The Risen Christ

Present and Embodied in Consecrated Life Today

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Introduction

*Perfectae Caritatis* (PC) begins by referring to the chapter on religious life in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 43–47, and it is in the context of *Lumen Gentium* that *Perfectae Caritatis* must be read. *Lumen Gentium* highlights the universal call to holiness based in baptism. All the baptized are called to perfection in charity (LG 39). So where does that leave those in consecrated life for whom the profession of the evangelical counsels are also meant to “foster the perfection of love of God and love of neighbor” (LG 45)? How is this way of the counsels a special way as enunciated in LG 39? Where do those in religious life “fit into the life of the church”?¹ *Lumen Gentium* itself indicates that the difference between the universal call to holiness and the call within consecrated life is found in the profession of the counsels in a *stable form of life* (43).

Ever since the Council presented faith in personal rather than propositional terms (*Dei Verbum* 5) the movement towards a greater focus on the person has accelerated especially with the personalism of St. John Paul II. In his description of apostolic consecrated life in the West, St. John Paul II presents religious as persons who “have consecrated themselves to God through the public profession of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism and in a stable form of common life, for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God” (*Vita Consecrata* 9). The addition of “a specific charism” in this definition adds a more personal thrust since it is
to persons that charisms are given. This combined with the initial focus in *Vita Consecrata* on the person of Jesus in a Trinitarian context can open another way of imaging the distinctiveness of consecrated life.

**The Personal Presence of Christ**

In consecrated life the unity of the community comes not from conformity to impersonal rules, but from “God’s love which has flooded the hearts of its members through the Holy Spirit,” and in this unity Christ is present (PC 15). This presence of Christ extends to mission. Making Christ present through personal witness “is the primary task of the consecrated life!” (VC 72). Thus, aside from a stable form of life, the distinctiveness of consecrated life can be said to flow from making Christ present through a life lived in communal love and in accordance with a specific charism. How can this occur? In what way can the unifying love of the community embody the presence of Christ, and at the same time the evangelical counsels lived in accordance with a specific charism also harmoniously embody the presence of Christ?

The presence of Christ embodied in consecrated life flows from the resurrection and ascension. Now that Christ is risen he is not here (Luke 24:6). In his unique risen body he has ascended into heaven, and he is no longer present on earth with a single material body. In his historical mode Christ was limited. In his historical humanity he could be only in one place at one time. Now that he has ascended to heaven that limitation is removed. However, when Jesus ascends he does not discard his humanity. The removal of spatiotemporal limitation does not translate now into a purely divine presence or into a purely spiritual presence devoid of embodiment. His incarnational presence remains, but in a new mode. So, precisely what is the nature of this new mode that allows Christ to be present and embodied in consecrated life today? We speak of the pneumatic presence of the risen Christ. But how is this different from simply speaking of the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Part of the difficulty comes from how we understand presence. In everyday language the presence of something occurs when it exists at a certain place and time. If the car is present in the garage it cannot be out on the road. This is a view of presence based on
objects and substances. This type of presence is insufficient to answer the question of how the love of Christ can be embodied in consecrated life today through both communal love and a specific charism.

Developing an understanding of presence beyond normal substantial presence can open a theological avenue. As proposed by Gerald O’Collins presence can be characterized as personal and relational. Implicit in any reference to the presence of the risen Christ is the presence of his person. In whatever mode he is present it must be truly he—his presence must be a personal one. Now, a personal presence is not simply a substantial presence, but a presence which includes relationality. Indeed, one Trinitarian outlook would ground substance itself in a relational personhood. Without going to this extreme it can be said that a person is essentially relational. Therefore, the personal presence of the risen Christ in consecrated life has a relational structure.

The Whole Is Present in the Part

This relational structure enables us to understand the way Christ can be personally present in consecrated life through communal love and, at the same time, through a specific charism. An understanding of presence based on individual substances (like the car present in the garage) can be termed a local presence. In contrast, a non-local presence occurs when a single reality is wholly present in many places. For instance, the law of gravity is fully present in every part of space. This law describes a relation between substances rather than being an individual substance itself. The individual substances are locally present while the relation is non-locally present. In this respect we can speak of the risen Christ as non-locally present, and therefore wholly present, in the element of communal love, or in the element of a specific charism or in both together. The relational structure of Christ’s personal presence ensures the possibility of harmony between these elements of consecrated life. Christ’s presence takes on the quality that the whole is present in the part.

