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JESUS DID NOT START RELIGIOUS LIFE;  
WHY DID IT APPEAR IN THE CHURCH?  
BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF CONSECRATED LIFE

**A b s t r a c t.** This paper examines the biblical foundation of religious life in the context of the history of salvation. It briefly presents the God's plan of salvation. As historical Israel failed their mission exile was the consequence of this failure. A consequence of the restoration of Israel will be the pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem. Jesus' healing miracles point out that God is restoring his people and that is why he takes away all kind of sickness. The ancient Church knew that it had to be a sign of the truth of the Gospel in its entire existence however, when, after the "Milan edict" of Constantine (312/313 AD), the masses enter the Church, its early structure of "house Churches" was broken. Soon after the monastic movement began. With the monastic communities coming to existence, there was a chance that at least these religious house churches would preserve the community dimension of the Church and that they would continue to be a sign for the pagan society of how God wants his people to live.

**Key words:** religious life; salvation plan; sign of truth.

INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament, the word "consecrated" occurs only six times and it refers first of all to Jesus himself "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (John 10:36). Once in the world Jesus says: "for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (John 17:19). In fact, Jesus was celibate for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (*cf.* Mt 19:12); he led a life of poverty, having "nowhere to lay his head" (*cf.* Mt 8:20; Luke 9:58) and was totally obedient to the Father: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). However, we can hardly say the same about his closest disciples. Jesus said that he consecrated them in the truth, However, Paul himself a celibate (*cf.* 1

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Cor 7:7) told on Peter and other apostles that they were going around preaching accompanied by their wives: “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” (1 Cor 9:5). Their life of poverty was also problematic. On the one hand, it is true that they left everything and followed Jesus when he called them (*cf.* Mt 19:27; Mark 10:28; Luke 5:11), but after Jesus was crucified and buried they retrieved their boats and apparently started the business as usual: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing” (John 21:3). All these seem to demonstrate that try as we may, we cannot say that Jesus started consecrated life in the Church. So, why did it appear, or rather, why did it have to appear precisely in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, 300 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection?

The document of the Second Vatican Council on the Consecrated Life, *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC), describes Consecrated Life as the service of God and the following of Christ “for the *salvation of the world* and the building of the Church” (*cf.* PC 5–6). That is why, in order to understand the meaning of Consecrated Life from the biblical perspective, we need to consider the history of *salvation* as it is narrated in the Bible.

## 1. GOD’S PLAN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Everybody agrees that this “history” begins with God’s promise to Abraham<sup>1</sup>: “*And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing [...] and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*” (Gen 12:2–3).

There are three important points in this divine promise:

- 1) God intends to create *a nation* (God does not want just an individual. He wants a people).
- 2) God wants this nation to have *blessing* (an abundant, prosperous life).
- 3) This blessing is to be shared by *all the families of the earth* (right from the beginning God’s purpose is universal).

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<sup>1</sup> When the Jews tell their ancient history, they start with Abraham. It is well illustrated in Hershel SHANKS (ed.), *Ancient Israel, A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Washington: Biblical Archeology Society, 1988).

God's promise regarding the multitude of Abraham's descendants comes to fulfillment in Egypt. However, the rapid growth of Israelites is perceived by the Pharaoh as a threat to his country. He tries to suppress them through the process of *social marginalization* and *economic exploitation* (cf. Exod 1:8-14).

The central event of the history of salvation in the Old Testament is EXODUS, i.e., the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.<sup>2</sup> God wants to lead the descendants of Abraham to a land of abundance, *a land flowing with milk and honey*: "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, *a land flowing with milk and honey*" (Exodus 3:8; cf. Deut 26:9).

The land flows with milk and honey as food for human beings there, where they live in a society intended by God. The departure from Egypt, from a land of social marginalization and economic exploitation, is not a genuine exodus unless it leads to the constitution of a new society (the division of the waters was a sign that God was creating something new; just as during the creation of the world God divided the waters, so now he divides the waters of the Sea of Reeds in order to create something new — this time a new society). The project for this new society is revealed at Mt. Sinai<sup>3</sup>: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my Covenant, you shall be *my own possession* among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." (Exodus 19:5–6).

