

Antonio Maria Sicari

HE CALLS US FRIENDS
Laymen and Evangelical Counsels



Original title:
Ci ha chiamati amici. Laici e consigli evangelici
© 2001 Jaca Book, Milán

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First English language edition published
April 2015

On the cover:
Alessandra Slucca, *The Church* (2012)

ISBN 978-88-99036-03-4

To the Ecclesial Carmelite Movement
first addressee of the following pages
“a lectione in dilectionem”

“Christians: Christ-bearers,
Either we take Christ against the world,
or the world will take us against Christ.
To be baptized is not enough;
To observe the commandments of God
and the precepts of the Church is not enough;
To have a thorough knowledge
of the Catholic Doctrine is not enough.
The vital thing for our soul is
To make itself so poor and humble and chaste
To transform itself in the manger of Bethlehem;
Because only then Jesus will shine in it”.

(D. Giuliotti, *Polvere dell'esilio*, 1929*)

(Domenico GIULIOTTI, *Polvere dell'esilio**)

* Edizioni Logos, Roma 1980, pp. 92-93.

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INTRODUCTION

Meditation on evangelical counsels started back in the first centuries of the Christian era, but it is not concluded yet. The presence in the Gospel of a *Voice* requiring not only what is commanded, but also what can be friendly *suggested* is a belief that has always given joy to those who wanted to consecrate their life to God: martyrs, virgins, monks have perceived it immediately.

Common Christians, however, have experienced a sort of regret: if we are *all* called to “love God with all our heart, soul and strength”, if we are *all* invited to surrender ourselves entirely to Christ, Lord and Master of life, how is it possible to say that *some* are called to follow Him “more closely”, “more intimately”?

The fact that there exists a difference in love intensity between more generous Christians and more tepid ones is evident; yet the question is whether there can be “something more” that distinguishes them based on their state of life and, thus, on the same vocation they were called to by the Lord. Let us leave to theologians the explanation of how a state of life can and must be better. Surely, this has nothing to do with its members’ cleverness, but with the fact that the mystery of the entire Church shines brightly in a certain state of life. It is important to emphasize the fact that, whatever the assigned vocation, individual holiness depends on love intensity.

But common faithful had the right intuition when they defended their spontaneous conviction that *evangelical counsels* should be able to apply to every vocation and every state of life. The thing is that theological meditation on this matter has been slow and laborious, and it has often been limited to require that everyone follows at least the “spirit of evangelical counsels”.

Reality, however, is plain and fascinating. The three great words with which the Christian tradition identified *Jesus’ basic advice* – virginity, poverty and obedience – not only express the possibility to follow Him in the so-called “consecrated life”: they describe, indeed, the same structure of the human being, as he was forged by God’s wise and provident hands. They are, therefore, *words we recommend* everybody practices on the path to the beatific “principle” in which each of us was conceived, wanted and loved “in Jesus Christ”.

The meditations in this book are not abstractions, they are the result of a constructive dialogue between consecrated persons and laymen,¹ both willing to learn that the evangelical advice of virginity, poverty and obedience announce *a type of human being*, a new quality of life that must be lived and enjoyed by all Christians: each one according to his/her own state of life.

This work is an in-depth doctrinal study that – in the hope of turning into concrete experience – can be useful to all lay Christians, whichever “spiritual homeland” (Movements, Associations, Communities, Groups) they are gathered into by the Holy Spirit to let them enjoy the one and only Church.

Father Antonio Maria Sicari

¹ The present second edition, completely reviewed and extended, is the result of further discussion between consecrated and lay persons, which took place after the book’s first edition (A.M. SICARI, *Ci ha chiamati amici. Laici e consigli evangelici*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2001).

Chapter 1

THE CHRISTIAN'S NEW LIFE

Christians are creatures regenerated by grace. Those who become aware of this spend their life as children longing to become more and more like Jesus, the only-begotten Son of the Father, who sent Him for the salvation of the world.

