

The Role of Consecrated Women in the Church and in Society Today: A Reflection

*by Sr. Julma Neo, D.C.
General Councillor of the Daughters of Charity
16-VII- 2001*

1. Introduction

I would like to begin this reflection by stating what may seem an obvious fact, that is, that my development of this subject will be very much influenced by my personal and social context. I am a consecrated woman, a Daughter of Charity, born and reared in a developing country in Asia. For the most part of my consecrated life, I was engaged in formation work with sisters and the laity and in pastoral work among the poor, particularly through the base communities. I am sure someone with a different personal background from a developed country in the North would treat this same subject differently.

I think it is important to say this at the beginning, since this question of context forms an important element in the reflection I will share with you.

2. Context

2.1. Significance of context

With the new hermeneutics and the shift from a classical to a historical method in contemporary theological reflection¹ (understood as faith and life dialogue), context has assumed an importance as never before. As partner in this dialogue, context determines in a way the content of the reflection – its statements and conclusions.

To understand better my statements and conclusions, I would like first of all to highlight certain features of our ecclesial and societal context today that to my mind significantly affect consecrated women and women in general.

2.2. Some realities today that significantly impact on consecrated women

2.2.1. Ecclesial realities

A number of ecclesial documents within the past few decades and the orientations they created have greatly affected consecrated women.

¹ Robert Maloney, *The Way of St. Vincent* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 48.

By stressing the common mission received by all Christians at baptism, *Lumen Gentium* opened the doors for the fuller participation of women in the life of the Church. This common mission implies co-responsibility among men/women, lay and consecrated, clergy and the hierarchy. *Gaudium et Spes* added still another dimension to this understanding of mission. By exhorting a more positive view of the world, *Gaudium et Spes* reversed the Church's centuries-old stance of separation from the world. It spoke of mutual relations between the Church and the world (GS 40) and encouraged dialogue between them (GS 44). Its insistence on the dignity of the human person provided a further impetus for women's reawakened sense of their own dignity.

Other ecclesial pronouncements are even more explicit in their statements about women/consecrated women. *Vita Consecrata* contains by far some of the most significant affirmations of consecrated women ever made by a pope. It exhorts the promotion of "*a new feminism that rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination in order to ... overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation*" (VC 58, *Evangelium Vitae* 99). *Pacem in Terris* 41 had earlier identified the aspirations of women as one of the "signs of the times." *Mulieris Dignitatem* affirms the dignity and role of women today.

In addition, there are other similar references in documents issued by various Synods and gathering of bishops and major superiors/religious on the continental levels.²

2.2.2. Societal realities

Our society today is one of **contrasts and paradoxes**. The synthesis of the responses of consecrated women from all over the world prepared for the Synod on Consecrated Life describes this reality well. Ours is a world where we simultaneously find: *seeds of death and seeds of life, unbelief, ignorance, practical atheism and search for God, transcendence, meaning, gap between rich and poor, culture of violence and search for more just relationships between nations/peoples, new global awareness of women's dignity, concern for the environment, exclusion and division (race, culture, gender, class, religion) among persons, groups and nations and longing for global and cosmic unity.*³

Let us take a closer look at two contemporary realities that have far reaching consequences for women: globalization and the women's movement. Although they may not be found in all countries to the same extent, their progressively growing impact on a global level cannot be denied.

² Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris* # 48 European Synod, *Final Message* # 9 American Synod, *Final Message* # 7 Asian Synod, *Final Document* FABC 4 1986, *Statement of AMOR* (Asia-Pacific Meeting of Religious) X 1994.

³ "Theological Reflection on our 30 Years Post Conciliar Experience of Feminine Apostolic Religious Life" in *UISG Bulletin*, no. 94, 1994, p. 20.

Globalization, prominent in the agenda of many governments, has further widened the scandalous gap between the rich and the poor and has reinforced the “feminine face of poverty.”⁴ Among the “victims” of globalization children and women count the most, persons with HIV-AIDS, migrant workers, victims of the sex trade, refugees, low paid women laborers.

