

THE JOY OF LIVING AS A MEMBER OF A RELIGIOUS FAMILY

Experience of a Congolese Major Superior

One day, I started counting the number of candidates my religious family has had since it began its initial formation in Africa. I couldn't finish the count because it was so high. The first question I asked myself was: "Didn't all those who couldn't go forward as I have today have a vocation? Is it just because "many are called" and "few are chosen"?"

If I look at those of us who have stayed, I also see that there are some who are no longer "in", even though they live with us in the Congregation. I have the impression that if God were to start this world all over again, they would no longer choose the consecrated life and even less my religious family. Why this loss of joy? Why this decline in enthusiasm for serving our Master? How can we not understand that putting ourselves at the service of the King of the Universe is a source of joy?

And when I see those who leave, who abandon the consecrated life because of the "Community", I say to myself: there is something missing, or better still, something that is missing to make the life as a whole, religious life, a source of joy. You can't choose your unhappiness. And if what was initially a source of happiness turns into "hell" over the years, then something is no longer working.

That's why I was asked to write this little guide, with its practical themes, to spice up our togetherness which, if we don't pay attention, becomes a little bland every day.

Community life is our bedrock, our foundation, our bedrock. Without community life, we are anything but "religious" or consecrated.

In this guide, I would like us to pray for community change as well as for ourselves. As the saying goes, "first be the change you want in your world". Whatever we see as "negative" in our community life, whatever we deplore as "destructive elements" in our living together, that is the change we must be. Nothing can be changed from the outside. Real change comes from within. And the best change starts with myself.

Just as **the grain of wheat** buried in the earth does not bear fruit unless it dies, so too our communities will not be places of joy if we do not know how to "die within ourselves" for the good of all. We are called to revisit our attitudes, our feelings and our comments on community life, in order to be better than we were yesterday.

We don't pretend to offer a magic solution so that we can effortlessly recover our lost joy. Our intention is humbly to offer a few pragmatic guidelines for a life together that's a joy to live.

In this reflection, we would like each of us to feel the joy, peace and love of the first Christian community: "they were **diligent** in the apostles' teaching, **faithful** in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayer ... **they held everything in common**, and every day the Lord **added to** the community those who would be saved" Acts 2, 42-47.

We have certain concepts that will help us to meditate on our being religious: **assiduity** (to be constant, to be superbly attentive to, to give one's time and space to something); **faithfulness** (who conforms and does not change position despite everything, who trusts

his master, who follows only one path); **to put in common**, is to contribute one's being and one's having for the good of all, to seek only the happiness of others, is to think of others; **to add**: is to add. The only question is: do I live all this in my religious state? Does the Word of God still speak to me? Am I faithful to the demands of the community and the Eucharist? Am I voluntarily contributing my assets and my being for others, or am I more of a community consumer? Does my attitude attract and give me the joy of living in the community?

Dear consecrated persons, "God **needs you** to proclaim his Gospel, but he also calls you, **together with others**, to make his Gospel a place of love, joy and forgiveness"¹ . We are going to explore these different themes, which will help us to enjoy living together.

As you can see, these themes can be used to animate candidates or aspirants to the consecrated life, or even ourselves. We are aware that there are many books on religious life. This small contribution is intended simply as a pragmatic aid, without pretending to be a theological or sociological study of the consecrated life. We simply want, from our small experience, to save this "boat of religious life" which seems to be losing its way. The various themes dealt with are not in any particular order of importance. All these themes taken together constitute our call, our convocation as Consecrated Persons.

In this reflection, we will talk in turn about :

1. Community, a school of love
2. Community, home of mercy
3. Community, school of prayer
4. Community, the laboratory of forgiveness
5. Community, Bethesda swimming pool
6. Community, a reflection of Pentecost
7. Community, Last Supper
8. Community, widow's contribution
9. Community, Mount Sinai
10. Community, Servant of the Lord
11. Community, a place for living and the living
12. Community, a barrier to slander
13. Community, fulfilling the "Our Father
14. Community, my Bethany
15. Consecrated life and witness to perfect community life

¹ P. Maxime MENGA, "A way of living in community", p. 8

1. COMMUNITY, SCHOOL OF LOVE

It is love that sustains our community life. Without love, we are no more than passengers travelling in the same metro, each waiting to get off. Without love, we are like the builder who built his foundation without solid concrete. Without love, we are nothing. It is love that consolidates our life together and our being together.

The Community is our school. It teaches us to grow, like the stages of a school, every day until we become "specialists" in love. Religious **are specialists in the love of Jesus**. We have no other school than that of Jesus. Now let's see how his love is expressed in his school, and let's face up to the fact that we belong in what class, despite our age?

The degree of witness of a community depends largely on the degree of love that its members have for each other. We do not have the love of the fanatics of a football team. We must live a love as Christ recommends it to us.

"When religious are no longer happy (loved, we would add) to live, pray and act together, and when they flee into outside activities, that's already a bad sign" ²

Without love in a religious community, life becomes "difficult, insipid and unlivable". This is why we are called to build our communities on the basis of love and the love of Christ.

"You have heard that it was said:

You shall love your neighbour and not do your enemy any favours. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... when you love those who love you, what reward do you deserve? Even the pagans do it" (Mt. 5:38-48).

A community that lives love will pray the "Our Father" with all its meaning. When it says "Our Father", it knows that it has only the children of the same Father, of the same family.

A community that lives love is one that builds its unity and fulfils Christ's condition when he tells us to be "**one**". Monsignor Muyengo tells us *"rivalries divide us into camps, into disciples, some of Paul and others of Apollos, and still others of Cephas (1 Cor 1:12), forgetting that we are all at the service of one and the same Lord ... to succeed in our mission, we must form one body whose members will always be different, each bringing the richness of his singularity, his particularity and his gifts" ³*

Love is lived in difference. Love conquers selfishness and individualism. Love gives itself to others. Love is sharing. You cannot claim to be a consecrated person if you are incapable of loving, from the depths of your heart, your brothers and sisters with whom God has called you. Our consecration is based on the love of God manifested in his Son Jesus Christ. God loved us first in order to love us first. The love of a consecrated person is not half-measured. It is a love that is full, even overflowing. We cannot be there in spite of ourselves. It is the love that binds us together and makes us say "this is my brother, this is my sister".

² Maxime Menga, op. cit. p. 11

³ Mgr Muyengo, "Deliver us from evil", p. 47

In our meditation, we will take the passage from Saint Paul, called the hymn to charity. Each one stops at each step that love can take in a loving life. Pray with the words of Saint Paul so that your whole life becomes "love". Like Saint Paul, we consecrated persons must say every day: "there is neither Greek nor Jew" among us, we are only sons and daughters of the same Father, and we belong to a single family. And that family is my Congregation, my Church and my Pastoral Ministry. Consecrated persons are influencers of love in today's world. If we are not yet, we must quickly become so. It is love that will make us good witnesses to Jesus. Selling our image of "conflict, division and intolerance" is not what God expects of us, expects of you (a consecrated person).

God wants us to become his "simultaneous translators" of love, and of true love. We've all been in a meeting where the speaker speaks a language we don't understand. To make ourselves understood, we were given headphones so that we could follow the speaker through a translator. This simultaneity meant that we were able to follow the conference. The world expects us to convey God's will for them simultaneously. A mother once said to me: "Father, sometimes you don't know what you are. Sometimes you don't realise the value of your mission". This lady was right. We consecrated people often forget the value of our mission. A mission that is worth its weight in gold. A mission that saves the world. A mission that is more than Noah's. Speaking of our mission in negative terms, I would say: "Do we know that if the world no longer feeds on God's will or lives on his love, it's my fault, your fault and our fault? Who are you to deprive the world of God's love? Let's not be screens (like basketball players) for others, let's be reflections, mirrors, simultaneous translators, or better still, apostles of the Gospel.

Let each consecrated person ask himself these questions: *what has destroyed the love of God in my Community? In my Congregation? In my mission? (Lack of patience? lack of understanding? jealousy? pride? selfishness? anger? injustice? ...)*. That I pray from my lack of love to achieve what Paul says in "**1 Cor 13, 1 - 13**".

2. COMMUNITY, FOYER DE LA MISERICORDE

"**To be merciful** means to show more compassion for someone than they deserve" (Internet source). It is the kindness with which God shows grace to mankind, to sinners

(Internet). It is truly a forgiveness that is granted to us out of pure goodness without our deserving it.

In his apostolic letter "Misericordia et misera", Pope Francis states that mercy is the meeting of two hearts: God's heart that comes to meet man's heart. The heart of stone is transformed into a heart of flesh, capable of loving despite its sinfulness. Here," continues the Pope, "we truly see ourselves as a new creature: I am loved, therefore I exist; I am forgiven, therefore I am born again to a new life; I have been merciful, therefore I become an instrument of mercy".⁴

When we read the book of Titus (3:4-5), God shows us clearly that the decision for our salvation comes from his heart, not from our works. We cannot understand the depth of God's mercy if we do not look at ourselves, if we are not aware of who we are, and how God has 'picked us up'. Saint Paul, through his spiritual experience, understood very well the place of God's mercy. God regenerated him and entrusted him with the mission of being "apostle to the Gentiles". This is why he often began with the words "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ".

If we do not know our spiritual history well, we will find it difficult to bless our God and to feel his mercy towards us. It is said that "He who has never known hunger in the night will not be able to understand him who weeps because of hunger".

*"Merciful! He sees the suffering of the one who weeps, He understands it and, moved with compassion as in the days of His flesh, He sympathizes and consoles."*⁵

This is how Christ invites us to be merciful as our Father is merciful (Lk 6:36). In his mercy, Christ touched even those sick people who were considered the outcasts of society: the lepers. Are we capable of touching the lepers in our communities out of mercy? (Mk 1, 41).

In his heart, Christ did not let the cry of the poor go unheard without a compassionate response on his part. He heard the cry of the blind man who asked him to heal him (Lk. 18:38-42). Do we listen to the cries of our Community, or do we close our ears so as not to hear them? Are we not among those who rejoice in the misfortunes of our brothers and sisters? Do our hearts "tear" and suffer when a member of our "body", our community, suffers?

We are not going to analyse the three parables of mercy in Luke's Gospel (15, 1 - 37). We will only consider the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), which I believe refers us directly to community and religious attitudes. The other two will serve as meditations.

True community mercy is exercised in relation to our "neighbour". We can also ask ourselves: "Who is my neighbour? Who really is my sister? Who is my brother? We all take part in the daily Masses. We prepare our worship with different themes. We organise annual retreats. We have all sorts of spiritual exercises in our lives and in our Rules and

⁴ Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis "Misericordia et misera", no. 16 quoted in *24 heures pour le Seigneur*, p. 7

⁵ Paul Fuzier: "Mercy" (internet)

Constitutions. Have we discovered who "my neighbour" is yet? Let's take a quick look at what this Samaritan did to this stranger. Each of his actions may correspond to the benevolent attitude of a consecrated person.

The Samaritan has :

- Discovered the person lying on the ground (pay attention)
- Giving your time (being with the other person)
- Providing first aid (alleviating the suffering of others)
- Giving way to others (humility)
- Take the injured person to the hostel (learn to find a solution for the other person)
- Spending time and money on others (forgetting yourself)
- Leaving the unknown in the right hands (looking after others)
- Promise to come back (consider the other)

Christ concludes: "Go and do likewise. May you become merciful and gracious. *"The best way to be all things to God is to be all things to your neighbour," our Foundress tells us.* Make no mistake, the neighbour closest to us is our room-mate. What Pope Francis calls "the Saint next door". Our path to sanctification passes through there, through the door next door. Our path of mercy begins at the next door. To go looking for it far from us is to live with hypocrisy and the applause of others. Christ says that we already have our reward.

The attitude of mercy is not something we take for granted. It takes its place in our lives by looking to the one who calls us: Christ. It is an attitude that grows within us as we integrate Christ into our journey of religious life. Let us never take our eyes off Christ if we want to live the dimension of mercy in our vocation.

Mercy has a lot to do with the "heart", with our intimate life with God. If we are not merciful, we have no heart. Our intimate life with God is weak. The same God who is able to say "I have seen the misery of my people...". To be merciful is to allow God's attitudes, feelings and actions to penetrate our hearts and our lives.

"Where there is no willingness to look at oneself, there is no mercy either; all that remains is the pomp of a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, but unable to look at poor Lazarus lying outside the door of his house"⁶. (Lk. 16, 19)

I think I'm provoking and shocking you by saying: "knowledge of God does not guarantee our attitude of mercy". The author of "The Parables of Mercy" puts it even better: *"Love of God does not guarantee love of neighbour"⁷.*

The attitude of mercy urges us to act, spurs us into action. (The Samaritan cares for the dying man; the Father comes out and embraces his son; the Shepherd goes to look for the Lost Sheep, etc.). The lack of mercy in our lives as a whole means that every day we become specialists in "spiritual selfies". This is slowly killing us. So let's live out all the attitudes

⁶ The Parables of Mercy, Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, p. 21

⁷ The Parables of Mercy, op.cit, p. 40

taught by the Good Samaritan: attentiveness, giving freely of ourselves to others, availability, humility, respect, positive follow-up of the lives of our confreres/sisters, self-forgetfulness, consideration, forgiveness, etc.