The *New Testament* often speaks of “new creation”, “new creature”, “new man”, “new life”, and we usually take these formula in an ascetic-moral sense. We ask ourselves which behaviors we should change or improve in order to enter this renewed existence. This is surely important, yet the novelty the Holy Scriptures refer to is far more radical. It happens even before we decide to change or renew ourselves. It reaches us unexpectedly, like a gift.

More than that, it is this same novelty which gives us the strength for any further change. It is similar to what parents experience when a long-desired child comes to life, to a boy/girl's joy when he/she meets the person he/she falls in love with,¹ or to what a lonely person feels on meeting a true friend.

In the life of Jesus' disciples, the novelty was not only the remarkable change in their humanity that became evident after living with

¹ DANTE [1265-1321] wrote his *Vita Nuova* (*Incipit vita nova*) and it is well-known that the Latin term *nova* means “juvenile life” as well as “renewed life”; in both cases the beginning is marked by the *miracle* of his meeting with Beatrice (her greeting, her smile): a miracle bringing salvation.

the Divine Teacher for some years: the main novelty was the total, unexpected gift they were given on the same day they met Him on the shore of the Tiberiad Sea, when they answered His call without even knowing where He would lead them. This new-born friendship already bore in itself the seed and gift of any further novelty.

The Christian experience always starts with the miracle of a renewing encounter. This happens when God is no longer just the Master and Lord who governs us with His commands: He becomes for us the Spouse who comes to reveal all His love, to welcome us in His intimacy and give us His own life. The novelty a Christian is asked to realize is not, therefore, to improve or change at all costs, but the desire to respond and adhere more and more and better and better to a love relationship. And Love has its own law: the law of *more and more*. Those who love Jesus are not satisfied with obeying His commands. They are willing to listen to anything that can help love grow: any suggestion, any piece of advice.² Some examples from the Gospel can help us understand.

Publican Zacchaeus³ was still a sinner when he met Jesus. The novelty didn't come with his moral change (with his giving up theft and giving back what he had stolen), but with the unexpected offer from Christ who said: "I will come to your house today" and this offer filled Zacchaeus with joy. From this gratuitous encounter Zacchaeus received not only the capacity to obey the commandments ("You shall not steal! You will give back what does not belong to you!"), but the generosity to spontaneously offer more for love ("Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded

² There is an old and interesting etymology (even though not agreed upon by everybody) which makes the word *advice* derive from *con-silère* ("to be silent together"), as it happens between two people who respectfully keep silent, one person waiting for the other one to start speaking. While the word *command* may imply non involvement and distance between the person who commands and the one who obeys, the word *advice*, on the contrary, presumes friendship, dialogue and mutual understanding. Besides, *advice* relies on mutual trust.

³ Cf. Lk 19:2-8.

anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much!"⁴). Jesus had not asked him to do this, but Zacchaeus perceived that such a choice would please Him. Jesus was friendly suggesting and by listening to Him Zacchaeus realized he would become a closer friend of His.

The rich youth⁵, on the contrary, had observed all the commandments and even received the grace to meet the Messiah, but no novelty occurred in his life because he refused Jesus' love call to abandon any other wealth to follow Him.

But the *new* story, with its *new* love commandments started when – during the last evening of His life – Jesus told His apostles who had followed Him until that last, very dramatic night in spite of their extreme fragility: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15:15).

It is on this "something more" – nourishing friendship – that we want to meditate especially.

1. Novelty feeds on friendship and friendship feeds on dialogue

To understand the issue, we have to question ourselves about this fundamental point: what novelty happened to us with Jesus Christ's coming? What does it mean, exactly, to become a Christian?⁶

We know the Creator placed His Law in the world and in every man's heart – in *nature*, so to speak – and whoever honors God and

⁴ Biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition*, Copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

⁵ Mt 19:16-22.