A hologram is a useful scientific analogue for this quality of the whole present in the part. If a photograph of an object is cut into pieces then each piece of the photograph will contain only
a part of the image of the object. A hologram is remarkably different. If a hologram of an object is cut into pieces then each piece of the hologram will contain the whole image of the object. A hologram of this type is created using laser light and viewed later also using laser light. In creating the hologram, laser light is shone onto an object. This light which is reflected from the object reaches the film at the same time as another ray of direct unreflected light reaches the film. These two beams of light interact to produce an interference pattern of light and dark patches—a hologram. When this hologram is viewed under ordinary daylight this pattern looks completely random with no resemblance to the object at all. However, when viewed using laser light the image of the object becomes visible. This is because the image of the object is not recorded on the film, but rather a relational pattern through which the laser can make an image by reconstructing the light reflected from the object. The whole image of the object is visible in the film when the whole film is illuminated with laser light, but it is also visible when only a small portion of the film is illuminated. The relations of spacing and contrast between the light and dark patches in the pattern on the hologram make this possible. These interpenetrating relationships of spacing and contrast which embed the whole information about the object across the entire hologram enable the whole image of the object to be present in any portion of the hologram. It does not matter whether the part is large or small; the relationships within the hologram ensure that the whole image will always be displayed.

This concept “of seeing the whole in the part” highlighted in the hologram analogy is also central to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s presentation of the Gestalt Christi. For Balthasar, revelation is a whole; so even when discussing a specific part of this revelation he has the whole in mind. This whole is the Gestalt Christi “present to faith as an indivisible … figure or form.” The Holy Spirit makes the form visible to the eyes of faith by enabling the believer to be “drawn into the form itself.” The part is any concrete expression of the Gestalt Christi in the world, such as a dogma or a sacrament or even a single mystery in Christ’s life. In his glorified form Christ is present in a new mode different from the normal mode of physical presence. Balthasar calls this Christ’s “pneumatic mode of being,” and it enables him to be present uni-
versally without any spatiotemporal restriction. The holographic analogy indicates that it is relationality that makes it possible to see the whole in the part. Since Christ’s person can be defined in relational terms (as outlined above), it is possible to affirm that the personal presence of the *Gestalt Christi* can be found in any appropriate part—any appropriate, concrete expression within consecrated life. Now, just as Balthasar does not think of the *Gestalt Christi* “as a kind of static exemplarism separate from the activity of human history,” so too I do not think of the non-local personal presence of Christ separate from an organic connection to the historical Jesus reaching out through human history. In fact, according to the holographic analogy, the risen Christ can only be present now (like the holographic image) because there was a time he was concretely present in history (like the object of which the hologram is made). But what can actually constitute an appropriate concrete expression within consecrated life?

**Concrete Embodiment in Consecrated Life**

The basic translation matrix of the holographic analogy links the original object to the historical Jesus, the laser light to the action of the Holy Spirit, the holographic film to the concrete instances of consecrated life in the world today, and the non-local image of the object visible in the hologram to the presence of the risen Christ in consecrated life. The consecrated community itself is not Christ, but can make him present under the action of the Holy Spirit. Through the action of the Holy Spirit acting on the relational structure in concrete instances of consecrated life, Christ becomes present. Without these concrete relational structures it would be more appropriate to speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit rather than the presence of Christ. Therefore, we must examine the concrete relational structure within consecrated life. In other words, we must look closer at both communal love and the specific charism within an institute from a concrete relational perspective.

Communal love in consecrated life must of necessity be a love between persons in relationship, not a love for the community as such. This personal communion manifests in itself an organic unity in “an intricate holistic system” rather than a mechanical
unity.\textsuperscript{16} Christ becomes present in this communion by the action of the Holy Spirit. Following the holographic analogy Christ can be present in any part of this communion so long as the relational structure is concordant between the part and the whole. This communion which mirrors Christ’s love cannot be closed in on itself, but must be open and inclusive. Thus, the communion of persons in a particular community must be open to the wider communion of the whole institute. Further, the communion of the religious institute must be open to the wider whole of the church and the relational structure of this communion must be concordant with the relational structure of the whole church, including its hierarchical structure, if it is to truly manifest the presence of Christ.

