

FOCUS

DISCERNING AND NURTURING VOCATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF SIGNS OF THE TIME:

Implications of Fidelity and Renewal of the Mission and the Works of Religious Institutes

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Why are we discussing "signs of the time" and religious vocations? It is evident that religious life has shifted and is still shifting grounds. Our times have changed. The values that sustained ancient institutions are eroding and / or are being changed. Certain values also cannot be upheld because conditions for maintaining and nurturing them have changed or are no longer there. Religious institutes are recording numerous cases of unruly behaviours from their members, while formators are having challenges with candidates who come to their institutes.

The present topic is approached under six subtitles. The essay begins by looking at the meaning and history of the term "Signs of the Times" (its origin, biblical use, circular use and use by Vatican II). It goes on to investigate what events qualify as signs of the time in contemporary society. Determining what the signs are would help to articulate how these signs affect religious life. They are keys to understanding how Religious communities can discern and nurture vocations in contemporary times and how to remain faithful to their founding vision and mission. Finally, a conclusion on the nature of our response to the signs of the time and implications of fidelity and renewal are reached through following Jesus' directive to "watch and Pray".

- 1. Meaning of the Term*
- 2. History of the Term*
- 3. Signs of the Time in Contemporary Society*
- 4. Signs of the Time and the Changing Landscape of Religious Life*
- 5. Fidelity to the Mission of Religious Institutes*
- 6. Evaluation and Conclusion: Watch and Pray*

1. MEANING OF THE TERM

Macmillan dictionary defines it as something that shows how things are and what may happen in the future. This definition is given to show that people do not like how things are. The Cambridge dictionary defines it as something that is typical of the bad way things are. The phrase might also be considered to refer to unusual events which challenge the status quo. For instance, having bomb detectors at every corner of public place in the society (supermarkets, airports, stadiums, churches, conference centers etc) is a sign of the times.

A sign is a pointer to another reality. It is anything which communicates a meaning to the observer about something else. So, a sign points beyond itself to another reality. It is an indication of something specific and significant. Signs present themselves in different ways and they communicate different meanings. For instance, in the medical sphere, a sign could be symptom of sickness or evidence of recovery. Signs can also communicate through any of the senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile etc.

We might question ourselves on the kind of ideas the phrase "signs of the time" raise in our minds. Most often, the phrase take our minds to signs of the end of times and prophecies about end of the world. For instance, "Signs of the Times" is the name of a monthly magazine, published by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which encourages people to live good Christian lives while they await the final coming of Jesus. The term originates from Matt 16:1,3:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the *signs of the times* [σημεῖα τῶν καιρῶν].

In the Bible, a sign is a signal or miracle that signifies something of divine or demonic origin. Through signs God communicates with us through means that point back to Himself. The question is, if we are attentive to read these signs. Many people believe that the Divine only speaks through amazing, miraculous, ethereal events, and unfortunately, this kind of thinking blocks the flow of communication. But the truth is that the Divine is just as present in the grime and banality of daily life as He is in the "extra-ordinary" events.

The sign might indicate a time of crisis or a particular time like the last times. In the book of the prophets, signs depict either times of crisis or time of restoration, for instance, Amos' vision of locusts at the time of latter growth (Amos 7:1) was a sign of upcoming disaster. In Isaiah 7:14 instead, the sign of a young woman with child was a word of future salvation from God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus made reference to signs which refer to significant events in his ministry that signal the time of the Messiah. These events include: the person of Jesus and his activities

which point to the presence of God and which call the people to repentance and faith. Jesus adds that the only sign given to a faithless age that always asks for a sign is the sign of Jonah (Matt 16:4). In the Gospel of John, miracles are called signs because they point beyond themselves to the divinity of Jesus. Therefore, the biblical use of the term is both Christological and eschatological.

Many people believe that we are living in the last days of history, and there are prophecies that lead to this belief: wars and different occurrences of conflicts (2 Pet 3:3-4; Mark 13:7-8), appearance of false prophets who perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect (Matt 24:23-24), increase in travel and education (Dan 12:4), increase in terror and movement of the heavenly bodies (Luke 21:25-26), sudden destructions in the midst of talks of peace and security (1 Tess 5:2-3), and the coming of the antichrist (1 John 2:18). To this list, one might want to add faithlessness (Matt 16:4) as a sign of the times.

From the events that characterize the present time, religious institutes are challenged to understand these signs more fully and clearly, in order to propose possible adaptations for formation and nurturing of vocations in the religious life. They are challenged to strategically redefine their pastoral action. The question then is, How would they maintain fidelity and redefine their founding vision and mission in the changing religious climate of the present era? There might be the natural temptation to adopt a certain misguided "realism" that suggests compromises or whatever accommodations one can make as a way of gaining some small measure of influence over a culture that is increasingly hostile to the Gospel.

