

Documents of the Church for Consecrated Life

Patrick J. Griffin, C.M.

One of the ways in which the role of the Provincial Director is described in the Statutes of the Daughters of Charity is that:

“The Director and the Formation Commission give special attention to Church documents and their appropriate application” (SDC 56f.).

This instruction is repeated in the “Directory of the Provincial Directors” (#24). The documents of the Church can be a rich source of material for us in our presentations and efforts of formation for our Sisters. There will, of course, be a wide variety of familiarity with these documents among us as well as among the Sisters, but everyone can profit from both an initial and a deeper treatment of these texts. I know that I have.

I will divide my presentation into two parts: first, a brief consideration of what might be treated as documents of the Church; and second, five themes around which one might categorize some of the most important documents.

I.

DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF DOCUMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Dealing with formation documents of the Church and how they are useful to us in our Vincentian vocation can be both time-consuming and fascinating. I must tell you that I found reading these documents very interesting and often got caught up in some personal reflection on what they meant for my own formation. When I consider the breadth of the documents which could be placed under the heading of formation documents, I divide them into five groups about which I will speak in summary form.

The first and most important group which I identify is the Bible. Yes, I classify this as the primary and foundational formation document of the Church. It is from the Bible that all the rest of the formation documents get their authority. And the Bible is clearly the document of the Church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it was

written in the Church by members of the Church. It is the Church which decides which books are included in the Bible and how passages are to be interpreted. Clearly, the Bible is the first and foremost formation document.

A second grouping of formation documents of the Church would be those texts which are provided for us by the Councils of the Church and the authoritative writings of the Holy Father. Two documents which are essential for our consideration emerge from the Second Vatican Council: the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (LG, 1965) and the Decree *Perfectae caritatis* (PC, 1965). We will take a brief look at these two documents and what they have to teach us about formation. Regarding documents of the Pope, I will highlight one in particular: the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* by John Paul II (VC, 1996). The documents which I place in this group have a particular authority and place a significant obligation on our attention.

A third group which I would like to single out deals with the particular office in the Church which has responsibility for people like us: the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life – although this office has changed its name several times. Many of the documents generated by this office speak directly to us and our formation needs. I highlight a number of these documents in chronological order: “The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life” (1980), “Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes” (1990), “Fraternal Life in Community” (1994), “Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium” (2002), and “The Service of Authority and Obedience” (2008). This last set of documents is the one to which I will give particular attention in the second section of my presentation.

A fourth group of documents which the Church offers us for formation emerges from our own writings. Keeping our eyes focused on the Daughters, we would identify first, their Constitutions and Statutes. This is the carefully written and studied material which most clearly reflects their charism and which captures the Church’s intent for the Company. I would add to this group, the writings of our Founders. Both Louise and Vincent reveal their vision of the Company in their writings and we read these documents profitably for capturing what is most important for particular formation. Lastly, I would include within this group, the particular texts which we have generated through reflection upon our community material and the needs of our time and place. Thus, the “Instruction on the Vows”, the Inter-Assemblies Document, the guides for the Visitatrix and the Provincial Council, on Initial Formation, for the Provincial Treasurer, for the Provincial Directors, and so on. We know that these documents are the product of a careful reflection on who the Daughters of Charity are and who they need to be in order to remain faithful to their charism.

And the last group of documents which I will identify includes those great works generated by members of the Church to help all of us know more clearly how we need to be formed in the image of Jesus. Thus, the “Introduction to the Devout Life”, the “Imitation of Christ”, the “Cloud of Unknowing”, the “Interior Castle”, and so on. Classic works which speak to each age about the need to be formed in Christ.

The point of this listing is to emphasize that the Church offers us numerous documents which contribute to our formation. Some of these are quite familiar to us, and some are less so. In my presentation, I am going to give particular emphasis to the documents generated by the Councils of the Church, the writings of the Pope, and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. These will direct us to some of the best of what the Church has to say about formation from its official stance.

II.

