

## **WOMEN OF THE COVENANT TODAY**

### **MISSION AND LIFE**

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#### **1.**

### **“ARISE, GO ON YOUR JOURNEY” (Dt. 10:11)**

#### **TRUSTING IN THE PROMISE**

Sisters, Daughters of St. Paul, you have chosen as the motto of your 11<sup>th</sup> General Chapter: “*Arise, go on your journey*” (Dt. 10:11), *trusting in the Promise*. Thus it would be well to start from here: from the text and its meaning, in the context of your 11<sup>th</sup> General Chapter.

#### **1. WHY IS A GENERAL CHAPTER CALLED A “CHAPTER”?**

It is interesting to remember from the outset why a General Chapter is called a “Chapter.” In the first place, for centuries this name referred to the monastery hall in which the monks gathered, and where they still gather today, in assembly. The room is usually called the “Chapter Hall.”<sup>2</sup>

But why use the word “chapter”? It seems to be due to the habitual practice of opening every assembly by reading several chapters of the Rule or a chapter of Sacred Scripture. This practice gave rise to the terms “Chapter” and “Chapter Hall.”

Your Chapter is not based on a text of your Constitutions but on a chapter of Sacred Scripture that you chose as a font of inspiration: chapter 10 of Deuteronomy, focusing on verse 11. You then added to this verse an idea fundamental to the whole Old Testament: “trusting in the Promise.”

You know well why this verse of Deuteronomy was chosen, along with the perspective of trust in the Promise. But allow me to focus this initial reflection precisely on this text.

I asked myself: what does this text from Deuteronomy have to do with your life and mission, with your charism today, at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And even more radically: how would this text resound in the heart and practice of Blessed James Alberione?

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<sup>2</sup> The daily assembly of the community for reasons of discipline and administration of monastic matters always included the reading of a chapter of the Rule. Because of this, the same assembly was called a “Chapter” and the place where the monks met was called the “Chapter Room.” The qualifying words “conventual,” “provincial” or “general” explain the nature of the meeting. A General Chapter is made up of representatives of the whole order or congregation or other groups of monasteries. Historically, General Chapters or the seeds of them can be found in St. Benedict of Anianus at the beginning of the 900’s. The idea was revived a century later at Cluny. The example of Cluny awakened imitators and abbeys like Fleury, Dijon, Marmoutier, St.-Denis, Cluse, Fulda and Hirasau (or Hirschau) became centers of groups of monasteries in which a more or less embryonic system of general chapters was introduced. Later, in Citeaux, Camaldoli, Monte Vergine, Savigny, etc., reforms developed the idea that was eventually inaugurated in the IV Lateran Council in 1215 and since then the General Chapter has become a custom practiced in all Institutes.

Let us first take a look at the meaning of the text and then question ourselves about the meaning it can have for your Founder and for you today.

## 2. THE TEXT OF DEUTERONOMY 10:11 IN ITS CONTEXT<sup>3</sup>

### a) *Structure of Deuteronomy*

The Book of Deuteronomy is divided into 4 parts:

- *First Discourse of Moses*: a retrospective of what God did (1:1–4:43)
- *Second Discourse of Moses*: what God asks in view of the future (4:44–28:68)
- *Third Discourse of Moses*: summary of what he asks for the covenant and the call to choose God and obey him (29:1–30:20)
- *The transition* from Moses to Joshua (31:1–34:12).

### b) *Dt. 10:11: The second discourse concerning what God asks in view of the future*

The text you chose as the motto of your General Chapter (Dt. 10:11) is part of the Second Discourse of Moses concerning “what God is asking for the future” (Dt. 4:44–28:68) and is situated within the verses dedicated to a renewal of the Covenant (Dt. 10:1-11).

The section of Dt. 10:1-11 continues the positive movement already begun in Dt. 9:25,<sup>4</sup> in contrast to a previous negative movement (Dt. 9:1-24).<sup>5</sup> It is connected to the renewal of the covenant of Ex. 34:1-4, although it does not present the events in the same chronological sequence.<sup>6</sup>

Dt. 10:1-11 recounts that after Moses broke the first stone tablets due to the idolatry of the people and after he pleaded with God on their behalf (Dt. 9:25-29), the Lord asked him to carve two other stone tablets like the previous ones and to climb the mountain: on these tablets God would write the ten words (the Decalogue) that he had already written on the first tablets. The Lord God asked Moses to build an ark and place the stone tablets in it. After descending from the mountain, this is what Moses did (Dt. 10:1-5).

Afterward, the people continued their march toward the promised land. When they reached a region rich in streams, the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to:

- carry the ark of the Lord’s covenant;
- always remain in the presence of the Lord;
- serve him;
- bless the people in the name of the Lord, as they still do today (Dt. 10:7-9).

The Lord himself is the heritage of Levi (Deut.10:9).