From this parable, we can discover that the "neighbour", the place of our compassion, of our mercy, is not the other person. It is I who show mercy. When I don't, the other ceases to exist. I am merciful by performing the act of mercy. If I don't, the other ceases to be and I take "spiritual selfies", I fill myself with myself and look only at myself.

"So it is not love of God that generates love of neighbour, but love of neighbour that mirrors love of God"⁸. As if to say: "Show me how you love the other and I will tell you how much you love God".

When we organise activities in our primary schools, we get the pupils to sing, saying "if you love Jesus, strike your feet, hands, etc.". We consecrated people must sing in our hearts every day, saying to ourselves: "If I love Jesus, let me perform acts of mercy at all times".

And we know that there are works linked to mercy, some of them corporal and others spiritual. We are only going to list them without comment so that each of us feels responsible before God in this area of Mercy in our life together.

Corporal works of mercy (Matthew 25:35-36)

- ✓ Feed the hungry,
- ✓ Give drink to the thirsty ;
- ✓ Clothe those who are naked ;
- ✓ Welcoming foreigners;
- ✓ Assisting the sick;
- ✓ Visiting prisoners;
- ✓ Burying the dead.

Spiritual works of mercy :

- ✓ Advising those in doubt,
- ✓ Teaching the ignorant ;
- ✓ Warn sinners;
- ✓ Consoling the afflicted ;
- ✓ Forgiving offenses;

⁸ The Parables of Mercy, op. cit. , p. 47

✓ Bear patiently with annoying people ;

✓ Praying to God for the living and for the dead.

Let's finish our little reflection by asking ourselves this question: "How can I grow in my love for my sisters or brothers to become a little more merciful in my Community? Or "Can I say that I love God if I am not merciful?"

Let us take to heart this invitation from Christ, my brothers and sisters: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful". A consecrated life without mercy is like a car without an engine, or better still, a mango tree that does not bear fruit.

3. COMMUNITY, SCHOOL OF PRAYER

For the past three years I have headed the Conference of Major Superiors (COSUMA) in the Ecclesiastical Province of Kinshasa⁹. In our various exchanges with the Major Superiors, this dimension of prayer is not lacking. The observation is almost the same everywhere: we no longer pray enough. If Christ, who is the Son of God, had the time to withdraw to pray, why are we who follow him no longer able to do so? We can spare the nuns or the

⁹ The Ecclesiastical Province of Kinshasa comprises the dioceses of : Boma, Matadi, Kisantu, Kinshasa, Kenge, Kikwit, Popokabaka, Idiofa and Inongo.

cloistered, but the Congregations with an apostolic life are experiencing a great deficit in prayer.

In my own religious family, we have seen an unprecedented slackening in this aspect of prayer. A brother coming home from work, university or some other activity is capable of skipping prayer, but still turning up for his meal. And without embarrassment or remorse. On Thursdays (sports day), some people come home, and rightly so, very tired because of sport. They start talking and commenting on what happened on the football pitch. It's when the bell rings for Vespers that I see some of them go back to their rooms to wash up. That's when I tell myself that something has gone wrong. Why have we lost the taste for prayer? Is it routine? Lack of spiritual depth?

In a survey conducted by Abbé Marcus BINDUNGWA¹⁰ on spiritual mediocrity, he comes to this conclusion, which seems to me to say everything about our spiritual life: *"Basically, this survey, without dramatising the extent of the problem of the spiritual mediocrity of Congolese consecrated persons, nevertheless confirms that this defect is real and of such magnitude that it deserves very special attention from the category of persons concerned. In principle, consecrated persons should excel in the interior life, so much so that their excellent attitudes inspire other Christians. But they do not excel. They are only average when it comes to spirituality. This shortcoming stems from a lack of mastery of the field, even by people who have been trained for a long time in this area"*.

If Christians do not excel in the spiritual life, and consecrated persons, for that matter, do not either, then the light of Christ is slowly being extinguished. Now is not the time for judgement. Now is the time to sift through the various reasons why our spiritual life is not flourishing.

1. Activism.

I've always been touched by Christ's attitude. He goes to visit Simon's family and finds his mother-in-law ill. Christ healed her. Saint Mark tells us that in the morning, Christ went away to a deserted place and there he prayed (Mk. 1:35). Jesus gives us the example of a contemplative-active person. Activism leads us to believe that we are "leaving God for God", and yet we are filled with nothing but ourselves. Our construction is not solid, because our foundation is made of sand. Activism makes us believe that we are "useful" and that we are responding to the needs of God's people. Prayer, on the other hand, has no material reward. Nobody gets paid for praying a lot. You get paid for doing a lot of work. Earnings have pushed prayer back in our communities. I once received a very discouraging reply. A confrere said to me "even if you don't see me at prayer, you should know that what I do outside the Chapel is not my mother's work". Knowing our parishes in Kinshasa, who can begin to listen to Christians from the end of morning mass until 10pm? And every day? This is because external activities, carried out without a dose of prayer, increase our self-esteem.

¹⁰ Priest of the Archdiocese of Kinshasa

2. The routine

We are all committed to praying the Liturgy of the Hours every day. The time spent in training should normally create a "spiritual tradition" in our curriculum. But that's not what happens once the initial training is over. It gives the impression that we were praying for a "good report", but our hearts weren't in it. And praying the same psalms every week and on feast days no longer encourages deep meditation on what we sing or pray in our community chapels. Routine has killed off the richness of the Word of God.

One day, I tried to explain to the confreres the depth of the psalms so that they would discover its role in our spiritual life. I gave them just three reasons to love the Liturgy of the Hours:

- These are the psalms sung by Jesus in his life.
- It is the heritage of a spiritual experience of a people chosen by God
- By believing what I sing in the psalms, I immediately make it my personal and community prayer.

3. The lack of a "taste" for prayer

Christ says to be the "salt of the earth" (Mt. 5:13), and if the salt were to become stale, what would we use to salt it? There are times when the spiritual life becomes bland, as if we've lost the taste for contact with God. This lack of enthusiasm doesn't encourage us to go to the Chapel, or to do daily adoration. We know that food without salt takes a lot of effort to swallow. In the same way, a prayer life without "taste" is an ordeal. That's why you'll find religious in the chapel who can't concentrate, who move around all the time and sometimes come and go for no reason at all. The chapel becomes a place of rapid passage. The lack of taste in prayer makes you feel that the chapel is a place where the air doesn't circulate, where you suffocate. This attitude gives joy to the nuns who are told: "Today, prayer is individual". This attitude makes some people say "I pray better in my room". We know that our room does not give us all the comforts of a chapel, because temptation is great. It is the lack of a taste for prayer that makes us shun Lauds, Mass, midday prayer, Vespers, adoration and Compline. Everything stops in the life of the religious. As a result, there is a certain sadness on the religious's face. For their conscience tells them that their time is running out and that their place is not in a consecrated life.

4. Disappointment

God's silence can have several interpretations in our spiritual life. There are those who want to experience immediacy in their requests. We forget that our faith is sometimes scrutinised to check its quality. Many religious are disappointed when their prayers do not

seem to be answered. They say to themselves, "What's the point of going on asking" if the requests of yesterday or the day before have still not been answered? What's the point of bothering God and spending time in the Chapel? It's true that after a disappointment, you have to be strong to get up again. But God always listens to our prayers, whatever their nature. God doesn't keep one thing for two people. Each of us has our own "package" of goods reserved just for us. God always answers. Disappointment is not an attribute of God. What would God lack that we should go looking for him elsewhere? Our disappointment is simply a sign of our lack of patience and faith. Faith "*is the guarantee of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen*" (Heb 11:1). Let us be reassured that it is we who disappoint God through our lack of faith and patience.

5. The shame

I've always loved Samuel's response to God: "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10). Listening to the Lord means being ready to go wherever he sends you, or doing his will. Sometimes we promise God that his will will be done. When we don't keep our promise, we feel as if we've accumulated a debt that we no longer know how to pay. We are ashamed to appear before God, because we recognise ourselves as "debtors". This personal shame must lead us to discover the images of God that we bear. This shame must be the path to the God of Jesus Christ: the God of love, full of compassion; the just and merciful God. God, our Father.

We could certainly extend the list of reasons or motives that distance us from prayer, and therefore from our intimate relationship with God. The common denominator of all these reasons is ourselves. None of these reasons come from God. God wants us to live up to our vocation, our call.

Our consecrated life is a life given totally to God for the good of his people, his Church. Our one and only model is Christ. Although he was Son of God and God, he took the time to go alone, to a deserted place, to pray. He prayed in all the circumstances of a man's life: in joy or in sorrow. He is a fine example of a successful spiritual life.

Without a true and free prayer life, we are no more than sounding brass or clanging cymbals¹¹. It is the life of prayer that nourishes our "inner man". It is prayer that accompanies us in all that we are as consecrated persons. Without prayer, as Cardinal AMBONGO used to tell us, we are no more than humanitarian agents, in the same way as Doctors without Borders or UNHCR agents.¹²

Consecrated persons are invited to feel, every day, that their prayers are like the support of Moses' hand, so that war and the vicissitudes of life do not in any way shake God's love

¹¹ Here I use the language of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13, 1)

¹² Remarks made at a conference for consecrated persons on 01 February 2024 at Notre Dame du Congo Cathedral

for the world. Prayer is the place where God becomes "the rock" of their strength, and nothing can shake them.

We can close this chapter by saying that "*the fidelity and coherence of our vocation require in our time a greater awareness of the importance of this relationship with the Lord, which we are called to deepen with gratitude, determination and confidence*".¹³

Each Community is invited to use all possible means to guarantee, accompany and support the spiritual life of its members (times of personal prayer, community prayer, recollections, lectio divina, retreats, spiritual guidance, faith sharing, spiritual reading, etc.).

Anything that can contribute to the growth of our "inner man", our life of faith, cannot be neglected. Let every consecrated person know that the foundation of his or her calling is prayer. Prayer nourishes and fertilises our apostolate. One cannot exist without the other.

¹³ 39^{ème} General Chapter of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Document "Our inner man is renewed every day", no. 1

4. COMMUNITY, THE LABORATORY OF FORGIVENESS¹⁴

¹⁴ We are inspired by the conference given by Father Ngoma Ngoma (Lazarist) to the Major Superiors on 22 March 2023 at the COSUMA headquarters (Limete, 13^{ème} rue Résidentiel).

You can't talk about mercy without talking about forgiveness. You can't talk about forgiveness in religious life without talking about conflict. This is why we are going to dissect this conference into two parts:

1. Conflicts
2. Forgiveness

A. Conflicts

"Conflict is an opposition between two or more people who come up against divergent ideas or opinions and where the expectations of some are often in opposition to the expectations of others" (Internet).

What are the different types of conflict?

- **Conflict** of interest.
- **Conflict** of power.
- Identity **conflict**.
- The **conflict** of values.
- Emotional **conflict**.
- Intercultural **conflict**
- Generational **conflict**, etc.

What are the elements that accompany a conflict?

Conflict is charged with **emotions** such as anger, frustration, fear, sadness, resentment and disgust. Sometimes it can involve aggression and violence (Internet).

Conflict management

All social life always gives rise to conflict. But religious life is also a social life. Even a single person can experience conflict. Saint Paul expresses this when he says that "what I want to do, I don't do". The lack of conflict is a sign that it is hidden, concealed, and when conflict arises, it erupts in a virulent manner. We shouldn't dream of a religious community without conflict. The difference between us and the social community is that in religious life, conflicts are managed differently, and its roots lie in the Word of God. **Religious are called to manage conflicts in the spirit of the Gospel and of brotherly love.**

What is conflict?

Conflict is often confused with disagreement. The latter can lead to conflict. Disagreement is a difference of assessment, conviction or opinion about something. For example, about prayer times. It is possible for disagreements to become a conflict. The decisive criterion

for moving from disagreement to conflict is the **balance of power**. So a **conflict** is a disagreement experienced as a power struggle.

Conflict between people also generates internal conflict. Paranoid people always feel victimised within a community. So you need to have the courage to face up to the conflict. Conflict is not always negative. You can discover a positive value in it.

The value of conflict

Conflict is not always negative. It can be either a danger or an opportunity. It all depends on how you manage it.

Conflict is destructive when it is denied. And it resurfaces in a more virulent form, as we said above. It is the return of the repressed. It comes back as devastating. Or when it shifts from an object conflict to a conflict of persons. The object is displaced towards my personal relationship. This shift becomes a violent conflict. And violence is the negation of the other person and the desire to suppress them as a human being (physical or psychological death, etc.). Conflict dehumanises the other person, and even the perpetrator. It ruins you; even interpersonal relationships are affected; it ruins communities. A religious community cannot experience conflict in this destructive way. First of all, it makes no sense in terms of our vocation and is a poor witness to our experience of the Gospel among God's people. Christ tells us that a kingdom divided cannot stand.

