

Małgorzata Pagacz

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland
m.pagacz@uksw.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-4504-9142

Joseph Ratzinger on the New Evangelization: The Implications for Consecrated Life

Joseph Ratzinger o nowej ewangelizacji –
implikacje dla życia konsekrowanego

ABSTRACT: The article deals with the issues on consecrated life, raised by Joseph Ratzinger in his address *The New Evangelization*. The aim of the article is to consider the following questions: to what extent the reality of consecrated life corresponds to the dynamics, structure and method of the new evangelization and related recommendations; and to what extent the content of the new evangelization is present in this form of life totally devoted to God? The first part presents Joseph Ratzinger's address *The New Evangelization* in the context of contemporary Church teaching. The second part of the article shows the structure and method of the new evangelization in the life of consecrated persons. Then – in the third part – it is argued that the essential contents of the new evangelization (conversion, the kingdom of God, the person Jesus Christ and eternal life) are at the very centre of the consecrated life and are of fundamental importance for it.

KEY WORDS: new evangelization, consecrated life, Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł podejmuje kwestie zawarte w przemówieniu Josepha Ratzingera *Nowa ewangelizacja*, odnosząc je do życia konsekrowanego. Celem artykułu jest udzielenie odpowiedzi na pytania: Na ile rzeczywistość życia konsekrowanego odpowiada dynamice, strukturze i metodzie nowej ewangelizacji oraz wskazaniom odnoszącym się do niej? Na ile treści nowej ewangelizacji są obecne w tej formie życia całkowicie poświęconego Bogu? Pierwsza część artykułu przedstawia przemówienie Josepha Ratzingera na tle współczesnego nauczania Kościoła, druga – ukazuje strukturę i metodę nowej ewangelizacji w życiu osób konsekrowanych. Trzecia część jest uzasadnieniem, że główne treści nowej ewangelizacji (nawrócenie, królestwo Boże, Osoba Jezusa Chrystusa i życie wieczne) znajdują się w samym centrum życia konsekrowanego i mają w nim podstawowe znaczenie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nowa ewangelizacja, struktura, metoda, treść, życie konsekrowane, Joseph Ratzinger, Benedykt XVI

Introduction

In 2000 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered an address in which he explained the structure, method and content of the new evangelisation. Although the address was primarily delivered to catechists and religion teachers, it is also relevant to a wider audience and even has universal reach. These reflections and remarks of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which have lost none of their relevance even today, are also worth exploring with regard to the consecrated life. Therefore, the following questions were put: to what extent the reality of consecrated life corresponds to the dynamics, structure and method of the new evangelisation and the indications relating to it; and to what extent the content of the new evangelisation is present in this form of life totally devoted to God? This text offers an answer to the research questions, taking into account that consecrated life at the heart of the Church denotes the imitation of Jesus Christ on the path of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. This issue of new evangelisation have been dealt with in numerous publications and studies on contemporary consecrated life, however, without considering the content and significance of Joseph Ratzinger's *New Evangelisation* address.¹

Joseph Ratzinger's address *The New Evangelisation* against the background of contemporary Church teaching

In order to properly and profoundly understand the thought contained in Joseph Ratzinger's address *The New Evangelisation*, it must be read in the context of the entire contemporary Church teaching on the topic of the new

¹ See W. Gałązka, *Konsekracja zakonna w nowej ewangelizacji* [Religious Consecration in the New Evangelization], [in:] *Duchowość w dobie nowej ewangelizacji* [Spirituality in the Era of the New Evangelization], ed. M. Tatar, Sandomierz 2016, pp. 141–164; J. Gocko, *Znaczenie profetycznego wymiaru życia konsekrowanego w nowej ewangelizacji* [Significance of the Prophetic Dimension of Consecrated Life in the New Evangelization], "Życie Konsekrowane" 7/4 (2000), pp. 5–16; A. Dziuba, *Eklesjalne znamiona życia konsekrowanego* [Ecclesial Marks of Consecrated Life], "Teologia i Człowiek" 47/3 (2019), pp. 11–32; J. Tupikowski, *Ewangelizacja kultury a życie konsekrowane* [Evangelization of Culture and Consecrated Life], "Życie Konsekrowane" 8/1 (2001), pp. 69–75; J. Kiciński, *Powołanie – konsekracja – misja. Personalistyczny aspekt teologii życia konsekrowanego we współczesnym Magisterium Kościoła* [Vocation – Consecration – Mission. The Personalist Aspect of the Theology of Consecrated Life in the Contemporary Magisterium of the Church], Wrocław 2008, pp. 228–233.