Today many social analysts and even advocates of globalization admit that the negative consequences it has brought in its wake outweigh its positive contributions.⁵ The “culture of death” that accompanies globalization evokes grave concern among those committed to a more humane future. A more critical questioning and guarded acceptance have now replaced the enthusiasm and the hope that initially greeted this phenomenon.

The **feminist/women’s movement**⁶ is a movement that has been rapidly spreading throughout the world within the past few decades. Governments, global institutions and churches, whatever their bias towards women’s movements, have not been blind to their influence.⁷

It is unfortunate that the feminist/women’s movement has often been misunderstood and reduced simply to a few controversial women’s issues, e.g., abortion, reproductive rights, ordination. At other times, feminism has been presented as being “anti-men” instead of being “pro-human.” Such perspectives towards women’s movements are quite limited and they risk missing the woods for the trees.

There are different strands (liberal, cultural, radical) or brands of feminism (Western, Hispanic, Afro-American, Asian or African).⁸ Allow me to make three statements about these movements in general and the cause they advocate.

First of all, feminism involves a changed consciousness of women and about women by both women and men. Through the women’s movement, both

⁴ According to a 1986 UN Report data cited by Mary Dija Ogebe in “Social Injustice,” *Our Time Has Come* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1994) 61, women are half of the world population, perform 2/3 of the work hours, receive 1/10 of world income and own less than 1/100 of world property; ¾ of women are in developing countries, 55% are in Asia. See also, Ivone Gebara, “Les Femmes et la Mondialisation- Le Droit a la Difference” (Sedos Bulletin, November 1999) 295-301.

⁵ Cf. also *Ecclesia in Asia* # 6.

⁶ A distinction is made between womanism/women’s movement and feminism/feminist movement. The two are different but related. (“Womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender”). The latter has its origin in middle class white women’s struggle for equality with men, particularly before the law, in the West. The former is associated with women of color from North America and from developing countries.

⁷ Most governments and international meetings have included feminine concerns in their agenda and/or have added more women among their participants. Cf., representations in the recent Special Assemblies for Bishops.

⁸ Claire Murphy, *An Introduction to Christian Feminism*” (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1994) 16-29. See also, “An Overview of the Philippine Women’s Movement” by Rina Jimenez-David, a paper presented at a seminar on *Advancing Gender Issues in the Legislature*, 27-28 August, Manila, Philippines.

have become more conscious that women are not simply “objects,” as they have so often been regarded in the past. Rather they are “subjects” that can influence the shape and the direction of history through the power they have within them to make choices in freedom and responsibility. Women, too, have been created in God’s image (Gn 1:27) with the same dignity and rights as men. Feminism puts the primacy on people’s shared humanity rather than on gender. Action in behalf of the feminist cause flows from a commitment to a common humanity.

Secondly, among women of color and women in the Southern Hemisphere, this consciousness involves a struggle to be freed from a three-fold oppression they have been experiencing for generations: oppression due to race (racism), class (classism) and gender (sexism). Economically poor women in developing countries experience a deeper oppression than their counterparts in the North. Hence, they would rather speak of “women’s movement” to distinguish themselves from the “feminist movement” associated with the experience of middle-class white women in developed countries.

Thirdly, feminism refers to a *way of seeing reality* (vision, perspective) that is inclusive and holistic. It is a vision that is “both/and” rather than “either/or.” It sees the whole of the cosmos – plants, animals, human beings and the environment – as being interconnected (the “web of life”). The death or destruction of a part invariably affects the whole. From this *way of seeing* flows a characteristic way of *relating, being present and doing*.⁹

The feminist perspective is the opposite of the patriarchal perspective that has predominated in the Church and in societies for centuries. The patriarchal perspective sees reality as dualistic (soul-body, spirit-matter, thought-feeling, intellectual work-manual work) and hierarchical (top-down, above-below, superior-subject, clergy-laity, men-women, old-young, white-black). In this perspective, the first elements in this set of pairs are always considered superior to the second. This patriarchal perspective has contributed to producing opposing and conflicting groups in the Church and in societies.