Through the obedience to God's will Israel is to become:

- ◆ God's own possession—Israel cannot be understood without God.
- ◆ A kingdom of priests—a society of mediators of God's will to the nations.
- ◆ A Holy Nation—different from all the other nations.

God's will is expressed not only in the Ten Commandments, but in all the laws of the Pentateuch. Besides the cultic and ritual law, we have laws regarding social/community life.<sup>4</sup> The land given to the Israelites by God

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Norbert LOHFINK, *Option for the Poor. The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: D & F Scott, 1987), 33; Juan ALFARO, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor — O.T.," *Concilium* 187 (1986): 28–29.

<sup>3</sup> J. ALFARO, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor — O.T.," 32–34; N. LOHFINK, *Option for the Poor*, 42–47.

<sup>4</sup> For this section regarding the social/community laws see Norbert LOHFINK, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of The Bible", *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 34–49; Bruce V. MALCHOV, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996); David L.

was a visible sign, a sacrament of this covenant. Every Hebrew family would have a perpetual right to the land, the basic capital that they were to receive upon arrival to Canaan (Leviticus 25:23–28).

The owners of the land, that is, the majority of Israelites, are viewed as God's administrators or God's managers, for "land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23). Since the Israelites have received the land from God, they are to manage it according to God's will and not according to what they would prefer. God's will is that the produce of the land satisfy not only the owner's family but also those groups which, for very different reasons, are not in a position to live off their own land: widows, orphans, strangers and Levites (Leviticus 19:9-10: „When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the *poor* and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God”).

Those who do not have land are not reduced to the status of beggars. Their dignity is not diminished. They go and collect what is theirs from the land that is not theirs (Deuteronomy 24:19-22: “When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this”).

God Yahweh acted on behalf of the poor and marginalized people in Egypt not in order to create a new poverty and marginality among them, but in order to eliminate them altogether. The Israelites are to take care of one another, especially the stronger of the weaker, those who have of those who have not.

Every year those who have will leave something, according to their generosity, for those who do not have. It does not mean however, that all the rest is theirs. They still need to give the tithe: for two years to the temple but every three years 10% of their produce will be brought to the community

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BAKER, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?: Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

store and from there distributed to those who are in need (Deuteronomy 14:28-29: “At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do”). Only after this kind of sharing with the poor, can an Israelite say with a clear conscience that he has fulfilled all the commandments (Deuteronomy 26:12-15: “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your towns and be filled, then you shall say before the LORD your God, ‘I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all thy commandment which thou hast commanded me; *I have not transgressed any of thy commandments*, neither have I forgotten them; I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead; I have obeyed the voice of the LORD my God, I have done according to all that thou hast commanded me. Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel and the ground which thou hast given us, as thou didst swear to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey”).

The land flows with milk and honey as food for human beings, there where they live in a society without marginalization and exploitation, where the dignity of all is upheld. The “haves” are not to use any excuses in order to avoid sharing their income with “have-nots”, but they are to consider that 10% as a sacred portion, as something that does not belong to them. They are to understand that only the removal of that sacred portion will secure the blessing and abundance in the land.

If this system worked, the Hebrew “have-nots” would be well taken care of. It will never be possible to eliminate the existence of strangers, orphans and widows, but it is possible, according to the Covenant law, to create a world in which one can be a stranger, an orphan, or a widow without being marginalized and exploited (see also Deuteronomy 16:11–14).

The question arises: what about those, who have land but fall sick and are unable to work the land, or become victims of some sort of misfortune or natural disaster such as drought or flood? The new socio-economic system designed by God, makes provisions for them as well. (Deuteronomy 15:7–

11: “If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother,<sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.<sup>9</sup> Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and it be sin in you.<sup>10</sup> You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.<sup>11</sup> For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land”).