evangelisation. The issue has occupied an important place both in the teaching of Benedict XVI,² as well as that of Francis. It should be furthermore mentioned here that without first exploring Ratzinger's address it might be difficult to fully grasp the concept of the new evangelisation developed by Benedict XVI³ and concluded in the Apostolic Letter in the form of *Motu Proprio Ubicumque et Semper* of 21 September 2010, in which, already as Pope, he established the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation. At the heart of this papal initiative was the intuition contained in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the relation between the Church and the modern world. The post-conciliar popes continued to reflect on the need to find suitable forms "to help people of our time to hear the living and eternal word of the Lord."⁴ The holy popes Paul VI and John Paul II, driven by a desire to implement the Council's teaching in the life of the Church, recognised the value and profound significance of evangelisation in the modern world. Paul VI noted that

as a result of the frequent situations of dechristianization in our day, [the work of evangelisation] also proves equally necessary for innumerable people who have been baptized but who live quite outside Christian life, for simple people who have a certain faith but an imperfect knowledge of the foundations of

² See the following studies that clarify the concept and specificity of the new evangelisation according to Benedict XVI: J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* [The Concept of New Evangelization in the View of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI], "Studia Pelplińskie" 54 (2020), pp. 29–46; S. Tokarek, *Ewangelizacja według Benedykta XVI* [Evangelization According to Benedict XVI], "Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego" 33 (2013), pp. 247–256; W. Osiał, *Wezwanie Benedykta XVI do nowej ewangelizacji w świetle Listu apostolskiego motu proprio „Ubicumque et semper”* [Benedict XVI's Call to the New Evangelization in the Light of the Apostolic Letter Motu Proprio "Ubicumque et Semper"], "Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne" 24/1 (2011), pp. 277–290; G. Kaczorowski, *Wychowanie chrześcijańskie jako integralna część (nowej) ewangelizacji w ujęciu Benedykta XVI* [Christian Education as an Integral Part of (New) Evangelization According to Benedict XVI], "Teologia i Człowiek" 64/4 (2023), pp. 165–180.

³ See J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., pp. 29–46. It is worth adding that it is possible to find studies on evangelisation according to Benedict XVI, which, sadly, do not refer to his address *The New Evangelisation* at all (see e.g. S. Tokarek, *Ewangelizacja według Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., pp. 247–256).

⁴ See Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter in the Form of *Motu Proprio Ubicumque et Semper*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper.html [access: 10.05.2024].

that faith, for intellectuals who feel the need to know Jesus Christ in a light different from the instruction they received as children, and for many others.⁵

Pope Paul VI had in mind people who were far from the faith and therefore stated that the Church, in carrying out her evangelisation work, “must constantly seek the proper means and language for presenting, or representing, to them God’s revelation and faith in Jesus Christ.”⁶ Saint John Paul II considered the above tasks to be priorities, and therefore they were fundamental points of his teaching. During his first visit to Poland he used the phrase “new evangelisation.”⁷ In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* he stated that “the hour has come for a re-evangelization.”⁸ This concept – which was systematically deepened in numerous speeches – summarised the challenges awaiting the Church today, especially in the regions of former Christianisation. The statement of Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on the new evangelisation can therefore be understood more fully in the context of the teaching of the then Pope John Paul II.

Benedict XVI explained what the novelty of the new evangelisation his predecessor spoke of consisted in. The new evangelisation is not “new”

in its content but in its inner thrust, open to the grace of the Holy Spirit which constitutes the force of the new law of the Gospel that always renews the Church; “new” in ways that correspond with the power of the Holy Spirit and which are suited to the times and situations; “new” because of being necessary even in countries that have already received the proclamation of the Gospel.⁹

⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, no. 52, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html [access: 10.05.2024].

⁶ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 56.

⁷ See John Paul II, *Homily during Holy Mass at the Shrine of the Holy Cross*, Mogila, 9 June 1979, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790609_polonia-mogila-nowa-huta.html [access: 11.05.2024].

⁸ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 1988, no. 34, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html [access: 11.05.2024].

⁹ See Benedict XVI, *Homily during the Papal Mass on the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. First Vespers*, 28 June 2010, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100628_vespri-pietro-paolo.html [access: 11.05.2024].

Benedict XVI's teaching on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's realities is therefore an expression of the continuity of the Church's teaching. In the *Motu Proprio Ubicumque et Semper*, Benedict XVI finally specified the tasks of the new evangelisation. He states that "this variety of situations demands careful discernment; to speak of a 'new evangelization' does not in fact mean that a single formula should be developed that would hold the same for all circumstances."¹⁰ The document emphasises the need for a new evangelisation in countries which once cherished the Christian tradition, where, due to the abandonment of religious practices, there is a need for a "a renewed missionary impulse, an expression of a new, generous openness to the gift of grace."¹¹ Benedict XVI also pointed out the first task of the new evangelisation, namely "to make ourselves docile to the freely given action of the Spirit of the Risen One who accompanies all who are heralds of the Gospel and opens the hearts of those who listen."¹² The Pope stated that in order to "proclaim fruitfully the Word of the Gospel one is first asked to have a profound experience of God."¹³ The basis of all evangelisation is not a human project of expansion. Instead, what is crucial is the desire to share the inestimable gift that God has given to man by allowing him to share in his life. Benedict XVI thus started from a realistic picture of the condition of the contemporary Church and world. He did not seem discouraged or resigned in the face of the decline of Christianity in Europe, but considered reality with courage and sought concrete ways to reverse the decades-long secularisation trends.¹⁴

