

# Goethals News

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Consecrated Life Today

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## Editorial

### Consecrated Life, A Sign of the Church's Vitality

Fr. Dr. J. Felix Raj, SJ



As Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1996 Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the invitation of Jesus, "Come and see" (Jn1:39), is the golden rule of pastoral work for promoting vocations to priesthood and consecrated life (no. 64).

As an inspiring attempt to revive and revitalize the followers of Christ, Pope Benedict XVI announced 2009-10 as the year for Priests and Pope Francis announced 2015 as the year of consecrated life (usually known as religious life).

The Church cannot survive and thrive without the witness of priests and consecrated persons (usually known as religious women and men). Unfortunately, many of us seem to have forgotten this "golden rule" and rely too much on ourselves and modern marketing methods to attract vocations.

Jesus Christ is the ideal of the priests and the consecrated persons. He is the first to be consecrated and sent by God with a mission to the world. Every Christian is consecrated by God in Christ through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation to participate in this divine mission.

With the profession of the "evangelical counsels" of poverty, chastity and obedience, the consecration received from baptism and confirmation is further deepened in a particular manner. It empowers the consecrated persons for a more significant participation in Christ's saving life and mission to the world (Lumen Gentium, 39, 44).

And so, the vocation to consecrated life is a grace; it is a gift; it is a life-long commitment to God and his people recognized by the Church. But like the rich young man in the Gospel (Mathew 19:16-30), those who receive the grace may refuse even to accept the invitation; or, like Peter, may struggle for a long time before they fully give themselves to Christ; or like Judas, they may be seduced by what the world offers them and betray the Master whom they had known and for a time had followed.

There is a prevailing question in the minds of many people: what's happening to priesthood and consecrated life? With the dwindling number of entrants into religious congregations and a perceived irrelevance, consecrated life is facing many challenges today. Some say there is a serious crisis, that factors like globalization, secularization, multiculturalism have made inroads into cloisters and have adversely influenced this kind of Christian way of life.



Jesus and the Apostles

In the west, there is the recurring process of restructuring and merging of provinces of religious societies. Lack of vocations has led to aging of members. Congregations are closing down long-standing and prestigious institutions or handing them over to lay leaders. There is a questions whether the Western situation will develop in Asia and Africa?

As Chesterton once observed, there is a revolt against vows, even to the vow of marriage. Mother Teresa used to say, a family that prays together, stays together. Strong Christian families foster vocations. But today Christian family life is weak and shallow.

It is the Eucharistic Lord and the celebration of the Eucharist that promotes and sustains vocations to priesthood and consecrated life.

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If the Eucharist becomes, instead of being a mechanical exercise or a part of our daily routine, presence, communion and sacrifice, our personal and community life become meaningful and rich. Then youngsters will be inspired and challenged to follow Christ to sacrifice themselves for the service of the Church and the world.

Is the decline in consecrated life – quantitatively and qualitatively, a symptom of losing its relevance? Will there be a revival? What will happen in the next fifty years?

This issue of the Goethals News is dedicated to A Review of Consecrated Life Today. Fr. Jose Kalapura of Patna traces the history of religious congregations in India and their contribution to society.

While Fr. Julian Saldhana of Mumbai appraises consecrated life from Indian's multi-religious and multi-cultural context, Sr. Inigo of St. Anne's Sisters looks at it from a perspective of women religious. Fr. Michael Amaladoss of Chennai writes, from a theological point of view, a positive note about the future of consecrated life.

Whereas Mr. Dipankar Basu, a former teacher of St. Xavier's School, Kolkata, presents a Hindu view of religious life today, Fr. Leonard Fernando of Trichy accesses it as a counter-cultural movement to follow Jesus radically.

This special issue intends to raise some reflections on the topic and a meaningful discussion among readers. We look forward to your response.

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## Catholic Religious Life in India: A Historical Perspective

Rev. Dr. Jose Kalapura, SJ



India, the birthplace of many major world religions, is a land known for its sages and holy people. Irrespective of its multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural background, India has the greatest respect for religious life and the monastic (*sanyasa*) tradition. Even though the majority of Indians do not follow the Christian religion, they respect Christian consecrated

(religious) persons and priests.

Although Indian Catholics are only a small minority, consecrated life continues to attract hundreds of young persons to religious life and the number has been increasing over the years, whereas it is decreasing in Christian Europe and America where religious life is on the verge of danger of extinction.

Institutes of Consecrated Life in the Catholic Church are popularly known as Religious Congregations. There are also quasi-religious institutes known as Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life. The difference between these Institutes and Societies is mainly on the basis of the nature of the vow they profess and the rigorousness or the less rigorousness of their life-style.

Consecrated life in Christianity first emerged in monastic form after 250 AD in Egypt under the initiatives of St. Antony of the Desert and Pachomius. Monastic communities gradually emerged in the Middle East and spread to Europe. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century monastic life became well organized under the leadership of St. Benedict. Thereafter numerous Religious Orders were founded in Europe. In India, although Christianity of the Syriac tradition spread from the first century, monastic life was not introduced here for centuries.