2. HISTORY OF THE TERM

Besides the circular uses of the term, the cliché is a biblical expression which refers to significant events and trends in human history for centuries. The term was given a specific theological content by a document of Vatican II, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World "*Gaudium et Spes*", no.4, where it refers to those events in history which are characteristic of an epoch, and which if properly read, can reveal the presence or absence of God. A part of this paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes* reads:

In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live. An outline of some of the more important features of the modern world forms the subject of the following paragraphs. Ours is a new age of history with profound and rapid changes spreading gradually to all corners of the

earth. They are the products of people's intelligence and creative activity, but they recoil upon them, upon their judgments and desires, both individual and collective, upon their ways of thinking and acting in regard to people and things. We are entitled then to speak of a real social and cultural transformation whose repercussions are felt at the religious level also (GS, 4).

According to this text, events that represent the signs of the times are a product of people's ways of thinking and acting, their desires, aspirations and search for meaning, which lead to real social and cultural transformation, whose impact is felt at the religious level, and which the Church must interpret in the light of the Gospel. Before the Council, the term was used by Pope John XXIII in the Bull "*Humanae Salutis*" (Of Human Salvation, 25th Dec. 1961), the document which he wrote to convene the Council. In the document, the Pope rejected the idea of those who say that darkness overshadowed the earth. He rejected the idea in order to "renew confidence in our Savior who has not left the world he redeemed". The Pope does not deny totally the presence of darkness in the world but he was encouraging the people of God to open their eyes to other events that indicate positive fate of the Church and humanity (HS, 3).

During the Council, Pope John XXIII published the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* (13th April 1963) in which he used the term "signs of the times" as subtitles to three distinct sections of the letter (§§ 29; 126; 142), and identified three significant events that qualify for signs of the times: (a) the progressive development of the working classes, (b) the growing role of women in public life and (c) the gradual disappearance of colonialism. The phrase "signs of the times" was used four times in the documents of the Second Vatican Council: *Unitatis redintegration* §4; *Dignitatis Humanae*, §15; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, §9 and *Gaudium et Spes*, §4

After the Council, Pope Paul VI used the term in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (6th August 1964) where he refers to the dialogue between the Church and the world as a sign of the times. Since after Vatican II, the phrase has continued to be used in papal documents and in the Catechism of the Church.

3. SIGNS OF THE TIMES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

It is important at this stage to identify the events which qualify as signs of the times in which we live. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, the determination of what qualifies for a sign of the times and its interpretation is not an easy task. It is a prophetic task which must be done with a spirit of prayer and under the assistance of the Holy Spirit (GS, 44). According to the council, understanding and deciphering of the signs of the times requires a high degree of faith and openness to the Holy Spirit. "The Council wishes to assert in the light (of faith) those values which are most highly praised today and to relate them to their divine source. For insofar as they stem from endowments conferred by God on man, these

values are exceedingly good. Yet they are often wrenched from their rightful function by the taint in man's heart and we stand in need of purification" (GS 44, art. II).

As GS 4 says, the phrase "signs of the Times" denotes events that characterize an era and which represent the aspirations, needs, search for meaning and attitudes of people of a particular time. Besides incidents of natural disaster and unpredictable weather conditions, there are significant events in today's world which are so widespread and so pervasive that they could be said to represent the aspirations and needs of human beings and nations today. We live in societies that are gradually and progressively becoming secular and losing the God focus. We are also experiencing the abandonment of religion, the gradual loss of the religious spirit, the relativization of Gospel values and the persecution of Christians in many parts of the globe, increasing immorality, adoption of anti-life and anti-gospel policies by governments and institutions, abuse of human rights and freedom, disregard for human life and the common good, materialistic spirit. In addition to all these, many nations are experiencing un-abating political unrest which lead to deteriorating economic climate, socio-political chaos, fear and anxiety. People feel they are living in perilous times. We have only to open our eyes to realize that the world is undergoing major catastrophic shifts, and we are powerless to do anything about it.

This is the world in which consecrated persons live and work. This is the world from which candidates are selected for consecrated life. In these circumstances, I would number consecrated persons and increase in vocations to the religious life as a primary sign of our time. One fundamental challenge we might have with signs is to misunderstand, misread or misinterpret them. We might also live with them without paying attention to their significance. In the prophecy of Amos, we are clearly shown that signs from God can be given in the most banal of events. In Amos 7:1-9, Amos recounts a number of things the Lord showed him - locusts, shower of fire and plumb line - which are signs of God's judgment. Religious institutes are invited to be sensitive and open to happenings in the world if they must remain faithful to their mission in the world. When these signs are judged through the light of the Gospel then we are truly inspired with the faith filled vision.¹ As priests and religious, our openness to God through prayer and the various spiritual activities that are open to us every day - the Eucharist, Holy Communion, and Eucharistic Adoration - all these tune our minds to the spirit.