The new evangelisation is also a particular concern for Pope Francis, who is faithfully continuing the path set by his predecessors. Francis dedicates his manifesto – the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* – precisely to the theme of proclaiming the Gospel in the modern world. He invites there to a new stage of evangelisation marked by the joy of the encounter with Christ.¹⁵

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et Semper*, op. cit.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et Semper*, op. cit.

¹² Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et Semper*, op. cit.

¹³ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Ubicumque et Semper*, op. cit.; see also: W. Osial, *Wezwanie Benedykta XVI do nowej ewangelizacji*, op. cit., pp. 283–286.

¹⁴ E. Guerriero, *Świadek prawdy. Biografia Benedykta XVI* [Witness to the Truth. A biography of Benedict XVI], transl. J. Tomaszek, Kraków 2018, pp. 517–518.

¹⁵ See Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2014, no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html [access: 11.05.2024].

Structure and method of the new evangelisation in the life of consecrated persons

In his address *The New Evangelisation*, Cardinal Ratzinger noted that, although the Church had always evangelised and had never abandoned this task, the process of de-Christianisation and the disappearance of essential human values is ongoing. A huge part of modern humanity is unable to find in the Gospel a convincing answer to the fundamental question of how to live the life. That is why, in addition to permanent evangelisation, a new evangelisation for everyone and not only for some select group of people is being sought. In this context, the cardinal warned against the temptations of impatience, of striving for immediate, great success, of achieving great numbers. He pointed out that this is not God's method and reminded us that the reality of the kingdom of God is described by the image of a mustard seed (see Mark 4:31–32). This image refers at the same time to the dynamics of evangelisation, which by its nature is an instrument and vehicle of the kingdom of God. Ratzinger states:

New evangelization cannot mean: immediately attracting the large masses that have distanced themselves from the Church by using new and more refined methods. No – this is not what new evangelization promises. New evangelization means: never being satisfied with the fact that from the grain of mustard seed, the great tree of the Universal Church grew; never thinking that the fact that different birds may find place among its branches can suffice – rather, it means to dare, once again and with the humility of the small grain, to leave up to God the when and how it will grow (see Mark 4:26–29).¹⁶

This view of the kingdom of God and at the same time of the new evangelisation corresponds to the specificity and nature of consecrated life. The vocation to the exclusive love of Christ and service to Him in the Church is a pure gift of God and a mystery of His unconditional, anticipatory love; it is a gratuitous call from God who invites those whom He Himself wishes to greater love and devotion to the Church for the kingdom of God. The initiative always comes from the Creator and is addressed to individual people from whom He expects a positive response. The event of vocation is in itself something akin

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *The New Evangelisation, Building the Civilization of Love*, https://www.piercedhearts.org/benedict_xvi/Cardinal%20Ratzinger/new_evangelization.htm [access: 24.04.2024] [hereinafter: NE]; see J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., pp. 36–39.

to a mustard seed; it is an invitation and a challenge: it begins a new, hitherto unknown phase of a person's life and opens up entirely new prospects for the future. In the vocation of consecrated persons, what Ratzinger observes is fulfilled: "Large things always begin from the small seed."¹⁷ Those who are called are able to perceive the grace-bestowing, often very inconspicuous and delicate, action of God, who never ceases to show His care also through the human mediation of those called to cooperate with Him. In this way, in the course of the past centuries, many men and women, attracted by the love of God, have decided to give their own lives completely to Him and to devote them to the heavenly kingdom.¹⁸

A life according to the evangelical counsels means a particular deepening of baptismal consecration. Through religious profession, the intimate union with Christ already established by baptism is transformed into a gift of imitation of Him by means of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.¹⁹ Considering that important and great things often have humble beginnings, those who enter religious life remind other people that "their true and complete progress consists in responding to their calling 'to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men.'"²⁰ Every human being is called to a relationship with the Creator built on freedom, the source of which is God's creative love, and to share in His action.²¹ To become a consecrated person, moreover, it is necessary to be called by God. A vocation cannot be planned or earned – it originates and comes from outside of man. Saint John Paul II notes that "those who are called entrust themselves to the love of God who wishes them to be exclusively at his service."²² Entrusting oneself is an attitude of trust in God, who is greater than all human anticipation and calculation and who is able to

¹⁷ NE.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Myśli o życiu konsekrowanym* [Thoughts on Consecrated Life], transl. M. Wilk, Kraków 2010, p. 15.