The first Religious Order which came to work in Kerala, India was the Italian Franciscan Order in mid-thirteenth century which did not see any continuity. Steady presence of Religious missionaries began with the arrival of Portuguese Franciscans and Dominicans who accompanied the Portuguese colonialists in early 16<sup>th</sup> century first to Kerala and later to Goa. Subsequently the Jesuits (1542), Augustinians (1569) and others established religious houses in India.

The first indigenous Religious Congregation (Oratorians) was founded in Goa in 1680, which was a lone exception. From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, further foreign congregations and some indigenous congregations were founded in India. Today, nearly 400 religious congregations are working in India of whom about 50 percent are of Indian origin.

The largest number of consecrated persons belongs to women Religious Congregations which number some 335, whereas the number of men clerical congregations is 64 and of Religious Brothers, only 18. The number of women Religious is over 130,000, whereas the number of Religious priests is only 19000 and of brothers, only 4000.

Consecrated personnel form the backbone of the Indian Church. The largest share of Church's ministerial work is being carried out by Religious men and women, supporting some 18000 diocesan clergy.

From a historical perspective Indian Catholic Religious life is modeled on Western tradition, even those founded in India. Though India has had the *sanyasa* tradition for more than 2500 years, Christian religious life was not much influenced by Indic ashram life. This must have been because religious tradition was overly oriented and guided by European Christian tradition on one hand, and dialogue between religions was nearly impossible before Vatican Council II, on the other. However, since early twentieth

century, there have been attempts at adopting Indic religious life in Christianity, starting first with Protestants (Sadhu Movement) and later by Catholics.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, a layman and Bengali Brahmin convert, took the first steps to establish the ashram way of life in the Catholic Church in 1894. His vision was of being a Christian in the Hindu culture. But, unfortunately, the local ecclesiastical authorities discouraged his attempt. Later, around 1950, two French missionaries, Fr Jules Montanan (Swami Arubi Anandam) and Dom Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), established the Saccidananda Ashram at Santivanam in Tiruchi district of Tamil Nadu. This is known as the mother of the ashrams of the Catholic Church in India. The Kristiya Sannyasa Samaj, founded in 1955 by Bede Griffiths and Francis Acharya is famous for its assimilation and integration of the spiritual heritage of India.

Thereafter a number of Catholic ashrams (nearly 50) have cropped up in the country, and the inmates live a life of consecrated brotherhood or sisterhood. There are also consecrated individuals who live alone in different areas of the country as an inspiration for all. Generally, Indian Christian monks do not engage in active apostolate but many of them engage in some activities within the precincts of their ashrams besides their daily prayers, meditation and other spiritual exercises. Following Hindu sanyasis, they are strict vegetarians. They welcome people of any profession without consideration of caste, class, creed or religion for spiritual retreat, recollection and moral advice. Indian Christian ashrams are spiritual centres where people of all religions visit and pray in the spirit of ecumenism and dialogue.

Interestingly in Indic tradition, particularly in Hindu tradition, men adopt sanyasa more than women, whereas in the Catholic tradition, it is women who outnumber men.

The ashram tradition aside, most Religious congregations are active orders following the example of Christ's life, though there are contemplative orders too. The largest share in the various ministries of the Church is being shouldered by the Religious. Church's visibility is more conspicuous in their ministries.

The educational institutions run by them are well known throughout the country for the excellence of their training and the sense of discipline they instill. Catholic educational institutions are open to all, irrespective of caste and creed. Similarly a number of welfare institutions like health-care centres, orphanages, homes for the aged and handicapped, etc., are owned and administered by them all over the country. Through their institutions, they are devoted to the care of the sick, their members being trained nurses, doctors and other medical personnel. Their activities are carried on among the rich, the poor, city-dwellers, sufferers, the rejected, the unwanted, the underprivileged and the



Pope Francis with Sisters

marginalized. Almost every rural and urban parish and station is attached to dispensaries run by religious women. Consecrated persons are quite willing to work in the neglected regions.

A recent trend is the interest and commitment which many religious congregations and their members have shown in getting involved in prophetic and advocacy action to create a more just social order in a context of poverty, oppression, injustice and misery of the masses. A lot has been done in the task of animating the Dalits, tribals, women, labourers, and youth.

Catholic religious intuitions have made impact on Hindu India. The discipline and the way of life lived in the Christian institutions managed by consecrated persons has such a positive influence that other religions are induced to copy them. For instance, the Ram Krishna Mission, with its hospitals, educational institutions, homes for the aged, etc., started by the Hindus, is an imitation of Catholic initiatives.

However, the image of a Catholic religious person is different from that of a religious of the Indic traditions. While the former is more known as skilled pastoral workers, competent educators, efficient administrators, and expert social workers than as 'spiritual' or prayerful person, the latter (Buddhist monks, Jain nuns and Hindu sanyasis) are known as men and women of God, less involved in educational, social, and upliftment works. This is precisely what Swami Abhishiktananda says when he describes Indian religious life: "the call to sanyasa is primarily inspired by *viveka*, the ability to distinguish between the transitory and the permanent." It seems many Catholics join religious *institutions*, rather than enter into religious *life*.