The Israelites are told that cases of poverty will always arise, but the one who has become a poor person is not to be considered a nuisance or a stranger, but a brother, and needs to be treated as such. He or she needs to borrow to survive the hard times and to restart the family economy. Their needs are not to be met with refusal. How the lending is to be done is explained in another law (Deuteronomy 23:19–20, *cf.* Exodus 22:25–27)

What happens if the borrower is not able to repay even the capital that was put at his disposal? In this case, the Covenant law resorts to a common practice in the Ancient Near East called “slavery for debts.” Those who cannot generate enough profit to pay their debts can sell themselves to their lenders, that is, they can sell all their work to them. However, that kind of “slavery” cannot last forever. The longest it can last is six years, for on the seventh year, the so-called sabbatical year, the release has to be granted (Deuteronomy 15:1-5: “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release.<sup>2</sup> And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD’s release has been proclaimed.<sup>3</sup> Of a foreigner you may exact it; but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release.<sup>4</sup> But there will be no poor among you (for the LORD will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance to possess),<sup>5</sup> if only you will obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment which I command you this day.<sup>6</sup> For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you”).

Nobody in Israel is to be kept in a perpetual state of dependency. Everyone has to be given another chance to start the family economy afresh. However, after up to six years of working for one's lender, the newly released person will have nothing on his/her own and will be forced to borrow again. Will it not be a beginning of a vicious circle of borrowing and slavery? In order to avoid such a situation, the law says: "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.<sup>13</sup> And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed;<sup>14</sup> you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.<sup>15</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today." (Deuteronomy 15:12-15).

The final goal of the law of the Covenant is the elimination of poverty within the new society of God: "There will be no poor among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4), and in consequence, the elimination of marginalization and exploitation of its members. According to the order proposed in the Pentateuch God intends that Israel be an *egalitarian nation of sisters and brothers* taking care of one another. These laws are to make sure that Israel becomes a kind of divinely-willed "contrast society"<sup>5</sup> (in this world, but not of this world), "an example to other nations: Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be *your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples*, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And *what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law* which I set before you this day?" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

This holiness/otherness of Israel was to be seen also in the way the authority was to be administered. The Law has very clear ideas on how the king of Israel should carry out his duties: "when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in the charge of the Levitical priests;<sup>19</sup> and it shall be with him, and

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<sup>5</sup> N. LOHFINK, *Option for the Poor*, 45.

he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them; <sup>20</sup> that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left; so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.” (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). Thus the supreme authority is also subject to the word of God. King’s faithfulness to that word will assure the well-being of all. Moreover, it is important to note that the king of Israel does not have subjects but brothers and sisters and he needs to treat them as such.

These laws are also to make sure that Israel never becomes another Egypt—a society of oppression and exploitation. A tangible sign of this newness of Israel will be freedom from sicknesses: “If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians, for *I am the LORD, your healer*” (Exodus 15:26); “You shall serve the LORD your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and *I will take sickness away from the midst of you*” (Exodus 23:25).

Historical Israel failed their mission and it became like other nations (not to be different, to become like other nations was a constant temptation of Israel). Exile was the consequence of this failure. However, the theme of *Israel as an example to other nations*<sup>6</sup> and the theme of *freedom from sicknesses*<sup>7</sup> return in the prophecies that look forward to the future restoration of Israel:

ISAIAH 2:2-5: It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all *the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”* For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. *O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gerhard LOHFINK, *Jesus and Community. The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, transl. by J.P. Galvin (Philadelphia: SPCK, 1984), 17–19.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 12–13.



ISAIAH 14:1: The LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land and *aliens will join them and will cleave to the house of Jacob*

ISAIAH 25:6: On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make *for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken.*

ISAIAH 49:6: He says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my *servant* to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a *light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*”

ISAIAH 55:5: Behold, you shall call *nations* that you know not, and *nations* that knew you not shall run to you, because of the LORD your God. and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

ISAIAH 56:6: And *the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

ISAIAH 60:3.5: And *nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. the wealth of the nations shall come to you.*

ISAIAH 66:18–19.21: For *I* know their works and their thoughts, and *I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations that have not heard my fame or seen my glory: and they shall declare my glory among the nations And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.*

JEREMIAH 3:17: At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and *all nations shall gather* to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and *they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.*

ZECHARIAH 8:22–23: Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and *to entreat the favour of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying. Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.*

The prophecies regarding the removal of all sicknesses are no less eloquent:

ISAIAH 30:26: Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day *when the LORD binds up the hurt of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.*

ISAIAH 33:24: And *no inhabitant will say, "I am sick"*; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.

