



Nota bene: this material we offer you reorganises some ideas proposed by Fr. Pedro Solis, Visitor of the Philippines. It is not intended to be prayed and finished in a single day of retreat. It is a retreat that can be prayed and meditated on throughout the month. The way in which I present the theme is not exhaustive, nor does it pretend to be a lesson. They are points, if you like, a little loose, just to provoke some reflections. We hope you find them useful. Fr. Aarón Gutiérrez Nava, CM

Introduction

We are in the final stages of preparation to celebrate the 400 years of the Congregation of the Mission's God-given jubilee of life for the evangelisation of the poor. As we approach its final outcome, it is essential to reflect on the essence of our consecration and the role we play as missionaries in the contemporary world. Such reflection must resonate deeply with the ideals and challenges of consecrated life in our own time.

We wholeheartedly desire to provide the means to achieve the objective we set ourselves at the beginning of this Jubilee: *"to grow integrally in our missionary identity and sense of belonging, supported by the presence and action of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in us"*, the same one that stimulates us in these last months to reflect on the gift of **"Consecration"** and to rediscover its vocational, prophetic, synodal and missionary dynamism in today's world.

The consecrated person commits himself, from baptism, to live the *"evangelical counsels"* in a free and conscious following of Jesus Christ. In an attempt to radicalise this commitment, vows are taken, a canonical way of obliging the person to fulfil the promises made, publicly or privately. In these times in which the institutional is losing more and more strength, it is decisive to highlight the free and conscious commitment to live the evangelical counsels with radicality: the life of Jesus Christ is the root of the living of our consecrated life. Our life is a living offering to the Father of Jesus Christ, to collaborate in the building of the Kingdom, the salvation of the world.

The term *"consecration"*, in both its active and passive sense¹, invites us to deepen our understanding of *how we live our commitment to God and to others*. At the heart of our missionary life must be a harmonious integration of both aspects: the recognition that we are part of a wider tradition that guides and transforms us through a personal commitment to grow in holiness in the evangelising service of the poor.

¹ **"Consecrate"** is a word that can be used in two senses: * **in the active sense:** it is the action of *"consecrating"*, of *"endowing with the sacred"*; or, of *"dedicating something or someone to the sacred"*. If it is applied to a person, he or she consecrates himself or herself by striving to gradually take on in one's own life that which is characteristic of the sacred. Thus we speak, for example, of a person consecrating himself by working out in his own life the virtues that are directly or indirectly related to God. * **In the passive charge:** *"being consecrated"*, another person adds something of the divine to any other reality. All realities can be "consecrated": people, things, food, clothing, places, time, and so on. In this sense we can include various forms of consecration: canonical consecration, theological consecration, sacramental consecration, etc.

Consecration is the dynamism, the force, the energy that impels us to live our lives with meaning, promptness and diligence. The call to focus life on seeking the "state of perfection" that St. Vincent promoted is a constant challenge. We understand that we have not attained perfection, but we are on the way to it; and that reminds us of the importance of revitalising the living of the vows, and the cultivation of our virtues. The authenticity of our consecration is reflected in the way we live the "evangelical counsels and virtues" and respond to the needs of the poor, who are at the heart of our mission.

Therefore, the first question we are invited to ask ourselves in this plan of reflection in the form of retreats is: what weighs more heavily in my consecration: the active or the passive sense? What do you give more importance to in your daily life: the baptismal consecration? the priestly consecration? the consecration expressed through the vows? Am I aware of the dimensions proper to my consecration? How am I living them? It is obvious that living the dimensions in which "*you have been consecrated*" supposes a conscious, free, firm and constant decision to "*consecrate*" yourself, carrying out every day what you have promised in conscience and freely.

In this conviction, we join in the Pope's wish for the present ecclesial Jubilee: "*to be pilgrims of hope*". We reaffirm our itinerant and missionary identity to be a source of hope for those who, because of their conditions, feel that the promises of the Lord are far away and even obscured.

1st Retreat
September 2024



LET US GIVE OURSELVES TO GOD...

to do with us as it pleases
(XI, 762f)

Motivation

In this retreat I intend to submit the mystery of my "consecration" to God to an examination of conscience, prayer, contemplation and, above all, conversion. It is appropriate for me to begin with a brief reflection on my baptismal consecration, where I was clothed with Jesus Christ, priest, prophet and king. In this retreat I wish to recall that the basis of all consecration is the "offering of self", in memory of what Jesus Christ did, *"the eternal high priest"*². In this sense, to consecrate oneself means to become an *"offering"*, a most beautiful aspect of the Eucharistic liturgy³.

