

VOWS, VIRTUES AND RELEVANCE

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December 2, 2013

"Is the Church still relevant ?" is a question we often hear these days. Smaller numbers attending Church, shortage of vocations, sexual abuse crises and consequent enquiries, the position of women in the Church, abortion, same sex marriages, internal governance structures - these are just some of the symptoms and factors that lead to questions about the relevance of the Church in today's world. Religious Congregations within the Church, as they face ageing groups and declining membership, are also asking questions about their own relevance in these times. And so they should !



After attending the Religious Profession of Vows of Sr Germia Tocama SGS in the Philippines, Sr Clare Condon SGS¹ recently wrote² :

I ask myself again: What relevance does such a commitment to vowed life have in our twenty-first century world of globalisation, consumerism and secularisation? Isn't the prevailing paradigm one of self-advancement, immediate gratification, and attention to the here and now, on what can life give me now?

.....My reflected response to this question of relevance is that perhaps such a commitment is more significant than ever before. There is still an underlying yearning in people for an authentic spirituality. On a universal scale this has been evident in the global interest in the election of Pope Francis. The desire for spiritual leadership has been articulated strongly.

On a personal level, as a perpetually professed Sister of the Good Samaritan, Germia is dedicating her life to the ongoing seeking of God, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. For her, God is not dead. God is indeed alive and active in her life and in the lives of all people. In fact, she sees that God is alive in all of creation. Her daily search for God is evident in the living out of the values found in the Gospel stories. She encounters God in her daily prayer, in lectio, the sacred reading of Scripture, in participating in the prayer of the Church—the Work of God—by allowing the psalms, God's poetry, to wash over her morning and evening, every day.

Germia witnesses to the perennial values of life-long conversion. It is a journey of spiritual and personal growth. She places her trust in God's forgiveness and compassion so that she can grow more fully as a human person. Her life is a

¹ Sr Clare Condon is the Congregational Leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict. Photo of Clare Condon above courtesy of the Catholic Diocese of Lismore NSW.

² Condon SGS, Sr Clare, "Is Vowed Religious Life Relevant Today ?", *Compass*, (A Review of Topical Theology), Winter 2013, Vol 47, No 2, pp 7-8; accessed November 6, 2013, at: <http://compassreview.org/winter13/3.pdf>

counterbalance to those who believe that one can only achieve happiness by self-assertion and dominance of others.

Clare Condon then goes on to talk about the particular vows that are professed by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

Daughters of Charity and Vincentian Priests and Brothers

The Daughters of Charity and Vincentian Priests and Brothers (Congregation of the Mission) also take vows of course. The Daughters of Charity take their vows anew each year, the Vincentians take theirs for life. But these vows do not make them "Religious" - they are members of what are called Societies of Apostolic Life in distinction to the Sisters of the Good Samaritan who are a Religious Order. However, arguments can still be made regarding the relevance of the vows the Daughters and the Vincentians take.

In addition to their vows, the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Priests and Brothers could also ponder the relevance of the particular virtues they commit themselves to try to practice - the virtues of simplicity, humility and charity (for the Daughters of Charity) and the virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal (for the Vincentian Priests and Brothers). In terms of identity and lifestyle, these virtues have an importance that is often underestimated.

There is also the relevance of the ministries that different groups in the Vincentian Family carry out. Historical and even financial reasons for continuing some of our works may well play a role in our decisions to carry on these works, but we can easily convince ourselves that relevance is of lesser importance.

And then there is the relevance of the way we live in community and the authority structures that sometimes govern, or over-govern, our lives and ministries.

All of the above are things which we as members of the Vincentian Family sometimes take for granted - vows, virtues, ministries, community etc. But can we say that all these aspects of our lives appear relevant to those whom we might think would be attracted to joining us - particularly in the sense that what is relevant for us should also have the same relevance for them ? Do we make these assumptions in our formation programmes ? Can we assume that all these aspects of our lives automatically transmit our charism, or help to develop it further in those we meet ?

Relevance is as much an issue for the Vincentian Family as it is for the wider Church !

FOR REFLECTION

1. How much thought do we give to the relevance of the virtues we aim to practice as part of our Vincentian heritage ?
2. How much consideration do we give to the relevance of our way of living community life in the present world ?