

Mount Tabor: the “Place” of Consecrated Persons in the Church  
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It pleases me to return to the diocese of Providence where some fifty-three years ago I began at Providence College my own adventure with religious life. So I express gratitude to Father Timothy Reilly, JCL, Chancellor of the Diocese of Providence, for his kind invitation. My visit back to Providence coincides with the Year of Consecrated Life which will close on the World Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2016. Allow me also to observe how much Saint John’s Seminary in Boston, which is just a short hop north on Interstate 95, appreciates our seminarians from the Diocese of Providence. I have divided my conference into three parts: (1) Inhabiting Mount Tabor; (2) Obscuring Tabor; (3) Renewing Tabor.

1. Inhabiting Mount Tabor

The Church recognizes three specific vocations whereby baptized men and women sanctify themselves and merit the reward of everlasting life. They are: lay, clerical, and consecrated. In the life of the laity, numerically of course the largest group, Christ is glorified as the foundation from which all created reality draws value and meaning. They, the baptized men and women without whom the Church would look, as Cardinal Newman remarked, foolish, are meant to transform “temporal affairs,” that is, the family, the marketplace, and political life.<sup>1</sup> In order to accomplish this high purpose, the laity dwell in the *familiaris consortio*, within the family, or the domestic church. Their “very special” consecration then comes with marriage, whereas the status of the single person supposes their involvement in ecclesial movements and other forms of communitarian dedication to God.<sup>2</sup> The second vocation is that of the cleric, Bishop, priest, and deacon. In the life of the priest, Christ reveals himself as Head and Shepherd, who never ceases to concern himself with the good of the people redeemed by his blood. They,

Bishops and priests, exercise the ministry of pastoral charity.<sup>3</sup> Their lives remain ordered to worship and the care of souls. Diocesan priests, wherever they may in fact reside, “dwell” in what is called a presbyterate, and in others groupings that are related to the Bishop in the local Church.<sup>4</sup> In this context, “to dwell” means to find one’s place there. The clerics’ consecration comes from the one sacrament of Holy Orders.

The third vocation, which includes both lay persons and clerics, is that of consecrated life. In the virtuous life of consecrated persons, Christ is *contemplated* as the eschatological goal to which all tends, the ultimate end, as it were, of all that exists. Consecrated persons dedicate themselves to Christ with “undivided heart.”<sup>5</sup> Because of their withdrawal from engagement with secular preoccupations, the Church regards consecrated persons as icons of the Transfigured Christ. These consecrated persons dwell in a circle of “fraternal life in communion” which can take many forms. The basic form remains the monastery. However, there are other communions or orders, for example, of virgins, of hermits, and of widows. The Church recognizes contemplative institutes, apostolic religious, secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, and other new forms of consecrated life. Those who dwell, however, in these “communions” may not observe the strict rhythms of community life that one finds in a monastery.

According to recognized practice, the consecrated person becomes consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels, that is, of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Because these vows or promises make the consecrated person best resemble the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ, the Church teaches that this consecrated form of life enjoys “an objective superiority” among the three vocations.<sup>6</sup> This teaching reflects the ancient structure of the Church in which the monk and the Bishop stand at the center of the Church’s life. In spite of what is often taught about the Second Vatican Council, this hierarchical structure still holds good within the Catholic

Church. Equality with respect to the call to holiness does not mean egalitarian status within the Church. At the same time, the objective superiority of consecrated life does not mean that every consecrated person automatically becomes holier than everyone else. It means rather that the form of life enjoys a higher degree of perfection than one finds in marriage and even in the priesthood. Obviously, each of these vocations affords those who embrace them the opportunity for holiness and holds out their unique excellences. This is especially true of the priesthood which bestows on the priest the power to forgive sins and to transubstantiate.

One should not imagine that the three vocations remain exclusively ordered to only the sanctification of the individuals who embrace them. Each of these consecrated vocations enjoys a direct relationship to the task that the Church receives from the Lord, namely, the task of transforming the world. Today we speak of the transformation of culture or, more recently, of evangelization.