¹⁹ See John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 1996 [hereinafter: VC], no. 30, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html [access: 24.04.2024].

²⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, 1971, no. 19, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio.html [access: 11.05.2024].

²¹ See Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, no. 15, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html [access: 11.05.2024].

²² VC 17.

transcend man's weaknesses.²³ Joseph Ratzinger reminded us that this truth was already present in the Old Testament, which shows what God's design is and the specificity of God's action:

"The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you." God says [this] to the People of Israel in the Old Testament and thus expresses the fundamental paradox of the history of salvation.²⁴

God's love for man is at the same time the foundation of the response of the one called – a response of a total and unconditional nature – given to the One who calls.

According to Benedict XVI, the vocation to the consecrated life can be better understood through the example of Mary of Bethany, who "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak" (Luke 10:39). Consecrated persons, like her, dedicate themselves wholly and exclusively to Christ and thus are capable of imitating Him more fully.²⁵ For many people today, including those who consider themselves believers, this attitude of the consecrated is seen as insignificant, and therefore depreciated or disregarded. However, as the *Code of Canon Law* indicates, "the first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer" (can. 663 § 1).²⁶ Consecrated persons, giving absolute priority to God, want to put Christ at the centre of their lives again and again through prayer.

The nature of man's vocation to the exclusive love of Christ can be seen more fully in the light of what Ratzinger writes about the way God works.

God does not count in large numbers; exterior power is not the sign of his presence. Most of Jesus' parables indicate this structure of divine intervention and thus answer the disciples' worries, who were expecting other kinds of success

²³ See more: R. Słupek, *Teologia aktu wiary w nauczaniu Benedykta XVI w Roku Wiary* [Theology of the Act of Faith in Teachings of Benedict XVI in the Year of Faith], "Wrocław Theological Review" 21/2 (2013), pp. 117–125.

²⁴ NE.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Mysli o życiu konsekrowanym*, op. cit., p. 18.

²⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, 1983, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html [access: 11.05.2024].

and signs from the Messiah – successes of the kind offered by Satan to the Lord: All these – the kingdoms of the world – I will give to you ... (Matt 4:9).²⁷

These reflections of Ratzinger also shed light on the current situation of consecrated life. Today, congregations and religious orders – in addition to many problems – are affected by a decline in vocations and ageing of their members (especially in Europe). Pope Francis drew attention to these and other difficulties in his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*. In spite of various problems, however, religious life is for him a reality that fills one with hope.²⁸ For the external accomplishments can never be a source of internal power or an indicator of God's presence. Hope, which is the fruit of faith in Christ, is realised in the midst of uncertainty, in the awareness of human weakness and limitation. Pope Francis noted that despite all the problems, God keeps repeating: "Be not afraid... for I am with you" (Jer 1:8). And this is why the Pope warns us not to succumb to the worldly temptation of numbers or efficiency, not to rely on our own strength. He urges us not to base our hope on statistics, but on Him for whom nothing is impossible.²⁹ Furthermore, it should be noted that today, although there are fewer vocations than in the past, they are more cautiously and deeply discerned, both on the part of young people and of the Church.³⁰ In his reflections, Pope Francis referred explicitly to the teaching of Benedict XVI, who urged consecrated persons not to: "join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light."³¹ The

²⁷ NE.

²⁸ See Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 2014, I, 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html [access: 11.05.2024].

²⁹ See Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, op. cit., I, 3; see M. Pagacz, *Pokusa duchowej światowości w życiu konsekrowanym w ujęciu papieża Franciszka* [The Temptation of Spiritual Worldliness in Consecrated Life According to Pope Francis], "Studia Bobolanum" 33/2 (2021), pp. 231–244.

³⁰ Francis writes that "we are increasingly aware of the need for a better process of selecting candidates to the priesthood" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 107), which can also be applied by analogy to the consecrated life. He warns that no motivation can suffice to enter the path of special service to God, and in particular it can never be the search for some form of power, honours or the desire for material prosperity.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Holy Mass with Members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on the Occasion of the 17th Day of Consecrated Life*, 2 February 2013, <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/>

future of consecrated life cannot depend on human calculations or trust in one's own strength.³²

In a similar vein, Joseph Ratzinger wrote about the structure of the new evangelisation. He noted that in the early days of Christianity, believers formed small scattered communities that were, according to worldly criteria, meaningless.