⁶ We will keep our meditations within *the Christian* domain, but we must not forget that, through our affiliation to Christ, *the human being* is completely revealed to him/herself and finds his/her true fulfilment. Thus, our meditations here involve "every man", too.

names Him with due veneration, should, thus, respect this *natural law*. Human mind is capable enough to understand the concept of obedience to God the Creator, to discern the fundamental difference between good and evil, between truth and falsity, justice and injustice, even though it can be mistaken in some concrete applications. The original sin has made this obedience harder, but not impossible, because God's grace has always been secretly working in every man's heart.

It was in the context of the Hebrew Revelation, however, that *the universal, natural law* – condensed in *Ten Commandments* – was offered as a pact of Alliance between God and the people He had chosen. In this way, the natural law appeared more clearly as an expression of God's Wisdom and Goodness: the well-known *ten Words* (or "ten Commandments") were revealed to Moses as an expression of the divine pedagogy and as an offer of friendship with God.

In the *Old Testament*, however, the Law had already been synthesized in *two great precepts of charity*, and man's obedience, too, was required more and more as a love response. A beautiful episode in the Gospel reminds us of this; it tells of an intense moment of spiritual understanding between Jesus and a scribe:

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that *He is one, and besides him there is no other*"; and *"to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength"*, and *"to love one's neighbour as oneself*, - this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'" (Mk 12: 28-34).

2. The new Law is Jesus Himself

It is with the incarnation of God's Son that the divine Law (both natural and revealed) undergoes a thorough change and becomes *new*. The ancient Law is not at all diminished in its permanent principles of goodness, truth and justice, but it becomes a matter of personal love, a relationship of friendship between us and God who became our brother, friend and Spouse.

By revealing to us the merciful Father, by giving us His own life as Son to conform us to Himself and by infusing the Holy Spirit into us, Jesus transforms God's Law: rather than a code to be respected or some external norms to be observed, the Law becomes the authoritative Word engraved into our heart.

More than this: the Law becomes the presence of the Holy Trinity in our heart: a presence that speaks to us, appeals to us, involves us in an intimate dialogue and leads us with love. We can say that each of the three divine Persons is the Christian's *law*, in that the love relationship with each of them truly guides the Christian. For a saint (that is for a true Christian) *law* is the Father's loving will that he/she will look for; *law* is Christ's example faithfully imitated in all actions; and *law* is the Holy Spirit's guide that he/she will follow with all his/her heart. We are then speaking of "The Law of Charity" that the disciple has to learn by contemplating his Lord and Teacher.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony, Saint Dominic's first successor at the head of the Dominican Order, in 1236 advised Diana of Andalò in this way: "Read the book you always have in front of your soul's eyes, the book of life, the book of the immaculate law that converts souls... It's the *Law of Charity* and you'll find it beautifully written every time you contemplate Jesus, your Savior hanging from the Cross, as a parchment written with his wounds and illuminated with his blood"⁷.

⁷ JOURDAIN DE SAXE [1190-1237], *Lettres à Diane d'Andalò* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 127-128. English translation: Gerald VANN O.P., *To Heaven with Diana! A Study of Jordan of Saxony and Diana D'Andalò with a Translation of the Letters of Jordan* (NY: Pantheon, 1960).

Is there in the Gospel any difference at all between *commandments* and *advice*? It is a specification rather than a difference. Once stated that “the new Law is the Law of *Charity*” (and as a consequence, all disciples are called to the perfection of charity)¹⁶, we can also notice that the *commandments* teach us to practice the essential acts of charity and to remove what is incompatible with it, while the *counsels* teach us to do what favors charity and to remove any obstacles to it. To favor charity in all ways and to remove all obstacles is surely “something more”, but not “an extra something” because it is all about love. Hans Urs von Balthasar explained: “He who is touched by love will not find peace till he accomplishes all that he can do to help love win. The ethics of such a man are at complete disposal of this radical commandment. ‘Good’ and ‘permitted’ for him is what concords with God’s call to “love more”. ‘Bad’ is what does not concord with it even though the world, even the Christians, were to consider it reasonable and morally acceptable”¹⁷.

