Decree on the Suitable Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*)
Victor Clore


This document morphed several times, beginning with a hackneyed schema, not satisfactory to most Council Fathers. Then, along with several other schema, in an effort to streamline the council agenda, it suffered a drastic demotion to a simple list of propositions; this was unacceptable to many bishops, especially those who were themselves members of religious orders. Some bishops proposed simply to include a chapter on Vowed Religious Life in *Lumen Gentium*, which was being drafted. This became Ch VI. Finally, during the recess between the third and fourth sessions, a draft for a document was reconstituted, which became the basis for the present decree.

*Perfectae Caritatis* begins with a reference to *Lumen Gentium*, which states that the *gospel counsels* have always been accepted as exemplars of the true charity that reveals the unmistakable presence of the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, four chapters of *Lumen Gentium* relate to the religious life: Ch II, The People of God; Ch. IV, The Laity; Ch. V, The Universal Call to Holiness; and Ch. VI, Religious – all of which complement *Perfectae Caritatis*.

### Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)
**Chapter II  The People of God (#9-17)**

Practically everything in Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* is a fresh understanding. The whole people shares in Christ’s work of salvation as priest, prophet and shepherd. “The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, though they differ in essence and not simply in degree, are nevertheless interrelated: each in its own particular way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. … [T]he faithful… by virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist, and they exercise their priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer… and by active charity.” The whole People exercises Christ’s priesthood by virtue of their baptism (i.e., they are not delegated to do so by the hierarchy).

This new understanding of all the baptized faithful taking an active, conscious participation in the work of salvation sets up a new context for the vowed religious life. Up until now, it was assumed that most of the laity are mere passive recipients of the Church’s ministry. Vowed Religious, although *lay members* of the church, were considered to be the standard exemplars of the way to engage in an active, conscious participation in the work of evangelization and service.

### Chapter IV  The Laity (#30-38)

**#30**  *All* members of the church are called to share in Christ’s saving work, by virtue of baptism & confirmation.

**#33** There are two distinct forms of *lay apostolate*: “The laity have the specific vocation to make the church present and active in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth.” “… [T]he laity can be called to a more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who assisted the apostle Paul… appointed by the hierarchy to carry out certain ecclesiastical offices which have a spiritual aim in view.” [Up until now, these two aspects of apostolate were done mainly by people in religious orders, with an exceptional few people, not in vows, doing *lay apostolate*.]

**#35** Christian family life has a special value in the laity’s prophetic office. Married people also take a vow, but the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience make the major difference for members of religious life.

### Chapter V  The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church (#39-42)

**#39, 40** Everyone in the church is called to holiness, whatever their condition or rank. Holiness is especially manifested in the *evangelical counsels*, which are recommended, but (in this paragraph) they are unique to a very few, rather than the norm for all. All the faithful are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity. Even though this section is not describing vowed religious, it nevertheless uses the terminology that traditionally describes the three vows – poverty, chastity and obedience. Note that *chastity* is not limited to those who live a life of *celibacy* or *virginity*. Chastity describes mutual respect, selflessness, decency, etc., which everyone should practice. The term *chastity* is routinely misused in place of *celibacy* these documents.

**#41** In different kinds of life and duties, one holiness is cultivated by all who are led by the Spirit of God – beginning with bishops, called to exercise their ministry with holiness; then priests who “form the spiritual crown of the bishop;” then deacons, then clerics, then married people, then widows and single people and finally “those also who are crushed by poverty, weakness, or various hardships, or who suffer persecution for the sake of justice… united with Christ in suffering for the world’s salvation.” This hierarchical ordering of holiness is a throw-back to traditional piety, and flies in the face of any attempt to promote a “universal call to holiness.”
Chapter VI Religious (#43-47)

The evangelical counsels have been recognized by the church from very early days as an exemplary way of consecrating one’s life to God, in various forms of solitary and communal living, participating in the life and death of Christ, for the salvation of the whole church. The religious state is not an intermediary condition between the hierarchy and the laity; rather, both clerics and laity may respond to the call to religious vows.

The council acknowledges that vowed profession of evangelical councils unquestionably belongs to the church’s life and holiness, even though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church. (1)

The profession of evangelical counselors is both a freedom to dedicate oneself wholeheartedly to the Kingdom, and also a sign to all the members of the church to carry out the duties of their Christian vocation.

The hierarchy regulates the practice of the evangelical counsels, and approves these communities’ rules of life; members of religious communities have a duty of reverence and obedience towards the bishops.

Living the evangelical counsels involves renunciation; “This is not an obstacle to personal development, but by its very nature is highly conducive to this development.” [Nothing is said about how this happens.]

Lumen Gentium, Ch. VI rehearses most of the familiar ground rules for religious life. There is little recognition that religious life will need to create a new interface with the now-empowered baptized and confirmed laity. These separate chapters seem to be written by totally different groups.