In reality, they were the leaven that penetrates the meal from within and they carried within themselves the future of the world (see Matthew 13:33). An old proverb says: "Success is not one of the names of God." New evangelization must surrender to the mystery of the grain of mustard seed and not be so pretentious as to believe to immediately produce a large tree. We either live too much in the security of the already existing large tree or in the impatience of having a greater, more vital tree—instead we must accept the mystery that the Church is at the same time a large tree and a very small grain. In the history of salvation it is always Good Friday and Easter Sunday at the same time...³³

According to the then cardinal, true service of the Gospel is contingent on renouncing one's own self and offering it to Christ for the salvation of men. Jesus, the Son of God, completely united to God the Father, brings the believer into the Trinitarian communion. The true evangelisers never speak in their own name, but point to the Saviour: "evangelizing is not merely a way of speaking, but a form of living: living in the listening and giving voice to the Father."³⁴ This attitude is embodied precisely in consecrated life, whose "essential contribution that the Church expects from consecrated persons is much more in the order of being than of doing."³⁵ Consecrated persons, by living totally for God and for the kingdom of God, become signs of God's primacy, of His presence, love and fidelity. Their lives are filled with prayer as a constitutive part of their life. And prayer is the foundation of all preaching and apostolic action – without

homilies/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20130202_vita-consacrata.html [access: 12.05.2024].

³² See M. Pagacz, *Faith as the Foundation of the Renewal of the Consecrated Persons' Life in the Light of the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*, "Collectanea Theologica" 94/1 (2024), pp. 189–203.

³³ NE.

³⁴ NE.

³⁵ See Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2007, no. 81, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html [access: 12.05.2024].

it, all methods are ineffective. Being deeply rooted in God is the foundation of the new evangelisation.

The principle of self-renunciation has concrete consequences. Ratzinger illustrated it through Jesus' parable of the grain of wheat which, having fallen into the ground, dies and thus yields an abundant harvest (John 12:24). In the context of evangelisation, this parable is an extension of the parable of the mustard seed. Both principles-parables have been fulfilled throughout the history of Christianity and are still in force, being of fundamental importance for the new evangelisation. Ratzinger reminds us and makes it clear that the success of apostolic mission is "not the fruit of great rhetorical art or pastoral prudence; the fruitfulness was tied to the suffering, to the communion in the passion with Christ," as is perfectly evident from the example of St Paul and the evangelisation he carried out.³⁶ Without renouncing one's selfishness, the most beautiful and spectacular evangelisation efforts are worthless. The process of renouncing the self is a concrete form of giving up one's own life, according to the words: "whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). In this light, it can be seen that consecrated persons are those who give themselves fully to Christ and for Christ in the service of His kingdom. They renounce not only themselves, their self, but, moreover, they resign from what is good (marriage, their own family, their freedom and unconstrained disposal of their property, the pursuit of their dreams, their plans) in order to become as free as possible for God, so that He can use them according to His will.³⁷ The evangelical counsels are the way of imitating Jesus in His total submission to the Heavenly Father, on His path towards the cross, on the way to Jerusalem.

The contents essential for new evangelisation in consecrated life

Conversion, the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ and eternal life were marked by Joseph Ratzinger in his address *The New Evangelisation* as the contents essential and key elements of any true evangelisation.

³⁶ NE.

³⁷ M. Saj (ed.), *Benedykt XVI do osób konsekrowanych* [Benedict XVI to Consecrated Persons], Kraków 2009, pp. 77.

Conversion

Among the contents essential for new evangelisation is, according to the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the call to conversion. It was crucial in the teaching of John the Baptist and, moreover, Jesus himself included it in the conclusion of his own preaching: “Repent, and believe in the gospel!” (Mark 1:15). “To convert” means to reconsider, to revise one’s individual and social life, to allow God to penetrate the principles applied to one’s life, not to live like everyone else, not to act like everyone else, not to justify one’s own ambiguous or wicked actions on the grounds that others behave and act in the same way. According to Ratzinger, “to convert” means to seek a new lifestyle, a new life. Conversion is not synonymous with the adoption of moral perfection, for Christianity cannot be reduced to moralism. Christian conversion is turning towards Christ, accepting from him “the gift of a new friendship, the gift of communion” with him;³⁸ it is “humility in entrusting oneself to the love of the Other, a love that becomes the measure and the criteria of my own life.”³⁹

Consecrated life presupposes constant conversion. Looking at the history of religious life, one can see that Eastern monasticism in particular valued conversion and considered it an indispensable element of life, involving self-renunciation, compunction of heart, ceaseless prayer, fasting, vigil.⁴⁰ John Paul II, in his exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, noted that the need for conversion applies to all believers, but it applies especially to the consecrated life:

In fact the vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the Kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a ‘transfigured’ existence.⁴¹

³⁸ NE; see also: P. Kiejkowski, M. Pagacz, *Europa – humanizm – życie konsekrowane. Wokół myśli J. Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* [Europe – Humanism – Consecrated Life. Around the Thought of J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI], Series: Studia i Materiały – Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu. Wydział Teologiczny 214, Poznań 2021, pp. 71–75; M. Pagacz, *Mathematics as a Way Towards the Creative Logos: Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI’s Understanding of Scientificity*, “Collectanea Theologica” 92/2 (2022), pp. 112–113.