3. The three evangelical counsels

When we speak of “evangelical counsels” it is then important to recall the first, fundamental demand of Christian love. God gave us all of Himself: we have to respond by giving everything. But, in order to give everything, the only, realistic way is to give “more each time”, to listen to the friendly advice (paternal, spousal, friendly) He gave us in His Gospel and proposes again in everyday life. This conviction should be grown by all Christians.

However, we cannot forget that the Christian tradition – meditating on the Gospel – identified especially three counsels (of virginity, poverty and obedience) and put them at the basis of a certain state of life: monastic and/or consecrated.

¹⁶ Let us repeat here that sainthood lies in this “perfection of charity” – and not in the states of life.

¹⁷ Hans Urs VON BALTHASAR [1905-1988], *Gli stati di vita del cristiano* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1996), 375. English translation: *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

As for the advice of evangelical *Poverty*, the episode of the rich youth has often been considered for meditation (this episode represents a true catechesis on poverty),¹⁸ together with the special invitation to the Apostles to “leave everything” in order to follow Jesus¹⁹.

As to the counsel of *Virginity*, the attention has always been focused on the pages of *the New Testament* in which it is emphasized the vocation of those who “do not get married because of the Kingdom of Heaven”²⁰ and keep “an undivided heart”²¹. These passages teach us that the truly spousal relationship of the faithful with Christ can become as demanding as to ask some persons to devote themselves entirely to Him and His Church.

As to the counsel of *Obedience*, prominence has been given to the texts in which Jesus reveals Himself as “The obedient Son in constant obedience to the Father’s will”²² (He considers this will “His food”)²³. Other texts tell of the experience of a particular group of disciples (men and women) who unconditionally followed Him with the only desire and disposition to listen to His Word.

These three *evangelical counsels*, therefore, are explicitly “professed” by some Christians only, yet they are important and valid for all Christians. As a matter of fact, these *counsels* reach deep into human existence²⁴. To discover this “radical depth”, even though by comparison with the different states of life, is an issue that involves all believers, better to say, all mankind. Moreover, with time we learn that all human beings are faced, at a given moment, with the *definitive* virginity, poverty and obedience of their being.

¹⁸ Mt 19:16-26.

¹⁹ Mt 19:27-29.

²⁰ Mt 19:10-12.

²¹ 1 Cor 7:25-35.

²² Phil 2:5-11 and Heb 10:5-10.

²³ Jn 4:34.

²⁴ To learn how to reach deep into ourselves and how to “give everything” is every human being’s basic need as a person: man feels truly realized only when he is able to perceive himself in his entirety and can donate himself completely.

“Evangelical counsels” and “State of consecrated life”

The affirmation that in the New Testament there are *counsels* asking those who are willing “more love and adherence” to Jesus, finds its roots in ancient tradition. As ancient and widespread is the persuasion that these counsels are followed mainly by “consecrated people”, who publicly take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in order to get in a closer and constant contact with Christ, to imitate and obey Him, to devote their life entirely to the mission of His Church.

The Church itself uses such expressions as “gift”, “more” and “better” with reference to the special vocation of these “consecrated people” and their response to the “evangelical counsels”.

Besides, the Church has always supported this belief: the project that God the Father has for all men in Christ, shines more vividly when some people are called “to follow Christ closer” and “to conform to Him” even exteriorly, by devoting all their life “to the service of God’s Kingdom”.

This, however, raises a crucial problem. If it is true that *all Christians* are called to love Jesus Christ “more and more”, how can there exist “something more” *not everybody* is called to? How can it be that not all Christians are called to obey the evangelical counsels that recommend, in fact, this “something more”?