FIVE THEMES FOR CONTEMPORARY CHURCH DOCUMENTS

1. Formation Documents: “*Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*”

A 1990 document was issued by The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which (as I said) is the Vatican congregation which deals with matters connected with our life. It is called: “Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes”; this topic relates to what we are doing today and these days. The Congregation states its mission and the purpose of this particular document early:

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life... [has the] mission of giving guidance to institutes. This can help them to elaborate their own programs of formation (*ratio*), as they are obliged to do by the general law of the Church. On the other hand, men and women religious have the right to know the position of the Holy See on the present problems of formation and the solutions which it suggests for resolving them... It reminds all of certain requirements of the law with respect to present circumstances and needs (DOFIRI 4).

And it describes those to whom this document is particularly addressed:

“Life consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels” – of which religious life is a species – “is a stable form of living by

which faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that having dedicated themselves to his honor, the upbuilding of the Church, and the salvation of the world by a new and special title, they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the Kingdom of God and, having become an outstanding sign in the Church, they may foretell the heavenly glory” (DOFIRI 7).

This description is filled with many helpful and important distinctions and elements. You may find it interesting to study.

The two areas to which I want to draw attention and to direct your reflection in this document are these:

(1) REASONS FOR ON-GOING FORMATION

67. There are three basic motivations for permanent formation:

- the first arises from the very function of the religious life within the Church. There it plays a very significant charismatic and eschatological role that presumes on the part of religious men and women a special attention to the life of the Spirit, both in the personal history of each one and in the hopes and anxieties of others;
- the second comes from the challenges which arise from the future of the Christian faith in a world that is changing with increased rapidity;
- the third concerns the very life of religious institutes, and especially their future, which depends in part upon the permanent formation of their members.

These points all lead to the observation: “To follow Christ” means that one is always “on the road” – always journeying towards him.

(2) ITS CONTENT

68. Continued formation is a global process of renewal which extends to all aspects of the religious person and to the whole institute itself. It should be carried out, taking into account the fact that its different aspects are inseparable from, and mutually influential in, the life of each religious and every community. The following aspects should be kept in mind:

- life according to the Spirit, or spirituality: this must have primacy;
- participation in the life of the Church;

- doctrinal and professional updating;
- fidelity to the charism of one's institute.

It is helpful to note here the clear and succinct way in which the content of formation in our lives is presented: spirituality, apostolate, training, and the charism. Each of these elements deserves a place in a community's planning for formation.

2. Documents Highlighting the Meaning of Consecrated Life: *Lumen Gentium, Perfectae Caritatis, and Vita Consecrata*

There are a number of documents which highlight the meaning and character of consecrated life. Two of the most important come from the Second Vatican Council; one is an excellent document from more recent times. Any reflection which we offer on the type of life to which we are given in the Company and the Congregation can profit from a study of these documents.

a) *Lumen Gentium* (1965)

In Chapter Six of the Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* (1965), the Second Vatican Council spoke to the nature of consecrated life and reminds its members of their place among the people of God and their particular role in the Church:

Religious should carefully keep before their minds the fact that the Church presents Christ to believers and non-believers alike in a striking manner daily through them. The Church thus portrays Christ in contemplation on the mountain, in His proclamation of the kingdom of God to the multitudes, in His healing of the sick and maimed, in His work of converting sinners to a better life, in His solicitude for youth and His goodness to all men, always obedient to the will of the Father who sent Him (LG 46).

Note what is being said here. We are reminded of the particular way in which *we model the life of Christ to others in all our ministries and way of living*. We also make the Kingdom of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit known:

The religious state clearly manifests that the Kingdom of God and its needs, in a very special way, are raised above all earthly considerations... it clearly shows all men... the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvelously working in the Church (LG 44).

This sets the stage for many later references in other documents.

b) *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965)

Perfectae caritatis (1965), the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, from Vatican II, built upon the direction set in the related chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. It presented five general principles which were intended to guide the renewal of consecrated life “under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church”:

1. Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule. (*Vincent and Louise willingly maintained that Christ is our foundational and guiding rule – Vincent’s “what now, Christ?” expresses this attitude; and both future saints also insisted that we come to know Jesus most fully in our reading of the Scripture*).

2. It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore let their founders’ spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions—all of which make up the patrimony of each institute—be faithfully held in honor. (*Respecting our charism and the particular way in which we follow Christ in his service of the poor is essential to our ministry and community life. It is a wealth which we strive to invite others to share in*).