Conflict as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to recognise the other person's personality. Conflict allows us to identify the problems that are eating away at the community. Conflict is a symptom revealing a problem (either injustice, abuse, exclusion, malaise, etc.). Conflict thus becomes an opportunity to change behaviour. Conflict brings our inner aggression into play. It's an opportunity to manage our anger so that it becomes an active attitude. Let conflict become a factor of unity and balance. It brings newness and innovation. Let's not forget that in a conflict situation, the first tendency is to "protect" one's position. In many cases, our position becomes our "identity", our "honour". We hold on to it, thinking that we could lose our identity or our honour. In an article by Jean Luc Galizia¹⁵, the author gives us some positive attitudes for overcoming conflict:

- **Avoidance.** *We don't want to get involved for many reasons, such as the fear of losing the esteem of others or the attraction we have for them, whether imaginary or real. We are not ready to admit that a conflict exists, even though we can see the real reasons for it.*
- **Denial.** *This is a defence mechanism against unmanageable situations. When we are unable to confront a reality that is too painful, we simply deny it. Denying the conflict and avoiding confrontation in no way prevents the situation from deteriorating. The person is trying to protect themselves because they don't want to believe that a confrontation is imminent and because they hope that the "small"*

¹⁵ What are the right attitudes in conflict situations (Internet)

problem will resolve itself. Often we don't feel involved in a conflict, we find it pointless, low-level or we want to avoid adding to the existing controversy. It's important to remember that a real conflict that isn't resolved tends to fester, and the more this happens, the harder it is to ignore.

- **Resignation.** *Resignation is a fairly common attitude to conflict. It consists of deflecting situations, putting things off until later, avoiding a discussion. It is often a submissive attitude. It involves abandoning one's positions and interests. This approach leads to a devaluation of oneself or at least a lack of assertion of oneself, one's ideas, opinions and even values. This attitude is characterised by a renunciation of one's rights, authority and power. Resigning is also about trying to spare people's sensitivities, smoothing things over and fostering relationships rather than trying to resolve the conflict. Of course, you have to be conciliatory and respectful of people, remain correct and try to control your emotions. But you must not give in on an essential point, on the core of the problem.*
- **The authoritarian or oppressive response.** *In this approach, the only thing that counts is victory over the other person. The aim is to reassert power without taking into account the needs or interests of the other party. This often leads to a kind of symmetry, an escalation between the parties in the hope that the other will give in, capitulate. As the element that triggers the conflict is not really examined, the focus shifts to the adversary to be defeated. Violence in any guise (gentle, diplomatic, etc.) never solves the problem. The risk lies in the fact that an unresolved problem will reappear in one form or another. If you think that by force you can put an end to the debate at a given moment, this is often only a temporary illusion. Nobody accepts a constraint imposed by force in the long term. What's more, this oppressive attitude maintains the win-lose logic. In team management, which requires everyone's active participation, cooperation and commitment. This logic has disastrous effects.*
- **The search for solutions.** *This is certainly the most realistic attitude. People feel fully involved in the conflict and try to set aside all prejudices about the situation. For them, the conflict must lead to increased gains for each of the parties involved. Building trust is one of the foundations of this attitude. Depending on the nature of the conflict, there may be several types of response: negotiation through compromise, collaboration or cooperation.*

For us consecrated persons, the response to conflict is to seek peace and reconciliation. This is also the path indicated to us by the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, which began in Rome and will end in 2025.¹⁶

In the search for a solution to the conflict that is ruining the community or the interpersonal or intrapersonal relationship, the person who takes courage to put an end to it is called upon to listen to both parties in conflict and to show impartiality. If the conflict

¹⁶ Theme of the Jubilee of Consecrated Life: "Pilgrims of hope, on the road to peace".

is deep-rooted, he or she can call on the experts in conflict resolution that we have in the Conference of Major Superiors. And the best door to reconciliation is forgiveness, which comes deeply from the heart.

B. PARDON

We have heard many times before that there is no such thing as an ideal Community. This is true. In interpersonal relationships, it is the place where the exercise of forgiveness must take on its full meaning. So another name for a religious community could be "**forgiveness laboratory**", a place where we consecrated persons are the first "technicians".

This is how Mahatma Gandhi said that "*forgiveness is the most beautiful gift we can offer and give ourselves in life*".¹⁷ Clearly, when we offer forgiveness, we also offer ourselves a space of peace and appeasement. Forgiveness is a key to profound inner freedom. You don't "imprison" anyone and you're like a "fish in water".

Lack of forgiveness is a burden that we carry and that risks destroying our lives and our community atmosphere.

Knowing how to forgive, ask for forgiveness and forgive ourselves is a trilogy that constitutes a great form of love that we have for ourselves and for others".¹⁸ For me, a consecrated person who lives by this trilogy is a great "influencer" of peace in her religious family. Forgiveness is enormously liberating. It contributes to the flourishing of life as a whole. Without forgiveness, the community lives in a state of nameless tension, which creates fear and suspicion.

What is **forgiveness**?

We've all experienced betrayal, injustice, slander and backbiting. There is no greater pain than knowing that the person who eats with you is a traitor. The result is that we are filled with hatred, revenge, sadness and so on.

Father Maxime says that it is "*a generous act that we do, at the same time, for ourselves: to feel lighter and happier; and for the other person: to invite them to begin, together, a new life story*"¹⁹ (Idem, p. 162). True forgiveness enables us to become "**actors in our own lives**".

I agree with Father Maxime when he tells us that forgiveness is "*a new look of love - unconditional love - for the other person, whether they want to ask for it or not. It is a free and gracious act*". Sometimes we waste a lot of energy waiting for the other person to admit their wrong or fault. Many times, it just doesn't happen. So this virtue of forgiveness

¹⁷ Maxime Menga, op. cit. p. 157

¹⁸ Maxime Menga, Idem, p. 161

¹⁹ Maxime Menga, op. cit. p. 162

is a permanent attitude. The Apostle Peter thought that 7 times was more than enough. Christ will show him that 77 times 7 is the **new calculation of forgiveness**.

My sisters and brothers, the refusal to forgive (for real or justified reasons) does not spare us from the justice of God that is projected before us. God tells us: "If you do not forgive your brother with all your heart, neither will he forgive you" (Mt 6:14-17). Let's look first at God and his actions, and then at ourselves, before saying "no" or closing our hearts to the forgiveness (whether we ask for it or not) of our sister or brother. We can only live off the vertical "true forgiveness" that comes from God. The horizontal forgiveness that we offer to others (sometimes with too much difficulty) is only a reflection of the first.

"If we are not healed internally, every memory of the wound becomes a de-healing of it, and will continue to feed the wound, the remorse and all the negative feelings towards the person who caused it. So it's in our interest to learn to forgive, because we lose nothing" ²⁰

I conclude with Maxime: *"learning to ask forgiveness of one's brothers is an essential step for anyone who wants to learn to love and live in harmony" ²¹*

The last question you can ask yourself is this: why does the "depth" of my heart sometimes find it hard to forgive?

²⁰ Idem, p. 172

²¹ Idem, p. 184

5. COMMUNITY, BETHESDA SWIMMING POOL

We can read this episode in the Gospel of John, 5, 1- 12, where Jesus heals a cripple who had been ill for 48 years.

Let's start by saying that "*the pool of Bethesda was a pagan place dedicated to Aesculapius, the god of health. It was rumoured from time to time that the sick were healed there. The*

pious Jews, scandalised to see healings taking place in a pagan place, said that people were not healed there by Aesculapius but by an angel of the Lord. In this miraculous place, many hoped to be healed, but very few were.

The Community is the place where Christ comes to meet us to heal us, to bring us out of our infirmity, our selfishness and our individuality. Many of us have been "sick" for a long time (jealousy, backbiting, tribalism, favouritism, regionalism, fetishism, etc.), a disease that eats away at us and destroys us. We need to hear Christ say to us: "**Do you want to be healed?** And get up, take your stretcher and walk.

When you're ill, you feel as if your body is "slipping away" from you, that you are no longer in control. We become weak, dependent and sometimes very sad. Healing brings us joy, the joy of living and the hope of still being useful on this earth.

"**I have no one**" says the cripple. How often are we alone in our communities? How often do we feel rejected by others because of one thing or another? How often do we cry in our rooms (without witnesses) because of this unwanted solitude? Sometimes we feel like committing suicide in our homes because of the isolation of our members. Having no one is a **great moral and emotional suffering**.

The Community is the school where Christ tells us to "**stand up**". It has always been said that the glory of God is the standing man. Standing up is an important dimension of faith and of our vocation. God said to Abraham, "Arise". He said to Moses "stand up". It's the first step towards a mission. It's the sign that we're starting out on a journey, or that we want to start out on a journey. It's a dimension that prevents us from being humiliated, petty or resigned. Stand up is an invitation to be like others. The Community must help us to stand up, to get out of our position of weakness, humiliation, isolation or lack of peace (I have no one).

Christ heals this man by his own will, after hearing his explanation (*as soon as the water is stirred up, and before I get there, another has already gone down*). The Community is the first to take a step towards our "sick" brother or sister.

"**Take your stretcher and walk**": although the road is now before us, we are still carrying our story, albeit in a different way. The most important thing is not so much our story, but our journey towards... the new opportunity that the Community is offering us to move forward.

Giving a new opportunity is the path that Christ shows us by living in a religious community. It means giving others the chance to become 'other' in their own skin. Yes, labels stick to us a lot in religious life. Each member is sometimes "crucified and condemned" in the court of the Community without judgement. How often do we hear "he'll never change". Who has stolen "the key" to the change or conversion of a brother or sister in a Community?

Grab your stretcher and walk, that's the invitation Christ gives us today. It is the same invitation he gave to the sinful woman. "Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8:1-11). Note that

Jesus "bent down" (he took the woman's position of humiliation) and by standing up, he helped the woman to take up the new life "sin no more".

Let's give our members the chance to live differently. Let's open them up from all the prisons that we have locked them up in because of our pride. Let's not forget that sometimes we have the "beam" in us and they only have the "mote" in their eyes.

And so we are invited to "die to ourselves" like a grain of wheat, so that it may bear much fruit. (Jn 12:24-26).

Let's always try to get our members to "stand up" and walk together, so as to avoid the isolated, the abandoned, the lonely and so on.

Let us be clear once and for all: "**we are more than our problems**". A problem, no matter how great, cannot define man or the human being. Man is more than his problem. And let's not look at him only in terms of his problem. Let's look around and discover other aspects of his being.

As a trainer of Postulants, I had to solve two cases that have borne fruit today. The first was an intellectually average student. The training team suggested that I send him away. After listening to the candidate's history and educational background, I quickly discovered that he lacked a solid foundation. So I shouldn't dismiss him without giving him every possible opportunity to raise his level. So I did. Today, he's one of the good priests we have in the Congregation. Another showed that he was intelligent but not wise. For some members of the team, he's a young man who will never mature. This case was tricky in the sense that we don't study wisdom. Listening to his personal story, I realised that he was a spoilt child. Everything was thought out for him and nothing was done without his agreement. And he did as he pleased. I spent the whole year with him, presenting him with borderline situations to see how he acted. He had time to 'wake up' and start making decisions for the good of everyone. Today, he is an excellent colleague. Yes, we are more than our problems. No one can be identified with his or her problem, although we are all, to varying degrees, problems. One person's outburst of laughter can be a problem for someone who wants peace, calm or tranquillity. One person's silence can be a problem for someone who wants to listen to music, and silence is disturbing. In short, we are all problems.

Another anecdote that might help us to change the way we look at others, at a colleague. I went to Japan to take part in the Provincial Chapter. From the General Government, I had been sent with certain guidelines to give, certain directions to leave. This is what I tried to do during the first day of the Chapter. On the second day, during the break, the nun who was acting as my English translator said to me: "Father, I was also a member of the General Council. I know and understand your concern about the mission of your brothers here in Japan. But I must tell you one thing: don't focus too much on the black spot on the white paper. Focus all your energies on whiteness and you'll see that the black spot won't have enough impact". Not understanding this profound philosophy, I told her to be concrete.

She took a piece of white duplicator paper and put a small black spot on it. Looking me straight in the eye, she said, "Father, that's all you see in your brothers (showing me the black spot on the paper) and you leave all this part (showing me the rest of the white on the paper). When I was left alone, I quickly realised that I was losing a great wealth from my brothers. And this wisdom helped me to grow to such an extent that one day a brother said to me "since you came back from Rome, you've changed a lot". Personally, I haven't changed; it's the way I look at others that has. That's why I often say to myself: "The black spot on my white paper can't swallow up all my whiteness, even though it's a remarkable spot".

May our communities truly be places where everyone seeks to lift each other up. This chain of effort will ensure that the places where we live together are oases of peace, love and fraternity.

6. COMMUNITY, A REFLECTION OF PENTECOST

On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13), not only were the doors opened and fear overcome, but it was also the day when "everyone heard the Good News" in their own language, despite the diversity of cultures. As the saying goes: you can only understand identity from difference; you can experience light from darkness, and so on.

With the coming of the Holy Spirit, communion, love and unity have become the key to living together (Gal 5:22). The spirit of Pentecost is a great challenge for consecrated life today. We are strong enough to build the "Towers of Babel". Without being exhaustive, I will simply paint a negative picture of everything that destroys our "living together" or that does not allow us to live the spirit of Pentecost in our respective communities.

1. Individualism:

We are "happy" alone, which is really the opposite of God's will. God wants us **all to be happy**, because happiness is for everyone. It's not "one all" formed by our different "individualisms". It's a whole that comes from the joy and happiness of everyone, at the same time.

But we are finding that "living" together is currently a major problem. Modern technology has driven the knife even deeper into the various wounds of our tendency towards individualism. We live alone, without others, while being with them, and without them. Our friends are far away. We avoid having them around for fear of controlling ourselves and restricting our freedom.

I notice in my own community how we all disperse after the meal. Everyone goes back to their rooms. And if you try to see what time he turned off his phone, for example, it's far too late after the hour of separation.