This patriarchal perspective is also characterized by a way of relating that dominates, competes and imposes. Globalization has reinforced this manner of relating. We see some concrete effects of this patriarchal perspective in our daily life. For example in generation and racial conflicts, in tensions between parish priests and pastoral lay workers/sisters, in media advertisements exploiting women, in suspicious attitudes towards the body and feelings in spirituality.

⁹ Cf. Joan Chittister, “*Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*,” an unpublished manuscript of a talk given during the SEDOS Symposium held in Rome, December 2000.

Just as the feminist perspective can also be found in men, so, too, the patriarchal perspective is often present among women because the patriarchal system¹⁰ has been deeply entrenched in most cultures for centuries.

3. The role of consecrated women today

Given these realities in the Church and in society, what then should be the role of consecrated women today? I propose three roles.

3.1. To contribute to the creation of a “culture of life”

Consecrated women can help give birth to this “culture of life” by globalizing:

3.1.1. a *new way of seeing* (vision, perspective) that is inclusive and holistic. Consecrated women need to foster this feminine perspective in those who do not have it and to help those who have lost it to recover it.

In divided and fragmented societies, this *way of seeing* helps people arrive at personal and social integration. For at the bottom of most conflicts anywhere in the world today is a vision that allows some groups to exclude or to dominate others. We see concrete examples of this in the recurring conflicts in the Balkan States, in the Middle East, among minority groups in North America, Western Europe, Oceania and Islam dominated countries, in ethnic/tribal wars in Asia and Africa and among the indigenous peoples of Latin America and Asia.

3.1.2 a *new way of relating (relationships)* that is marked by mutuality, interdependence and equality, not by domination or competition. In this way of relating, it is not a question of inferiority and superiority or of having “power over.” Rather it is a question of equality on the basis of a shared humanity.

This manner of relating respects the “otherness” of the other. Differences due to race, gender, class, culture, ideology or religion are not equated with inferiority. They are seen as legitimate, as richness to be accepted and explored for collaboration towards the common good rather than as threats to be diminished or as evil to be exorcised.

In a world often intolerant of differences, this new way of relating has profound implications not only for the interpersonal but also for the international and political levels.

3.1.3 a *new way of being present* (presence) that is characterized by a “being with” in compassion. It is a sensitive presence that listens with the heart

¹⁰ Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 10, p. 59 ff.

and thus is able to penetrate depths of being otherwise not accessible to reason. “*The heart has its reasons that reason knows not*” (Pascal). This manner of being present pierces through socially constructed norms that equate people with “what they do,” with the color of their skin or with how much they possess, but that often hide their deep longing to be valued for who and what they are. This new presence leads to solidarity without frontiers.

In today’s world where efficiency, productivity and competitiveness are valued at the expense of the greater portion of humanity, we need this “new presence” if we are to survive humanly. The century that just ended has been one of untold violence and unimaginable suffering. Our century will be one of further violence unless we turn it into a time of tenderness and compassion.

3.1.4 a *new way of doing* (praxis) that empowers, works *with* people, rather than dominates, that dialogues in search of non-violent solutions rather than imposes. Pluralism (religious, cultural, ethnic) is a feature of our world today. It will not become any less in future. A friend forwarded to me these interesting data from the Internet that illustrate this reality. According to Philip Harter, a medical doctor at Stanford University School of Medicine: “If earth’s population was shrunk into a village of just 100 people with all the human ratios existing in the world still remaining, this tiny diverse village would look like this:

“57 would be Asian, 21 would be European, 14 from the Western Hemisphere, 8 would be African, 52 would be female, 48 would be male, 70 would be non-white, 30 would be white, 70 would be non-Christian, 30 would be Christian, 6 people would possess 59 percent of the entire world’s wealth and all 6 would be from the United States, 80 would live in substandard housing, 70 would be unable to read and 50 would suffer from malnutrition.”