3. All institutes should share in the life of the Church, adapting as their own and implementing in accordance with their own characteristics the Church’s undertakings and aims in matters biblical, liturgical, dogmatic, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social. (*Being guided by the needs of the Church and participating in the life of the Church through our prayer and obedience is part of our life. We continue to allow this to guide our liturgy and thinking*).

4. Institutes should promote among their members an adequate knowledge of the social conditions of the times they live in and of the needs of the Church. In such a way, judging current events wisely in the light of faith and burning with apostolic zeal, they may be able to assist men more effectively. (*Responding to the particular needs of our time and adapting our ministries so as to be available and effective in serving the most poor and abandoned continues to enliven our decision-making and assignments. Vincent and Louise were nothing if not clearly attuned to the needs of their times. As inspired by them, we follow this mode of acting*).

5. The purpose of the religious life is to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active

ministry. (*Attempting to understand and live the evangelical counsels in their fullness is a continued goal and effort. Allowing the apostolate to so dominate one's efforts that community and prayer are compromised is contrary to our spirit and source of strength. "Leaving God for God" is a dynamic which works both ways in our life and practice*) (PC 2).

These general principles which were developed in the document guided the renewal of religious life in the past half-century and still must be taken into account as we consider the continued evolution of the Company. They are repeatedly quoted in later Church documents.

c) *Vita Consecrata* (1996)

In the most recent years, the Church document which has had the greatest influence on all thinking on consecrated life, and which is heir to the Vatican II documents cited above, is the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* – the “Consecrated Life”. It is addressed to: “The Bishops and Clergy, Religious Orders and Congregations, Societies of Apostolic Life, Secular Institutes, and all the Faithful on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World”. This address really says it all. *Vita Consecrata* is directed to us and is intended to help us reflect on our life and ministry, thus on our formation. It is a very readable document with many helpful insights for us.

There is much in this document that takes on the characteristic of spiritual reading as it attempts to speak to our hearts about who we are as consecrated women and men. It tells us of the importance of our way of life:

The consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it “manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling” and... it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission (VC 3).

Pope John Paul II states:

In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father's call and to the prompting of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ, in order to devote themselves to him with an “undivided” heart (cf. *1 Cor* 7:34). Like the Apostles, they too have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as he did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters (VC 1).

Each line of this statement has a powerful invitation for us.

- First of all, the call to follow Christ with an “undivided heart”. The ability to follow Christ completely without looking back, without reservation and without distraction with other concerns is an extraordinary calling. It is to make Christ our “all” and allow him to be the center of our life and action. What a responsibility and gift it is to be able to follow him in this way! And our life choice demands it of us.
- Secondly, the call flows from obedience; we respond in freedom through our obedience to the way in which we have been summoned by the Father and guided by the Spirit. Thus, our vocation is more than simply personal generosity on our part; it is an obedient response to the grace of God alive in our lives and will.
- And thirdly, this call is to serve as Jesus served by leaving everything else behind and placing oneself at the disposal of the Lord and others. The freedom to follow Jesus in this way flows from the unburdening of self from all which would hold us back from genuine service.

Right from the very beginning, and with repeated emphasis on the evangelical counsels and the grace of the Holy Spirit, this document sets a direction for and gives direction to the consecrated life. One is well-rewarded from a careful reading of this text.

Pope John Paul II offers a fervent wish: “I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life in its three aspects of consecration, communion and mission” (VC 13). These three elements focus our attention on dedication of self, communal life, and humble service in the apostolate. Each of these elements is, of course, central to our life and ministry.

3. Documents on the Spiritual Life: *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life (1980)* and *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium (2002)*

My intent is to highlight some of the essentials of these documents and to whet your appetite for the manner in which these documents can be profitably read by those and for those in ongoing formation.

a) *The Contemplative Dimension Of Religious Life (1980)*

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life desired to draw up some practical and formative guidelines to encourage the integration of the interior life and activity in institutes of so-called active life. In doing this, it saw the need and the urgency to stress the absolute primacy of life in the Holy Spirit for the contemplative dimension of religious life. The Sacred Congregation describes the contemplative dimension fundamentally as the theological response of faith, hope, and charity, by which the believer opens up to the revelation and communication of the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The contemplative dimension is expressed by listening to and meditating on the Word of God; by participating in the divine life transmitted to us in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist; by liturgical and personal prayer, by the constant desire for God and the search for his will in events and people; by the conscious participation in his salvific mission; by self-giving to others for the coming of the Kingdom (CDRL 1).