We forget that "alone we go fast", but "with two we go far". We forget that "alone" you die without witnesses. We forget that "alone" makes "the mouth rot". We forget that "one finger doesn't wash the face".

Individualism (as opposed to the solitude that comes with commitment) is a weapon against ourselves. It only pays us in monkey money. **Individualism means that we are closer to those who are farther away and further away from those who are closer.** You can't build a community with fictitious members. The virtual community is nothing but an illusion. It empties us into ourselves and makes us believe we're living in "heaven on earth". Especially as you can manipulate all the fictitious members to your heart's content. You can line them up when you want, and move them away when you want. All this drains us and makes us fictitious too. The Community that helps me discover who I am is the one in front of me. The one where sister so-and-so lives, or brother so-and-so. The one that forces me to eat on time, pray on time and sleep on time. The one that offers me time for retreat, personal reading or Lectio Divina. The one that measures my patience and fraternity.

2. The frantic race for power

As disciples of Christ, the question of "who is the greatest" looms over all of us, and even more so today (Mt. 18:1-4); or we are all looking for the "mother of the sons of Zebedee" to take us up to the pedestal of the "Cathedral" (Mt. 20:20-21).

It's true that being a "leader" is enough of an honour (Mr Abbot, Father, Monsignor, my sister, my brother, etc.). But Christ wants us to be more "servants" than masters. He wants us to be leaders who serve others (the least of these) and not to seek or make our power felt (Mt. 20:24-28). Power separates us. Power creates a class of brothers or sisters in the community. Through power, we discover that we are from the North, the South, the West or the East.

Did we enter consecrated life to "lead"? To be a leader? And with this spirit, do we really believe that we are still following Christ?

I've heard it said several times: "when the elections are coming up, she goes to the village and when she comes back, she dominates everyone", or "he has fetishes to dominate the Provincial Superior. The latter doesn't know how to change him. They always leave him as Bursar". The community is divided, because everyone thinks that consecrated life is only fulfilled by being a "leader", by having power. Let's never forget that in consecrated life, any bit of authority implies "responsibility" towards oneself and the other members of the community.

3. The pursuit of wealth at all costs

"My Father's house will be called a house of prayer. But you make it a den of robbers" (Mt. 21:13). Although Christ warns us that we cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24), we forget this once in the Pastoral. For some, it has even become the primary objective of their commitment to the priesthood or consecrated life. As a policeman once said to me: "We are among those who never stop working". Just yesterday, one of our lawyers said to me: "Father, whether you want it or not, you priests are considered to be rich".

Since we want to solve all our families' problems (starting with the minerval and ending with the small expenses of everyday life), how can we avoid running after money?

With every day that passes, we experience that money mismanaged is really a bad master. We become "hypocrites" because of money. We lie because of money. We kill each other because of money. We wish each other dead because of money.

One day, a bursar told me this anecdote. One of his brothers used to collect the bills in the bins at Super Marché. He used this to justify his monthly expenses. But one day (as they say, there's always a day for the landlord), because of haste or inattention, he picked up a bill from a mother who had a baby, because on the list were baby bottles, baby milk and Pampers. He introduced the bill as a supporting document. When the bursar checked the invoices, he discovered the lie. We called the brother and he confessed that he was just collecting the bills at the Super Marché. That's how money makes us liars.

Like the brother who refused an obedience because the place he was sent to "wasn't going to find him". A way of saying: "there's no money there". Anyone who is not sent to where the "money" is is considered to be the unloved one of the Congregation. Religious almost never find their joy in the mission, but rather in the money. The best criterion for a fulfilled mission. A sad illusion. If we were to see the list of goods that cannot be bought with money, we would never take it as a measure of our mission. For example: sleep, love, inner peace, health, death, life, etc. God alone gives it to us freely. As if to say, what is free is more gratifying for our commitment, for our mission.

4. The search for easy sex

The forbidden is said to spur action. As we are "locked in", the other sex (for those who are straight) tries to find out what is really hidden between our feet. Apart from that, we're all beautiful in the convent or seminary. (sango ya vilain aza te).

A father said to me: "If God has to condemn the unfaithful, then you priests are part of that condemnation". What sadness !!!! he added, not only are you doing what is contrary to your commitment, but you are doing it with many at the same time. Aren't you sick, Father?

The use of sex is also on the increase among nuns. A nun once told me, I entered the convent a virgin. And I asked her how she didn't keep her virginity? Her answer: the convent. I found out that a lot of sisters did it and I did it.

We are becoming the "great consumers" of pornographic films. If one day we could publish a list of the numbers of priests and nuns who offer to watch pornographic films every evening after vespers, we ourselves would be astonished. Because even the holiest neighbour will be one of them. We also excel at masturbation. (Beware of strangulation).

Emotional imbalance has led many of us to abuse. We all know what happens to them.

The time has come for us to realise that our virginity, our consecration, is an important oblation for our sequela christi. Keeping our virginity or our chastity is one of the best ways of saying thank you to God and putting ourselves at the service of everyone, without exception. What I say about the African man or woman affects every continent. There is no longer one continent that is an expert in chastity and another that is a poor pupil in virginity. We all need to be made aware of the danger we all face.

Many consecrated persons have destroyed their chastity, either by following bad examples or by lack of solid support from the community. What are we looking for in the other sex when we neglect our commitment? Drowsiness for selfish pleasure? An unconscious response to a gift? A way of giving back to someone who has helped us? Whatever our justifications, nothing fits in with our commitment. We made our profession by telling the world, the Church and God to be chaste, obedient and poor. Anything that does not come from this commitment emanates from ourselves, and therefore from the Evil One.

As one writer put it: "*an act, even a consensual heterosexual act, shows that we are looking to others for help in a personal situation that has become untenable*".²²

5. Clericalism

It's a danger that threatens us all. Clericalism puts us at the centre of everything, at the point where everything gravitates. Clericalism is thinking that nothing can work without us, because we are "men of God". It's believing that after Jesus, it's you and you alone. In short, clericalism leads us to put on a "one-man show" wherever we are sent.

In short, we can add to the list of things that destroy our commitment (tribalism, favouritism, etc.) and make the world our only reference point. But we are called to live differently because the one we follow, who called us and chose us, lived differently. We are invited to follow him as "sinners" but for true holiness. One question we must often ask ourselves is: "*Am I credible in the way I live out my commitment? Am I an opportunity for our church today?*"

Be aware that we are the "**faces on display**" on which the world often places its hopes. If we don't measure up, it's a great disappointment for society and for Christ, who calls us.

"In many situations, communities come and go according to interests and calculations, plunging their members into dissatisfaction and frustration. The dysfunctions are due, among other factors, to a lack of real solidarity. This explains the attitudes of non-assistance to people in moral, spiritual or psychological danger, desertions, abandonment of post and abdication of responsibility, the creation of bastions of resistance, of parallel government, of snipers as in a battlefield where we mark each other, where we protect ourselves against the potential enemy that can be our brother or sister... Distrust sets up at all levels multiform fractures of brotherhood that weaken the original purpose of consecrated life: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). ***The community machine cannot run smoothly and efficiently if the oil of solidarity is missing***, and the whole edifice loses its evangelical relevance"²³.

The great remedy for breaking away from everything that destroys our consecrated life is the spirit of Pentecost. We can do nothing of ourselves if the Spirit is not within us. Or better still, every time we do something contrary to our commitment, we drive God's Spirit

²² N. Hausman: "Training while preventing abuse" in CAIRN. INFO, p. 69

²³ Valentin Ntumba ocd, lecture given at COSUMA Kinshasa on 14 December 2022

out of our lives. How can we stand without him? How can we be effective without his presence? We know that the flesh is weak. Should we continue to trust the flesh instead of the Spirit?

With the fire of Pentecost, we will speak the language of love, unity, peace and reconciliation. These are important virtues for the life of the whole, for consecrated life. Let us allow ourselves to be led at every moment by the Holy Spirit. Let us allow him to transform not only the face of the earth, but also and above all the deepest recesses of our hearts. It is the Spirit who gives us the strength to love others despite their "faults". He helps us to build a community of sanctifiable sinners. He helps us to see ourselves as members of the same religious family.

It's important that the blood tie doesn't cry out too much in our religious families. Our togetherness has a lot to do with the spiritual bond. In the Spirit and through the Spirit, we are one. It is the Spirit who guides us to act as the members of our body; despite their diversity, they form a single body. As in our baptism, the Spirit invites us to no longer live the difference between those of the North, East, South or West. It is the Spirit who builds the foundations of our communities so that love and peace may reign.

To experience Pentecost is to **grow in the experience of God**. This makes many things in our lives easier and can be a key to overcoming certain temptations and crises in our spiritual journey. So let's make God's presence our daily concern. Growing in the experience of God is like building a house on a rock. To grow in the experience of God is to develop in ourselves the "ear of Samuel" that says "Speak Lord, your servant is listening". Growing in our experience of God means learning to identify with the prayer of the "Our Father". Growing in our experience of God means gradually making the Father's will our own food.

To live Pentecost is to live one's vocation in a happy and balanced way. Being a "man of God" and living a sad life are (for me) incompatible. The incompatibility lies in the fact that we have responded freely and spontaneously to God's call to love. Love lived well, even if at times there are doubts, is a path of freedom and joy. The consecrated person, through his or her community and apostolate, should be a man or woman of joy. The joy of knowing they are loved by Christ; the joy of carrying, as in a fragile vessel, the mystery of the redemption of the world; the joy of counting themselves among those who bring Christ to the poorest. In short, everything that is placed in your hands should be a reason for joy (the community, the apostolate, prayer, group recreation, sports time, etc.); the joy of having been chosen by the Bridegroom.

To live the Spirit of Pentecost is to ask God for the virtue of patience. The "**chapter of God's gifts** is not closed" and what God keeps is always well kept. This way of looking at things helps us to avoid jealousy and the desire to always be like others. It invites us to thank God even when we don't yet have what we would like to have. Trust in the Lord, because the chapter of gifts is not yet closed. You will always have something from God if you trust him. *"Faith in God's love is like the common thread running through a whole history of graces"*.²⁴

Why do you often compare yourself with others? Why do you want, at all costs, to have what others have? Even the talents given by the Master were given to each according to his ability (Mt. 25:15b).

It is the spirit of Pentecost that will help us to rise to our challenges, to finally create Communities of life, love, justice and peace. Fruits of the Holy Spirit.

The best question is: "What do I need to change in order to better live the spirit of Pentecost? In my Community and in my Province?"

²⁴ Idem, p. 75

7. COMMUNITY, LAST SUPPER

In my small experience, the Consecrated ask more questions of all kinds, but which can be summed up in these terms: "What does the Community do for me? (In the area of studies, clothing, taking care of our parents, the mission, my biological family, my personal needs, etc.). Religious leave aside the fundamental question of their lives: "*What am I doing for the Community?*" In this way, we move from the Community for me to "me" for the

Community. This is the spirit of Christ's Last Supper. So let's meditate on the Gospel of Saint John, chapter 13^{ème}, 1-17

This chapter teaches us two major lessons, in my opinion:

1. By washing the feet of his disciples, Christ wants to purify them so that they can participate more fully in his Last Supper;
2. It is also an invitation to serve others out of love. To be a Servant of the Community.

Jesus, knowing that his hour has come, wants to give us a "great sign" of his love through his service to his brothers and sisters. In this episode, there are the flaws of Judas, the one who sided with the devil to betray his Master. Let's remember the parable of the wheat and the chaff. A reality that deeply affects us as human beings.

The Gospel shows us that the decision to take the place of a slave comes from Jesus himself (he gets up, he pours the water, he washes the feet, etc.). Hence the law of service: "Wash one another's feet".

What makes us greater than the one who chose us and sent us? What makes us less obedient to his commandment to love and serve?

True service to others leads to **the Beatitudes**: "Happy are you if you put them into practice". Happy are we if our first and last concern is that others receive the best service from me.

There is no religious family that is not at the service of others, of the most disadvantaged (active or contemplative). It is our ego that pushes us away from this ideal of Christ. We are invited to return to the one who calls us, to the one who is our model, to the one who guides our lives.

Service to others and for others brings us God's blessings, as in Tobit **12:6-21**: "You did not hesitate to get up and leave your table to go and bury a dead man...". God blesses us when we serve his people with righteousness and love.

The big question is, why doesn't the Eucharist convert us? What impact does the Eucharist have on our lives? If it is the pinnacle of the Christian life? If it is the sacrament of sacraments, why doesn't our practical life change after so many Masses that we have attended?

1. Around the same table
2. Sharing the same meal
3. Summoned by the same person, Christ
4. Telling us to "do this in remembrance of Him".

I'd like to give you a few pointers, which you can no doubt add to through your own experience.

1. We are more and more in the religion of exteriority

2. We participate out of conformity, not conviction;
3. Our nature is stronger than the message conveyed by the Eucharist, a message of love;
4. We no longer take the Eucharist seriously, because of routine. We end up being mere spectators rather than profound participants in the mystery being celebrated. This may be due to a distancing from the meaning of the Eucharist and its significance in our faith journey;
5. We do not believe in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist;
6. In every Mass, we play only one role and we are all characters;
7. The body of Christ becomes a "social fact" rather than a mystery of salvation;
8. We lack the motive to convert. We get used to evil and our conscience rationalises everything. In this way, everything becomes normal. So the Eucharist is meaningless.

We no longer see the "ever new" character of the Eucharist. Monotony" makes us think it's just a habit. We become "impervious" to the summons that each Eucharist brings to our lives.