If Jesus gave us – through His words and behavior – some *counsels* to live closer to Him, how can a Christian (any Christian) who loves Him be satisfied with only what is commanded? Is not there the risk to miss that same novelty coming from meeting Christ: an encounter based on love, dialogue, advice, constant growth and that “longing for more” experienced by all those who love and feel loved?

Before answering this question, let us consider what the Teaching of the Church says. Vatican Ecumenical Council II explains: “The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls. The counsels are a divine gift, which the Church received from its Lord (...) The faithful of Christ bind

themselves to the three aforesaid counsels either by vows, or by other sacred bonds, which are like vows in their purpose. By such a bond, a person is totally dedicated to God, loved beyond all things... then, he is more intimately consecrated to divine service (...) The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation (...) Christ proposed to His disciples this form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. This same state of life is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church"²⁵.

The latest apostolic Exhortation *Consecrated Life* explains: "In the Gospel, many of Christ's words and actions shed light on the meaning of this special vocation. But for an overall picture of its essential characteristics, it is singularly helpful to fix our gaze on Christ's radiant face in the mystery of the Transfiguration... The event of the Transfiguration marks *a decisive moment in the ministry of Jesus*. It is a revelatory event which strengthens the faith in the disciples' hearts, prepares them for the tragedy of the Cross and prefigures the glory of the Resurrection. This mystery is constantly relived by the Church... Like the three chosen disciples, the Church contemplates the transfigured face of Christ in order to be confirmed in faith and to avoid being dismayed at his disfigured face on the Cross. In both cases, she is the Bride before her Spouse, sharing in his mystery and surrounded by his light. This light shines on all the Church's children. All are equally called to follow Christ, to discover in him the ultimate meaning of their lives, until they are able to say with the Apostle: 'For to me to live is Christ' (Phil 1:21). But those who are called to the consecrated life have a special experience of the light which shines forth from the Incarnate Word. For the profession of the evangelical counsels makes them a kind of sign and prophetic statement for the community of the brethren and for the world; consequently they can echo in a particular way the ecstatic words spoken by Peter: 'Lord, it is well that we are here' (Mt 17:4). These words bespeak the Christocentric orientation of

²⁵ VATICAN COUNCIL II [Rome, 1962-1965], Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), No 43-44.

the whole Christian life. But they also eloquently express the radical nature of the vocation to the consecrated life: how good it is for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! (...) It is precisely this special grace of intimacy which, in the consecrated life, makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels (...) By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world. By embracing chastity, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the Only-Begotten Son who is one with the Father (cf. Jn 10:30, 14:11). By imitating Christ's poverty, they profess that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love (cf. Jn 17:7, 10). By accepting, through the sacrifice of their own freedom, the mystery of Christ's filial obedience, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the One who delights only in the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34), to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything"²⁶.

Let us now briefly discuss the obliging or non-obliging nature of the evangelical counsels.

In the past, the existence of the consecrated life, besides the ordinary Christian life, was simplistically explained in this way: in the Holy Scriptures there are God's ten commandments (*precepts*) and some *counsels* present especially in the Gospel, as we have just said. All Christians are called to obey the commandments, while some persons are called to observe Jesus' counsels, too. The former will have an ordinary, quiet life, but will find some difficulty in reaching sanctity; the latter will have a harder life, but among them there will be many examples of sanctity. This way of approaching the question, though imprecise, has had large diffusion, even though it has always been maintained that everybody can become a saint according to the degree of charity one lives up to, as sanctity consists in the fullness of charity.

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II [born Karol Józef Wojtyła, 1920-2005], Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), No 14-16.

In the latest Teaching, two affirmations recur and both are fundamental. The first is that “all Christian faithful are called to sanctity”²⁷, and the second one teaches the unity of Christian life and the equal dignity of the different states of life²⁸. As a consequence, there have been people who started to feel a bit disappointed about the question of the “counsels”, as they thought that the use of this terminology kept the distinction between two classes of Christians: the “common ones” who are asked very little, and those who belong to “a spiritual elite”.