³⁹ NE; see J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁴⁰ See VC 6.

⁴¹ VC 35.

In another paragraph of this exhortation, the Pope addressed those consecrated to God: “You know well that you have set out on a journey of continual conversion, of exclusive dedication to the love of God and of your brothers and sisters, in order to bear ever more splendid witness to the grace which transfigures Christian life.”⁴² Living the evangelical counsels requires permanent conversion,⁴³ which is facilitated by the Sacrament of Reconciliation, allowing one to experience God’s mercy, gives purification and renewal of heart.⁴⁴

Consecrated persons are therefore in need of continual conversion and, at the same time, their striving for conversion is of importance in the process of converting other people. Saint John Paul II noted that the presence and attitude of consecrated persons is at the same time meant to awaken in every believer “a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one’s neighbour, especially the most needy.”⁴⁵ Authentic witnesses to Christ, who strive for strengthening friendship with Him, support those seeking closeness to God and spiritual deepening. In this context, consecrated life is a gift offered by God so that all may recognise “one thing necessary” (see Luke 10:42).⁴⁶

The basic principle of conversion is that God is, and “without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is.”⁴⁷ These days, when many claim to experience the absence of God, consecrated persons are a sign of God’s presence and action, and by their very existence they call for conversion. For this to happen, their profound communion with the One who calls them and gives them the gift of vocation is necessary. People totally dedicated to God are His friends and disciples, characterised by a unity of life and action, strengthened by listening to the word of God and the sacraments, immersed in prayer and contemplation, detached from the mentality of the world and constantly converted to the love of Christ so that it is He who lives and acts in them.⁴⁸

⁴² VC 109.

⁴³ See VC 82.

⁴⁴ See VC 95.

⁴⁵ See VC 39.

⁴⁶ See VC 109.

⁴⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 78, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html [access: 12.05.2024].

⁴⁸ See M. Saj, *Benedykt XVI do osób konsekrowanych*, op. cit., p. 182.

The kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the centre of Jesus' preaching; it is the key word in His message. The kingdom of God, however, is not a thing, a social or political structure, or a utopia. According to Ratzinger, the kingdom of God means that God exists, God is alive, He is present and acts in the world, in the life of every human being.⁴⁹ "God is the most present and decisive reality in each and every act of my life, in each and every moment of history."⁵⁰ And therefore "the *unum necessarium* to man is God. Everything changes, whether God exists or not. Unfortunately – we Christians also often live as if God did not exist (*si Deus non daretur*). We live according to the slogan: God does not exist, and if he exists, he does not belong."⁵¹ This statement by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the same time raises the question of possibilities and ways to change the situation described. In response, Ratzinger pointed to the necessity of an evangelisation which speaks first of all of God, which proclaims the one true God: Creator, Sanctifier and Judge, since "to proclaim God is to introduce to the relation with God."⁵²

The reality of the kingdom of God is shown in the lives of consecrated persons, who are its sign on earth. John Paul II states that through the consecrated life, "the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven."⁵³ People consecrated to God are called, as the first disciples, not only to embrace the kingdom of God personally, but also to offer their lives at the service of this cause, abandoning everything and following faithfully the way of life of Jesus. Religious life is a foreshadowing of the future kingdom; consecration "more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods [...] [and] foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom."⁵⁴ By their presence, consecrated people remind us that the only thing truly necessary is to seek God's "kingdom and his righteousness" (see Matt 6:33) and to

⁴⁹ See NE.

⁵⁰ NE.

⁵¹ NE; cf. R. Sarah, *Catechism of the Spiritual Life*, transl. M.J. Miller, Irondale, AL 2022, pp. 291–297.

⁵² NE; cf. J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., pp. 40–41; M. Tatar, *The Ontic Foundations of Peace in the Perspective of Pope Benedict XVI*, "Collectanea Theologica" 93/4 (2023), pp. 157–167.

⁵³ See VC 1.

⁵⁴ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, no. 44, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [access: 12.05.2024].

unceasingly pray for the coming of Christ.⁵⁵ By their presence and commitment, they contribute to making this kingdom present now, through the renewal of the spirit of the Beatitudes. John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* noted that

The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved, and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (see Matt 22:30).⁵⁶

The evangelical counsels, especially chastity, are kept for the sake of the kingdom of God. The vocation of consecrated persons is to serve the kingdom of heaven, to extend the kingdom of Christ, according to God's design and the charisms of the individual institutes.