Throughout history men and women founders experience personal encounters with Christ. From these encounters each founder responds creatively to seek to make concrete the relational structure of the kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ in his life on earth. This creative response connects Christ with the current concrete context of the founder. From this singularity of creativity flows the specific charism of the founder that embodies the relation between Christ and the founder’s context. In following the charism of their founders, institutes of consecrated life have “a profound ardor of love to be conformed to Christ in order to give witness to some aspect of His mystery.”\textsuperscript{17} As mentioned above regarding non-local presence and the \textit{Gestalt Christi}, even a single mystery of Christ’s life can be a part which reveals the whole. Thus in following their individual charisms and exhibiting facets of Christ, such as his prayer, his preaching, or his healing ministry, institutes truly make Christ personally present (LG 46). There may be difficulties for various reasons in linking the specific charism of an institute to a founder.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, the specific charism of the institute can be seen to flow from connecting Christ in some aspect of his mystery to concrete situations in the world, and making him present in the world through this specific charism.

The presence of Christ in the communal love of a community and in the specific charism of that community has both an historical movement and eschatological movement. In the historical movement, persons, communities and whole institutes are called to discern the signs of the times and actively set up concrete rela-
tional structures in creative ways in line with their charisms that facilitate Christ becoming present in their life and ministry. In the eschatological movement the Holy Spirit continues to fashion the community and its relational ordering according to the Gestalt Christi, thereby making the risen Christ personally present. In the eschatological movement, persons, communities and whole institutes are called to be responsive and docile to the action of the Holy Spirit in shaping them according to the risen Christ who is “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

**Concrete Harmony in Consecrated Life**

Since Christ is one, the presence of the risen Lord manifest through the specific charism of the institute cannot differ from the presence of the risen Lord manifest through the loving communion of the community. Let us examine three ways that this harmony can operate.

The first comes under the heading of unity. In the holographic analogy the hologram shows forth the image of the object by means of the relations of spacing and contrast. These relations must be consistent over the entire film for the whole image to be able to be seen in any part of the film. If these relations are distorted or changed in one area of the hologram, the image is no longer manifest in that part of the hologram. Now, there is a constant interplay between the imperfect historical movement of religious seeking to grow in love for each other in the community, and the eschatological movement of the Holy Spirit molding the community to show forth the Gestalt Christi personally present. So unity is never a completed fact, but always a journey. In consecrated life, this journey is seen in a seeking for unity, a common mind and heart between members setting up concrete relations in line with the Gospel that truly make the risen Christ present. Simultaneously, this unity must be consistent with the specific charism of the institute. A common mind or an apparent loving communion that takes the institute away from the specific charism breaks the image of Christ in the institute. Thus obedience in consecrated life is not simply obedience to superiors (who in their loving presence should act as “a bond of union among all members”), but also obedience to the specific charism.
Conversely, too strong a focus by members on obedience to the charism, without sufficient appreciation that they are part of a community with other members who have different capacities, needs and talents, and whom they are called to love, also diminishes the visibility of Christ in the institute. For example, in the early days of the Franciscan order there were the Spirituals who believed in a total radical poverty, literally following the rule of St Francis. They held too strongly to the specific charism of poverty without due consideration for the bond of communal love among the friars and even ended up violently ejecting other friars from their friaries. Eventually, despite some initial papal approval, they broke from communion with the church itself. In this fashion, by breaking from the loving communion of the community in their concrete relations they not only lost the capacity of manifesting the presence of Christ in these relations, but also they lost the capacity to manifest the presence of Christ in their specific charism of poverty.