Bishops and diocesan priests enjoy their specific roles in evangelization through the enactment of the Gospel, whereas the consecrated person stands at the spiritual center of this divinely mandated work. The consecrated person abides as a living icon of transformed Catholic life. For this reason, the consecrated person, according to the divine plan for the Church, occupies a “place” on Mount Tabor, the biblically warranted venue of maximum transformation by God’s grace. Mount Tabor, as you will recall from the Gospel account, witnesses Christ’s Transfiguration (see Mt 17: 1,2). “This [standing at the center] is particularly true,” so the Magisterium affirms, “whenever one descends from the ‘mountain’ with the Master and sets off on the road which leads from Tabor to Calvary.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, in this life, contemplation does not afford escape from reality. [One should carefully note the difference between Christian contemplation and religious or philosophical lifestyles that promise escape from the limitations

of matter by the practice of techniques that resemble contemplation.<sup>8]</sup> Christian consecrated persons direct the eyes of the faithful towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven.<sup>9</sup> By their “place” on Mount Tabor, consecrated persons discover themselves ordered to the transformation of created realities, namely, of all that exists, including human intelligence. The vision of consecrated life that the Church holds out includes a cosmic dimension, one in which the classical monastery stands out as an icon of the New Jerusalem.

In fact, to discover the source of what the Church holds about consecrated persons, we must return to the beginning of Western monastic history. Saint Benedict stands at the origin of the unique contribution that consecrated persons make to the transformation of culture. For more than 1,500 years, it has been the prerogative of Western monks to show that learning allows one to approach God, even though the monk must advance beyond secular studies in order to move toward eternal life. In his classic exposition of monastic culture, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, Dom Jean Leclercq speaks about “devotion to heaven” as the dominant disposition that guided the educational work of the medieval monks, which along with agriculture were the principal modes of evangelization that monasteries undertook.<sup>10</sup> Some hold that Western culture as we have known it grew out of the monasteries that, after Saint Benedict, spread rapidly throughout Europe.

The document from the Second Vatican Council that treats religious or consecrated life is called *Perfectae Caritatis*, “Of the Perfection of Charity.” Some thirty years later, the 1996 Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope Saint John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, explains this conciliar document and, even today, expresses best what the Church holds about consecrated life. There we read that “the deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed

in relation to the Holy Trinity.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, only a theological hermeneutic guarantees an authentic interpretation of religious and other forms of consecrated life. Sociological, psychological, and entrepreneurial analyses of religious life are necessarily self-limiting. They prove themselves unable to reach up to the Trinity.

Most Catholics encounter consecrated persons who are religious and who engage in some distinctive apostolic work within the Church. However, as already mentioned, other forms of consecrated life do exist in the Church. As important as institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate are, men and women hermits set the gold standard for consecrated life. They invite us, says Pope Saint John Paul II, “never to lose sight of the supreme vocation, which is to be always with the Lord.”<sup>12</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas reflects this view when he writes that “solitude befits those already perfect.”<sup>13</sup> While it is true that the hermit belongs to an order of hermits, the vocation to live alone with the Lord offers an outstanding example of the consecrated life. Some of you may have seen Philip Gröning’s 2006 film, “Into the Great Silence.”<sup>14</sup> The Carthusian vocation, which essentially is eremitic in a community setting, exemplifies what consecrated life embodies. Again, “solitude befits those already perfect,” declares Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, the Church holds that “consecration inevitably implies mission. These are two facets of one reality.”<sup>15</sup> When the Carthusian says Mass in his cell, he reaches out to the whole world. All consecrated persons reach out to the world by their devotion to contemplating the face of the Transfigured Christ. Diocesan priests enjoy the same influence through their offering of the Holy Mass. Just as the Church cannot exist without the Mass, so she cannot express the fullness of her reality without a Mount Tabor and those who, metaphorically, inhabit it.