9. We are the generation of "superficiality". (masala ya libata);
10. We think that "God's mercy" is enough, forgetting that he is also "just";
11. We have lost our sense of the "fear of God";
12. The misconception of the ideal promoted by the Eucharist: unity. We find this ideal difficult to achieve, so we fall into inaction and become a stiff-necked people.

If we follow all the steps of the Mass, we should not come out of it as we went in. Each of us should come away with a clear message, experience or mission for our lives and for the good of others. The two tables of the Mass, leading us to a single mystery of salvation, are moments for listening to God and accepting a mission.

The first mission is to live, to build communion. This is another name for the Eucharist. Christ invites us to share the same table with our brother or sister. A symbol of fraternity, friendship and love. And how can I still separate myself from my brother during and after the Eucharist? Have I not fully grasped the message of communion that each Mass sends me?

The Eucharist sends us on mission to evangelise and to become servants in the service of others. Where does the spirit of self-serving come from? To forget others and look only to our own interests? Why can't we be a gift to others any more? If Christ tells us that to be a servant is to seek to be the last, religious today seem to create their own logic: to be the first in order to avoid being the last. Yet the Eucharist is the meal of the servants, the last, the poor and the friends of Christ.

The best question to ask yourself is: "Why doesn't the Mass transform my life" so that I can build my community as a "Eucharistic" place?

8. COMMUNITY, WIDOW'S CONTRIBUTION

There is no one in the Community poorer than he has nothing to give, or richer than he has nothing to receive. The Community is the place where goods are shared, the ideal place to share our wealth and our poverty.

I begin this theme with Christ's parable inviting us to be beautiful trees that bear fruit. **(Mt.7, 15-20)**. It is true that a sick tree cannot bear good fruit. We suppose that in religious life, knowing that we are chosen by Christ, we should be this "beautiful tree".

When we look at the number of arguments that divide our Communities, there is the question of goods and sharing. We often forget that the Community has invested a lot in us. It's true that our needs can increase with time and the responsibilities we take on. But this cannot be done by depriving the Community of the minimum necessary. Hence the image of this theme: the widow's mite. **(Mk. 12, 41-44)**

The joy and peace of community life often come from the common fund. Many communities have problems because of our sharing of goods. It is not enough to be a "great leader" to contribute to your community; even a small banana can stop the "hunger" of a sister or a confrere. Pooling resources is a problem for African religious in general, and Congolese religious in particular, today. We put too much pressure on the common fund to meet our personal or family needs. Yet it is our "obolus" that the community needs. Giving everything we have to live. Our security is the community, not the other way round.

We are sometimes very selfish in community life. We keep the "superfluous" for ourselves. But when we have a serious problem, the brother or sister is adamant that the community should help him or her. We don't ask the question: where will the community get what I need to help me if I haven't helped them before? Remember, you only reap what you sow. If you sow more, you reap more; if you sow less, you also reap less.

Let us be among those whom Christ will have to say "in her poverty, she has given all she had to live on". This widow has nothing left to live on, but she has gained in her hope and in her faith.

We are often the authors of our own despair. That's why we don't get very far. I know several religious today who are disappointed because they put their hope in men or in the biological family. How many times have we heard "It's over. I don't want anything more to do with my family. What little savings I had, they've ruined and they still come to me for help".

It's like this nun, Director of a Congregation school, who dealt with certain teachers so that some of the children would pay the school fees directly to her. This money went straight into her pocket. She bought some motorbike taxis. A year later, there were no motorbikes running and nothing in her personal coffers either. On the contrary, she had to spend another large sum of money to treat someone who had been hit by one of her motorbikes. Unable to do it on the sly any more, she went and told her boss. You can imagine what happened next. No, it's our contribution that the Community needs.

Another example is that of a religious prefect of a large school who embezzled teachers' pay money by giving it to dollar hitters, with the intention of earning more. All the money was lost because it was a scam. To make up the difference, he mortgaged his school's

registration certificate in a local bank. Unable to pay and threatened by the bank, he was forced to inform his superiors. Today, he is no longer in the Congregation. And his biological family is not taking care of him either.

We could go on and on with the list of examples. It's just sad to see that we're a long way from our ideal of life in this common economy, and that creates tensions in the community. We expect from the community what we should give it beforehand. What a contradiction!!!

In 2 Kings 12:9-12, King Joash ordered the priests not to touch the money for repairing the Temple. The priests obeyed so that God's house could be built. This is the renunciation that we lack today in religious life. We no longer want to "sacrifice ourselves".

During a canonical visit, my young confreres asked me for their pocket money, which they hadn't had for two months. My question was, who had died because of this lack? They replied: nobody. So I told them two things: pocket money is help that the community gives us, not a salary. The second thing is that sacrifice is part of our life. It's sad to know that we're all chasing money. And if that money was for the benefit of the Community, even better. But it's for our own benefit. That's how our communities are destroyed, but our private homes are well furnished. Our cars are being destroyed, and the ones that are 'private' in the name of a cousin are doing just fine. We are becoming more and more hypocritical. Christ is right to regard us as a deceitful and tortuous generation, a generation of hypocrites.

The race for economic power is blinding us more and more. We no longer see the needs of our communities. We are no different from the rich man **Luke 16:19-31** tells us about. Who are we to listen to now? If we close our ears to our Constitutions, our Rules or our various training courses on the vow of poverty? If we were asked the question: between the Community and friends, who should we choose? Between the Community and the family, who should we choose? The best answer is to say, I will never pit my Community against other entities, however important they may be. Because if family or friends ask today, it's because it's the community that has given.

If we want to live in the spirit of the widow, we cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13; Ps 62:11). Yes, in Sheol we take nothing with us. And the man who is fulfilled lasts less; he is like a tree that is felled. Let us not attract brothers or sisters because of our money. Let's attract them because of our poverty. That is true love.

Many people say that fidelity in marriage, as far as the man is concerned, is seen in wealth; and on the woman's side, is seen in misery. In consecrated life, we could say that fidelity to the vow of poverty in consecrated life is seen in the way community goods are managed. For those who do not yet manage things find it easier to talk about poverty.

Let us not forget that the ungodly grow like grass and flourish, but disappear forever (Psalm 72). Let us not envy those who impoverish our communities. Let us create a new

generation of consecrated Africans and Congolese who work entirely for the good of the work and the religious family. This generation is possible, be its first defender.

Young religious take as their examples only those who contribute little or nothing to our common coffers. Such a chain of examples leads us straight to the ruin of our religious families. Who can save us? It is the new generation that I call the "generation of change". The programme that Christ leaves us for the good of consecrated life is a programme that takes into account the needs of all and of others. Why do we forget the beautiful example of the first Christian community? Why do we want to be part of the "family of Ananias and Sapphire"? The change I want is for all of us, myself being the first. I believe in a new generation. Don't stray from this circle, because you're already part of it.

This new generation will no longer be afraid of an audit, or wait for their superior to ask for supporting documents. This is the generation of transparency. This is the generation of constant invention. This is the generation that spends only on what is strictly necessary. It's the generation of consecrated people who thrive on little. This generation is possible. It begins with me, with you and with us. A generation that seeks in order to give and that does not expect everything from the Congregation. A generation that is indebted and grateful to the Congregation. This generation is possible.

So our daily prayer must be "**Lord, help me to be poor for you**". Otherwise, we will be leeches on our religious families. Especially as bad examples attract more and spread like oil on paper.

9. COMMUNITY, like "Mount Sinai

God gave Moses his law on Mount Sinai. Once he had come down from the mountain, Moses gave the people an account of his encounter and the content of his mission by telling them the Word of God. The people were unanimous in their response: "We will put into practice everything that God tells us". (Exodus 24).

We're going to look at some of the attitudes of these people to help us enjoy our community.

If we reread Exodus 24, we see that God gives his people the law, and they respond: "whatever the Lord has said, we will do and obey". The Scriptures also tell us that we are invited not only to listen to the Word of God, but to put it into practice.

The joy of the Community is also lived around the Word of God. It must be our daily food. We cannot understand our life, or a consecrated person, without the Word of God. It is thanks to the Word of God that we are called "batu ya Nzambe²⁵". It is the Word of God that is our daily "food". It gives meaning to our mission and consecration. Without it, we are anything but consecrated. It is through the Word of God that we also discover God's will for his Church, for his people and for ourselves. This Word is the source of our conversion, of our change. We cannot listen to God without being "a little" transformed.

One day, Peter replied to Christ, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).

1. These words show us that we are chosen by God in the same way as the other members of my Community (Jn 6:70).
2. These words show us that we are envoys, always on Christ's mission (Mt. 10:1-16).
3. It says that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt.5, 13-16).
4. It tells us that the true disciple of Christ is not the one who cries out loudly "Lord, Lord", but the one who does the will of his Father (**Mt.7, 21-27**). Yes, many times we have built our vocation on sand. That's why the slightest wind blows us away like chaff.
5. It asks us to correct our brother fraternally, instead of criticising the other unnecessarily (Mt. 18, 15-16).
6. It is she who asks us to forgive 77 times 7 (Mt.18, 21-22)
7. It invites us to abandon ourselves to Divine Providence (Lk. 12, 22-31).

We could continue the list ad infinitum. The main thing is that each of us should discover the joy of the Gospel and the Word of God. A word that is destined for us. Because, through his Word, Christ shows himself to be closer to us. What a joy it is to know that it is God himself who is speaking to us!

Walk always in the love of God (and of your neighbour), the content of the whole Word of God, and you will always be in the joy of your vocation (convocation). Say like the people of Israel: "whatever God says, we will do". Put the Word of God into practice every day, and don't just listen to it. Be an active and participative listener to the Word of God.

²⁵ Translated as "Man of God".

10. COMMUNITY, SERVANT OF THE LORD

We are going to take our inspiration from the Gospel of the announcement to Mary by the Angel Gabriel. We know that this announcement refers to Elizabeth, Mary's cousin. The two women each bear a child, which is very significant for the life of the People of God: John the Baptist and Jesus. These two figures symbolise God's faithfulness and grace. The Father of John the Baptist is going to demonstrate this by telling us "***God has visited and***

delivered his People, as he had already said to Abraham and his race, to deliver us so that we may serve him in holiness and righteousness throughout our lives".

An important element in community life is **fidelity**. Faithfulness to our baptismal commitment. Faithfulness to our commitment as consecrated persons. Faithfulness to the demands of our life as consecrated persons. We make a "profession". We become "specialists" in fidelity. Every time we stray from our "fidelity", we push our consecration further and further away. Religious life invites us to "espouse" the figure of John the Baptist in our lives. A person who lived in humility and respect for his mission. He did not take a place that was not reserved for him. John the Baptist's response to the Jews should always challenge us:

"Let him who has two coats share with him who has none, and let him who has food do the same. Do not demand anything that is not prescribed for you. Do not molest anyone, do not extort anything, and be content with your pay" (Lk 3:10-14).

Being faithful to God means learning to have him as our one and only support, our eternal rock. Being faithful to our community means putting it at the centre of all our concerns (spiritual, material or moral). Everything must start from my community and everything must return to my community. Faithfulness to our commitments makes us balanced and fulfilled people.

Following the example of John the Baptist, let us be those religious who "illuminate" those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. Fidelity in the consecrated life is a virtue of action.

This story also leads us to experience the "**grace**" that comes from God. "Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). The Angel's visit is already a grace that Mary, our Mother and Model of our faith, receives from God. The words spoken (do not be afraid, you have found favour with God, you will bear a son, the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, nothing is impossible for God, etc.) are words filled with God's grace. Grace as a gift from God, an offering from God for me, for you and for us. *"For the grace of God, the source of salvation for all men, has been made manifest. It teaches us to renounce ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live in the present age according to wisdom, justice and godliness. It makes us know God and shows us how we should conduct ourselves"* (copied from Google).

We are not the best people to deserve the consecrated life. We are not the only ones God could have called to follow him in religious life. We were chosen only because God wanted us to be. Like Mary, we are called to rejoice. Meditating only on our choice should be a reason for permanent joy. Becoming a religious, still in perpetual vows, is a mission that we carry within us.

Each member of our communities is invited to find out whether he or she is faithful to the ideal of his or her life and to the mission entrusted to his or her religious family? Many times, we are varnished consecrated persons. On the outside, we appear to be members

of our community. Inside, we are quite different. This duplicity helps neither the community nor myself. Let's not forget that a piece of wood under water will never turn into a crocodile. What we hide eventually comes to light. This appearance can be violent and destructive. Hence the importance of being faithful to our commitment. This ensures that we are not divided within ourselves.

Our prayer would be to say to God "Father, make me always faithful to my vocation and fill me with your grace".

11. COMMUNITY, A PLACE FOR LIVING AND THE LIVING

As Christians, we all know that life is a "gift from God". This gift is so precious that he, and he alone, is the author and the decision-maker. All our lives depend on him. Everything we do (feeding, clothing, maintaining, etc.) is to enhance that life so that it continues to glorify God. Life is a daily manifestation of God's love for each of us. Even if illness can make it difficult at times, we are convinced that life will prevail.

For Christians, life has no end. We find it even after our death. Christ himself told us that "he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live". Life in Christ is a permanent gift from God. Life is given to us. That's why nobody has so much money to "buy" life. No one is so privileged to preserve it without God's intervention. In medicine, it is said that doctors only delay death a little. But it is God who gives life.