Jesus Christ

Cardinal Ratzinger drew our attention to the strong temptation to diminish Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to a merely historical Jesus. Nowadays, this reduction is rather not tantamount to denying His Divinity, but presenting Him in a distorted way, adapted to human comprehension. Therefore, according to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it is necessary to discover the truth about Christ, Emmanuel, in whom God's "I am" becomes concrete; imitation of Christ is essential for this. Ratzinger makes it clear that imitating Jesus does not consist in imitating the man Jesus, for this would be an anachronism.⁵⁷ The imitation "has a much higher goal: to be assimilated into Christ, that is to attain union with God."⁵⁸ It is not a question of morality, but of entering into communion with Christ, for which the sacramental life is of utmost importance.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See VC 26.

⁵⁶ VC 32.

⁵⁷ See NE; G.L. Müller, *The Reason of Faith: The Legacy of the Great Pope*, "Collectanea Theologica" 93/4 (2023), pp. 12–13.

⁵⁸ NE; J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵⁹ See K. Porosło, *Sacramentality in the Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI*, "Collectanea Theologica" 93/4 (2023), pp. 53–83; A. Proniewski, *The Church Lives by the Eucharist, the Eucharist Lives in the Church: The Ontological Identity of the Believers*, "Collectanea Theologica" 93/4 (2023), pp. 85–107.

In the perspective of the new evangelisation that proclaims the truth about Jesus Christ the Saviour and leads to an encounter with Him, consecrated life takes the privileged place, since by its very nature it is a way of imitating Christ through the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. It is difficult to imagine a way of life that would be more suitable to this end. The consecrated life is directly and inseparably linked to the person of Jesus Christ: it draws its origin from Him, relies on imitating Him, models itself on His example and teaching. Without being rooted in and related to Christ, it would have no meaning. The distinguishing feature of religious life is that it imitates Jesus more accurately and more faithfully than other forms of life. Vatican II wants a renewal of religious life above all through a radical return to the imitation of Christ.⁶⁰ Moreover, the whole post-conciliar teaching of the Church indicates that the restoration of Christ to the central place is a necessary condition for the authenticity and quality of the life of consecrated persons. Contemplation of the person of Jesus, His words and deeds shows the value of consecrated life and reveals much of its nature.⁶¹

The imitation of Christ is rooted in the Paschal Mystery: the Cross and the Resurrection as the centre of Christology. Ratzinger stated that

The cross belongs to the divine mystery—it is the expression of his love to the end (John 13:1). The Sequela of Christ is participation in the cross, uniting oneself to his love, to the transformation of our life, which becomes the birth of the new man, created according to God (see Ephesians 4:24). Whoever omits the cross, omits the essence of Christianity (see 1 Corinthians 2:2).⁶²

Consecrated life has an undoubtedly Paschal dimension;⁶³ it is precisely a participation in the cross of Christ in the light of His Resurrection. The religious person is called to bear witness in a special way in his or her life to the saving power flowing from Christ's cross, which is the proof of God's greatest love

⁶⁰ See Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1965, no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html [access: 12.05.2024].

⁶¹ See M. Pagacz, *Życie konsekrowane w służbie poszukiwania sensu według Benedykta XVI* [Consecrated Life in the Service of the Search for Meaning according to Benedict XVI], "Wrocław Theological Review" 29/1 (2021), pp. 330–337.

⁶² NE.

⁶³ See VC 24.

poured out into this world.⁶⁴ Consecrated life cannot be separated from the mystery of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus – without these mysteries it is not possible to realise it.

Eternal life

A central element of any true evangelisation is also eternal life. Preaching eternal life, however, we do not encourage an escape from the present. Ratzinger asserted that it is not true that “faith in eternal life makes earthly life insignificant. To the contrary: only if the measure of our life is eternity, then also this life of ours on earth is great and its value immense. God is not the competitor in our life, but the guarantor of our greatness.”⁶⁵ It is precisely this eschatological perspective that is adopted on the consecrated life, a sign of the world to come. John Paul II reminds us that there is an immutable doctrine which presents consecrated life as a foreshadowing of the future kingdom. The Second Vatican Council states that consecration “foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom.”⁶⁶ This happens above all through the vow of chastity, always understood by tradition as a foreshadowing of the final world, which is already at work today and transforms the whole man.⁶⁷

Every consecrated person is an eschatological sign, since he or she adopts already on earth that state of life which will be shared by all in heaven, in accordance with Christ’s words about those who “neither marry nor are given in marriage” in heaven (see Matt 22:30). It is therefore a clear sign of eternal life, a reminder of the value of heavenly goods; it points to the final destiny of the world beyond all temporary prospects. A life wholly devoted to God is marked with the expectation of the Lord’s second coming, an expectation that indicates the transience of all other historical realities. A religious person, by their very existence, “points to that eschatological horizon against which the choices and life decisions of every man and woman should be situated.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ See Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, no. 29; VC 24; M. Saj, *Benedykt XVI do osób konsekrowanych*, op. cit., p. 246.