4. SIGNS OF THE TIMES AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

In this section of the paper, I would like to focus attention on specific signs, which are gradually changing the landscape and climate of religious life. While enrolment into religious institutes in Africa increase, our age records reduced quality of Christian witnessing among consecrated persons in the Church. There is the confusion or ignorance of the religious about their identity, secularization and materialism, the rise of practical

¹ <https://www.sign.org/articles/discerning-the-signs-of-the-times>

atheism, and commercialization of sex among the religious. Many religious institutes, especially female religious congregations, neglect the religious (theological) formation of their members, and they content themselves with formation in 'lucrative' professional education. In matters of spirituality, some formators of candidates appraise sentimental goals — emotional outbursts at prayer sessions. Often, our convictions are weak and unstable; we are lacking in inner spiritual resources and the power of the gospel is not impacting on our lives. All these speak volumes of the formation of candidates to religious life and of ongoing formation of the young religious. In the light of all these, religious institutes must concern themselves primarily with issues of fidelity to the vision and mission of their foundations.

5. FIDELITY TO THE MISSION OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

Another sign of the present time regards the quality of our humanity and of our relationships. We live in a time of massive infidelity and lack of trust in anyone. This is evidenced in people's inability to keep promises made to God and to fellow human beings. It is also evidenced in the high rate of broken marriages, disregard for agreements and signed contracts, selfishness and the obsession for independent living and undefined freedom. Consecrated people also exchange their vowed obedience and communal life for independently run social or political work. Fidelity is the virtue that helps a people to establish harmony between their actions and words. This virtue is vital for the building of relationships between people and for the consolidation of social units like family and social, political and economic institutions. Fidelity is also important for consolidating religious institutions. If the religious are unfaithful to their vows and authorities of religious institutes have materialistic goals, the institutions might crumble or lose its relevance. Fidelity to the mission of a religious institute demands that one wages constant war against well defined attitudes that militate against the aims and goals of its foundation. Other specific measures which must be taken to maintain fidelity are the following:

5.1 Training Skilled Formators for Formation

If the discerning and nurturing of vocation is a major project of a congregation, then the training of skilled formator(s) is also of ultimate concern. Many of the reasons why formation does not yield expected results is a system of government that settles for the minimum, even with regard to the choice of a formator. An instance of good formation could be cited here from an area in the secular world where formation takes place. This is the athletic world, and this is because of the strict training to which trainers subject their trainees in sports. A sinister group that executes efficient formation are cultic groups in tertiary institutions. It is hard for me to imagine the kind of transformation that takes place in the lives of those formerly innocent and uncomplicated young men who after a month of initiation in the bush are able to put a gun on someone's head. This is real formation. These show that formation is a remoulding, a sort of conversion. After a person is formed, the shape of his or her life changes, in character, behaviour and orientation; becoming something else. In an era that encourages secularization and materialism, religious groups are

challenged to embark on formation which accompanies the candidate in the arduous process towards becoming a new creature in Christ and living according to a particular charism and spirituality. Do we consider this goal when we choose formation directors/directresses?

What kind of formation obtains in religious institutions? Usually, congregations consider certain qualities for a formator: mature, obedient, loyal to the congregation, motherly/fatherly, and so on. We need to learn from the business world, successful firms do not elect any good person into the administrative offices. The person must know the business, would have shared in its life for a long time, would know the challenges of the firm, its strengths and weakness, their partners and competitors and who is smart enough to know how to grow the business. In our case, a religious with a motherly/fatherly heart does not have all that it takes to accompany young people coming from this generation. Some formators neither understand the signs of the times nor are they able to interpret them. Some institutions send their designated formators to training for a period as short as three months or longest, one year. This is too short to create a formator. Institutions can help such mature, mother/fatherly religious by giving them the skill to do their work. Formation must be a transformative process.

Among other qualities, the formator must have love for the word of God and must have a passion for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is so that he/she can transmit this love into the formandees. He/She must be able to cultivate in them the love for the word of God. This virtue is lacking among members of many religious groups, and if this so, our identity as images of Christ to the world is questionable.

5.2 Training Against the Secularized / Materialistic Spirit of our Times

Our societies are gradually being secularized and its effects are gradually influencing religious life. Secularization deals with a certain way of thinking and considering things from a mundane perspective, replacing religious signs with secular ones. When we say that an environment is secularized, it means that it no longer accepts a religious interpretation of events; it is worldly, purely material, completely drained of the divine spirit that used to determine the life and meaning of earthly realities.

The word, materialism, deals with material or what we can touch or what is physical. Its interest or concern is desire for money and material possessions rather than spiritual, intellectual or ethical values. It is the belief that comfort, pleasure and wealth are the only or highest goals or values or the only source of happiness. It is also the rejection of any religious or supernatural interpretation of events.