ISAIAH 35:5: Then the eyes of *the blind* shall be opened, and the ears of *the deaf* unstopped; then shall *the lame* man leap like a hart, and the tongue of *the dumb* sing for joy.

A consequence of the restoration of Israel will be the pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem. This pilgrimage is pictured as an eschatological event. An important thing about it is that the Gentiles/nations do not become believers as a result of missionary activity; rather, the fascination emitted by the people of God draws them close. If God does not restore Israel, the nations would not be able to come. They will come, when they see Israel putting in practice the will of God, that is, walking in the light of the Lord.

## 2. THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PLAN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

All these prophecies come to fulfillment in the New Testament. Jesus' healing miracles point out that God is restoring his people and that is why he takes away all kind of sickness. When the messengers of John the Baptist come to enquire if Jesus is the one foretold by the prophets Jesus, instead of giving a direct answer, points to the healings he has just performed: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: *the blind* receive their sight, *the lame* walk, *lepers* are cleansed, and *the deaf* hear, *the dead* are raised up, *the poor* have good news preached to them." (Luke 7:22, *cf.* Isaiah 35:5).

Now, if it is true that the people of God become what God wanted them to be from the time of the Covenant at Mt. Sinai then the nations should recognize the signs and start coming to Jerusalem. Jesus seems to bring people attention to this fact by the cleansing of the temple. Actually, the part of the temple Jesus was cleansing was called the Court of the Gentiles/nations. By performing that sign Jesus seems to make room for those nations which are on the way to join the restored Israel, that is, Jesus'

community because the Kingdom of God has arrived: “he taught, and said to them, ‘Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all the nations?*’” (Mark 11:17).

In fact, one of the first acts of Jesus is the appointment of the Twelve — a prophetic sign that Jesus is restoring Israel<sup>8</sup>: “And he went up on the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And *he appointed twelve*, to be with him, and to be sent out *to preach* and have authority to cast out demons: And *he appointed the twelve*: Simon whom he surnamed Peter...” (Mark 3:13–16).

Thus, the existence of the eschatological Israel begins with the constitution of the Twelve and their preaching of the Kingdom of God. The replacement of Judas before the Pentecost is a very important event (Acts 1:15–26). A similar procedure does not take place after the death of James (*cf.* Acts 12:1–2). If the Passover corresponds to the time of Exodus, the Pentecost, 50 days later, is the feast of the Covenant of Sinai—the Twelve at the Pentecost symbolize without doubt the new people of God.<sup>9</sup> As the twelve tribes were present at Mt. Sinai when God was making the Covenant with them, so the Twelve apostles are present on the day of Pentecost when God is making the New Covenant, by writing not on the stone tablets, but on their hearts with the Holy Spirit:

JEREMIAH 31:31-33: Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall make a new covenant with the House of Israel (and the House of Judah),<sup>32</sup> but not like the covenant I made with their ancestors the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, even though I was their Master, Yahweh declares.<sup>33</sup> No, this is the covenant I shall make with the House of Israel when those days have come, Yahweh declares. Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God and they will be my people.

EZEKIEL 36:24–28: I shall take you from among the nations and gather you back from all the countries, and bring you home to your own country.<sup>25</sup> I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your filth and of all your foul idols.<sup>26</sup> I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead.<sup>27</sup> I shall put my spirit in you, and make you keep my laws, and respect and practice my judgments.<sup>28</sup> You will live in the country which I gave your ancestors. You will be my people and I shall be your God.

<sup>8</sup> *Cf.* G. LOHFINK, *Jesus and Community*, 9–11.

<sup>9</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, 89–90.

The description of the first Christian community underlines the fact that the restoration of Israel has taken place and that this new Israel lives according to the will of God promulgated at Mt. Sinai.