⁶⁵ NE; J. Babiński, *Pojęcie nowej ewangelizacji w ujęciu Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI*, op. cit., pp. 41–42.

⁶⁶ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 44.

⁶⁷ See VC 26.

⁶⁸ See Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 81; M. Saj, *Benedykt XVI do osób konsekrowanych*, op. cit., p. 144; M. Pagacz, *Życie konsekrowane znakiem nadziei dla współczesnego świata w nauczaniu Kościoła od Soboru Watykańskiego II*

“Consecrated life is a sign of good things to come in human civilisation, as it travels onwards “in exodus” along the paths of history,”⁶⁹ and by its very nature is called to a ministry of witness which makes it a sign in the Church. Persons consecrated to God on their own are special witnesses in the Church and in the world of the extraterrestrial meaning of human existence; with their eschatological orientation they point to the supernatural reality and to the prospect of eternal life.

Conclusions

Joseph Ratzinger’s reflections and recommendations on the structure, method and content of the new evangelisation show that consecrated life is a reality that fundamentally and actively participates in it. The vocation of the consecrated person and their journey can only be properly read in the light of the parable of the mustard seed and the metaphor of the grain of wheat, on which Ratzinger drew in indicating the structure and method of the new evangelisation. The contents essential of the new evangelisation given by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (conversion, the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ and eternal life) are at the very heart of consecrated life. They are fundamental in religious life and in the testimony given by those consecrated to God. The vows of chastity, poverty and obedience make consecrated persons, called to ongoing conversion, legible signs of the kingdom of God already existing in this world.

The interdependence between the specificity of the new evangelisation and the reality of consecrated life leads to at least several conclusions: 1) The nature of consecrated life fully corresponds to the requirements of the new evangelisation. 2) The recommendations for the new evangelization given by Joseph Ratzinger are equally important for those consecrated to God today. They take on particular significance in view of the contemporary crisis of religious life and, in a certain sense, show the way out of this crisis; to some extent they are also an antidote to the distortions and dangers of religious life.⁷⁰ 3) Without

[Consecrated Life as a Sign of Hope for the Modern World in the Teaching of the Church since the Second Vatican Council], Kraków 2019, pp. 199–201.

⁶⁹ See Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Keep Watch! To Consecrated Men and Women Journeying in the Footsteps of God*, 2014, no. 1, <https://cmswr.org/wp-content/uploads/Keep-Watch.pdf> [access: 12.05.2024].

⁷⁰ See D. de Lassus, *Zagrożenia i wypaczenia życia zakonnego* [The Dangers and Perversions of Religious Life], transl. A. Kuryś, Kraków 2022; J. Ratzinger, V. Messori, *The Ratzinger*

the theological virtue of faith, it is impossible to grasp the structure, method or content of the new evangelization; neither is it possible to renew the life of consecrated persons without a deep and living faith. 4) The decline in the number of vocations and the ageing of consecrated persons are not reasons for fear or despondency, since, viewed from the perspective of the structure and method of the new evangelisation, God does not attach importance to great numbers or external power, but His power is manifested in human weakness. However, the diminishing number of people who would intend to join institutes of consecrated life requires of the present members to deeply discern and reflect on the reasons for this negative trend, and should undoubtedly stimulate them to greater zeal and fidelity to God, to place Christ at the centre once again. 5) Living the evangelical counsels is of cardinal importance in the work of the new evangelisation in the modern world, as the whole contemporary teaching of the Church also confirms. Due to the essence and specificity of this form of life, consecrated persons – by their very existence and through the apostolic actions they undertake – communicate the contents essential to the new evangelisation: the truth about conversion, the kingdom of God, the Person of Jesus Christ and eternal life.

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MAŁGORZATA PAGACZ USJK (DR) – assistant professor in the Department of Christian Mysticism and Head of Postgraduate Studies in Spiritual Direction at the Faculty of Theology of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. Her research interests include the theology of consecrated life. She has published over 30 scientific articles, as well as monographs, including *Życie konsekrowane znakiem nadziei dla współczesnego świata w nauczaniu Kościoła od Soboru Watykańskiego II* [Consecrated Life as a Sign of Hope for the Modern World in the Teaching of the Church since the Second Vatican Council] (Kraków 2019); with P. Kiejkowski she co-authored *Europa – humanizm – życie konsekrowane. Wokół myśli J. Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* [Europe – Humanism – Consecrated Life. Around the Thought of J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI] (Poznań 2021). A member of the Polish Association of Theologians of Spirituality and The Society of Catholic Scientists.