Among us, religious, a secular and materialistic spirit is in vogue. Many of us are more concerned with what is physical, material proof than with deep emotions, beliefs and spiritual ideas. What is being called into question here is making the search for prosperity the answer to meaning or the ultimate aim for embracing religious or priestly life. In addressing superiors of

Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on 28th January 2017, Pope Francis deliberated much on the materialistic culture of our time and on factors that inhibit faithfulness and perseverance in religious life. He says,

The first factor that does not help maintain faithfulness is the social and cultural context in which we move. We live immersed in the so-called culture of fragmentation, of the temporary, which leads us to live in an “à la carte” way, as slaves to fashion. This culture introduces the need always to have “side doors” open onto other possibilities, feeds consumerism and forgets the beauty of the simple and austere life, very often causing a great existential emptiness. There has also been the spread of a strong practical relativism, according to which everything is judged in relation to a self-realisation that is at times far removed from the values of the Gospel. We live in a society in which economic rules substitute moral ones, dictate the laws and impose systems of reference at the expense of the values of life; a society where the dictatorship of money and profit advocates a vision of existence in which those who are not productive are discarded. In this situation, it is clear that one must first let oneself be evangelised in order to engage in evangelisation.²

In his address, Pope Francis points out that incidents of lack of fidelity among the religious is a "hemorrhage" that weakens consecrated life and the life of the Church. The Pope mentions many factors that encourage unfaithfulness or lack of fidelity in religious life: inability to take care of young candidates or religious who are victims of the logic and culture of worldliness, internal divisions in religious communities, the search for power, or “climbers”, a worldly way of governing institutes, a service of authority that sometimes becomes authoritarianism and sometimes “laissez-faire”.

On the need for accompaniment, the pope recognizes that numerous vocations are lost due to lack of valid guidance and he recommends that "consecrated life must invest in preparing guides who are qualified for this ministry". In very concise statements, the Pope repeatedly emphasized that "If consecrated life is to maintain its prophetic mission and its appeal, continuing to be a school of faithfulness for those near and far, it must keep its freshness and the novelty of the centrality Jesus, maintain the attraction of spirituality and the strength of mission, show the beauty of following Christ, and radiate hope and joy."³

5.3 Being Evangelizers in a Globalized world

Globalization is a defining sign of our times. Globalization could be a good thing, an expression of our common humanity and solidarity. It has brought information and technology at everyone's door step. But right now, globalization is too often about money

² <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11495>

³ Ibid.

and power. Despite vast differences in history, culture and language, the different peoples of the world are now wearing the same clothes, listening to the same music, drinking the same soft drinks, and watching the same movies and TV shows.⁴

This has led to a peculiar vision of human life and happiness. Globalization's biggest impact is "anthropological." It's creating a new kind of secularized man, speaks of humanitarian goals and progress that leaves no room for God to the extent that it gives the impression that religion is enemy of humanitarian goals and progress.

The first reaction to globalization is active and personal witness to the world of a life totally dedicated and reserved for God. Consecrated person must give active witness of their love and need of God to a world that is tending towards self sufficiency. They must also take advantage of the benefits of globalization which provided easier access to preaching the gospel to more persons who are willing to listen.

6. CONCLUSION: WATCH AND PRAY!

The first part of this paper established that the events which represent the signs of the time are indicators of the deepest desire of human beings, their aspiration and desires, and especially, their search for meaning which lead to social and cultural transformation and which the gospel must interpret and address. The changes evidenced in the socio-cultural and political world has also brought tremendous changes to the religious climate. In the face of these events, religious institutes must maintain a dynamic fidelity to their mission.

The mission of a religious institute is defined by the founding charism of the same institute. Dynamic fidelity to mission means that as the institution grows and opens itself to new situations or new challenges in the world, it must anchor itself on its spiritual foundations while being also open to the signs of the times. In other words, dynamic fidelity allows an institute to maintain its old identity in renewed developments.⁵

The events that characterize our age - globalization, secularization, materialism, erosion of the religious spirit, attraction to sentimental religiosity and so on - have already changed our religious landscape and are able to cause the major seismic shifts in the life of consecrated persons if religious institutions are not able to interpret their effects on their members.

In order to tackle the challenges of the signs of our time and to remain faithful to their mission, religious institutions must "watch and pray". The gospel injunction to watch and pray (Matt 26:41) encourages us never to let down our guard. GS 44 rightly counsels that our responses to the signs of the time is a prophetic task which must be done with a

⁴ cf. <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7767>.

⁵ Cf. Antonio Romano, *The Charism of the Founders*, Milan: St Pauls, 1994, p152.

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spirit of prayer and under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, I have also suggested that religious institutes must adopt a personal approach to evangelization. They must reinterpret for their members the tenets of their spirituality, emphasize formation and invest heavily on spiritual accompaniment of their members.