In such a milieu, there is only one way to live in peace; that is, for dialogue – interpersonal, intercultural, inter-religious – to become a way of life. Unless we have learned to dialogue, the possibilities for unity in future will remain painfully limited for us.

3.1.5. *Consecration, the “culture of life” and the reign of God.* Consecration provides a profound motivation for consecrated women to create this “culture of life.” Through their consecration, consecrated women commit themselves to follow Jesus radically. And Jesus embodied the new way of seeing, relating, being present and doing we have spoken of earlier.

Jesus’ *way of seeing* was inclusive. The Good News that he preached was good news because it excluded racism, classism and sexism (Gal 3:28-29), which are products of historical and cultural evolution. Jesus *related* to women in a

way that was completely unheard of in his time and that astounded even his disciples (Jn 4:27). He took women seriously and engaged them in profound theological conversations (Samaritan woman: Jn 4:7-26; Martha: Jn 11:21-27). He allowed himself to be challenged by the Syrophoenician woman in Mk 7:24-30. He believed in Mary Magdalene enough to make her the first bearer of the good news of the resurrection (Jn 20:17-18). Jesus accepted to be ministered to by women disciples (Mk 15:41; Lk 8:1-3). He so completely trusted a woman that he let himself remain in her womb powerless for nine months (Lk 2:6-7).

Tenderness, sensitivity and compassion for the marginalized (leper: Mk 1:40-45, widow: Lk 7:11-16) characterized his *way of being present* to people. He was attentive to the good qualities of the “little ones” (the widow who gave her all: Lk 21:1-4) and to their unmet aspirations (the sick man by the pool in Jn 5:5-9). His *way of doing* empowered people. He did not condemn people but set them off on a new lease in life by freeing them from whatever held them captive – whether demonic possession: Mk 5:1-20 or sin: Jn 8:3-11. Dialogue was part of his approach to people (Samaritan woman: Jn 4:7-26; disciples at Emmaus: Lk 24:13-27).

Creating a “culture of life” is essential to our mission as consecrated persons for it was at the heart of Jesus’ mission. “*I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full*” (Jn 10:10). Today he continues to ask us to participate in its creation. When consecrated women respond to this challenge, they help bring about the reign of God here and now. By so doing they transform society. Today as in the time of Jesus, the reign of God has not only a personal but also a societal dimension.

3.2. To witness to a “new holiness”

3.2.1 The need for consecrated persons to be witnesses rather than to be simply efficient administrators and competent professionals has been repeatedly underscored in various documents and gatherings.¹¹ The same is true of the imperative that consecrated persons be holy.¹²

3.2.2. Today’s consecrated women need to witness to a type of holiness that can speak to our contemporaries. As the 1997 European Congress on Vocations underscored, new models of holiness are called for.¹³

¹¹ Cf. Unpublished manuscript “*Report of the Bishops’ Conferences and Religious in Asia*” presented at the pre-Synodal Consultation on Religious Life held in Thailand, May 1994. See also, “Vocations to Consecrated Life” by Bruno Secondin in *Vocations to the Consecrated Life in the Context of Modern and Post-Modern Society* (USG 1999) 94.

¹² *Lumen Gentium* chapters 5-6, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 69 and *Vita Consecrata* # 35.

¹³ *Final Document of the Congress on Vocation to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe* # 12.

“*Feminine spirituality*” is one such model. What are some features of this spirituality?

“Feminine spirituality” is “*integral spirituality*.” It rejects compartmentalizing the person whether in prayer, celebration, spiritual direction or discernment. The “emotions” and the “body” can lead the person to God just as much as the “spirit” and the “will.” One can pray with the body as well as with the mind. In this spirituality, consecrated women grow in their relationship with God as “whole persons” with their unique personal histories and feminine traits.