My **aim** must be to live the coming year 2025 *"as a grace that can make us more aware of the gift we have received"*⁴ and to direct my life in a renewed way towards holiness, towards its fullness. It is a matter of taking advantage of the double jubilee⁵ that we are celebrating, as a great opportunity to revitalise "the offering of my whole life to God", to give positive newness to the living of the vows, to the virtues and in general to "follow the Spirit of Jesus Christ", which are natural elements in the revitalisation of my identity and sense of belonging.

The tendencies which were visible at the end of the last century have become more pronounced and constitute today a cause of deep concern for the Church. In the midst of these trends, the consecrated person must maintain a constant concern to acquire a deeper understanding and experience of his consecration in the different areas: baptismal, priestly, charismatic, as well as other consecrations made. Everything must contribute to giving one's heart to Jesus Christ in a total way. He, who gives himself entirely because he loves me, is the only one capable of repairing my heart and disposing it entirely to the evangelisation of the poor.

I pray that God will give me the grace, in these times, to turn from my heart to the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

2. Opening Prayer

✚ Pray the prayer for the 4th Centenary of the Foundation of the CM

3. Points for prayer and meditation...

a. SEE

The living of the vows and the practice of the missionary virtues express my consecration. The times in which we live challenge us, as always, *"to be in the world without being of the world"*⁶. Various tendencies of the process of globalisation are working against our covenant with the Lord, especially

² "Christ has come as the high priest of the ultimate good". Heb 5,5-6; 9,11; 1 Pet 2,9; Heb 4,14-16

³ It is worth recalling here the tradition of having the people bring the offerings to the altar and the priest receive them, not only as "the fruit of the earth and of man's labour", but because of the commitment of the faithful to offer themselves as "a sacrifice pleasing to God, the Father almighty", "for the good of his holy Church". Thus "the life of the faithful, their praise, their suffering, their prayer and their work are united to those of Christ and to his total offering, and thus acquire a new value" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1368).

⁴ Paralleling the words of Pope Francis said to animate the Year of Consecrated Life (30 November 2014 to 2 February 2016).

⁵ The jubilee of the universal Church for the first 25 years of this "new missionary epoch", and the jubilee for the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the CM, which have coincided and call us even more strongly to give our whole life to God.

⁶ Jn 17, 11b-19

"worldliness or profanity⁷", which Pope Francis has so strongly contested. These and other tendencies today threaten the offering of the heart to God and to the good of our brothers and sisters. It has become urgent to reflect on the priesthood as an "offering of self⁸" and to seek ways of overcoming the damage done to the Christian vocation by the present mentality.

We understand by "**vocation**" God's call to life, and to live one's existence in a certain style of relationship with Him". The vocation accepted and assumed is already a consecration and is crystallised in the sacrament of "baptism". Through this fundamental "consecration" God takes man, His creature, and brings him, so to speak, into His family sphere. The baptised person becomes part of the "House" of the Father as a "son" who is united with his "brothers" in the spirit of the Holy Trinity (model of familiarity). It is obvious that this consecration presupposes a strong foundation in the theological virtues. It is not logical to consecrate oneself to God if one does not believe and trust in Him⁹; if one does not proactively await what He has promised; and, above all, if one does not love Him and give Him one's life.

What seems so obvious is not so obvious. We forget that to consecrate oneself is to "offer everything to God" and we go after other interests¹⁰. A newly ordained fellow deacon came into conflict with a non-ordained fellow deacon. I have never known whether it was to protect himself or as part of an unserious conscience, but he told him without being disturbed: "Be very careful, because I can excommunicate you! And when I received the sacrament of Holy Orders, what happened to Saint Peter¹¹ happened to me: a strange person approached me and, after congratulating me, said to me: "How much would it cost me to have some of the oil with which you have just been consecrated? They seemed to me to be jokes, but on second thoughts, they were said with a certain character of a very subjective truth.

These two anecdotes reveal the tension between a magical vision of ecclesiastical power and the true essence of ministry: serving God's people, without exercising control over them. They are two brief examples of attitudes and expectations transformed into practical misunderstandings about vocation and service, but they speak to the need to reflect deeply on the nature of consecration and the impact of clericalism¹² on the lives of those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed, clericalism is one of the main enemies of vocation, for as Pope Francis rightly mentions, it is a phenomenon that distorts the purpose of consecration and creates a barrier between ministers and the community.