Overall, consecrated persons have been playing a leading role in humanizing the social life of the people of India. They are, in their own way, the hope of the dying, the unwanted, the uncared for and the unloved. Social involvement on the part of consecrated persons has been an inspiring force in the country.

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# Religious Life In The Indian Context Today

Rev. Dr. Julian Saldanha, S.J.



## What is Religious Life:

Religious life, characterized by the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, is something which flows naturally from the very nature of the Church. As K. Rahner put it: "There will always be people in the Church who come together, renouncing marriage, for a common work in the service of their neighbour, out of love for Christ". The concrete form of

mission and of life in common, will differ among the Congregations, depending on the special charism of the founder/foundress and the needs of the times. Thus Mother Teresa, who once belonged to the Congregation of the Loreto Sisters committed to education, later founded the Missionaries of Charity dedicated to the poorest of the poor.

No particular Congregation has a guarantee of permanence. In fact, some Congregations have ceased in the course of history, while some have amalgamated with others. Nevertheless, Religious Life as enunciated by K. Rahner above continues and will always do so. It is one way in which faith in God is testified to in a concrete manner: detachment from material goods, including renunciation of private property, shows that one can 'let go' of things in view of the fullness which is God. In addition, celibacy is an anticipation of the future state, "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30).

Through various forms of service, the Congregations seek to follow Christ and to embody the injunction, "Love your neighbour as yourself". Such 'merciful activity' does indeed make Christ present in some manner. The common life shared by communities testifies that a union beyond distinctions of race, language, caste or nationality is possible and also anticipates the future state. Thus what the Church preaches is illustrated in reality. Such witness of life, especially in India, is valued immensely more than doctrines and dogmas. One looks for the transformation wrought in the life of the witness: personal experience ('anubhav') and detachment.

## Religious Life in history:

In history, Religious Life has often acted as a gentle critique of the Church when it sought to compromise with worldly ways and comfortable living. Thus in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, we have the Desert Fathers, who renounced the world and lived like hermits in the wilderness. Likewise, the strict poverty embraced by Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) became a stark critique of the life-style of some Church people of the time. Religious always face the challenge of not being 'of the world', though 'in the world'. They are called to the imitation of Christ and to a more radical living of the Christian life. They do not evaluate their life in terms of increments, promotion, career. In fact they reject the idols of money, pleasure and power. So in an atmosphere of growing

consumerism they will appear counter-cultural. At the same time, the Religious are expected to be joyful witnesses.

Large sections of Dalits and Tribals, who continue to be relegated to the margins, receive the services of the Religious. This preferential option for the weaker sections of society reflects the priorities in the ministry of Jesus himself. In particular, the role of women Religious needs to be underlined. This is what Pope John Paul II has done in his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM): "The example and activity of women who through virginity are consecrated to love of God and neighbour, especially the very poor, are an indispensable evangelical sign among those peoples and cultures where women still have far to go on the way towards human promotion and liberation" (N. 70). We know how true this has been and continues to be in India. Women religious have often pioneered the education of girls and the care of orphans, lepers and other grossly neglected sections of society.

## The Indian context:

India is a land marked by an immense diversity of ethnic groups, languages and religions. Especially in this context, Religious are called to be "universal brother/sister", an image that is particularly relevant in India. That phrase was coined by Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), who lived a hermit's life in the Sahara in Algeria and inspired the founding of two Religious Congregations: the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus. In his little hut in Beni Abbès (Algeria) he wrote: "I want all of those who live here, whether Christian, Muslims, Jews, or pagans, to become accustomed to seeing me as their brother- the universal brother."

Religious are especially called to exemplify the Church's own openness to and interest in all peoples and individuals, especially the least and poorest of their brethren. As such, they overcome barriers and divisions of race, caste, or ideology. They are a sign of God's love in the world - a love without exclusion or partiality (RM 89). Their contribution everywhere will include "building unity, working for reconciliation, forging bonds of solidarity, promoting dialogue among religions and cultures, eradicating prejudices and engendering trust among peoples" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* [EA] 24). Thus Religious will be at the forefront of the Church's dialogue with India's poor, its cultures and religions.

It is part of this dialogue, that Religious be confirmed in what are considered great values by the followers of all religions, e.g. renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity, silence and awareness of the divine presence, harmony, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety (towards parents, elders, ancestors), thirst for learning and philosophical inquiry (EA 6; 23). The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (1978) has pointed out how they may benefit from Asian ways of praying: "a richly-developed prayer of the whole person in

unity of body-psyche-spirit ... techniques of contemplation”. And so, Religious will “reflect attentively on how Christian religious life may be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes already planted by God in ancient cultures”.