The Sacred Congregation offered some guidelines for Institutes of Active Life.

First among these was the need for the integration of activity and contemplation. Closeness to Christ is essential and prayer was described as the indispensable breath of every contemplative dimension (CDRL 5). Thus, the community could not survive without regular and extended contact with the Lord through prepared prayer.

A second guideline involved renewed attention to life in the Holy Spirit. And this gets expressed in many ways (CDRL 8-14):

- *The Word of God*
- *Centrality of the Eucharist*
- *Renewal in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation*
- *Spiritual direction*
- *The liturgy of the hours*
- *Devotion to the Virgin Mary*
- *An Indispensable personal and community asceticism*

In all of these ways, the role of the Holy Spirit is evident and celebrated in the contemplative efforts of a community.

A third guideline involves community animation. It notes that the religious community is itself a theological reality, an object of contemplation (CDRL 15). Religious need a “place for prayer” in their own

houses, a place where the daily search for an encounter with God, the source of unity in charity, finds constant reminders and support.

A fourth guideline is the need for the contemplative dimension to be developed in ongoing formation (CDRL 17-19).

The document concludes: The more open religious are to the contemplative dimension, the more attentive they will be to the demands of the Kingdom, intensely developing their theological depth (CDRL 30).

b) *Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium (2002)*

The 2002 document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "*Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*", comes some five years after *Vita Consecrata* (which we considered earlier) and follows in its footsteps. At the beginning of the current document we read:

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* clearly and profoundly expressed *the Christological and ecclesial dimensions of consecrated life in a Trinitarian theological perspective...* This programmatic document remains the most significant and necessary point of reference guiding the path of fidelity and renewal of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (SAFC 3).

"Starting Afresh with Christ" intended to focus primarily on the spirituality developed in the earlier document from a pastoral point of view.

Listening to the invitation given to the whole Church by John Paul II, consecrated life must clearly start afresh from Christ, contemplating his face, giving preference to the ways of spirituality as life, teaching and pastoral practice (SAFC 19).

Clearly the example of Jesus and his ministry is the starting point for any spirituality of the consecrated life. We can hear the echo of Vincent and Louise which reminds us that Christ is our Rule.

4. Documents on Community Life: "*Fraternal Life in Community*" (1994) and "*The Service of Authority and Obedience*" (2008)

Treating the Consecrated Life necessarily involves one in the issues and values around life in community and how the principles of authority and obedience enter into play. There are two documents to which we can direct our attention in a particular way.

a) *Fraternal Life In Community (1994)*

This document recognizes that many changes have come about in the Church, in society, and in cultures which have influenced the way in which community life has been lived and can be lived. The actual experience and situations of communities today must be taken into account in order to determine the ways in which community life can be adapted and valued. The document begins with a powerful statement:

Born not “of the will of the flesh”, nor from personal attraction, nor from human motives, but “from God” (Jn. 1:13), from a divine vocation and a divine attraction, religious communities are a living sign of the primacy of the love of God who works wonders, and of the love for God and for one’s brothers and sisters as manifested and practiced by Jesus Christ (FLIC 1).

The document sets as its purpose the support of the efforts made by many communities of religious, both men and women, to improve the quality of their community life. It structures its presentation in this fashion (FLIC 7):

- a) *Religious community as gift*
- b) *Religious community as place where we become brothers and sisters*
- c) *Religious community as place and subject of mission*

Using the three images of the Trinity, Jesus with his disciples, and the church at Pentecost, this document emphasizes the love and unity which binds a community together. It recognizes that, at heart, a religious community is the gift of the Spirit.

Within a truly fraternal community, each member has a sense of co-responsibility for the faithfulness of the others; each one contributes to a serene climate of sharing life, of understanding, and of mutual help; each is attentive to the moments of fatigue, suffering, isolation or lack of motivation in others; each offers support to those who are saddened by difficulties and trials (FLIC 57).