In **John 14:6**, Christ presents himself as the way, the truth and the life. We can only live by being in Christ. A community is a place of life if and only if it is in Christ. Being in Christ means knowing how to love one another. Being in Christ means knowing how to support one another. Being in Christ means thinking of the poor. To be in Christ is to create an atmosphere of life (care for each of us and for each other). Being in Christ means seeking to give lasting fruit (peace, joy, harmony, service, sharing of goods, etc.). To be in Christ is to overcome selfishness. To be in Christ is to feel an affective and effective member of one's community and religious family. Being in Christ means always starting afresh from him. To be in Christ is to know how to be his true collaborator and co-operator. This is the way of life in a community.

Life alone can seem selfish, because it is lived only within me and it is I who am seeking it. That's why, in a community, we have to add the second step: that of the living. The Community is called to be "alive". Each member must feel alive in a community. Each member must feel the joy of living in a community. In this way, the temptation to look elsewhere is lessened at every moment. Each member must bring his or her life so that the whole community is a place of the living.

For us to have life and form living communities, in my opinion, we are invited to attach ourselves to Christ as the true vine (Jn 15:1-17). It is he who gives us the true key to our happiness: "to love one another". Love gives life and love gives life. Love fills our hearts and love carries us along without us asking ourselves many questions. For love and for love's sake, we're prepared to do anything. That's the way to live happily and help others live happily.

A few tips to make my community come alive :

- Taking care of it (from every point of view)
- Mutual respect
- Carrying yourself through good times and bad, through good times and bad
- Distributing and carrying out tasks
- Creating a climate of joy and closeness
- Time for joint reflection, planning and evaluation

- Time to pray together
- To experience the Eucharist celebrated every day
- To prepare the liturgy properly
- To prepare meals well, and to do so with love
- Have playtime or outings together
- To be open to each other, without judgement
- To experience deep friendship as members of the same community
- To always seek to "walk together" (Spirit of synodality)
- Let each of us be "a spring of living water" to which others can drink.

I am convinced that nobody wants our communities to "die", because our consecration does not make us "murderers". This is why we are invited to pray every day that our communities may truly be places of life and of the living. God Himself presents Himself as the Father of the living, because He does not want His children to die. He wants his children to live and to have life in Him. Every morning and every evening, the consecrated person is called to find the materials that contribute to the life of his community. As if to say: "Don't be a murderer of your community".

12. COMMUNITY, A BARRIER TO MEDITATION

I've always wondered why Saint Paul asks us to have constructive words on our lips, words that soothe and do not divide. If we pay attention to the different reactions of our members, we sometimes find those who criticise everything, positive or negative. And their criticisms are made behind the backs of others.

I'm convinced that it's discouraging to listen one day to what others say about you and that they don't have the courage to say it to your face. It's discouraging when you know that what's being said isn't true and it's sometimes done in bad faith or out of jealousy.

How many times have we heard: "I no longer have the courage to do something in my religious family". My response to this kind of comment has always been "don't betray the race of your people". It's not easy being part of the small remnant of Israel. You have to think hard and turn your tongue more carefully before speaking ill of your brother or sister.

Backbiting creates distance between us in the community. Backbiting cools the human warmth in a community. Gossip sometimes feels like an attack on my life. We say to ourselves, his words have already killed me so I must start paying attention. Backbiting divides. All these evils don't come from God (distance, coldness, exaggerated caution to save one's skin, division, etc.). They come from the evil one. It is he who sows these troubles in our respective communities. And yet we are not at the service of the evil one, but of the one who died for us, Jesus Christ.

If we follow its voice, it tells us: pray for those who persecute you. Love your enemies. Don't tire of doing good. Love your brothers and sisters as yourself. Or, if your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled with him. Yes, talking behind someone's back doesn't help and makes you look immature. A mature person takes courage in both hands and talks to his brother with a view to change, if need be.

The joy of living together grows when we are capable of fraternal correction. Each of us receives the other's observations like a crutch given to me so that I can walk better. There's no point in bombarding each other with things without the courage to say them to each other's faces. We are all "half angels". And let's not keep looking for the part that's missing to be fully "angel". Instead, let's try to help each other so that our angelic commitment increases every day. This is only possible if we allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit of Christ.

Let's not always wait until the last moment to say "I already saw that coming". The Scriptures tell us that a brother's lack of brotherly correction automatically makes you an accomplice. The brother or sister will be condemned by what he or she has done; and so will you, condemned by your lack of courage or your silence. The Prophet Ezekiel is so clear on this (Ezek 3, 17 - 21)

We all have an interest in our communities living in harmony and peace. This saves us stress and contributes to our peaceful rest. Let's live in our communities as the football game shows us. Everyone relies on everyone else and everyone relies on everyone else. This interplay is what makes a team strong. Seeking to live alone, to distance oneself from others or to present oneself as the purest of the community is not just a path to perdition. Community harmony is built by breaking down the walls of backbiting, of "songi-songi²⁶".

The Community is a place where everyone is called upon to be a bridge for the other. Through us, everyone can cross over to the other side without difficulty. The bridge unites us and enables us not to waste time in reaching the other side. This bridge is built in harmony and peace. This bridge is built in love and respect for others. This bridge is built in sincerity and truth. There is nothing my brother can do that is irreparable. So be your brother's "mechanic". And let others repair you too.

I once saw a video of children running for a trophy. The fastest one realised that the others were still behind. He waited for them and all the children held hands so that there was no last one. They all arrived at the same time. They all became "first". A beautiful image for our communities. Let's all run together, let's hold hands. Let's break down those walls of slander that make some people first and others last; or some people become better, through their criticism, and others the worst (according to their court of judgement). The joy of togetherness grows when everyone stands together in solidarity.

Let's not let our critics distract us. Let us realise that we are not better or worse than others. Each of us is called as we are for a purpose and a mission in the Church and in my Congregation. Together we can define our religious family.

God had not accepted Miriam's "kongossa" towards Moses. She was punished. Who are we to judge others harshly? Our only duty as a community is to "correct" others fraternally. To show them that our correction is a mark of love and affection.

The best religious community starts with you, or better still, with me. Tell your sister the truth; tell your brother the truth: you will save him twice. First as a human being and then as a consecrated person.

²⁶ A Lingala term for talking badly about others behind their backs

13. COMMUNITY, THE FULFILMENT OF OUR FATHER

We are thinking of taking another step in our reflections with a prayer that is very familiar to us, the "Our Father". As we know, this is the most complete prayer, because it links us to God and puts us in music with one another. It is both vertical and horizontal. In this prayer, we find 7 requests. These requests make Man a being in search of Holiness. To tell us that if we live by this prayer of the Our Father, our communities will be "spiritual centres" of vocation. They will be the "leapfrogs" of our entry into Paradise, because this prayer comes from Christ himself. He gives it to us after a request from the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples" (Lk.11, 1).

Let's take a quick look at each request:

1. **"Our Father in Heaven"**. Jesus wants to invite us to live as brothers and sisters, to feel that we are "family" and members of the same family. This is how he begins to call his Father and to include us in his filiation. God is "Our Father". Feeling that we are sons and daughters of the same Father has many consequences, such as loving one another, supporting one another, helping one another, welcoming one another unreservedly, giving one's time, sympathy, reconciliation, and so on. In short, everything that happens in a family that has only one Father. That Father is in Heaven. Not necessarily a place that is historically identifiable or physically located. Heaven is the symbol of God's throne, and we are called to "lift up our heads" to reach it. This place where God lives may seem far away, but it's not. God is in Heaven to invite us to praise him at every moment. He is in heaven to make us feel that he cannot be grasped or measured by humans. But as a Father, he is close to each and every one of us. He is in heaven to "see more clearly what we are and what we do", and to help us discover, by raising our eyes, that he sees us too. His gaze from Heaven gives us peace, confidence and security.

"Hallowed be thy name". The best question to ask ourselves as a "Community" is how do we sanctify this name of God? For we know that God is thrice Holy. It's up to us not to defile his name, because each of us carries God's name in our hearts. Better still, his name is written in our hearts. Sanctifying God's name means doing his will and making it our food, as his Son Jesus Christ so clearly shows us. And God's true will is to know Jesus Christ and put his Gospel into practice. The sanctification of God's name is (in my opinion) the daily living out of the Gospel of Christ. This gospel is summed up in love of God and love of neighbour.

2. **"Thy kingdom come"**. This Kingdom cannot come if we are not capable of building it with the materials that come from his son. One of the materials that comes to mind is found in Mt. 25:31-45 or in Lk. 10:29-37. The Reign of God cannot come about if each of us does not seek the good of the other, the good of the community

or the good of humanity. This Reign cannot come about if we live in individualism, selfishness and injustice. The Reign of God is built in the depths of love and self-giving. It is a Reign that comes when we free ourselves from the weight of sin (whether personal or communal).

3. **"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"**. This phrase should touch us in the depths of our hearts as religious, because we implore God's will in our lives everywhere. There isn't a page of Sacred Scripture where God doesn't show us that he is entirely love and forgiveness. To implore this will is to seek to live it and put it into practice, otherwise it risks being a mere pious slogan. When we pray in the Community, let's see if this will really begins to "take flesh" in our Community, in my life? This will of the Father is implored to be lived by us. Jesus warns us that it is not enough to say Lord, Lord to enter his Kingdom. Rather, it means doing the will of the Father (Mt. 7:21-27).
4. **"Give us this day our daily bread"**. Pope Francis has just given a catechesis on "gluttony" (Audience of 10 January 2024). *"We are thrown upon everything, to become masters of everything, when everything had been entrusted to our care, not to our exploitation! This is the great sin, the fury of the belly: we have abjured the name of men, to take another, that of "consumers"*. This part in Lingala invites us to ask for the "bread of each day: mokolo na mokolo". Bread is food. It is made by man to satisfy his hunger. Christ himself becomes our bread. When a community no longer knows how to ask God for the bread of each day, it already loses its dimension of "providence" (Lk. 12:22-32), of trust and of divine filiation. It is filled with self-sufficiency, pride and selfishness. The person who asks for bread every day makes himself "small" and escapes "consumption". A better understanding of this request makes us "one family", where selfishness is overcome by charity. May this bread that comes from God truly be our common food that unifies the community and makes us members of the same family.
5. **"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"**. I have always said that forgiveness is one of the Lord's most difficult recommendations in our lives as Christians and as religious. If we run quickly to God to ask his forgiveness, here we are admitting to him that we will do the same. And I believe that true forgiveness must start with each one of us and work its way up to God. I know that God is fundamentally forgiving. Am I capable of forgiving my colleague as our Father does? Why can't I imitate the Father? This part of our Father invites us not to imitate the example of the ruthless debtor (Mt. 18:23-35).
6. **"Lead us not into temptation"**. Although the Bible tells us that God cannot tempt us beyond our strength, this part of the prayer is about us asking God not to let us enter into temptation. Temptation is a danger for man. It is a limit that can lead you to do the worst. It is not yet a sin, but it can lead us to sin. It is better that it should not exist in order to "guarantee our holiness". Who has the strength to keep it from

our steps? God alone and his Son through the Holy Spirit. In community life, we have many temptations (tribalism, misappropriation, insincerity, individualism, duality, the spirit of separation, etc.). If we want to live a holy life together, each of us is called to make this part of the "Our Father" our own. A community that does not fall into temptation is a community of joy, peace and love. A healthy and holy community.

7. **"But deliver us from evil"**. Evil is always prowling around our convents like a lion seeking its prey. God is called to save us from evil, from the evil one and from the devil. Speaking positively about this part, we should say "Father, fill us with your charity and your Holy Spirit". For me, this is the only way to be delivered from evil, and it means asking for more love in our hearts. Religious are specialists in the love of God. Why do we leave our "speciality" to follow that of the "Evil One"?

Amen! We firmly believe that our communities should become places where this prayer of Christ is lived and accomplished. A prayer of sons and daughters, a prayer of conversion, a prayer of love, a prayer of forgiveness, a prayer of unity, a prayer of sanctification and a prayer of peace. And every time we recite it in the Eucharist, this prayer invites us to be Eucharistic (this bread of life and this real presence of Christ).

14. COMMUNITY, MY BETHANIE

In the following pages, I will talk about Bethany as a place of rest, but also as a place where we find these three figures: Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Let's start with 'Marie'.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary is the lazy one who chooses to sit at the Lord's feet (Lk. 10:38-42). Jesus himself says that she chose the better part. Sincerely, we seek God far from our walls and yet he is so close to us. Community is the first and last mission in our journey to listen to God. If you don't listen to your community, it will be just as difficult to listen to your pastoral work. The first place to listen to God's will is your community. That's why it should have a special place in your heart. Don't spend a day without entering the community chapel. Don't spend a day without greeting Christ who is sitting right next to you in the Chapel. Each day that passes, the consecrated person is invited to place himself at the feet of the Master to listen to him. Don't close your ears, or you risk doing the wrong thing. Those who have always chosen the village of "I don't care" fall into the house of "if I only knew". By that time, it's late or too late. Listen to your community and stay at its feet. There is no better rest than at the feet of the Lord. At those feet, you remain in silence. Silence betrays no one. At these feet you will grow in love. Love always makes you grow. In these feet, you become "alter christi". In these feet, you shine like the sun during the day and the moon at night. In these feet, we are like a little flame that enlightens us in our dark night. There is nothing better than to place oneself at the feet of the Master. So let us seek our rest by looking first at God's loving face. For everything in God gives us rest and tranquility.