In this context, we might mention the attempt, though short-lived, made by the Bengali Brahmabandhab Upadhyay to establish a Catholic or 'kā-sthalic' monastery which would form both contemplative and itinerant monks. They would be trained in both Vedantic and Thomistic philosophy, with their life-style adapted to indigenous customs. It revived memories of the great Jesuit pioneer in South India, Robert de Nobili (1577-1656) and a number of Christian ashrams which have been founded subsequently.

### Need of updating:

Already in 1965 the Vatican Council (*Perfectae Caritatis*) realized, that in order to respond adequately to their vocation in the modern world, Religious would need to adjust their life and work to the changed conditions of the times. This would imply abandoning outdated customs. They would have to adapt suitably their manner of living, praying, and working to the needs of their apostolate, the requirements of the given culture, the social and economic circumstances where they operate. This comprehensive adaptation would also encompass the dress or religious 'habits' of Religious which must always remain simple, modest and poor.

Thus Religious Life, which belongs to the very nature of the Church, will always be relevant in the world and certainly in India.

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## Religious Life - A Perspective of Women Religious

Sr. Inigo Joachim SSAM



The face of religious life is fast changing. There are new roads to traverse, new challenges to face, new questions to ask and new possibilities to explore. There is no infusion of fresh, young blood, communities are aging. The middle-aged are becoming too materialistic and some Congregations are facing oblivion. Sometimes I get serious doubts about whether the missionaries to India really

understood the demands of their prophetic vocation, were they sincerely striving to be true prophets?

Who are the beneficiaries of our so-called ministries? Are they the poor, the marginalized, street children, Aids patients, prisoners, migrants, abandoned women, the unwanted? The greater percentage of our personnel, economic resources, social and political influences – are they used for the empowerment of the powerless or are we empowering through our institutions the already powerful and rich and thus enabling them to oppress and enslave the poor further?

Shorn of a faith-inspired vision, the vowed life can degenerate into a comfortable, mediocre and self-centered life where joy and love have died. “Poverty” can become comfortable security with everything provided for; “Celibacy” can degenerate into unloving individualism; “Obedience” can mask a reluctance to take responsibility for one self.

No. 2a of the Document “*Perfectae Caritatis*” says: “*The fundamental norm of religious life is the following of Christ as we see him in the Gospel*”. It is a call to change our style of prayer, vows, mission and formation. No. 2b asks us “*to go back to the Charism of our Congregations*”. The Charism is one aspect of the gospel that the founders highlighted in their times. For example, the poorest of the poor for Mother Theresa! She highlighted that particular aspect of the gospel. She was driven by the mind of Jesus (Phil: 2: 5) No. 2c invites the religious to “*read the signs of the times and adapt religious life*” accordingly.

The changes desired by the Vatican Council can be expressed incisively in the following contrasts: Formerly,



St. Teresa of Calcutta and Sr. Nirmala

*regularity* was the hallmark of religious life. Vatican II replaced it by *radicality*. There are new things to do, new ways of doing them, new needs to meet and new paths to tread. *Rigidity*, according to which the schedule was set, the prayers were ready-made, the works were decided already and the needs of the poor and of the world were pre-determined, gave place to *flexibility* with new forms of religious life, new ways of being present in society.

*Withdrawal* from the world is replaced with *involvement* in the daily struggles of our people. *Conformity* to rules, giving yesterday's answer to today's problems, gives way to *creative commitment* - being innovative, pro-active and original.

A focus on productivity or efficiency and *achievement* changed into a stress on *fruitfulness* and effectiveness. *Asceticism* and self-discipline was the essence of religious life. Now the Religious joined the *public marches* of the poor, *fasting with them* for their rights. *Renewal* seemed a patchwork with the base remaining the same. The focus now is on *re-founding*, a radical new beginning based on Gospel values. From being *managers* and administrators, the Religious became *animators* and facilitators, influencing others by example.

*Piety Vs Spirituality*: I have no doubt that there is a lot of piety among us but I am not sure whether there is enough spirituality. We are faithful to a number of external exercises of piety. Spirituality has a lot to do with the quality of one's life. We cannot claim to be truly spiritual if the fruits of the Spirit are not visible in one's life (Gal. 5: 22-23). God is omnipotent and omnipresent and He is to be sought, not elsewhere, but everywhere

*Gender sensitivity and dignity of women* is another disturbing element often surfacing in religious meetings. The Bishops at the Asian Synod were most concerned that "the Church should be a participatory church in which no one feels excluded", acknowledging that "the contribution of women have often been undervalued or ignored" (EA. 34). Popular perceptions about women as 'second class citizens' should be changed. The crime reports should act as eye-openers. Women are systematically prevented from claiming equality on many platforms. The Bible says all can prophecy (I Cor: 14: 31). The Spirit has been poured on everybody (Acts: 2: 17-18). The Pentecostal fire rested on 120 people. We do not know how many women were there. Both men and women in the church are called on to be prophets, the conscience of the society. Both genders can be courageous, creative and compassionate missionaries in God's Kingdom.