It is in consideration of the above that the Church Teaching started to strongly insist on the fact that *all Christians are to feel somehow involved in the evangelical counsels*. Usually, the question is concluded with the following specification: one thing is *the state of life based on the evangelical counsels* (a kind of life only some people are called to), another thing are *the evangelical counsels themselves*, which ought to concern all Christians since all Christians are called to share the novelty of friendship with Christ.

We think it is possible and even necessary to go beyond this. The evangelical counsels do not only refer to Christian life in its different options and/or vocations, they involve indeed the same *Christian anthropology*. They describe how God imagined man “in the beginning” (that is, His original design) and they express the content of the revelation through which Christ “revealed man to man himself”.

4. The martyrs’ example

In the history of the Church there is a specific example, realized a thousand times, that can help us understand and clarify the problem of the relationship between *commandments* and *counsels*: the example of the Christians called to martyrdom.

²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, chapter V, No 39-42.

²⁸ JOHN-PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), No 55-56.

When Thomas More was imprisoned in the Tower of London²⁹, while waiting for the trial he had the following experience he himself narrates. Within himself moments of worry alternated with moments of “true joy”, because he felt that at last he would be able to offer to The Lord “everything at once”, in an unexpected way which would have been unrealizable otherwise, due to his conjugal state and his professional commitment. In that situation, where all ties would be violently broken, he found, besides man’s spite of which he was a victim, a sort of tenderness with which God called him back to his youth and made his former attraction for monastic life re-emerge. What he realized was that he found himself in a condition where the different vocations and states of life paradoxically tended to coincide.

It is important to consider this fact more deeply. Before the moment of the supreme ordeal, martyrs are common Christians who received one particular vocation from God: they may be laymen, consecrated persons or priests, of different age, culture and spiritual maturity. Then the moment comes and they are called to give Christ the testimony of blood. Regardless of their moral maturity (they may be at the beginning of their Christian experience or well-advanced on the spiritual path; they may still be morally fragile or may already have reached sanctity), they are all suddenly faced with the great Commandment of Charity and the evangelical counsel of giving their life for Jesus.

The love requested from them has no longer time to grow patiently (“more and more” toward Completeness). It is to be offered *at that given moment, entirely*, at once. Those who are called to martyrdom must literally live the first and greatest commandment (“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”) and must live the commandment of love for your neighbor in its most extreme form (by recognizing him even in those who take your life away). In order to achieve this kind of completeness, they would have needed a long process of maturation –

²⁹ Thomas MORE [1478-1535], Chancellor of Henry VIII, refused to swear obedience to the *Act of Supremacy* which recognized the king as Head of the Church of England. His refusal made him a martyr, costing him his life in 1535.

nourished by the thousands counsels present in the Gospel, which teach us how to grow in charity.

And yet God does not allow the ones called to martyrdom to have this time of maturation. On the contrary, regardless of their state of life (they may be married, have possessions or have lived in full freedom until that moment), they all have to suddenly profess absolute virginity, the most radical poverty and total obedience, going far beyond the consecrated people's experience.

It is an amazing evidence of how, if God calls for this, observance of the commandments and of the evangelical counsels can coincide and merge. Both of them are realized and even exceeded by this definitive choice: to experience that the person of Jesus is truly "Life of one's own life", to such a degree that it is worth dying rather than losing Him. The extraordinary possibility to see everything unified and almost surpassed in the great experience of martyrdom explains why the Church has always considered consecrated life as somehow "*substituting martyrdom*" in its absence. This is due to the fact that the Church considers it impossible to profess the three counsels of virginity, poverty and obedience without sacrificing one's whole existence to God.

5. To listen to Christ's counsels to go back to the origins and understand our destiny

God's Son brought us every novelty by bringing us Himself, said the first Christians³⁰. This novelty is well expressed and embedded in the *Credo* starting from the first article which says: "I believe in God the Father Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth".