The second figure is **Martha**. Christ tells her that she is worried about many things. It was Martha who was concerned about welcoming the Lord. She is therefore the figure of welcome, hospitality and propriety. Consecrated persons get bored in communities because of the lack of hospitality. As a result, our communities become little more than dormitories, rest rooms or restaurants of the heart. They lack human warmth, and this drives away members. Let's restore the figure of Martha to our Communities, Provinces and Congregations. A welcoming house is a blessed house. The first blessing must come from welcoming members. If not, we are living hypocrisy. Every member must feel at home and respected as such. No one can live in their community, in their Province, as a "tourist" or a "political refugee". This does not contribute to the growth of the spirit of belonging so decried in these days. Consecrated persons act as if this is not yet their religious family. They talk about their religious families while excluding themselves. You can see this in their community involvement, in the care they take of the community or in the care they give to the community. No one should just be passing through. Everyone is called to contribute to and build their community as if it were the last place on earth to live.

Marthe teaches us to welcome others without distinction. It's sad when you know that my community has received my biological brother or sister very badly. It's sad when my community doesn't receive any poor people, or when they are almost chased away from

our gates. It's sad when no one visits you. We don't mean that we have to change our prayer times or activities because of visitors. But the visits give us a breath of fresh air. It changes us a bit. The lack of a proper welcome means that we see consecrated persons everywhere and at late hours. Man cannot live in an inhospitable place. Even in a prison, there is space to create a certain spirit of living together. Martha brings us freshness from outside. Martha opens us up to blessings, like Abraham who received God's blessing because of his hospitality.

This is why each Superior and each member must make the place where we live together very welcoming. It must be clean and in a healthy environment. It must be tranquil and beautiful on the outside, through the upkeep of the garden and communal areas: chapel, refectory, kitchen, laundry, etc. Nothing can be repulsive in a community. Sometimes we men admire the care taken by the sisters' communities as if the sisters were aliens. It is our negligence that creates all this "community insalubrity". A friend gave me the following advice: "If you get into the habit of putting things back in their place every evening, you'll see that your house will be tidy". She was absolutely right. Men, especially, give the impression that they don't see dirt. Few of them care about the cleanliness of the community and common areas. And yet, we are all the first admirers of the care taken by our sisters in convents. Marthe teaches us to be clean, as a mark of hospitality. Everything in its place and everything with "its thing". Let us grow in the culture of beauty. Beauty attracts.

On one occasion, we went to visit a diocese in our Ecclesiastical Province of Kinshasa. To get to the place where the party was being organised, we had to pass through a community. What we found was sad: corridors full of cobwebs, paint dating back to the 60s and a roof that was starting to fall in. Such neglect does not make the place attractive or welcoming. Do we have to spend money to remove the cobwebs? Each neglect calls for a large expense in the long run. And in another diocese, we couldn't get into the toilets because of lack of maintenance. We had to go to the nuns' convent, which was several metres from the place that had welcomed us. These are examples that can tell us: "there is no spirit of Martha in this place". If you want to welcome others, starting with the members of the community, make the places where you live welcoming.

The third figure is **Lazarus**. We remember him more for the episode in which Christ intervenes to "raise him from Hades". But I want to emphasise the fact that people came to see if Lazarus had really come back to life. Lazarus became a living symbol of the presence and wonders of God. This place of witness must begin with each of us as consecrated persons. The world verifies God's presence through our deeds, our actions, our words, our behaviour, our way of being, and so on. We are called to bear the image of Lazarus. There is no moment in our lives that our consecration should be on the back burner. It is our profession, our commitment and our life. We are consecrated people. Imitators of Christ, sent by God. Through us, God acts and reaches his people, even though we are not the mediators. The world needs a Lazarus to believe. And the best witness is given by an entire religious community, and then by a Province. It's a great joy if the whole

community "breathes the Gospel" and lives by the Word of God. We lose a lot by creating divisions between ourselves. Christ himself tells us: "a kingdom divided does not last long".

We know that consecrated life is really threatened by our personal ambitions. Everyone wants to have "juicy jobs". No one wants to be "simply at the service of others". We have seen the disputes surrounding elections and the consequences that flow from them. We even ask ourselves the question: are we seeking power for power's sake, or is it a service that the congregation gives for the good of all? We are not far from those we criticise every day: our politicians. This is how the figure of Lazarus becomes interesting. Every consecrated person is invited to live with the idea that the world will come to "look" if Christ lives in me and in my community. Through the resurrection of Lazarus, many people have come to faith; through our way of life, let us draw others to God.

I am aware that there is always a gap between "speaking and living". Lazarus came back to life thanks to the intervention of Jesus. Let's put this Christ in the middle of our lives. If we ask for divine grace every morning and every evening, we will be more than conquerors. Our great weakness in consecrated life today is spiritual mediocrity. Let us emerge from our tombs and allow ourselves to be dazzled by the light of the Holy Spirit. Let us become more and more friends of Christ.

Lazarus was a friend of Christ. His figure invites us to grow in friendship with Christ. It's a friendship that is forged through knowledge of the Scriptures, in the silence of a retreat or in the faith-filled reading of everyday events. Nothing can be lived without the eyes of faith. With an eye of faith. This is the gaze that Christ will speak of at the end of time: "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me". Friendship with Christ makes every consecrated person a Bethany, a place of rest for God and a place of friendship with God. It is a great challenge that we are invited to take up as consecrated persons: to grow in friendship with God.

15. CONSECrated LIFE AND WITNESS TO A PERFECT FRATERNITY

The main observation is that the world is going through a **serious crisis of "living together"**, and religious life is going through a "crisis of fraternity". We are together, but we no longer feel like sisters or brothers in the same religious family. Some are there because they no longer know what decision to make, especially if there is still the weight of culture, society or family. All this is not because of a lack of vocation, but because of a lack of witness to a fraternal life, the ideal of all religious life. We no longer reflect the image of the first Christian community, as we pointed out above.

We thought we'd finish this little reflection on our "living together" with the theme of consecrated life and the witness of perfect fraternity²⁷. In my opinion, the great challenge facing consecrated life today is the witness of fraternity. We can no longer continue to be together without living together, or to live together without really being together. This dichotomy breaks the momentum of fraternity. What is the problem with our consecration?

We will focus on three main points:

1. The cries of brothers and sisters without responsibility, or rather without authority
2. The cries of the sisters and brothers Major Superiors
3. The path to a witness of perfect brotherhood

A. The cries of brothers and sisters out of authority

Consecrated persons who do not exercise the service of authority are crying out so that religious life can recover its "holiness" or its full meaning. They are aware that if religious life continues in this way, it will gradually drift away from what the Church holds dear. This holiness comes through charity, the key to a good life together, the key to mutual respect and acceptance of difference, and the cement that holds us together as we follow Christ's call. Christ tells us that it is by love that it will be known that you are my disciples.

What distances us from the sanctity of religious life today?

a. Lack of fidelity to our religious commitments

The Bishops' letter "At the School of Jesus Christ" is in the news. Behind this letter is a call to fidelity. Consecrated life is aware that we have come too far from our commitments. Society seems to support us in our perdition. This cry from religious men and women or from consecrated persons is a realisation that this is no longer our path. We are becoming

²⁷ Theme of the Asuma - Usuma plenary meeting in October 2021 at the Nganda Centre

specialists in "double life". We suffer in our obedience. We are "bosses" in our respective families or even in our family friends.

b. Many communities do not provide the means for their members, especially those studying in public institutions.

It's not enough to simply decide whether to send a young person to study. It is also necessary to weigh up the means to be employed. Sending a young woman or man off to study, without a proper calculation, leaves them, above all, to their own devices. This can lead them to "deviate" from their primary objectives. It is said that beyond a certain level of suffering, morality no longer works. We've heard how some consecrated women "prostitute" themselves to earn enough money to pay their tuition fees. Or they are forced to do "dirty" jobs during the holidays, just to support themselves. Consecrated priests no longer have time to rest. They are obliged to replace parish priests who simply go off to spend their holidays on the beach. This summer work is sometimes exhausting, and yet these consecrated priests have just spent a whole year studying. Who doesn't know that intellectual work is exhausting?

c. Counter testimony or lack of testimony of life

It is testimony that attracts others. Counter-testimony is driving away more and more candidates for the consecrated life. Unfortunately, we have external and internal counter-testimony. Externally, people wonder how we are still consecrated (our dress, our fidelity to the vows, our language, our behaviour, etc.). Internally, young people wonder whether this is really the life they have chosen or whether what they learned at the Novitiate is true.

d. Tribalism

It's a disease that has been plaguing consecrated life for a long time now, and it's one that requires a good deal of spiritual surgery. Several times we have heard the expression "**ekomi tour na biso**"²⁸. We are all aware that each mandate in the Church always has a day in the calendar for its end. Tribalism, with all its consequences, kills consecrated life.

e. Fear, envy, lack of self-control, lying (lack of inner freedom)

We have spent a lot of time training young people in a lack of inner freedom. This is why they are only waiting for the "end" to be themselves. This is a challenge that must be taken up at all costs if we want a fulfilling consecrated life. A great responsibility for superiors and formators. We once heard a major say "the formators are the founders or foundresses of today"²⁹. If we want the continuity of our Congregations, formators have a big role to play. As we often say: "Formators are today's founders, in the sense that they must

²⁸ Translation: it's our turn, now it's our turn to act

²⁹ Father Justin Emene at an online meeting of the COSUMA National Steering Committee

faithfully transmit the charism and spirituality of our founders. Being a trainer means learning to make the effort to put yourself in the shoes of our founders.

- f. **Misuse of social networks** (protecting colleagues in their limitations and shortcomings). Social networks are a wonderful tool for communication. Since their arrival in religious life, they have resolved and shortened many distances (Zoom, Meet, Facebook, etc.). However, these networks have destroyed the community life and intimacy of religious. The new communication techniques have created two communities: physical and virtual. This conflict affects us all: older, younger or more senior. Aside from this negative aspect, we should be aware that today, digital technology is a force even for evangelisation.

g. The identity crisis

Today, it's a challenge. We have lost our way. Our clothes no longer represent what we are or what we should be. We urgently need to recover our identity, not only as Christians but also as religious people. There is no worse thing to experience than no longer knowing who you are. This crisis also means that we are living in a state of confusion: we no longer feel connected to our religious family, and yet we spend our time and our lives there.

h. Lack of qualified staff

Today, the lack of qualified personnel is a challenge. The world is demanding more of us. We are called upon to train and to train ourselves. At the same time, we must avoid this becoming a source of conflict, because everyone is chasing specialisation. Increasingly, we have two categories of members: the intellectuals and the "non-intelligent". The latter category sometimes lives with a complex that creates community unease. And the first category feels that they are the most important members of the community, because they contribute more to the community coffers.

i. Lack of transparency (selfishness, materialism)

He who gives us responsibility has the right to hold us to account. Many times we hear the phrase "they don't trust me". That's not the point. Confidence in management has to be earned. It increases even more if we allow ourselves to be controlled. On the other hand, if we accept with faith that what we receive and produce is for our religious family, we won't even need an internal audit. Our works will testify that we are on the right path. In my experience, when a consecrated person gets angry, closes up or uses arguments such as "they don't trust me; they think I'm a thief; they want this audit because I'm not from their tribe, etc.", there's something wrong with the account. Transparency strengthens trust. Transparency increases our esteem as 'managers'. Transparency makes us more careful not to confuse "my money" with that of the institution.

j. **Power struggle** (lack of judgement, prejudice)

This is where the religious world copies the political world almost perfectly. We all seek to become: superior, thrifty. Nobody wants to be the doorman, for example. Saint Benedict teaches that the smallest service we render to others is the noblest there is. What's more, we take power by the most diabolical means in the world. What an incompatibility! You can't serve two masters at once.

k. **Generation conflict**

Another age-old challenge is the generational conflict. Those who knew Cardinal Malula and those of Cardinal Ambongo's generation. Those who were taught by "mama Koko"³⁰ and those who were taught by Sister X. Or again, we are the ones who knew our first missionaries, which is why our time is the best. If this conflict becomes deep-rooted, it's a rift in the community. Nostalgic people can't stand modern people, and vice versa. Just as we are told that no language is better, so no generation is better. Each generation has its own challenges and potential. It is up to each generation to come up with an appropriate response for the well-being of all. Let the elders be open to the new, and let the younger ones listen to the wisdom of the elders.

l. **Indiscretion**

Human dignity is an asset that everyone guards carefully. No one can bear to be exposed. We are facing a generation that no longer knows how to keep quiet. Everything must be told. Nothing can be kept secret. While the Council is in session, decisions are already being taken outside the room. Even the details of a decision are given. So everyone knows who was against and who was for. Other people's lives are out in the open. This discourages any possible follow-up and frank dialogue.

m. **The lack of control over our language**

If used properly, language can solve many problems. If not, it is a source of endless conflict. Consecrated people no longer know how to look after their language. They forget that language kills. Here, I favour Kabila's philosophy: open your mouth if words weigh more than silence. Our language confuses many vocations: "tala ndenge okama kitoko, congrégation ebongisi yo, ozo lia neti oko kufa lobi"³¹. (If I already feel part of my religious family, which family are you talking about, dear elder? This is how our young brothers and sisters in training ask themselves this question)

³⁰ One of the first nuns of the Congrégation de Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus in Kinshasa

³¹ Translation: it's the congregation that made you beautiful; you eat like it's your last day on earth...

n. Authoritarianism

Superiors who become "little gods" and govern only by canon law. They know no other language. They have become so authoritarian that dialogue between confreres no longer exists. They have created more fear in the religious family than joy. They have the first and last word. The others just have to obey. Sometimes, the young sisters become the "servants" of the Superiors. They do everything: washing the clothes, ironing them, arranging them, and so on. This system creates the wheel: I too will be served the day I become "head".