## 2. Obscuring Tabor

As the history of the Church reveals, sometimes consecrated persons obscure the brilliance of Tabor. With the exception of the Carthusians, no religious institute has survived without reform movements. Sometimes, however, reforms fail or do not last. “Broken things are ugly,” affirms Aquinas. It is easy to break up consecrated life. In October, 2013, the archbishop-secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life told a conference that over 3,000 men and women religious leave the consecrated life each year.<sup>16</sup> The reasons vary, but each reflects a refusal to accept the complete form of consecrated life. Consider one statistically verifiable example of break up: There are various conjectures that explain what happened to the great number of apostolic sisters in the United States who, since the Enlightenment, successfully created and sustained the largest private school system, health care system, and social work network in the world. The lesson that we can draw from the decline of the great mother houses once found in our country—to speak only about women religious for the moment—is that consecrated life in order to survive must maintain those essential elements that the Church identifies as indispensable for consecrated life. Beautiful religious life requires all of its parts.<sup>17</sup> The Church makes this requirement plain: “The nature, end, spirit and character of the institute, as established by the founder or foundress and approved by the Church, should be preserved by all, together with the institute’s sound traditions.”<sup>18</sup> Broken things are ugly. What lacks essential elements is broken. No one is drawn by the defective. Who buys an automobile with only three good tires? Above all, in order to preserve the identity of a religious institute, one must make the following of Christ, the *sequela Christi*, “the supreme rule of life.”<sup>19</sup> Then the stipulated specifics that are required for a complete realization of consecrated life will fall into place. Institutes of consecrated life that sustain their integral charism ensure that Mount Tabor remains a place of luminous beauty.

*Vita consecrata* reminds us that “the consecrated life proclaims what the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, brings about by his love, his goodness and his beauty.”<sup>20</sup> Beauty implies due proportion and harmony. Consecrated persons take on themselves the task of reconciling the classical forms of consecrated life with the reality of diversity. To put this otherwise, consecrated life requires inculturation. Just as the broken is ugly, so is the distended. Since the Second Vatican Council, some classical forms of religious consecration have lost a sense of the proportionate and the harmonious as judged with reference to their founding charism. Consider, for example, the requirement of common life that the Church stipulates for religious consecrated persons. It would be impossible to estimate the number of arrangements that have been established either to accommodate diverse commitments of apostolic activity or to facilitate the felt needs of personal preference. Still, living under one roof distinguishes religious from other forms of consecrated persons. Think of the Dominicans at Providence College or the Benedictine monks at Portsmouth Abbey.

When common life disappears altogether (and there are legitimate allowances), then consecrated religious disappear. The empty monasteries of Europe (some of which underwent forcible dissolution) bear witness to this truth. Such a turn of events proves gravely unfortunate. Religious life requires strengthening. For in fact, religious persons account for the largest number of consecrated persons. Virgins, widows, and hermits, secular institutes, and societies of apostolic life do not enjoy the same numbers. In each of these forms of consecrated life, however, one finds a specific proportion and harmony that characterizes a consecrated person’s life and its relationship to the specific mission that the Church recognizes as his or hers.

Let me give another example of proportion and harmony. This comes as a positive illustration drawn from the specific ends of the contemplative life. There exists a small but

growing community of Dominican contemplative nuns that has just paid off the first (since World War II) construction mortgage for a new monastery. [They still need to build a chapel!] This new fully amortized monastery stands on a hilltop in Linden, Virginia, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. The nuns of Saint Dominic's Monastery are also among the few Dominican nuns in the world to begin their day together at 3:30 A.M. with the recitation of the Night Office. These nuns also restored the monastic grille in the main parlor and wear the traditional veil of contemplative nuns. They exhibit a sterling example of what maintaining due proportion and harmony within religious life entails. To borrow a phrase, the nuns are doing something beautiful for God. The four senior nuns who founded the monastery have been joined in a short period of time by more than nine novice nuns. Call it Tabor in the Shenandoah valley. Similar proportions and balances can be identified for and apply to other forms of consecrated life. In short, consecrated life is meant to shine forth in its integral, proportionate, and balanced splendor. Tabor always resplends with beauty.