The *Credo* then lists all the articles proposed by our faith. We can also read it *as a whole*, as an explanation and *narration* of the only revelation Christ brought us: God's merciful fatherhood. By believing

³⁰ «Omnem novitatem attulit, semetipsum afferens, qui fuerat annuntiatus»: IRENAEUS OF LYONS [130-202], *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 34, 1. Cf. *Contre les hérésies. Livre IV*, t. 2, series *Sources Chrétiennes* 100-2 (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 846.

in the Heavenly Father, as a matter of fact, we also believe in His wonderful creation and we love it as a whole and in all its details.

- We *believe*, therefore, that God created everything with wisdom and love, and we *believe* that everything was forged by His hands with harmony and full of goodness.
- We *believe*, in particular, that God destined everything to man, “the only creature He wanted as an end in himself”, and imprinted His image in him. We *believe* that God is present “deep in His creatures’ heart”.
- Furthermore, we *believe* that God created man “in the grace of the original sanctity”, offering him an intimate participation in His divine nature.
- Thus, we *believe* that evil and death were not wanted by Him, but entered the world “because of the devil’s envy and because of the original sin”.
- We *believe* that God’s patient love never faltered and that He kept offering man His Alliance to the point of realizing – when the time had fully come – final *redemption* through the blood of His Son, who died and rose again, as well as through the effusion of His Holy Spirit.
- We *believe* that, now, this *redemption* must be freely accepted by “every man”, and the Church – with its sacraments, ministries and gifts – is the familiar place meant by God to welcome His creatures as they meet Christ, are freed of evil and return “love with love” in full awareness.

In the *Credo*, however, it all depends on that one word Jesus repeats with the utmost intensity: “Abbà” (Father!), a word that He pronounced with complete devotion, living in such a way that “by knowing Him we would get to know the Father Himself”. When, as a matter of fact, the disciple Philip said to Him: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”, Jesus answered: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father!” (Jn 14:8-9).

However, it is especially important to remember and emphasize this: by revealing the Heavenly Father to us and by accomplishing the mission of salvation God entrusted to Him, Christ also “came to reveal man to man himself”. He revealed to us the original design according to which God created us and the sublime destiny we are called to³¹.

Therefore, by believing in God our Father and Creator and in Christ, his Incarnate Son and our Savior, we also believe that we cannot fully understand ourselves – nor realize our life – if we do not meet Jesus in a vital, personal way. The light radiating from Christ does not only illuminate reality as it is now, it also illuminates the original beauty of the Father’s design. This design has to be restored to become even more glorious and bright. To take part with full awareness in this divine design, newly restored, is the believer’s true joy. It is the desire that prompts him to act and what makes him faithfully adhere to the Church.

Speaking of *consecrated* people, we usually say that, by professing virginity, poverty and obedience, they live in such a way as to anticipate the final goal to which all men and the world have to aim at. It is the goal of the ultimate and most complete love, of the ultimate and most radical poverty in order to get the utmost and ultimate wealth, the goal of the ultimate and eternal obedience of the human being to his Creator. This is surely true, but the same is true for all Christians who all walk *together*, and proceed, paradoxically, by going back to the origins. Together, they all have to track the original design according to which the Heavenly Father created them. They all have to discover, while still in this world, *the Laws of Heaven*: the ones of the “original integrity”.

All men’s sanctity starts this way, with this common “going back to the origins”³². “Your Saints”, writes Gertrud Von Le Fort in one of her

³¹ “Christ..., by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully *reveals man to man himself* and makes his supreme calling clear” (VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, No 22).

³² It is very important to stress that with the term “origins” we are not only referring to the original state of creation, but also to the Father’s mysterious design “as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and

Hymns to the Church, “are like water down the slope of the mountain, flowing up the spring”³³.

blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4-5).

³³ Gertrud VON LE FORT [1876-1971], *Hymnes à l'Église* (Paris: Casterman, 1952), 36. English translation: *Hymns to the Church*, translated by Margaret Chanler (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953).