ACTS 4:32-35: Now *the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul*, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but *they had everything in common*. And with great power the apostles gave their *testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*, and great grace was upon them all. *There was not a needy person among them*, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and *distribution was made to each as any had need*.

ACTS 2:42.44-47: And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And *all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need* And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and *having favour with all the people*. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

In other words, the first Christian community embodies the commandment of Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, *that you love one another*; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34)

The Kingdom of God arrives in God's recreation of Israel. It shines forth in the people/community of God. Jesus' goal was that the rule of God be fully established, that it comes visibly into appearance. The rule of God requires a COMMUNITY, a people of God in whom it can be established and from whom it can shine forth so that the world at large may be transformed.<sup>10</sup>

What happens within the first Christian community can be described as a moral miracle. A physical miracle is always limited as far as the time and space are concerned. A moral miracle, instead, is always there for everybody to see and to decide whether one wants to join, to be part of it or not.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' preaching was not addressed to states or to society in general. "He did not seek to establish contact with Herod Antipas or Pontius Pilate in

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. LOHFINK, *Jesus and Community*, 70-73.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. N. LOHFINK, *Option for the Poor*, 75.

order to tell them how they should govern.”<sup>12</sup> He always had in mind Israel (“Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup> but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Mt 10:6-7; “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Mt 15:24; *cf.* Mark 7:27) or the COMMUNITY of disciples which was the prefiguration of Israel and in which the Kingdom of God was to shine. This community was to be “the salt of the earth”, “the light of the world”, and “the city on the hill” (*cf.* Mt 5:13-14). *The final goal was and still is the transformation of the entire world, but this transformation presupposes that the people of God first live according to the will of God in their own midst.* Through the fact that Jesus’ community (the new or renewed Israel) is saved and transformed into a new society in which there are no differences between rich and poor, upper and lower, ruler and the ruled, the whole human society is to be enabled to join this movement and eliminate all the forms of injustice.<sup>13</sup>

God’s plan for the transformation of the world proceeds by means of the communities which form a kind of contrast-society. *But one can enter this new society only by following Jesus. There is no cheap route apart from faith.* If Christianity is not the salt of the earth or the city on the hill, it is largely useless for the salvation of the world. It is not important the size of the city, it is important that it is on a hill and that it shines forth.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHURCH<sup>15</sup>

The ancient Church knew that it had to be a *sign* of the truth of the Gospel in its entire existence because the truth of Christian faith can shine only when it is intelligible through the praxis of Christians. The astonishing growth which it experienced in a relatively brief period can only be explained through the radiance of that *sign—a community of brothers and sisters loving one another.*

Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels tell us that when Jesus multiplied bread “he said to his disciples, ‘Make them sit down in companies, about fifty each.’” (Luke 9:14, *cf.* Mark 6:39–40). That “about fifty each” is a clear reference to the size of the early Christian house-churches. The early Christians were

<sup>12</sup> G. LOHFINK, *Jesus and Community*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, 63–65.

<sup>14</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, 66–70, 122–132.

<sup>15</sup> See for this section *Cf. G. LOHFINK, Jesus and Community*, 149–170.

organized in small communities of about 50 to 100 members, where everybody knew everybody else, their history and their needs, and could practice love in a concrete way.

The witness of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Christian Apologists is very eloquent here. On the one hand, it is true that they were writing in defense of Christian faith and way of life. On the other hand, what they wrote must have been true; otherwise their defense would have not had any convincing power. Let us listen to some of them:<sup>16</sup>

TERTULIAN, *Apology* XXXVIII 8–9: But *we are brothers*, too, by right of descent from one mother Nature [...] But how much more fittingly are those *both called brothers and treated as brothers* who have come to know one Father God, who have drunk of one Spirit of holiness, who from one womb of common ignorance have come with wonder to the one light of Truth!