Around clericalism there are serious questions about the meaning of consecrated life today. It is true that the decrease in the number of consecrated men and women due to age, illness and death is a cause for concern. But we should be much more concerned about the decline in vocations, which can be interpreted not only as a problem¹³, but as a sign that the way in which consecration is lived and presented today may not be attractive or relevant to the new generations. Some speak of vocations emerging in the more closed congregations, but questions also arise about these new vocations: why do the new vocations have a certain tendency to return to "*priestly fashions*" that have apparently already been relegated? What are these calls really looking for? All this invites us to a profound reflection on the relevance of the witness of consecrated persons, how this can be a key element to inspire others, and how they will unite "reserved for God" and "mission", the "public" commitment to witness in the midst of the world to the radicality of the Gospel.

At the heart of these brief reflections lies the conviction that we need to re-dimension consecration, so that it is not seen as "*a burden*", as "*a rigid contract*", but as a path to happiness and full service.

⁷ They have various manifestations: Clericalism, individualism, acedia coupled with a certain religious indifference, new forms of Pelagianism and Gnosticism.

⁸ LG 10

⁹ Rom 10, 14-17: Let us remember the question, how can they call on him in whom they have not believed?

¹⁰ Pope Francis reacts to this forgetfulness and gives us a lesson on the meaning we should give to the giving of offerings at Mass: "The Lord asks little of us, in ordinary life, he asks us for good will; he asks us for an open heart; he asks us for the desire to be better in order to welcome the One who offers himself to us in the Eucharist; he asks us for these symbolic offerings which will later become his Body and Blood".

¹¹ Acts 8, 9-24

¹² Pope Francis sees various current manifestations of this temptation or trial for the consecrated; and he hopes to lessen its impact on the Church, the "*simple and humble people who walk in the presence of the Lord*"... and which must be freed from clericalism, which is a whip, a scourge, a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the bride of the Lord; it enslaves God's holy and faithful people", because it responds more to the temptations of possession, power and self-satisfaction than to the call to holiness assumed in consecration.

¹³ Why is it so difficult for the new generations to have the illusion of consecration to God? There are even those who wonder: could it be that God no longer calls, chooses or sends?

Consecration needs to be given a more authentic approach to what it means to follow Jesus Christ, in person and in community. In a rapidly changing world where traditional structures are often challenged, the challenge is to find ways to resonate God's call in the hearts of new generations. With a renewed outlook and genuine witness, consecrated people can offer a model of life that is not only respected, but also inspires and attracts people to follow that path.

b. JUDGE

Baptismal consecration is radicalised in other overlapping consecrations and is expressed by "the taking of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience", the realisation of which takes many different forms¹⁴. The net meaning of consecration, because this is what Jesus Christ did, is to "*keep oneself for God*", to place oneself totally at his disposal, to be sent into the world to build the Kingdom and to serve one's brothers and sisters.

The first and deepest gesture of my consecration to God is gratitude for having been created with such dignity (Ps 8), and destined to reflect in the world my true condition as "the image and likeness of God¹⁵". Every human person is "**sacred**" because he or she is the most solemn fruit of the Creator's paternal goodness and tenderness¹⁶. With sadness we recognise that this is an aspect that is little brought into concrete life. Hence Pope Francis explicitly called for "*greater attention to be paid to the grave violations of human dignity that are currently taking place in our time*¹⁷", since many of the abuses committed against the person from childhood forget, or at least neglect, this natural consecration of the human person. And this is not only a secular problem, it also extends to the interior of consecrated life. Many problems in community life, failures in the vows, convictions and truths lived half-heartedly or half-heartedly, as well as other problems in ministry, have their roots in forgetting the dignity of the person.

Yet, in God's sight, the simple fact of "*being in his image and likeness*" is far greater than the failings and weaknesses of his creatures. His capacity for forgiveness and the gift of conversion that he offers us so repeatedly, guarantee that the Father continues to respect the dignity and freedom with which he has created us. So why should we justify ourselves, should we not say that this reality is the great reason for hope, and should it not encourage us enough to strive to regain our lost dignity? This "ontological dignity¹⁸" or "essential consecration" is sufficient motivation to set out on the road to a deeper conversion. The classic justification: "*it is human weakness*" sounds like permissiveness. Hence the Church is insisting on the need to excel in the human formation of all the baptised, to serve as a basic platform for their spiritual, theological and pastoral growth.