Consecrated life shines forth, like the Transfiguration, with beauty which is recognized by brightness and color. "Spiritual beauty," says Aquinas, "which is the same as the honorable good, [consists] in fair dealing according to the candor of reason."<sup>21</sup> Because the modern mind has lost a deep appreciation for the candor of reason, today's world also has lost the sense of spiritual beauty. Think of contemporary sexual ethics. There is no need to substantiate this assertion. It should be self-evident to anyone who opens his eyes. "Clearness and proportion are both rooted in mind," says Thomas Aquinas, "whose function is to order and light up a symmetry."<sup>22</sup> Aquinas goes on to affirm that "beauty, pure and essential, dwells in the contemplative life, wherefore it is said of the contemplation of wisdom: 'and I shall become a lover of her beauty' (Wis 8: 2)." The Church, in fact, esteems the purely contemplative life



above other forms of consecrated life. She teaches that “men and women religious *completely devoted to contemplation are in a special way* an image of Christ praying on the mountain.”<sup>23</sup>

The mountain is Tabor. The view does not necessarily prejudice the position of Saint Thomas Aquinas which holds that the so-called mixed life of contemplative and active religious holds the place of prominence in the Church since “it is better to illumine than merely to shine.”<sup>24</sup>

Aquinas, who does not comment moreover on the difficulty involved in one’s achieving this ideal which is that of the Dominicans, makes his comparison on the basis of the end or objective that the religious institute achieves.

### 3. Renewing Tabor

These remarks on consecrated life are meant to encourage those already vowed to consecrated life to preserve in their fidelity to the directions set down by the Magisterium for the on-going renewal and support of religious life. They also intend to point out the specific character of the consecrated life in the Church. Priests and lay people need to understand what consecrated life brings to the Church. They need also to attain an understanding that reaches beyond the convenient and the pragmatic. Because of the unique relationship that a consecrated person enjoys with Christ, consecration and marriage are mutually exclusive. Some priests are consecrated; whereas the normative dwelling place for the cleric, as I have said above, remains the presbyterate, that is, the diocesan priest gathered around his Bishop.

The title of the 1965 conciliar document on consecrated life, *Perfectae caritatis*—of perfect charity—sums up what consecrated persons aim to accomplish. Contemplation of the transfigured face of Christ approaches on earth what happiness in heaven involves. The vision of God belongs to those who love God above all things and the neighbor as themselves, those who have done his will throughout the ages. For those communities, both lay and clerical, who devote

themselves to apostolic tasks, *Perfectae caritatis* stipulates that “the entire religious life...should be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity with a religious spirit.”<sup>25</sup> When so-called active religious (whom we most often encounter in our parishes and dioceses) fulfill their vocation, then they bring the experience of Tabor to bear on whatever they do.

It falls to the other two vocations in the Church to encourage vocations to the consecrated life. Like all special vocations in the Church, training young people to accept the grace of a vocation to consecrated life begins in the home. Parents need to explain why the Church cannot live with only lay people. The Reform movements of the sixteenth century effectively made that claim. No priests; no bishops; no monks; no nuns. In Memphis recently, I learned that the grandfather of President James K. Polk (d. 1849), a certain Ezekiel Polk (d. 1824), who was a confirmed deist, had inscribed on his tombstone: Bishops and priests are odious things. When his grandson ran for President, the Polk family had the saying etched out.<sup>26</sup> Such a precaution may not be necessary today. In fact, it may help a presidential candidate for the electorate to know that his grandfather was a deist. However, no Catholic should judge our present state of political life ideal for Gospel witness. A secularized culture urgently requires the light that shines forth from Tabor in order to avoid a reductionism that leaves only the state as a principle of organization for human life. We call this totalitarianism. The example of the resistance that the Little Sisters of the Poor in Denver have put up, with generous help from others, to the federally mandated requirement to provide their employees with contraceptives offers a contemporary example of the light that shines forth from Tabor. In this witness you see a verification of the Second Vatican Council’s warning that authentically apostolic activity happens best when it is also authentically religious witness. Something similar may be said for the other venues where consecrated persons have traditionally labored, namely healthcare and education. Recall that

before these enterprises became functions of the secular state, the Catholic Church through the agency of consecrated men and women provided these services for a broken world.

