



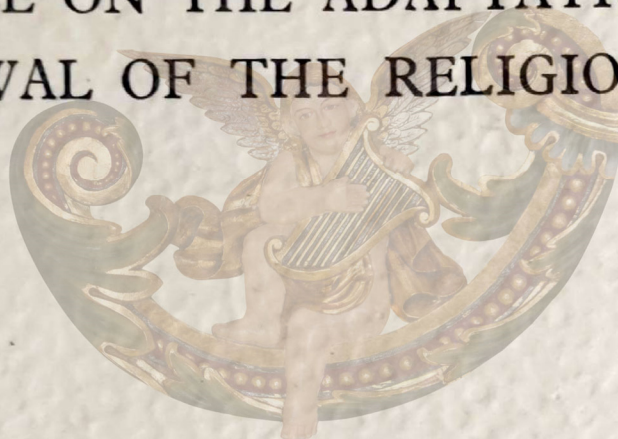
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RENEWAL OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

DECREE ON THE ADAPTATION AND  
RENEWAL OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE



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## Renewal of the Religious Life

CONSIDERING the importance of religious Orders and congregations in the life of the Church today, it is clear that the renewal of the Church, which is the primary objective of the Second Vatican Council, will in no small measure depend on the renewal of the religious life. That the religious life is in need of renewal and adaptation to the conditions and requirements of the present times is denied by no one, though not all realize the need with the same lucidity or sense of urgency, and the conciliar debate on the religious life manifested considerable differences of emphasis.

The pre-conciliar preparatory commission for religious had drafted several schemas on religious life, besides the chapter on religious in the Constitution on the Church (cf. *CLERGY MONTHLY* 1962, 168, 259, 293). After the general redrafting ordered by John XXIII after the first session (C.M. 1963, 52f), one of the 17 schemas accepted by the coordinating commission dealt with the *States of Perfection* (cf. C.M. 1963, 310). But before it came up for discussion in the Council, it was reduced to a set of 20 propositions, now called *De Religiosis* (cf. C.M. 1964, 271). This project was discussed in the third session (cf. C.M. 1965, 49), after the title had been changed once more, the final title being "Decree on the renewal and adaptation of the religious life" (*de accommodata renovatione vitae religiosae*).<sup>1</sup>

In the debate a number of impressive interventions were strongly critical and asked for a completely new text, less juridical, richer and more vigorous. But despite powerful opposition the schema was accepted by a simple majority (1155 against 882) as a basis for voting on the individual propositions. In the ballots that followed, 13 out of the 20 propositions failed to obtain the required majority of two-thirds, as a great number of Fathers proposed amendments ('*placet iuxta modum*'), the total of the *modi* being well over 14,000.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of these proposals the commission for religious was able, between the two sessions, to rework the whole schema. The text presented to the Council in the fourth session had been largely rewritten and considerably expanded; it was accepted almost unanimously, first on October 11, by 2126 '*placet*' against 13 '*non placet*', and again in the public session of October 28, in the final vote previous to the promulgation, by 2321 '*placet*', with only 4 '*non placet*'.

The theology of the religious life has been briefly exposed in chapter 6 of the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (on the Church). The purpose of the present decree is essentially practical: the renewal and adaptation of the religious life. The revised text tries to meet the criticisms raised during the conciliar debate,

1. It proved impossible to find a satisfactory title for this document. "States of Perfection" is considered ambiguous; "Religious" is inadequate, since the decree includes the Secular Institutes which are not religious institutes (no. 11).

2. The number of different amendments was, of course, much less (some 500), as many Fathers handed in the same *modi*.





though it remains somewhat timid and vague and has disappointed those who expected a more vigorous and bolder impulse for the reform demanded by the present times. But it contains principles which can be developed so as to remedy its shortcomings. In this preface, only a few points can be mentioned.

1. Regarding the *conception of the religious life*, the decree emphasizes, more strongly than did the Constitution *Lumen gentium*, its *christocentric* meaning: the religious life is essentially a following of Christ — “Come, follow me.” It is an answer to a personal call, the gift of self to Christ. The following of Christ is the leading idea of the whole decree (nn. 1, 5, etc); it is the ultimate norm and highest rule of religious life (2 a). What gives the religious life its permanent value is not the apostolic, educational or charitable work of the religious, but their consecration to Christ and to God.

The *ecclesial* aspect of the religious life is inseparable from its christocentric meaning. Being in the service of Christ, religious are in the service of His mystical Body. The particular work or institute is but an organ of the Church; its members must broaden their outlook, share in the life of the Church and adopt its spirit (2c, 5).

The religious consecration is rooted in that of baptism, which reaches in it a fuller expression (5; cf. Const. on the Church, 44).

All religious life, including the contemplative, is apostolic, and all apostolic life must be in some way contemplative. The dualism action-contemplation is thus attenuated (cf. 7-8. — One Cistercian monk wanted the distinction between contemplative and active religious to be abolished.)

2. Regarding the *reform of the religious life*, the general principles given in nn. 2-4 are important. All adaptation and renewal must both look back to the sources and consider the changed conditions of our time. The reform must not be imposed from above but the members must be consulted. All that is obsolete in the constitutions, custom books or prayer books must be suppressed as a first step towards adaptation. There can be no effective renewal and adaptation without a spiritual renewal, a real conversion.

Naturally, special attention is given to the renewal of the practice of the three vows (12-14).

The decree may seem at times vague and hesitant; but one must hope that it will be the starting point of a great movement of renewal and adaptation among the religious institutes which have served the Church so well in the past and remain indispensable in the present times.





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