On the basis of this dignity, a superimposition of consecrations is added, which is very important in Vincentian mysticism:

- **Consecration in the Sacraments:** baptism, priestly ordination, and otherwise in the other sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation.
- **Consecration by means of "sacramentals":** so characteristic of the consecrated life, the emission of vows in their various forms...
- **Charismatic consecration:** consecrated to be a gift in the measure of the charism received which gives meaning to my life and makes me spend it: in putting on Jesus Christ; in evangelising the poor

¹⁴ Today we find "**associations**" which focus on their consecration (temporary or perpetual), the most general aspect of consecrated life; they include single and married lay people, virgins, widows, ascetics, hermits, priests, nuns, people consecrated privately (to the Blessed Virgin, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus...) Someone once said: "it even seems that the Holy Spirit is blowing again".

¹⁵ Dignitas infinita no. 1

¹⁶ Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith "Dignitas infinita on human dignity", 08.04.2024 "This dignity of all human beings can, in fact, be understood as "infinite" (dignitas infinita), as St. John Paul II affirmed in a meeting with people suffering from certain limitations or disabilities, [1] to show how the dignity of all human beings goes beyond all external appearances or characteristics of people's concrete lives".

¹⁷ Id supra: "some issues closely related to the theme of dignity, such as the drama of poverty, the situation of migrants, violence against women, human trafficking, war and others".

¹⁸ **Dignitas Infinita no. 7:** "the expression "human dignity" often runs the risk of lending itself to many meanings and therefore to possible misunderstandings [15] and "contradictions which lead us to ask whether the equal dignity of all human beings [...], [is] truly recognised, respected, protected and promoted in all circumstances". All this leads us to recognise the possibility of a fourfold distinction of the concept of dignity: ontological dignity, moral dignity, social dignity and finally existential dignity. The most important meaning remains, as has been argued so far, that linked to the ontological dignity that corresponds to the person as such by the mere fact of existing and having been willed, created and loved by God. This dignity can never be eliminated and remains valid beyond all circumstances in which individuals may find themselves".

and allowing myself to be evangelised by them; in forming others to share in Christ's service to the poor; in short, in fulfilling the charism received from the Holy Spirit.

- **In addition, we can add devotional consecrations:** e.g. consecrate to the Virgin Mary, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, etc.

It is frightening to see the pile of consecrations that weigh on our weak human nature. The psychologists are right in saying that we shoot too high for how small we are. I believe that Monsieur Vincent, well aware of the difficulty that all this implies, simply thought that we should be "*good Christians*", and that everything else is contained therein, and that is what he encourages us to do. His thoughts on baptism as a "*second birth*" are never to be underestimated. He makes it sufficiently clear that the main challenge for a Vincentian missionary is to "*put off his old human condition*" in order to put on his new *human condition*¹⁹. Once "*clothed in Christ*", the missionary disciple is called to "*reject what is unworthy of this name, and to fulfil what is meant by it*" as the Church specifies in her prayer.

It is quite possible that from this conviction was born the expression "***Giving oneself to God***"; it is the best phrase I can find to explain what consecration consisted in for Vincent de Paul. To give one's life to God, to let Him do with us what He pleases, remains today the great challenge for the Vincentian missionary. The succession of consecrations to which we have committed ourselves should lead us to a holiness of life beyond doubt, but it seems that this is not the case... As in the case of Vincent de Paul, any search for "perfection" must lead me to re-evaluate the sacramental consecrations I have received, and to empower myself with that conscious and free consecration which responds to the deep call of the Spirit, which is a matter of grace, of effort, and of time.

c. ACT

a. "**Giving oneself to God**" was not "*a nice idea*" for St. Vincent. Nor was it just "*a purpose*". It was his permanent task. Vincent knows that "*giving oneself to God*" means "*giving oneself to Jesus Christ*". Is it possible to give oneself to God without giving oneself to Jesus Christ? At what point did Vincent discover the value of his sacramental consecrations? What set him in motion towards a more radical, more conscious and free consecration? It is not very difficult to say. God gave him the grace of a great strength of will.