“Feminine spirituality” is likewise *integral* in the sense that it goes beyond the dualism of the “private” and the “social.” No area of life remains outside the domain of spirituality. The consecrated woman meets God in her relationships, in her struggles in community, in the sacraments, in liturgical celebrations as well as in her ministry and in socio-political concerns (for example, promotion of justice, the preservation of the ecological balance, the debt issue). Thus, feminine spirituality is deeply personal as well as political, global and cosmic.

This kind of spirituality finds resonance in the holistic spiritualities of Asia and in those of indigenous peoples. It is much needed in Europe and North America given the fragmentation of the post-modern worldview.¹⁴

3.2.3 Through this integrated spirituality, consecrated women affirm that their faith in Christ is “something which has not merely a religious value but also a human value as an active and all inclusive project which teaches ... what answer to give to ... the new challenges arising from the cultures of our time.”¹⁵

3.2.4 Witnessing to this “new holiness” will be powerful on condition that it is *communal* and *intelligible* to our contemporaries. A witness that does not provoke questions regarding transcendence and mystery while being fully engaged in “secular” concerns will not be read as witness today. In these days of global mergers, individual witnessing is still needed but it no longer suffices.

3.3. To be a force for ecclesial renewal and societal transformation

The history of the Church has continually shown that consecrated women have contributed to ecclesial renewal and societal transformation down through the ages in various ways.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000) 109 and *Vocations to Consecrated Life* pp. 83, 90.

¹⁵ Cardinal Eduardo Somalo, “Orientations, Challenges and Opportunities Emerging in Consecrated Life,” *Catholic International* (March 1999) 120.

¹⁶ Two excellent books on this subject are those of Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Pre-modern Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) and *A Woman’s Way* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

Among the many ways through which they can do so today, I would like to indicate five:

3.3.1. Facilitating the “margins-to-center” movement in the Church by the poor, the laity and women

The Church as communion was a focus of the recently concluded Special Assemblies of Bishops for the different continents.¹⁷ But given the situation of the Church that still exists in many places, such a vision will not be realized as long as there are people that remain in the “margins” in the Church. In many countries, the movement by the poor and the laity is taking place, thanks to renewal programs. But that of women has hardly begun.

Consecrated women can contribute to ecclesial renewal by acting as catalysts for this triple movement through their various apostolic works.

3.3.2. Networking with others to promote the cause of women, particularly the most excluded

Many women’s congregations have taken up the challenge of women’s promotion through different apostolic works; for example, gender education, legal advocacy, assistance in their basic needs and enabling education. What is urgently needed is to network with others on the national and global levels in order to globalize these collective efforts.

Installing women in decision-making structures both in society and in the Church will be a quantum leap for the cause of women. As long as women are not included in processes of decision-making, all other efforts will remain palliative. Creating possibilities to ensure this presence remains “the” challenge for most women’s groups today. “*It is therefore urgently necessary to take concrete steps*” along this line (*Vita Consecrata* 58).

3.3.3. Providing models for collaborative ministry in the Church

Collaboration between men and women is not new in the Church, as we know from the history of our Congregations. But doing so in a spirit of partnership is relatively new and difficult. There are still deeply entrenched obstacles in both women and men, in groups and institutions that need to be overcome. For instance, attitudes such as machismo/male chauvinism, structures and cultural values that discriminate, stereotypes of the ideal woman, theological

¹⁷ See *Instrumentum Laboris* 1999 European and 1998 Oceania Synods, *Final Messages* 1997 American Synod, 1998 Asian Synod and 1994 African Synod.

orientations and psychological dispositions. An awareness of these roadblocks coupled with a desire to overcome them would be a very good beginning.

3.3.4. Constructing models for leadership and government that reflect the feminist vision and way of relating and doing

The feminine mode of leadership is circular rather than hierarchical. It emphasizes reciprocity, dialogue, participation, consensus and persuasion rather than domination, control and imposition. It focuses on people at the “base,” “below,” the “grassroots” thus relying heavily on the group not just the leader. This style of leadership strives to empower people instead of over-powering them through an excessive emphasis on the “powers” of authority.