We need to re-think the role of our traditional ministries. Once upon a time, though we were working in schools and hospitals, we were seen as missionaries and not as professionals. But today nobody calls these works apostolates. Money and its easy availability is a big



### Religious Sisters in Africa

temptation. It gives power. Since all cannot accede to such power there is competition, groupism and infighting. Every ministry was a response to the need of the place and the people. Efforts are made by at least a few to restructure outdated ministries in a new way and to recreate new ministries.

Earlier '*commitment*' meant a vocation people had voluntarily chosen to live with a difference. Today we see extremely committed lay people around us. The young do not find our life challenging. 75% of religious congregations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century flourished and died because they did not read and respond to the contexts of their time.

Partnership in Mission with the Laity: Lay people are extremely committed, knowledgeable and generous today. In many places, they are doing what we were doing earlier. There is need today to foster forms of collaboration and partnership with the laity.

Technological advancements and the Media seem to affect the life of religious congregations very seriously today. Religion has succumbed to science and relationships to technology. Gadgets are handed out to reduce our workload and to communicate faster in order to build the Kingdom of God. Between completely rejecting and totally accepting their use, there lies a third way of discernment. Evidently, some sort of education in their use is a must, and a mobile and net etiquette is to be learnt.

A more authentic, a more credible, and a more "readable" witnessing seem to be the overall challenge. If we are serious about being a transforming presence in our country, then we must embrace a lifestyle that witnesses to our people, regardless of their gender, cultural and faith traditions; the age-old values of true holiness, contemplation, renunciation and asceticism, detachment and simplicity.

"Into that Heaven of freedom my God, let my country awake"!

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# Religious Life Has A Future

Rev. Dr. Michael Amaladoss, SJ



Religious life seems to be at the crossroads today. Across the world the number of people joining religious life is going down. Even in India, as in the West, the number of children in families is going down. With just one or two children the parents are not likely to encourage children to opt for a religious vocation. Given the process of increasing secularization, the practice

of religion itself seems to be decreasing.

While there are still young people who want to help the poor and serve society in some way, they feel that they can do it without a full-time, life-long commitment. Much of the work that the religious do in educational and social institutions today can be done by others. As a matter of fact, in Euro-America, people are replacing religious in many institutions. Does this mean that religious life will disappear? Probably, not. To understand why not or why it should continue, we have to know what religious life is.

The Second Vatican Council affirms that all are called to be holy. It says: "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society." (Doc. on the Church, n. 40) It says further that this holiness "appears in a certain way of its own in the practice of the counsels which have been usually called 'evangelical'... and gives and should give a striking witness and example of that holiness." (n.39).

The counsel refers to stories like that of a young man who asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man answers that he has been keeping them. Should he do something more? Jesus tells him: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; then come and follow me." (Mt 19:21) The young man did not follow Jesus; but others did. Peter and Andrew, James and John leave everything and follow him. (cf. Mt 4:18-22) The religious are people who leave everything and follow Jesus.

The evangelical counsels are actually three: poverty, chastity and obedience. They are the deepening or flowering forth of the baptismal commitment to die to sin and dedicate oneself to God. One who professes to follow them does so "for two reasons: first, in order to be set free from hindrances that could hold him back from loving God ardently and worshipping him perfectly, and secondly, in order to consecrate himself in a more thoroughgoing way to the service of God. The bonds by which he pledges himself to the practice of the counsels show forth the unbreakable bond of union that exists between Christ and his bride the Church." (n. 44).

So the religious free themselves from everything that may hinder them from their union with Christ and their service of God. Though there are contemplative religious who are totally dedicated to God, there are others who can serve God in others, in the world. These do not leave the world and give up worldly goods that may be needed for service, but they are not attached to them.

In a way, such a choice of life was not totally new in history. Sanyasis in Hinduism and monks in Buddhism were there in India centuries before Christ. Some Buddhist presence may have been there in the Middle East at the time of or even before Jesus.

The three evangelical counsels and the deprivations that they involved were not seen as equally important from the beginning. Chastity and poverty would have been an element from the time of the hermits. The first hermits Paul and then Antony (in the Egyptian deserts) lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. AD. Obedience must have come in only when monastic communities were founded by St. Benedict in the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. AD. With the monastic communities growing rich, poverty must have become more a personal commitment. The monastic communities were stable and must have done some spiritual ministry around. They may also have served as schools for the young.

Traveling preachers come in with the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Schools and other charitable institutions come with the Jesuits in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The vow of obedience is particularly emphasized by the Jesuits, because their work was more organized and slowly institutionalized. While the Jesuits engaged mostly in evangelization and retreat preaching they also ran schools. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the French revolution secularized the governments, the need for educating the children in the faith gave rise to many religious congregations that began running schools.

There had always been a few contemplative communities all through history. A complete dedication to God in prayer and penance remains a challenge. But it was significant that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the increasing secularization of society, there was, for a moment, a rise in vocations for the contemplative life. Popular saints like Theresa of the Child Jesus still inspire contemplative vocations.