MINUCIUS FELIX, *Octavianus* XXXI 8: *Our bond*, which you resent, *consist in mutual love*, for we know not how to hate; *we call ourselves “brethren”* to which you object, as members of one family in God, as partners of one faith, as joint heirs in hope. You do not acknowledge one another, amid outbursts of mutual hate; you recognize no tie of brotherhood, except indeed for fratricidal murder.

TERTULIAN, *Apology* XXXIX 8: Look how *they love one another*.

ARISTIDES, *Apology* XV 7: They do good to their enemies; and *they love one another*.

IGNATIUS, *Letter to Magnesia* V 2: The unbelievers bear the stamp of this world, and the believers the stamp of God the Father *in love*.

JUSTIN, *Apology* 1.14: We who once revelled in impurities now cling to purity; we who devoted ourselves to the arts of magic now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God, we who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions *now hand over to a community fund what we possess, and share it with every needy person*; we who hated and killed one another and would not share our wealth with those of a different tribe because of their [different] customs, now, after the coming of Christ, live together with them.

JUSTIN, *Apology* 1.67: The wealthy, if they wish, contribute whatever they desire, and the collection is placed in the custody of the president. [With it] he helps the orphans and widows, those who are needy because of sickness or any other reason, and the captives and strangers in our midst.

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<sup>16</sup> Quotations according to *The Anti-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, I-X, ed. Alexander Roberts et al. (Edinburgh – Grand Rapids: T. & T. Clark, 1983–1989).

EUSEBIUS, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.XXUL 10 (Bishop Dionisius of Corinth to the Roman Church c. 170 AD): This has been your custom from the beginning, to do good in manifold ways to all Christians, and to send contributions to the many churches in every city; in some places relieving the poverty of the needy, and ministering to the Christians in the mines, by the contribution which you have sent from the beginning, preserving the ancestral custom of the Romans, true Romans as you are. Your blessed bishop Soter has not only carried on this habit but has even increased it.

The Twelve apostles preached the gospel in the whole contemporary world and established a sufficient number of local churches. This marked the conclusion of mission in the strict sense. The communities established by the apostles existed from then on as a *sign* of the truth that it is possible and it is great to live according to God's will. Pagan society was then in a position to choose, either to join them or to reject them.<sup>17</sup> "It is evident that *Christianity in the pre-Constantine age achieved its astonishing growth simply through its presence and notability, and not through organized missionary efforts.*"<sup>18</sup> "The primitive Church as a minority group and a community bearing witness to faith in Christ felt so strong in its creative newness and eschatological hope that, while being in the world, it was, on the whole, aware of not being of the world, of being a community of 'saints'."<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS LIFE — THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION OF CHRISTIANITY

When, after the "Milan edict" of Constantine (312/313 AD), the masses enter the Church, its early structure of "house Churches" was broken. Christian communities (50–100 members, cf. Mark 6:40; Luke 9:14), where each one knew everybody else and could practice love in a concrete way, slowly disappeared. Big basilicas were built to accommodate huge numbers of new members who were entering the Church many times without proper catechumenate. Consequently, Church's moral level was lowered.<sup>20</sup> Actually, the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. LOHFINK, *Jesus and Community*, 136-137.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Norbert BROX, "Frühchristliche und heutige Nöte mit der christlichen Gemeinde", *Diakonia* 11 (1980) 226.

<sup>19</sup> Jean GRIBOMONT, "Monasticism: Early Christian (to 600)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, IX (Washington, D.C.: Jacke Heraty & Associates, 1967. Reprint 1981), 1032.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Elizabeth RAPLEY, *The Lord as Their Portion. The Story of the Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2011, 2, 51.

first thing to disappear was the “kiss of peace” though both Pauline and Catholic Letters presume that it was a normal practice between brothers and sisters in faith (cf. 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14).

