

CONSECRATED LIFE TODAY: Charisms in the Church and for the World

Bro. José Pablo Basterrechea
Secretary of the Union of Superiors General

Journeying Together to "Our" Synod
The Extraordinary Congress of the U.S.G.
(22 to 27 November 1993)

The title of this article, *Journeying Together to a Synod*, opens with a deliberate tautology. What does the word *Synod* mean - strictly according to its etymological sense - if not a "journeying together"? I shall continue to use the term 'to "our" Synod'. We ought to look on every Synod as our own, as a celebration of that mystery of communion, the Church, which throughout its history has always taken an interest in highly significant problems. However, we are obviously touched more closely by one that is dedicated to the study of Consecrated Life, understood as a part of the Church, as having well-defined characteristics and in which our life as Brothers is incorporated.

After the two assemblies of the Synod of Bishops which were devoted to studying the two major components of the Church itself, the "Christifideles Laici" (1987) and the Priesthood (1990), John Paul II declared (cf. the letter of the Secretary of State, 30 December, 1991) that the next ordinary assembly would deal with "the Consecrated Life and its role in the Church and in the world". The choice of topic came to the fore because, as a special section of the Church, it was worthy of attention after the other two major Church groups had been the focus of special consideration. And even more so because of the urgency for a review and an updating of the same Consecrated Life, after it had gone through an historical period which is extraordinarily rich in studies, revised statutes, experimentation and changes. These developments have had an effect on traditions and attitudes which for centuries had been regarded as immutable, and have given the religious life a significantly new image which has not always been either well understood or accepted. On the other hand, this Synod is fitting at a time when there is a widespread decline in the number of vocations to the various religious families, a decline which causes so much anxiety and which gives clear evidence that among today's young people the value and meaning of the religious life and its relevance to the real needs of humanity are not held in great esteem.

● The idea of an Extraordinary Congress as a preliminary to the convocation of this Synod.

Let us now proceed to give an account of the history of the Extraordinary Congress convened by the Union of Superiors General (U.S.G.) in order to carry out an in-depth study of

the essential elements which should characterise the Religious Life as a specially important section of the Consecrated Life in the Church.

This initiative had been under careful consideration since halfway through 1991. At this time, it had already been deemed necessary to re-examine the "reciprocal relationships" between bishops and religious, in the face of the frequently encountered difficulties of understanding, which had recently been particularly felt between CELAM and CLAR in Latin America. Then, in the light of this convocation of a Synod that was to examine such difficulties and to clarify such relationships, the idea of organising an Extraordinary Congress seemed to be a matter of special import.

There was the problem of assembling the Superiors General to take part in this kind of project. In addition, the invitation had to be extended to include a significant number of theologians, sociologists and qualified experts, as well as authorised representatives from the conferences of religious of different continents and diverse cultures, in order to guarantee more precise knowledge of the situations and problems, and a more authoritative approach to the guidance and solutions being sought. As a convenient date, within the timetable for preparation for the Synod, to allow for greater availability on the part of the Generals, the last week in November, 1993, was chosen. However, before this meeting, a considerable programme of work and consultation had already been set in motion.

● A Somewhat Extempore Congress.

Before assembling such a rich and varied gathering of influential persons, the Superiors General adopted, for their usual semi-annual meetings a plan which allowed them to make a methodical start on the main topics of the Congress. In May and November of 1992 and in May, 1993, with the help of theologians and a cross section of representative, competent and experienced pastors, the following studies were made: "The Religious Life in the Church: a gift and a lasting service" (May 1992), "Religious in the Constitutional Communion of the Church" (November 1992) and "Religious in the Evangelising Mission of the Church" (May 1993).

In April, 1992, questionnaires were sent to all Superiors General and to the national and regional conferences of religious. In these, they were asked for their considered views on: (1) "the sources of tension in today's Religious Life"; (2) "the state of relations among the bishops, the secular clergy, lay persons and religious"; (3) "the missionary challenges of our time"; (4) "the way in which the diverse charisms are embodied and developed in different cultural contexts"; (5) "the need for joint consultation and planning in inter-Institute collaboration". The numerous and well thought-out replies already received constitute an excellent basis for later analyses.

● The Evolution of the Congress.

The invitation to play an active part in the Congress was sent to all Superiors General, accompanied by one, or several, council members, according to the numerical importance of each Institute (1), to various Vatican dicasteri, to about thirty bishops, to representatives of secular institutes and lay movements and to some fifty theologians and specialists in the consecrated life. Likewise, the International Union of Superiors General was invited to be represented by fifty delegates of female religious - Superiors General and experts (2).

On 22nd November were gathered in the Augustinianum in Rome (the Faculty of Theology of the Augustinians) 525

members of the Congress - superiors, pastors and experts - from very different countries and cultures, and who are generally recognised as both representative and competent. In the plenary sessions, as in the 27 language working groups, Spanish, French, English and Italian were adopted as the official languages.