Today, the counsels have become more personal commitments to be lived than to be institutionally structured. In a secularizing world, it is a challenge to live them fruitfully. Some of the educational and charitable institutions that the religious are running may disappear. They may become more money-making projects. But the poor will always be with us. So also there will always be people who are generous to offer themselves to God in order to serve the people.

Forms of religious life may also change. There is a phenomenon of secular institutes in which people dedicate themselves to various form of service without committing themselves with vows. People will continue to be generous

with God. The examples of St. Francis, Ignatius and Mother Theresa will continue to inspire the young. So religious life still has a future.

## The Relevance of Hindu Monasticism Today

Dipankar Basu



(Both men and women can be monks; however, in this article, the male pronoun 'him' is used to denote monastics of both genders. In Hindu scriptures, God is referred to as '*The Brahman*', i.e. THE ABSOLUTE REALITY and is indicated by the impersonal neuter word 'IT'; objectively, God is Nirakara (beyond form) as well as Nirguna (beyond description). In this essay, God is

taken as Father to all creation; hence, Him (with capital letter H) will be used to refer to God.)

In Sanskrit, the word "Sannyas" means "Samyak Rupe Nyas" i.e., 'throwing away with certainty' or "discarding decisively". Wealth, fame, emotional stability, gratification of senses, financial security, etc. are important to an ordinary man – but a Sannyasi discards all these. Renunciation of all that is worldly is the cornerstone of Hindu Sannyas.

One cannot choose to become a Sannyasi. God has to call him. Monastic life is not a career option; it solely depends upon God's will. On what basis does God do the selection? We don't know – all we know is His way of looking at things are fundamentally different from the way we see. Vast majority of men and women, who receive the CALL, happily respond with enthusiasm and vigour. Like gold in a furnace, God purifies and transforms them – moulds them into instruments to execute His Will. However, a few respond with extreme reluctance. God's call is too powerful to refuse – they respond grudgingly and try to resist God's efforts to change them (fearing loss of individuality). These unhappy monastics often give a bad name to their religious order.

After ordination, a Hindu monastic always wears the 'habit' (sacramental dress) as a sign of the call that he has received. Hindus in general, respect monastics as they acknowledge the fact that these persons have been selected by God to be His companions. Despite the variety in their spiritual practices, the members of all orders have two things in common – the **colour** of their robes and the **vows** taken.

(1).The robes are of ochre (saffron) colour. When clay is burnt it takes this particular colour. Hindus cremate dead bodies and the body is considered as clay. The monks themselves are 'dead to the world' as they perform the *Sradh* ceremony (memorial services to the deceased) of their own and their living parents. Monks would not attend social

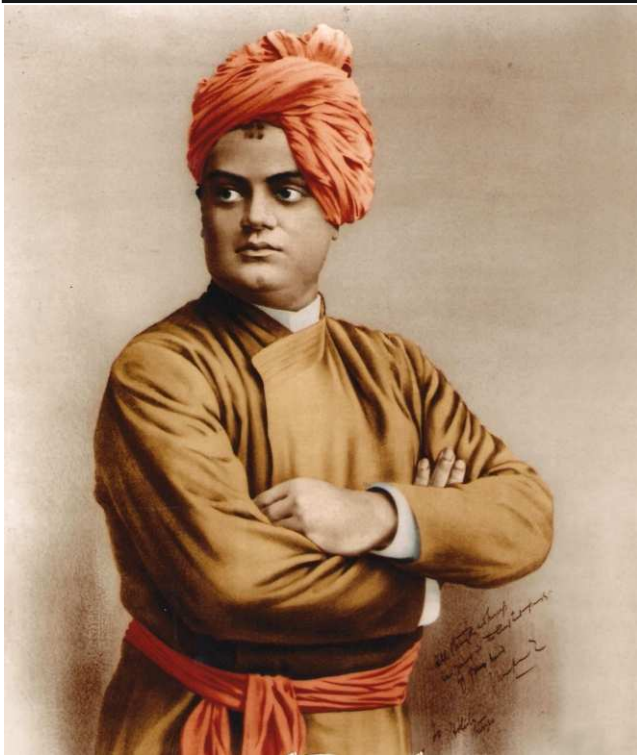
functions like wedding or *Poitey* (Bestowal of Sacred thread) .They never come to Sradh ceremony: during the Memorial rites, the spirits of the deceased ancestors come to accept the *Pinda* offered. These spirits would feel disturbed and confused as sannyasis are dead despite possessing a body.

(2).The Brahmacharis (novices) pledge to behave like HONEY-BEES and not like HOUSEFLIES. A honey bee will sit on flowers only while a housefly sits on flowers as well as garbage, shit and ulcer. By taking this vow, the Brahmacharis take a pledge to notice only what would lead them to God and ignore whatever is vulgar, sensuous and ugly. They also pledge Abhoy-daan to all living creatures i.e. they promise not to harm anybody.

