encyclical Letter, November 30, 2007), no.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pope Francis, *General Audience* (St. Peter’s Square, April 10, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)