The general theme of the Congress, *The Consecrated Life Today - Charisms in the Church and for the World*, significantly includes the adverb "Today". What we were seeking was a genuine up-dating of realities and lasting principles. Logically, the first day of the Congress was devoted to studying the reality, the "today", of the religious life. In order to implement this fully, the task of preparing and expounding the theme was entrusted to two highly qualified religious who have carried out exceptionally wide-ranging and technically sound investigations and surveys on the present reality of the Religious Life. E. P. Nygren, C.M., and Sister M. Ukeritis, C.S.J., both sociologists and professors in De Paul University (Chicago), presented a condensed synthesis of their sociological study, "FORUS" (the Future of the Religious Orders in the U.S.A.), which was conducted with 816 congregations or provinces, comprising 121,439 male and female religious. Father Jesús López, S.J., and Sister Begoña Isusi, M. M.B., of the D.I.S. (Department of Sociological Research, in Madrid) gave an account, documented with complete statistics and graphs, of the results of their research carried out with more than 200,000 religious, male and female, of many different countries, particularly in Spain and in Latin America. Both accounts, analysed and commented on in the afternoon study groups, formed an excellent starting point for the talks and discussions of the following days.

Over the next three days, the main speakers, Fr. Amalados, S.J., India; Fr. Ciardi, O.M.I., Italy; and the three theologians, Fathers Maccise, Mexico, Superior General of the Carmelites; Arnáiz, S.M., Spain, and García Paredes, C.M.F., Spain, developed the three focal topics of the Congress. "Religious in Mission", "Religious and the Ecclesial Communion" and "How to Understand and Present the Consecrated Life Today". Their addresses, backed by a deep knowledge of the respective topics and, moreover, developed by the work and the discussions that took place in the semi-annual meetings referred to above, were, for all participants, a source of plentiful and well-founded subjects for analysis and reflection. Their proposals were fully enriched by the round table contributions of the theologians and experts from 21 countries and from all continents, whose contributions completed and enriched even more so what had been delivered with such authority. All the interventions had been accompanied by an instruction to adopt a decidedly active attitude during these days: certainly the work of the 27 language groups during the afternoons of these days, and that of the five main groupings into which these 27 study units came together at the end of the day, brought reality and new richness to the themes, which had been so admirably dealt with each morning. Their observations and suggestions, collated by the secretaries of the working groups, have been included in the acts of the Congress, now being printed, together with the basic reports and the contributions of the main speakers.

On Friday, 26th November, Fr. García Paredes set forth the "trends emerging from this week's work". In a relevant synthesis, he made comments on and stressed details of the work of the different days. In this Theological Synthesis, which I could not hope to summarise here and which will be available to all, along with the subject matter of the Congress, in the publication which the Ediciones San Pablo is currently preparing, aspects of the reality and the function

of the Religious Life today are finely concentrated in depth, based on what came out of the exchanges that took place. How many are we, and in what moment do we find ourselves? What kind of world are we living in and how does it challenge us? The consecrated Life: a prophetic, eschatological stimulus for the mission of the Church. The Consecrated Life: a gift for communion. How do we go about explaining our charismatic spirituality in the Church? The future in the Spirit of the Consecrated Life.

Without giving way to sentimental elation, mere flights of fancy or to currents of opinion which are more flamboyant than well founded, these pages give an as exact as possible outline of this "identity and function of the Consecrated Life today", which the Synod aims to examine. The insight, which with regard to the subject under discussion is offered by the Congress that the U.S.G. succeeded in setting up in Rome towards the end of 1993, eleven months before the Synod Fathers meet, turned out to be particularly authoritative and representative. In the audience on Saturday, 27th November, which John Paul II gave to those who took part, the Holy Father expressed his happiness with the work carried out by this Congress, marked - as the Pope observed - "by its worldwide dimension and by the complete vision which came to it on account of its having been prepared by those in the highest authority from the diverse religious Institutes".

Conscious of this responsibility and consequent on it, the Superiors General met in assembly a few days afterwards, on 1st and 2nd December, in order to make a thorough examination of all that the Congress had collated and produced, and by this means to prepare a final document containing a compilation of their points of view, their convictions and the proposals to be placed before the Fathers of the Synod and also given to all the bishops of the world and to the superiors of all religious Institutes. In line with historical evidence, lived out specifically in the instance of each Founder, "the charisms in the Church for the world" highlight and are expressed as the work of the Spirit, by and through whose movement they are gathered together in following Christ. It is up to the Magisterium of the Church to discern and endorse such divine interventions.

During the past months, we have had occasion to see and to appreciate very many reactions to the "Lineamenta" offered to the Church as an impetus for a lengthy series of studies, congresses and meetings organised by religious throughout the world. Efforts, such as these, to attain a better understanding and definition of what the Consecrated Life is and what we can expect from it today, show that the Synod is already starting to function, in this period of preparation. Taken together, they are a valuable work of the Holy Spirit, perpetual animator of the Church. Given the many circumstances to which the Pope made kindly reference, we hope that the proposals of the Extraordinary Congress of the U.S.G. receive the consideration that they deserve and that they are helpful, in a special way, towards attaining a fuller realisation of the hopes that "Our Synod" continues to raise.

(1) Our Institute was especially strongly represented by the Brother Superior General and seven other Brothers.

(2) The U.S.I.G. has organised its own series of studies with superiors general and theologians of both sexes. An interchange of results between the two Unions of Superiors (U.S.G. and U.S.I.G.) has been planned.