B. Brothers and sisters in the service of authority

Among those who exercise the service of authority and leadership in our communities, many stories are told and commented on. Here are a few of them.

1. Who can you count on?

Today's Superiors no longer know who they can count on. Experience shows that they have been so disappointed that any choice already has a certain percentage of betrayal. So they settle for a small number of people in the religious family. Another problem: this creates a group called "the selected", the Leopards, the privileged, the

2. We are not understood

The Superiors have the impression that everything they can propose is not always well understood. This is also the source of many conflicts at the time of obediences. The brothers or sisters don't understand why only they are sent to such and such a place? Obedience is interpreted as a punishment, an estrangement or a lack of consideration.

3. My brothers or sisters are fighting me

Many Superiors live in constant stress, because of fear. Especially since poisoning has taken up residence in the convents. They no longer know how to eat the last meals, always suspecting that something might have been put in the pot. Some can't sleep any better for fear of spiritual attacks. They become meticulous. They observe everything with a magnifying glass. Even a little 'pimple' on the face is interpreted as a possible attack.

4. The sisters refuse all control

Even if we say that trust does not exclude control, in the consecrated life we seem to say: control excludes trust. Woe betide that superior who introduces a periodic internal audit. We have already heard a sister say: "He/she only waited for my turn to do the audit. Why didn't she do it with the others? Forgetting that the poor Superior had only just started

and she wanted to clear everything up. When you ask for a small audit, it's synonymous with mistrust. Superiors really wonder what to do.

5. The spirit of belonging is disappearing more and more

By our being, by our actions and by our social insertion, we should normally reflect our belonging to a religious family. Superiors get a bit confused when they see confreres or sisters living as if they didn't belong to that religious family. Hence the question of whether the initial formation was wrong. Sometimes, Superiors say to themselves: "How could we not have discovered all these faults during initial formation? Who let it slip through their fingers?"

6. The flesh speaks louder than the spirit

It's hard to find a community that's fighting because masses are no longer being celebrated. Conflicts today revolve around money, friendships, jobs, studies and so on. The spiritual life is sidelined in many aspects of consecrated life in the Congo. Let's see, especially among men, we can change the time of Vespers for a Barcelona match. The Scriptures tell us to "walk according to the Spirit and you will not fulfil the desires of the flesh". In the past, it was thought that the sisters had all the time in the world for prayer. Today we realise that this provision has become a challenge even for them. We no longer have time for **the One** who has called us.

7. Burnout

Many superiors regret having accepted this position of authority. They receive so much criticism that they are at the end of their tether, and some even start to suffer from insomnia, depression or cardiovascular disease. I know Majors who have come close to having a stroke. How many Majors hardly sleep at all because of all the problems in their religious families.

What can I do?

C. The path to a witness of perfect brotherhood

It seems "utopian" for us to maintain the concept of "perfect fraternity" insofar as it cannot be achieved on this earth. The difference between human beings is always and already a source of conflict. But an ideal is always a measure of our capacity to live and to pursue our goal. Religious life is not a path of "mediocrity", even if we ourselves can be mediocre at times. That's why a perfect fraternity is a wish for good witness today.

What tools are we giving ourselves to achieve this?

1. Returning to Christ

The fact is that every day we are moving further and further away from the centre of our lives: Christ. If he could speak to the depths of our hearts every second, our vocation would not be in jeopardy. We would know that our weaknesses do not erase his mercy and his love for us. We will discover that the mission entrusted to us is greater than our poor human calculations. And so we will remain faithful to him. This is how one sister put it: *"Religious life is essentially a dynamism of interior life and witness, generated by deep relationships and particular and definitive bonds with God and with the whole human family"*³²

Returning to Christ means seeking to renew our "inner man" every day (2 Cor 4:16). In other words, we are called to grow in our experience of God, in our charisms and in our consecration.

To return to Christ is to seek to live out the fidelity and coherence of our vocation. The world cannot continue to treat us as "lambda" citizens. We have a contribution to make, a special contribution to make to our society.

To return to Christ is to obey. As Cardinal Malula tells us: "Dear sister, you cannot limit yourself to doing. You must use all your abilities to open yourself to God's will and submit to it in a spirit of faith"³³

2. Being a witness

Without pretending to make an exegesis, I'll just give you three keys that can help us to be witnesses of our consecration today, based on the episode of the disciples of Emmaus: **dialogue, accompaniment** and **conversion**. (Lk. 24ff.) These three elements can resolve many (sometimes unnecessary) conflicts in our different communities. Leading the community to make the same journey of discouragement in order to become witnesses to the resurrection.

Being a witness also means helping brothers or sisters to overcome their inner conflicts. Many times, religious are torn between their vocation and other offers. The choice of a spiritual companion is important if the witness of life is to be maintained. Today, religious life is prone to individualism, excessive preoccupation with ourselves, etc. Accompaniment can help us to understand that we are not alone. Accompaniment can help us to understand that even moments of crisis "can lead us to a new trust in the Lord, who is always there to reach out to us and invite us to draw closer to him"³⁴

Being a witness means putting ourselves at the service of others. We are sent. To borrow the language of the 2025 Jubilee of Consecrated Life, to be a witness is to be of service.

³² Sister Joséphine MBEMBE, p. 12

³³ Cardinal Malula, cf. the relationship between consecration, spirituality and mission, p.31

³⁴ General Chapter of the Sacred Hearts (2018), p. 12

3. A few tools to support our inner life

We are all responsible for our own continuing education and inner growth. These tools are old but always new. They are :

- Reading and loving the Word of God (lectio divina, meditation, etc.)
- Faithful participation in the Eucharist (not just as a routine)
- Regular celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation
- Spiritual reading (our founders, our saints, etc.)
- Retirement (personal or community)
- Worship (personal or community)
- Faith sharing (community): fosters mutual trust in the community.

Because when a community encourages and nourishes its members spiritually, it becomes a witness and a testimony to God's people and to society. In short, it bears good fruit. It becomes the light and salt of the earth.

4. Living joyfully

I am convinced that we have all chosen religious life because we believe that it is a path of joy. No one can choose unhappiness or sadness as a way to live in this world. Every community should seek ways and means for its members to live in joy. Sometimes, joy does not cost much. It only requires small gestures of attention, love, tenderness, gratitude or forgiveness. The community is called to take into account "the joys and sorrows of its members".

Joy also comes from the **consideration** that the community or Congregation gives to each other. That there are no dignitaries, no untouchables and no others. To be a member of a religious family is to be a stone, an opportunity or a gift. Each one must be considered as such. Like Christ, we all have equal dignity.

To live joyfully is to learn to have a **good dialogue and a good discernment with the specific charism** of each member. (A confrere once said to me: "You have enabled me to live my two vocations: religious and farmer"). When you stifle your own charism too much, you give birth to bitter people.

5. Living in truth, humility and faithfulness

Proverb 14:5 says that a witness does not lie. The same can be said for religious life. A religious must live in truth. And humility is the way to be elevated (Lk. 14, 11). Saint Benedict says that one of the steps of humility is **to detest one's own selfish will** (Jn 6, 39), because doing one's own will leads to punishment, while doing the will of others leads to a reward. So it is the most ordinary and lowest conditions that lead us to humility.

6. Growing in communication

Communication is an important dimension in consolidating our "living together" today. Everything about human beings is communication (speech, gestures, the body). A misinterpreted linguistic gesture can create a community conflict. In our communities, better communication means listening and understanding. Good listening helps us to communicate more effectively.

7. Living together

Although different in age, culture, temperament and so on, Christ calls us to be his witnesses and to live together. This exercise invites us to recognise that we are not alone and that the other is as important as I am, and the other makes me exist.

An important lesson in this "living together" comes from Christ himself: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". This attitude makes the community a beautiful place to live every day. Living together transforms us all into "collaborators" (work-with).

From that point of view, everyone's opinions are just as important as mine.

8. Strong leadership

The ideal of strong leadership is Christ himself. In his ministry, he did nothing but "lift up" others. Strong leadership works in synodality. Strong leadership has an inclusive vision. Strong leadership also allows itself to be converted by others.

9. Become "influencers" of society

Like the "tiktokeuse" on social networks, religious life is called to be a witness to multiculturalism, dialogue between cultures and overcoming our divisions (tribes, clans, regions, etc.). Society expects us to be examples of love, relationships, ecology, spirituality, behaviour, mission and so on.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Consecrated life is about being rather than doing. Let's take more care of our being, our inner man, and everything will become clearer for us as we follow Christ.

Consecrated life is preparing to celebrate the Jubilee in 2025. The theme chosen by the Church is: "**Pilgrims of hope on the road to peace**". A theme that invites us to listen to the Holy Spirit, to be artisans of peace and reconciliation, and to build a just society. A theme that wants us to be not only at the service of others, but also and above all "at the service of others". To be of service today is to stop expecting others to do everything for me. It means doing everything for others without expecting anything in return. Being of service means knowing how to stop like the Good Samaritan so that no one in my community "dies" from lack of attention or from our weaknesses. Being of service means anticipating solutions for the well-being of everyone.

Being of service means giving our all to better build the Church of Christ. Service is the way to bear witness to the good life that the world so ardently expects of us consecrated persons. Being of service means supporting others, despite their weaknesses, so that they become better like "you". Being of service means choosing only one Master, despite the demands of the world. Being of service means following only one path, that of Christ. Being of service means learning to wash the feet of others. Being of service means knowing how to forgive, despite the seriousness of the act committed by the other. Being of service means opening your heart to everyone, whatever their social standing. Being of service means taking care of the "Common House", because it is the only place that shelters us.

If we are "useless" servants of one another, we will not fail to build communities of fraternal life, Christ's ideal and the reason for his call to consecrated life. Christ does not call us to create communities of war, separation or permanent conflict. He has called us to be his "reflections" in society and in the world. He has called us to "continue" his mission entrusted to the disciples. He has called us to "be with him", to be sent "to every town and village" where he himself should go. He is the author of our missionary agenda. We don't need to add anything. And the first place to experience Christ is in my community. Taking care of my community also means taking care of my religious vocation and my mission as a member of a religious family.

The joy of living together as a member of a religious family is an incredible source of energy for building the Kingdom of God.

Wanting a consecrated life worthy of our dreams starts with you, with me, and is built by an inclusive "we".

In this practical reflection on the consecrated life, we wanted to offer each consecrated person the tools to help them no longer see others as "destroyers" of their vocation or their community, but rather to be themselves the first and last builders of their community

and collaborators in the joy of all. We will gain much if all our communities become oases of joy. This does not exclude the cross or the difficulties.

The best question to ask myself is: who do I often listen to? Is it advice from people outside my community? Who do I listen to often? Is it the experiences of my elders who have been frustrated and disappointed in religious life? Who do I often listen to? Is it the voice of my conscience and my Constitutions/Rules of Life?

Our prayer is that each consecrated person will become a solution in his or her religious family and in the Church of Christ.

As Pope John Paul II said to us at the International Congress of Consecrated Life in 2004: "Consecrated persons are called to offer credible testimonies of Christian hope to a disoriented, worn-out and memory-deprived humanity, "by making visible the love of God, who abandons no one" and by offering "to people who have lost their way real reasons for continuing to hope".³⁵

May God help us all to build his Church. For every weakness must be the source of our strength. Let us be happy and seek to be happy for the sake of our vocation. Living happily will save us from many illnesses and discouragements. The joy of your community depends on you.

Pope John Paul II invites us: "Always be obedient in Christ. Let your communities be responsible communities in which the responsibilities of some are not a reason for others to withdraw; communities in which everyone exercises discernment, edifying charity and fraternal correction. Show the world how renouncing one's own will, one's own plans - in freedom, love and fidelity to the Gospel - is a source of happiness and opens the way to full self-fulfilment".³⁶

In any case, I am convinced that the dream of an ideal community begins with me. The search for a joyful community begins with me. Let's stop blaming others (brothers, sisters, superiors, formators, bishops, etc.). Let us all be responsible and good builders of our respective communities. Let us sow the seeds of peace, joy, love, reconciliation and forgiveness. In short, let us live the Gospel of Christ according to the mission received by our Founders, and we will be happy. The beautiful image of your community depends more on you. In this way we will create a chain of good works in our religious families. Be the guardian of your brothers and sisters. May each of us carry within us the Heart of Jesus, making our own all the sentiments of Christ. May each of us be this Heart of Mary, capable of accepting God's plan and remaining faithful to it for the joy and conversion of humanity.

³⁵ Passion for Christ, passion for humanity, International Congress of Consecrated Life, 23-27 November 2004, p. 302

³⁶ Idem, p. 304

Your community needs you. Every day, be the "solution" and stop being the "problem".
That's the real way to live together in harmony.

Kinshasa, on the feast of our Foundress, 23 November 2024

Father Camille SAPU MALANGU, ss.cc. (Picpus)

Provincial Superior of Africa