3.3.5. Undertaking seriously the challenge of inculturation of the faith/charism

Paul VI has rightly called the split between the gospel and culture as the drama of our time (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 20). Inculturation closes this split by bringing about the integration of life and faith/charism. Inculturation, far from being an imperative only for “mission countries,” is at the heart of renewed efforts at making faith a reference point for the construction of cultures and civilizations.¹⁸ I am deeply convinced that, especially today, renewal of the Church and societal transformation cannot go very far unless inculturation is taken very seriously.

Through these five concrete ways, consecrated women can help build an alternative future that can enkindle hope in the hearts of those who search for viable alternatives for the future.

This task of constructing an alternative future is formidable but possible. We cannot renege from this challenge. “We need to participate in the creation of cultures and society.” Otherwise we risk losing them by default.

3.4 In summary, three images that capture well this three-fold role of consecrated women are: “**mother**” (to give birth to a “new culture”), **mystic** (to contemplate God in all of reality) and **prophetess** (to construct an alternative future for the Church and society). By being fully who they are, consecrated women build up the Church and society. “*These sisters, fully consecrated and fully women, are the true, authentic answer to the challenge of the present day.*”¹⁹

¹⁸ *Instrumentum Laboris* # 15 European Synod.

¹⁹ Somalo, *ibid.*

4. Conclusion

4.1. It is my profound belief that unless lay/consecrated men, clergy and the hierarchy allow consecrated women more space to realize their roles in the Church and in society today, something that is essential to the future of the Church and of societies will remain unmet.

Women make up more than three-quarters of consecrated persons in the Church.²⁰ It will not therefore be presumptuous to claim that any diminishment of the role of consecrated women will ultimately redound to the impoverishment of the whole Church. *“The future of the new evangelization is unthinkable without a renewed contribution from women, especially consecrated women” (Vita Consecrata 57).*

More than half of the world’s population are women. Unless their full humanity can be assured, that of the other half continues to be jeopardized.

4.2. Just as biological life is not possible without the participation of both women and men, so, too, the “culture of life” will not be born unless both collaborate in a spirit of genuine partnership. The role of women in the Church and in society we have reflected on will not be realized without a change of attitude on the part of both women and men, without renewed ecclesial and societal structures. Only when this happens can we speak of having given birth to a “new creation” together.

Some important questions we need to ask ourselves at this point are:

1. How can you as Directors respond authentically to the changed consciousness of consecrated women today? How can you assist the sisters you work with carry out their role in the Church and in society with this new consciousness?

“It is equally important to point out that women’s new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves, where they place themselves in history and how they interpret it and the way they organize social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life” (Vita Consecrata 57).

²⁰ According to “International Statistics on Men and Women Religious,” *Catholic International*, VI, 3 (March 1995) 137 there were 865,902 women religious compared with 205,852 religious priests/brothers throughout the world in 1992.

2. *How can we, together, give birth to this “culture of life” in our provinces?*

3. *How can we witness to a collaborative ministry in our provinces? What attitudes in us facilitate/prevent this collaboration? What structures around us help/hinder it?*

4. *What do we – Directors and sisters – need to help us make this collaboration more effective?*

To continue this irreversible journey of walking together in our provinces, a journey that we have chosen (or perhaps was imposed on us by circumstances), we need much patience, openness, humility and courage. But hope remains. ***“Behold I make all things new...”*** (Rv 21:5).

4.3. Creating together this “culture of life,” being witnesses to a “new holiness” and being a “force for ecclesial renewal and societal transformation” – this is our gift as consecrated women to the Church and to the world for this millennium. I pray that this gift be accepted by us all with gratitude, openness, daring and courage as a gift from the Father, who is the “giver of all gifts.”