His dedication to God was not an act simultaneous to his baptismal or priestly consecration, but a "*pilgrim*" dedication, "he always walked in hope". A radical willingness to place himself entirely at the disposal of the one in whom he trusted. He had to go through many encounters with Jesus Christ and various experiences of failure and success, to reach the conviction of having been called by God "*to do with me what he wills*". St. Vincent makes this very clear in a rather late comment of his: "*As for me, if I had known what it was (to be a priest) when I had the temerity to enter into this state, as I later learned, I would have preferred to stay and till the soil rather than commit myself to such a tremendous state*". Perhaps by this time he had come to the conclusion that the most glamorous response of a lover is to "*give*" himself, and to "*give himself entirely*", and so he did.

b. **An experience to be repeated today in every missionary:** The Church affirms that, from its origins, "*there were men and women who set out to follow Christ more freely and to imitate him more closely*²⁰". This is important because Vincent de Paul is one of these, and this is his fundamental proposal to the missionaries of the "*Little Company*²¹": "*Jesus Christ, the only true Redeemer, came down from heaven to earth to exercise this office, made it the object of his life and death, and continues unceasingly to exercise the quality of Saviour by the communication of the merits of his shed blood. While He lived on earth, all His thoughts were concentrated on the salvation of mankind, and He continues with the same sentiments, because there He finds the will of His Father.... Let us pray God to inflame our hearts with the desire to serve Him; let us give ourselves to Him to do His will always....*

¹⁹ Gal. 3,27: "You who have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ".

²⁰ PC 1

²¹ Every consecration among us should have as its goal what **Constitution 1** says: "To follow Christ the evangeliser of the poor"....

Let us be certain that we will not be true Christians until we are ready to lose everything and to give our very lives for the love and glory of Jesus Christ²² .

c. Involve everyone in this adventure: Vincent de Paul will transmit his conviction to all: *"My sisters, let us place ourselves under her guidance, **let us give ourselves to her Son and to her** (the Virgin Mary) without reserve, so that she may be the guide of the Company in general and of each one in particular²³ "* For Vincent, all that he thinks, says and does will be sifted by the same sieve: *"Look at the precious field that God is opening for us in Madagascar, in the Hebrides and elsewhere. Let us ask him to inflame our hearts with the desire to serve him. **Let us give ourselves to him so that he may do what he wills with us**" (XI, 762f).*

Reading his texts, as radical as they are inspiring, reveals to me the real threat that the world presents to me and that I must face today. The aim of this retreat is not to go into texts to prove a thesis on consecration in St Vincent. To rethink my consecration, it is enough for me for now, the essential: it is necessary to strip myself of myself, of my selfish choices in order to give myself to God. This is the challenge that is so difficult for me to take up. This served many before, and it serves many of us now. This is the key to involve others, to make my consecration more attractive and credible.

d. Pilgrimage in hope: There is no lack of calls in the Church to put at the centre of my concerns the task of *"giving myself to God"*. This is the most effective means against the activist clericalism, and the classical functionalism into which so many of us have fallen and which it is now proposed to us to reject: *"A task driven by anxiety, pride, the need to appear and to dominate, will certainly not be sanctifying. The challenge is to live one's dedication in such a way that the efforts have an evangelical meaning and identify us more and more with Jesus Christ" (GE 28).*

There is no doubt that we have many things to do and we do them with the desire to evangelise, and to serve the poor. But... *"This does not imply disregarding moments of stillness, solitude and silence before God. On the contrary. Because the constant novelties of technological resources, the lure of travel, the countless offers for consumption, sometimes leave no empty spaces where the voice of God can resound. Everything is filled with words, epidermal enjoyment and noise at an ever-increasing speed. How can we not recognise that we need to stop this frenetic race to regain a personal space, sometimes painful but always fruitful, where sincere dialogue with God can take place? At some point we will have to perceive our own truth head on, to let it be invaded by the Lord, and this is not always achieved if we "do not find ourselves on the edge of the abyss of the most overwhelming temptation, if we do not feel the vertigo of the precipice of the most desperate abandonment, if we do not find ourselves absolutely alone, on the summit of the most radical solitude" [28]. Thus we find the great motivations that impel us to live our tasks to the full" (GE 29).*

I see in these words of Pope Francis an important reinforcement of our hope. It is time to start walking, or to follow the most important and radical path traced by St Vincent: *"**Let us give ourselves to him so that he may do what he wills with us**"* and the rest will follow.

²² XI, 74-5.

²³ X, 623