Diocesan priests play an important role in promoting vocation to the consecrated life. Bishops and priests are charged to explain the supernatural realities that make religious consecration a reasonable activity. Bishops and priests are certainly not odious things. Priests also have the pastoral charge to sustain consecrated persons in their vowed life. I bring this conference to a conclusion by appealing to all present to renew their efforts to make consecrated life known and loved in the Church. Cardinal Newman thought the Church would look foolish without lay people. Without monks and nuns and all other varieties of consecrated life, the divine plan for the Church would suffer diminishment, gravely.<sup>27</sup>

## END NOTES

1. See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.2. The Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christifideles laici* develops this theme. For the Newman quote, see John Coulson, *Introduction to John Henry Newman, On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1961), pp. 18-19.
2. See *CIC* can 835 ¶ 4.
3. The Post-Synodal Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* develops this theme. See *PDV* no. 21 for the note on pastoral charity.
4. See *PDV* no. 31.
5. See *LG* no. 42.
6. *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata of the Holy Father John Paul II 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*, no. 32.
7. *Vita consecrata*, no. 40.
8. See Romanus Cessario, O.P., “*Miscere colloquia: On the Authentic Renewal of Catholic Spirituality*,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 11 (2013): 627–47.
9. *Vita consecrata*, no. 1
10. Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), chap. 4.
11. *Vita consecrata*, no. 21.
12. *Vita consecrata*, no. 7.
13. *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 188, art. 8.
14. “Nestled deep in the postcard-perfect French Alps, the Grande Chartreuse is considered one of the world’s most ascetic monasteries. In 1984, German filmmaker Philip Gröning wrote to the Carthusian order for permission to make a documentary about them. They said they would get back to him. Sixteen years later, they were ready. Gröning, sans crew or artificial lighting, lived in the monks’ quarters for six months—filming their daily prayers, tasks, rituals and rare outdoor excursions. This transcendent, closely observed film seeks to embody a monastery, rather than simply depict one—it has no score, no voiceover and no archival footage. What remains is stunningly elemental: time, space and light. One of the most mesmerizing and poetic chronicles of spirituality ever created, INTO GREAT SILENCE dissolves the border between screen and audience with a total immersion into the hush of monastic life. More meditation than documentary, it’s a rare, transformative theatrical experience for all.” See <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?directoryname=intogreatsilence>
15. 31 May 1983 document of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, “Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate,” no. 23.
16. For a report on the statement, see <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=19526> (accessed 27 October 2015).
17. For some indication of these parts, see “Essential Elements.” See also, Romanus Cessario, O.P., “Love, Friendship, and Beauty: On the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Magisterial Document about Religious Life and the Apostolate,” *Logos* 11 (2008): 147-163.
18. “Essential Elements,” no. 14, citing *CIC* 578.

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19. "Essential Elements," no. 13, citing *CIC* 662.
20. *Vita consecrata*, no. 20.
21. *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 114, art. 2. (Gilby translation).
22. *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 180, art. 2, ad 3. (Gilby translation).
23. *Vita consecrata*, no. 32 citing the Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, no. 46.
24. See *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 188, art. 6.
25. "Essential Elements," no 12 citing *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 8.
26. Here lies the dust of old E.P.  
One instance of mortality;  
Pennsylvania born, Car'lina bred,  
In Tennessee died on his bed  
His youthful days he spent in pleasure,  
His latter days in gath'ring treasure;  
From superstition liv'd quite free  
And practiced strict morality.  
To holy cheats was never willing  
To give one solitary shilling,  
He can foresee, and in foreseeing  
He equals most of men in being  
That church and state will join their pow'r  
And mis'ry on this country show'r.  
And Methodists with their camp bawling,  
Will be the cause of this down falling.  
An era not destined to see,  
It waits for poor posterity  
First fruits and tithes are odious things  
And so are Bishops, Priests and Kings
27. See *Vita consecrata*, no. 1.