In those years, however, a powerful movement began to manifest itself with the constitution of a purely evangelical society. Pachomius, who had become a monk around the time of the “Milan edict”, began organizing coenobitic communities (c. 320 AD) that in his lifetime included several thousand brothers, not counting convents of women.<sup>21</sup> *He founded monasteries that he divided into houses* (house Churches?) “where men lived a disciplined *life in common*, performed remunerative work and practiced individual poverty and detachment in essential matters, alternating with judiciously organized prayer.”<sup>22</sup> His sister was in charge of the monasteries of women. Brothers and sisters formed so called “Double Monasteries.” The brothers took care of the material needs of the sisters, but otherwise the two sexes lived a separate life. (Justinian I (529) demanded a more rigorous separation of sexes in monasteries. The Council of Nicea II (787) repeated the admonition and ordered the toleration of such institutions already in existence, but forbade new foundations. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Century, “Double Monasteries” were still present in France, Spain, England and Ireland. Only the Council the Trent put an end to this practice).<sup>23</sup>

“Eusebius of Vercelli († 371) on his return from exile in the East, brought *the idea of this community life* for his clergy in the West (northern Italy). Later on, this idea was put into practice by Ambrose of Milan and Augustine.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, the monastic/religious communities kept alive *the community dimension* of the Church.

The religious state (Benedictines, Carthusians, Canons Regular, Carmelites) was founded on a single promise to live in a COMMON according to the rule. The profession of three vows is mentioned for the first time only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of the Hermits of St. Augustine. The ecclesiastical authority (in the person of pope Innocent III) begins to see them as “essential to the monastic life” only in 1202.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. R.F. SMITH, “Religious Life”, 290; E. RAPLEY, *The Lord as Their Portion*, 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> J. GRIBOMONT, “Monasticism: Early Christian (to 600)”, 1034; Cf. E. RAPLEY, *The Lord as Their Portion*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jean GRIBOMONT, “Monasteries, Double”, in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, IX (Washington, D.C.: Jacke Heraty & Associates 1967. Reprint 1981), 1021.

<sup>24</sup> J. GRIBOMONT, “Monasticism: Early Christian (to 600)”, 1036. Cf. E. RAPLEY, *The Lord as Their Portion*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. P.F. MULHERN, “Vow; Practice and Theology of”, 756–757.



With the monastic communities coming to existence, there was a chance that at least these religious house churches *would preserve the community dimension of the Church and would continue to be a city on the hill; that they would continue, through their way of life as a community, to be a sign for the pagan society of how God wants his people to live.* In fact, like primitive Christianity itself so also monastic communities transformed the ancient world, civilized it and, we can say, created the medieval society.

### CONCLUSION

If this picture of the biblical background for Consecrated Life is correct, then it follows, that *the quality of community life* of our religious orders, congregations and institutes *is far more important for the transformation of the world according to God's will than all our pastoral, social and educational work.* If keeping of our vows do not foster love in our communities, then these vows are nothing more than the talents hidden in the ground (*cf.* Mt 25, 18), they do not generate any interest, they do not add any members to the Church.

Today, when the Church of the masses slowly but inexorably disappears, the only Church that is vital and that expands is the Church of small ecclesiastical communities. This kind of Church flourishes and shines forth in different ecclesiastical movements. Are these new communities, made of lay people, religious and clerics, are they not exercising greater alluring power than our venerable communities of consecrated life? If they do, does it teach us anything?

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#### TEORETYCZNE DYSKUSJE O INKULTURACJI NA RZECZ TRANSFORMUJĄCEJ EWANGELIZACJI

##### Streszczenie

Autor w swoim artykule dokonuje analizy biblijnej powstania życia konsekrowanego w świetle Bożego Planu Zbawienia. Autor analizuje poszczególne elementy tego planu od Abrahama poprzez Wyjście z Egiptu, Niewolę Babilońską oraz oczekiwanie i przyjście Jezusa Chrystusa. Wraz z nastaniem Kościoła realizuje się biblijna wizja egalitarnej wspólnoty opartej na zasadzie sprawiedliwości społecznej. Wzrost Kościoła zwłaszcza po Edykcie Mediolańskim doprowadził do zmian w strukturze Kościelnej i zatracie jej pierwotnego charakteru. W tym momencie powstały pierwsze wspólnoty monastyczne, które próbują zachować wspólnotową naturę Kościoła – symbolu prawdy i zbawienia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** życie konsekrowane; plan zbawienia; Kościół jako symbol.