Decree on the Suitable Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)

Perfectae Caritatis takes for granted the conventional nature of religious life, and is mainly about the renewal of religious life, with the same goal of the council itself – aggiornamento.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is Familiar?</th>
<th>What is Developing?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 The practice of the gospel counsels is a way to search for true charity, which &quot;reveals the unmistakable presence of the kingdom of heaven.&quot;</td>
<td>#1 This present decree considers the life and rule of vowed persons, &quot;to respond to their needs in the modern world.&quot; The identification with Christ in a complete gift of self is a vital force in today’s world.</td>
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<td>#5 Religious live for God alone, abandoning worldly things. The church accepts their offering. “It is through humility and obedience, fortitude and chastity that they experience the kenosis of Christ (Phil 2:7-8) and the life of his Spirit.”</td>
<td>#1.4 These norms are for the suitable renewal of religious life, of societies of common life without vows, and secular institutes [more recent innovations].</td>
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<td>#6.2-3 Religious develop an intense spirit and practice of prayer. Fed by Holy Scripture and the bread of heaven, religious love their shepherds as sons and daughters, and all members of Christ as sisters and brothers.</td>
<td>#2 Appropriate renewal involves returning to the original genius of the religious founders, together with modifications of such foundations to accommodate new circumstances.</td>
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They experience an ever-growing sense of identity with the church, wholly committed to the apostolate.

#7 Some religious are contemplative; they “have chosen the better part,” but even their way of life is to be renewed.

#8 The church boasts very many various foundations, some clerical, some lay, all with different apostolic aims, with great diversity. All are based on a loving relationship with Christ. Truly suitable renewal will likewise assume different forms.

#12.1 The commitment to “chastity” (they mean celibacy) “wonderfully frees the affections for a more fervent love of God and all humanity.”

#12.2 Obedience increases the freedom of God’s children; it is not destructive of human dignity, rather it realizes personality more fully.

#24 Priests, teachers and parents must be tireless in recommending genuine vocations to religious life; and the members’ witness of their own way of life is the best recommendation in the search for new candidates.

[In 1965, the supply of religious vocations was not a concern in the United States, but the European church was beginning to experience a drifting away from religious practice in general, and religious life in particular.]

#6.2 They should take up their Bibles daily in quest of the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ.

#9 The monastic life, with devout service within the monastery, is to be revered and nurtured.

#10 Religious congregations of laymen and laywomen are an expression of commitment to the gospel counsels, while functioning in pastoral work in teaching, healing, etc. They are encouraged to adapt their way of life to contemporary needs. Although orders of men remain clearly lay, a few members may be ordained to serve their communities.

#11 Secular institutes also live the gospel counsels, and they must “sustain their forceful, world-wide apostolate, at once in and of the world,” with spiritual initiation and ongoing formation.

#12.2 “Religious must reject the specious teaching that absolute continence is impossible, or at least inimical to human maturity… Aspirants must have “adequate preparation and the presence of both emotional maturity and psychological balance… and be led to integrate religious celibacy into the wholeness of a balanced personality.” [This was a sound insight, but communities were more or less successful in carrying it out.]

#13.1 Religious must sedulously practice poverty.

#13.6 “Religious foundations have a right to acquire the possessions that their way of life and work demand, but they must shun the mere suspicion of superfluity, of receiving large revenues or of amassing treasures.”

#14.3 Superiors must lead their communities in a vital, conscientious obedience that creates partnership in initiating and maintaining apostolic work. Superiors must listen to their subjects and invite their cooperation; but they have the final decision.

#17 Religious dress should be neither flashy nor elaborate, but restrained and unaffected. It should meet the demands of hygiene, the style of contemporary fashion, and practicalities of the apostolate. If dress is unsuitable, it must be altered.

#18 Formation must be extended beyond novitiate for a sufficient opportunity to gain proper qualifications in spirituality and in the apostolate, in theology and human skills, harmonizing religious life with the demands of contemporary society; and providing education in both current sociology and modern psychology, integrating various interests promoting balanced personalities.

#20 Each religious foundation should continue in its characteristic apostolate, but adapt it to the current needs of the church.

#21 If a foundation or monastery is clearly devoid of any chance of survival, it should amalgamate with another foundation with a similar mission.

#23 Religious foundations must support the consultative conferences of major superiors set up by the Holy See, for the well-being of the church through effective cooperation. They can also assist in negotiation of matters of concern to all religious. [Note the top-down approach in the formation of Conferences of religious.]

#25 These directives for suitable renewal will help religious foundations meet the current demands of their call in Christ and their mission in the church. The Council holds in high esteem that manner of life expressed by virginity, poverty and obedience. May all religious spread the good news of Christ throughout the world, accepting the cross with assurance of glory hereafter.

What is the impact of this document on the Catholic experience today?