

Leadership in Religious Life

December 10, 2024



Article by Carbajo-Núñez M. published in the *Alphonsian Academy Blog*.

The 2021-2024 Synod acknowledged that consecrated life has developed numerous “practices of synodal living” over the centuries, and even today, “many communities are like laboratories for inter-cultural living.” At the same time, the Synod encourages leaders in consecrated life “to strengthen relationships in order to bring to life an exchange of gifts at the service of the common mission”^[1].

This is particularly necessary today as consecrated life faces significant transformation driven by sociocultural changes, vocational crises, and aging membership, especially in the West. This has led religious institutes to engage in profound reflection on their mission and identity.

1. Leaders must not focus on just keeping and administering

Today consecrated persons may face discouragement and a sense of inevitable decline, losing their prophetic spirit, hope, and creativity while holding onto nostalgia. To navigate this challenging period, they need to revive their hope and vision for renewal.

“More than an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia, it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities.”^[2]

Many religious leaders have tried to face present challenges by prioritizing the preservation of traditional activities over exploring new and innovative approaches. Frequently, they have adopted a nostalgic outlook, striving to revive past successes, sometimes by importing vocations from other continents without sufficient discernment or integration.

This approach, often referred to as a “programming method”, prioritizes preserving traditional activities that are no longer socially essential, as many have been taken over by civil authorities. The focus remains on preserving and enhancing established lifestyles and routines rather than

embracing new perspectives for transformation. When they finally realized that these activities become unsustainable, the response often shifts to repurposing buildings for income, such as through religious tourism, rather than reimagining and revitalizing their mission.

Instead, the Synod on Synodality emphasizes the need to develop leaders at every level of the Church who can foster "a culture of ecclesial discernment focused on mission" (S23df 86).

2. Religious leaders must promote a process of transformation

While planning and reflection are necessary, religious leadership must serve a higher spiritual vision, inspiring all to abandon complacent ways of living. To stay true to their vocation, the consecrated need dreams, vision, and "audacity".

Current challenges demand a dynamic fidelity to one's spiritual charism, transcending a purely pragmatic or numbers-focused perspective. The true threat to consecrated life lies not in declining membership but in the erosion of ideals and the embrace of mediocrity. There is, indeed, a profound difference between being a biblical "small remnant" and being "a leftover".

3. More than a program, the consecrated need a vision, an ideal

Consecrated life "is not about survival, but new life"^[3]. Religious life must embrace novelty and change as its core purpose, focusing on renewal rather than survival. This requires a deep structural transformation. As living organisms, religious institutes must adapt continually to various influences. They cannot survive without this process of transformation.

More than a program, the consecrated need a vision—an ideal that channels their energy and inspires them to remain fully open to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. This requires discernment to embrace the *novum* of history and confront the challenges they encounter, in a dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation, charism and prophecy.

Conclusion

Within the Church, the primary role of leadership is to inspire and motivate, unveiling the beauty of the Christian ideal to foster enthusiastic discipleship of Christ – a purpose that surpasses concerns for efficiency or flawless management.

Cultural change demands that religious institutes continually renew themselves to address emerging challenges, moving beyond discouragement and attachment to outdated routines. In this evolving context, they must consistently articulate their "why" – their core ideal and vision – to fully engage everyone in bringing it to life.

Leadership and fraternal life are essential to this renewal. Inspired by the deep faith and hope that drove the founders, the Consecrated are called to rediscover the essence of their charism and reawaken it through a profound process of transformation.

^[1] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, «"For a synodal Church: Communion, participation, mission". Final document» (Oct. 26, 2024), [S23df] 65, n. 65. The following paragraphs are taken from the article: Carabajo-Núñez Martín, «Leadership in a synodal Church and in Religious Life», in *Religious: Journal of Religious and Cross-cultural Studies* 9/2 (2024).

^[2] Francis, «Apostolic letter to all Consecrated people» (Nov 21, 2014), I,1, in AAS 106 (2014) 935-947.

[3] Francis, «Omelia,» (Feb 2, 2019) in *OR 29* (Feb 4-5, 2019) 11; García Paredes J.C.R., *Otra comunidad es posible. Bajo el liderazgo del Espíritu*, Claretianas, Madrid 2018.