The second way of harmony operating between the specific charism and the risen Lord’s presence comes under the heading of works. In the historical movement it is necessary to discern appropriate works that set up a relational ordering according to the pattern of the Gospel. Simultaneously it is necessary to discern whether and in what way these works show forth the aspect of Christ specific to the institute. A good work which is in line with the Gospel can distort the image of Christ in the institute, if it is not also following the specific charism of the institute. This is a type of poverty. There is a limit on what an institute can or should do. Respecting this limit ensures the presence of the risen Christ active in these works. Doing more works does not necessarily correspond to a greater presence of Christ in the world. In the eschatological movement, this requires a prayerful docility to the action of the Holy Spirit. This requires constant reflection by the institute on their works asking questions like: Where in our ministry did we or others experience the Holy Spirit making the risen Christ present? For example, Little Sisters of Jesus have a charism of prayer, presence and friendship. They live among the poor or “among those groups that are inaccessible to other forms of Church ministry,” and by their presence they become “an important sign of hope and healing in a broken world.” They live as the poor live and “do not want to take jobs or even
ministries, such as teaching, which will raise them above the poor among whom they have chosen to live.” Thus they limit what they do, even refusing ministries (good as they are), so they can be truly present, so they can truly be friends with the poor among whom they live – so that they can follow the specific charism of their institute, thus allowing Christ to be present.

The third way of harmony comes under the heading of deepening and expanding relationships. Christ can be present not only through the loving communion of the religious community, but also beyond the religious community in the wider communion of the church. Since Christ is one there must be harmony between his presence in both contexts. Therefore, in the historical movement, there is a constant challenge for consecrated communities to build the communion of the church as well as their own communal life. There is also the challenge for consecrated communities to be open to the broader communion of the church so that consecrated communities may themselves be built up in love. In the eschatological movement the Holy Spirit molds the bonds of both ecclesial and institute communion that the one and same risen Christ may be made present in each. Thus, the bonds of communion within the common life of an institute can be distinct, but not disconnected from the communion of the whole church. Thus in the historical movement there is an opportunity to discern how links between ecclesial communion and consecrated communal life can be deepened and expanded within the bounds that the charism of the institute and good order impose. One possibility can be found where those in consecrated life have formalized committed long term relationships with married and single people as can happen in new ecclesial movements. On the one hand, for members of consecrated life appropriate relationships with married and single people can promote a healthy emotional environment which can support chastity, while on the other hand, for those married and single the witness of charity among consecrated persons can open a beautiful window on the presence of the risen Christ in their communal life (Cf. PC 12). For example, in the Missionaries of God’s Love (MGL) (the institute to which I belong), there is an intimate connection to the Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community, a lay led new ecclesial movement whose membership consists mostly of married and single people, but also
includes all members of the Missionaries of God’s Love. Committed long term relationships formalized in a covenant commitment and based on baptism within the lay community give members of the MGL institute an environment to interact in healthy ways with other men and women. It also makes it possible for members of the MGL to build communion both as members of the institute and as members of the covenant community. In this way the baptismal calling supports the religious calling and vice versa, such that the harmony between the two enables the deepening and expansion of the presence of Christ embodied in consecrated life.

Conclusion

The holographic analogy shows that relationality enables the whole to be present in the part. So a relational definition of person enables us to see that the risen Christ can be personally present in any appropriate concrete expression within consecrated life. An appropriate part requires the twofold action of the Holy Spirit whereby a concrete relational ordering in the world historically and eschatologically enables the presence of the risen Christ. Since Christ is one, it is the same risen Christ who becomes present through relations of communal love within consecrated life and through the relational ordering centered on the specific charism of the institute. Within this dynamic between communal love and the specific charism it is possible to open a window on Christ, poor, chaste and obedient, present and embodied in consecrated life today. Thus, religious fit in the church by making the risen Christ present and embodied (through relational ordering and the action of the Holy Spirit) in their communal love and in their specific charism ensuring that their loving communion and specific charism are always in harmony with each other and with the life and mission of the wider church.

Notes

15 Schneiders, Finding the Treasure, 360.
16 Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and Sacred Congregation for Bishops, Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church (Homebush: St Pauls, 1978), n. 51.
17 Schneiders, Finding the Treasure, 287.
18 René Voillaume, Interpersonal Relations with God (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, 1967), 103.


23 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* (Vatican City: Holy See, 1983), n. 27.