(3).Vows taken at the time of ordination are very similar to those taken by the Catholic Religious. The Hindu monks take vows of '*Aparigraha*' (not using beyond the minimum needed for sustenance) and '*Anashakti*' (non-attachment). These twin vows, in essence, are similar to the vow of poverty. The vow of '*Shraddha*' (unquestioning obedience to monastic hierarchy) is similar to Obedience. But most important of all, the Hindu monks take the vow of '*Brahmacharya*' (chastity): they will not offer their body, mind and soul to anyone other than their '*Ishta-Devta*' (the favourite form of God). The justification of chastity is on two levels.

(i)First, marriage is a sacrament. The wife is known as '*Saha-dharmini*'. One cannot discharge religious obligations when he or she is single. Husband and wife together form a unit. The wife has a right over the body, mind and soul of the husband and vice versa. Hence, after marriage, a person loses the right of offering himself to God in totality. A Hindu monastic is indeed 'married' to God. (a) Hindu women announce marital status wearing a sign (sindur or mangalsutra). The monks would all the time wear saffron robes (even while bathing, they would wear a loincloth of the same colour).(b) A bride regards her husband's family as her own. She serves all of them with great love, care and affection. But, the relation she has with her husband is unique – the way she loves her husband is different from the way she loves other members of the family. Exactly in the same way, a Hindu monk regards all living creatures as members of his own family and would serve all selflessly, without expecting any reward in return.

He honours the saints of all other religions and presiding deities of all other sects. But the passionately intimate relationship that he would have with his '*Ishta-Devta*' will



A comparative study of the activities of alumni associations of institutions run by monastic orders (like Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Dev Sangha etc.) with the activities of the alumni associations of schools run by business houses (eg D.P.S. or Birla group), reveals that the ex-students trained by the monks continue to have lifelong allegiance to their mentors; the alumni/alumnae support their alma mater the way a grown up son or daughter would take care of the parents. But the alumni associations of institutions run by the business houses hardly do anything other than organising annual reunions!

A monk is expected to be free from worldly bondages. *Adi Shankaracharya* lists four freedoms to be enjoyed by monastics:

1. Freedom from tendencies harmful to creatures.
2. Freedom from desire for worldly treasures.
3. Freedom from desire for worldly glory like political power.
4. Freedom from desire for sensual pleasures.

In monastic life of the present era the number of cloistered monks has reduced drastically. Most sannyasis are "Contemplatives in Action". A monk engaged in apostolic activities has to be careful not to get trapped in the following types of bondage:

**1. The bondage of religion:** When he left home in response to God's call, he sought only God. However, he may gradually start identifying himself with his religion in the narrowest sense and become antagonistic to those who worship God in a different way. Thus, he runs the risk of forgetting his ultimate aim. He substitutes God with religious belief and practices.

**2. The bondage of the religious order to which he belongs:** He may regard other religious orders (within the folds of his religion) with contempt and view them as rivals. This harmful attitude arises from the egoistic thought: "I am intelligent enough to select the most effective Sadhna (Spiritual disciplines) my religious order holds a monopoly over other spiritualities leading to God."

**3. The bondage of institutionalism:** A monk may start identifying himself with a philanthropic institution. This may narrow his vision and lead him to lose the focus of his life, i.e. attaining God. He may start making unholy alliances and make compromises for attaining quick benefits for the institution. He may end up forgetting that he ought to work for the greater glory of God.

In lieu of conclusion, the first rule for the novices of the Ramakrishna order may be quoted "You have come to be a monk. Learn to become a gentleman first." The explanation given is simple: 'We are not mendicant monks travelling on foot all over the country. We have to work in institutions; we have to work with lay people in a team. If you are rude and ill-mannered, your collaborators will start hating you – they will not only hate you but also the order to which you belong. Worse still, they will grow allergic towards your Ishta-Devta. So, learn to be a gentleman first.'

not be reflected elsewhere. E.g. a *Vaishnav* monk would venerate *Shiva* and *Shaivaites* saints; but his love for the favourite form of Vishnu will be passionate and intensely personal.

(ii) Second, the Hindu concept of Atman i.e. The SELF is threefold (a) The '*Sthul sharir*' (the gross physical self) is commonly known as the body. When I say "I am hungry", I am identifying myself with my '*Sthul sharir*'. (b) The '*Suksha Sharir*' (the subtle body), commonly known as the psychological self, i.e. the nature of a person. The intellect, emotions, behavioural pattern, mental makeup and personality traits play an important role in constituting this Sharir. We remember a person after his death because of this '*Shuksha Sharir*'. (c) The '*Karana Sharir*' (the spiritual self), commonly known as the Soul of an individual. This soul will continue to undergo Birth- Death -Rebirth till it attains *moksha*.

The physical self is nourished by nutritious food, rigorous exercise and hygienic habits. The psychological self is nourished by education, grooming, intellectual pursuits and co-curricular activities. The spiritual self is nourished by regular prayers, selfless service, pilgrimage, meditation, contemplation, etc.

A monk takes a conscious effort to make his physical self, as much defunct as possible. For a blind person, the senses of touch and hearing become exceedingly strong, which almost compensate for the loss of the sense of vision. Similarly, the vow of chastity in a monastic life strengthens his psychological and spiritual selves. He does not become a father in the biological sense but leaves his mark in the minds and souls of those who come in close contact with him.