Jesus insisted that the greatest sign of his remaining present among us would be the living in fraternal community in mutual love and support. We are recognizable as disciples of Jesus when we live community well.

b) *The Service of Authority and Obedience (2008)*

In this Instruction, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, identifies its intent in the first paragraph:

The consecrated person, therefore, gives witness to the task, at once joyful and laborious, of the diligent search for the divine will, and for this chooses to use every means available that helps one to know it and sustain it while bringing it to fulfillment... *some* are called, usually temporarily, to exercise the particular task of being the sign of unity and the guide in the common search both personal and communitarian of carrying out the will of God. This is the service of authority (SAO 1).

Placing the values of “authority” and “obedience” within the task of seeking and accomplishing the divine will gives them an attractive and desirable context. This document also places these values within the context of speaking about Jesus as the obedient servant of the Father. The purpose of the document is accomplished in three parts which define authority in its triple service: to the individual persons called to live his/her own consecration (*first part*); to construct fraternal communities (*second part*); and to participate in the common mission (*third part*) (SAO 3). From the beginning, we should note the title of the document which immediately characterizes the exercise of authority and obedience as “service”.

In the presentation of this document, three elements are repeated often. One is listening as a key to authority and obedience. A person needs to be open to the Lord’s direction “when sensing in some way his presence in human intermediaries, such as in the Rule, the superiors, the community, the signs of the times, the expectations of others and, above all, the poor” (SAO 11). Secondly, the role of the Holy Spirit as guide and source of strength is acknowledged; the community is gathered and sustained by the presence of this Spirit. And thirdly, the filial character of obedience in imitation of the life and ministry of Jesus is emphasized. Christ’s entire life was centered around obedience to the will of the Father and accepting his will in all things.

5. Liturgy and Living Documents: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia (2003)*, *Verbum Domini (2010)*, *Porta Fidei (2011)*

These are documents which I identify as focusing our attention particularly on the Eucharist, the Word of God, and daily life.

a) *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003)

Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter on the Eucharist *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) begins with the statement that "the Church draws her life from the Eucharist" (#1) and proceeds to reflect upon the importance of the sacrament of the altar for the Christian Community. It has much to say for us and for our Sisters who maintain that "*The Sisters are conscious of the vital importance of the Eucharist, center of their life and mission and an indispensable meeting each day with Christ and their brothers and sisters... They offer themselves with the Lord Jesus in the memorial of his Pascal Mystery*" (C. 19b-c)

b) *Verbum Domini* (2010)

Pope Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) is a recent document, as we know, which invites a study of the Bible. Using the Prologue of John's Gospel as a centering point, Pope Benedict writes in this document on the importance of the Word of God in dialogue with the Church and with us, in the Sacraments (especially the Eucharist), in prayer and reflection, and in mission. It is a good document for studying the importance of the Scripture with our Sisters since the Bible is such an important part of our charism. "*In reading and meditating Holy Scripture, the living and efficacious Word, they [the Daughters of Charity] deepen their knowledge of the person of Christ and His attitude toward those who are lowly and oppressed*" (C. 22a).

c) *Porta Fidei* (2011)

Pope Benedict's apostolic letter *Porta Fidei* (2011) proclaims the "year of faith" for October 2012 - November 2013 and invites all believers to a deepening of the great gift of faith. This document quotes the Pauline verse which inspired the motto of the Company ("*Caritas Christi urget nos*" [2 Cor 5:14] in #7) as the Holy Father proclaims that "The Year of Faith will also be a good opportunity to intensify the witness of charity" (#14). Clearly, we have the encouragement to express faith in action. He invites the Church to be attentive to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" as a tool for providing real support for the faith which we profess; Catholics are encouraged to study and make use of it in this "year of faith". In this regard, he also encourages the study of the documents of Vatican II. Finally, we should note that "Religious communities as well as parish communities, and all ecclesial bodies old and new, are to find a way, during this Year, to make a public profession of the *Credo*" (#8). The clarity of that summons is

compelling for us. Thus, in this document we find numerous encouragements and directions to guide our reflections with the Sisters in the coming year.

Conclusion

It would be easy enough to take all these documents and place them within the divisions of accompaniment, animation, and formation – which are the categories which we are highlighting as the responsibility of a Provincial Director in relation to our Sisters. We know that documents of the Church are generally not easy to read and require some time and interpretation, but they offer a rich resource for Gospel-driven presentations and teaching. In order to do this, we need to be nourished ourselves at the table of wisdom which is provided by the Church.