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# Counter-cultural Religious Life

Rev. Dr. Leonard Fernando, SJ



## My call to Religious Life

It is a joy to recollect and share my summons to religious life and the future of religious living. One day while praying in the church in my village I could hear God calling me. I was studying in high school at that time. I felt great joy and at the same time fear gripped me. I did not dare to tell anyone what I was going through

and it was also not clear to me what demands the acceptance of the call would make of me. While going through this struggle I was impressed by the Jesuit Fathers in my school. Their commitment to work, their love and concern especially for the poor and the high regard people in Tuticorin town and villages nearby had for them inspired me. Vocation promoters, Frs. Singarayar and Anselm Miranda, helped me to discern God's call and enter Jesuit religious life. And my mother readily blessed me and allowed me to follow the path I had chosen. During the period of formation opportunities were given to grow intellectually and in affective maturity and to nurture leadership qualities. Through spiritual guidance and mentoring focus on the growth of an individual was taken care of. What I cherish is the universal approach that was given prominence. That helped me to be at home as a member of the universal society in different parts of the world, both during study and work. I could experience Jesuit companionship in our Jesuit communities worldwide. Acceptance and appreciation combined with corrections given when needed have helped us to blossom as mature religious.

## Future of Religious Life

Does religious life I have embraced have a future? I am convinced it has. Religious life has taken different forms through the centuries – anchorite monastic life (withdrawn from the world, eg. St. Antony the Hermit), cenobitic monastic life (life in common but still away from people, eg. St. Pachomius and his sister Mary, static religious life (eg. Benedictines), dynamic (eg. Franciscans), regular clergy (eg. Jesuits). In the missionary era, missionary religious life took pride of place. In recent years condition of the poor, care of the needy, abandoned and the marginalised (eg. Missionaries of Charity) have attracted more to follow a religious life that entails great sacrifice. All these different religious lives with their particular charism developed as a response to the particular context it has addressed in the world. But the connecting thread running through them was that it was a counter cultural movement wherein people who embraced that life decided to follow Jesus in a radical way. As in the past religious life will continue to flourish through emergence of new kind of religious life and by the reform of the existing ones.

As a counter cultural movement, it remains relevant and appealing to people. There are quite a few youngsters who are attracted to the person of Jesus who was compassionate, reached out to the needy and dared to challenge the political and religious powers of those days. They would like to be someone like him and are also ready to leave home and go to faraway places. As long as such spirited youngsters are there religious life will continue.



Jesuit Fathers of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata

There is another group of young men and women, who are from devout families where they have grown in acts of piety and reading of Bible and spiritual books. Their devotional practices and familiarity with the person of Jesus and the God they have encountered in the Bible and the exemplary lives of saints inspire them to embrace religious life.

There are also others, who out of curiosity like Zacchaeus in the Gospel, come to vocation camps. But during the camp

touched by God they respond generously to the call of God and opt for religious life. There are also others who never gave an impression in early life that they are going to embrace religious life because they were naughty, mischievous and talkative, still they become religious to the surprise of many and excel in the life of witness to Jesus and his values.



Religious congregations also invite people “to come and see”. Inputs given and information shared inspire or convince some to opt for religious life. Vocation promoters keep regular contact with persons who show inclination towards religious life, visit their families and establish local contacts who could be mentors to them.

The challenge to religious life is the number of children in the families – one or two children in families as against many in the previous generations and hence reluctance to send them for religious life. Of course this is not always the case because there are parents who readily allow their children to embrace religious life even if they have only one or two children. There are also instances of young men or women who leave home against the wish and sometimes without the knowledge of their parents and embrace religious life.

Another challenge to the future of religious life is the stress and stretch of the media. The youth are carried away by the glamour of the modern culture of consumerism and compromise and turn a deaf ear to the call of God.

But in spite of the challenges and attractions to a cosy life there are still people, as we see today, who come in big numbers to embrace religious life. Some religious congregations get more and some less depending upon how much the religious are familiar to them and their works are known to people and how far they are attractive to the youngsters as a life worth living with them as religious.

Through the ages we have noticed religious congregations emerging with particular charism as a response to the signs of times. For example, Mother

Teresa after listening to the “call within a call” founded the Congregation of Missionaries of Charity. When other congregations were getting less numbers to their religious life, the much more challenging life of the Sisters of Charity did not deter vocations, nay more people all over the world embraced this life of service. These stories of success give us the hope that religious life will continue to illumine light of love and compassion through the ordination of the Father as manifested in the Son, the divine countenance of Christ.



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- **Deborah Anna Logan** on Indian Women's Periodicals, USA.
- **Dominic J Azavedo** on History of All India Catholic Mission, Kolkata, India.

- **Shruti Goswami** on Dictionary Independent, Kolkata, India.
- **Subham China** on Maritime Predation in the northern Bay of Bengal littoral in 10<sup>th</sup> century, Kolkata, India.



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