### c) *Why the ark and the Levites?*

Some might ask: why does the theme of the ark and the Levites appear in this text? The reply could be the following:

- the custom ancient peoples had of placing the document of a treaty or an alliance under the gaze of the gods; Israel placed the document of its covenant (the two stone tablets on which the Decalogue was written) in the ark of the covenant, built of very resistant acacia wood;

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<sup>3</sup> For this whole section, cf. E.J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: an Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> “Those forty days and forty nights, I lay prostrate before the Lord, because he had threatened to destroy you. And I prayed to the Lord and said: ‘O Lord God, do not destroy your people, the heritage you redeemed in your greatness and have brought out of Egypt with your strong hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not look upon the stubbornness of this people nor upon their wickedness and sin, lest the land from which you have brought us say, “The Lord was not able to bring them into the land he promised them, and out of hatred for them, he brought them out to let them die in the wilderness.” ‘They are your people and your heritage, whom you have brought out by your great power and with your outstretched arm’” (Dt. 9:25-29).

<sup>5</sup> Moses tells Israel not to think that it is because of its justice or uprightness of heart that the Lord will enable them to possess the promised land, but because of the wickedness of its inhabitants, and in order to keep the word he had sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Lord also rebukes the people for their rebellion and idolatry (Dt. 9:1-24).

<sup>6</sup> For example: Ex. 37:1-9 says that the ark was built by Bezalel after Moses returned from the mountain. The material in this section has been reshaped to emphasize the shift from rebellion and a break of the covenant to renewal and the possibility of continuing it.

- the safety of the ark of the covenant and the assurance of its inaccessibility was entrusted first to Moses and then to the Levites;
- the ark was not only a storage container but a place of encounter with God: it was like meeting him in the cloud or seated among the cherubim; the ark was seen as the legitimate symbol of God’s presence in the midst of his people, while the golden calf was not.

The ark entrusted to the Levites had immense importance in a certain period (Dt. 10:6ff). After the idolatry of the people, supported by the priest Aaron, the priesthood could have disappeared. But Moses interceded before the Lord for the people and also for Aaron (Dt. 9:20<sup>7</sup>). In this way, the priesthood could continue through Eleazar. After the death of Aaron, the priesthood was entrusted to the Levites, even though it should be underscored that the covenant with the Lord was different from that of Aaron. The duties of the Levitical priesthood were three: *to carry the ark and instruct the people in the Law; to remain in the presence of the Lord and serve him, and to bless the people in the name of the Lord*. The Levites were also given the power to make decisions in cases of controversy or aggression (Dt. 21:5; cf. Lv. 9:22; Nm. 6:23). Given this responsibility, the tribe of Levi would not have any heritage (Dt. 10:9); it would be consecrated to God and the Lord would be its heritage.

d) *“Arise and go on your journey”*

Moses reminds the people about what happened after the explorations of the Israelite spies in Canaan:

When the Lord sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying: “Go up and occupy the land that I have given you,” you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God, neither trusting him nor obeying him. Ever since I have known you, you have been rebels against the Lord (Dt. 9:23-24).

Moses intercedes for the people. He remains once again on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, and God listens to his pleas, saying:

“Go now and set out at the head of your people, that they may enter in and occupy the land which I swore to their fathers I would give them” (Dt. 10:11).

Here we are dealing with a renewal of the covenant after the people’s idolatry of the golden calf. The tablets of the first covenant were destroyed and now the Lord orders Moses to cut new tablets. On these, the Lord uses his “finger” to write the “10 words” of the covenant and he gives them to Moses and he did before. But the tablets are placed in the ark for posterity (which is not written in Ex. 34!). Following this, Moses is told that the high priesthood will continue after Aaron and that the tribe of Levi will be given the responsibility of blessing the nation as it had done up until that day (Dt. 10:8). Thanks to the intercession of Moses, Israel would not be destroyed but would continue its journey, blessed and heartened on its way to the promised land. Placing the two stone tablets in the ark is a reflection of what would happen in the civil sphere, where a broken agreement implied the preparation of a new pact and a new swearing of alliance. This would explain why Moses says:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you but to fear the Lord, your God, and follow his ways exactly, to love and serve the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul, to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord which I enjoin on you today for your own good? (Dt. 10:12-13).

In interpreting Dt. 6:5 (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength”), commentators have always been faced with a problem. They ask themselves: can love be the object of a command? Normally, love is understood as a spontaneous feeling and not as an obligatory attitude. Nevertheless, in the Book of Deuteronomy, love for God is presented as an obligation. But the above-cited verses (Dt. 10:12-13) help to clarify the issue. To the question: “What does the Lord ask of you?” the text replies: *to fear him, to walk according to his paths, to love him, to serve him with all one’s heart and soul, to keep his precepts*.

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<sup>7</sup> “With Aaron too the Lord was deeply angry, and would have killed him had I not prayed for him also at that time.”

Love, fear, reverence and obedience are all placed on the same level as the basic attitudes of the Israelites toward their God. To love God means to be faithful and loyal to him (cf. Dt. 7:9; 11:1; 30:20), to obey his commands and to serve him (cf. Dt. 11:22; 19:9, etc.).

Here is evoked the same Eastern concept of alliance to which Deuteronomy is linked: the vassal's loyalty to his king is also expressed in terms of love, obedience and service. However, this concept, common to Deuteronomy and to contracts of vassalage, does not exhaust the meaning and scope of Dt. 6:5.

### 3. TRUSTING IN THE PROMISE

A characteristic of the God of the Old Testament is that he manifests himself as the God of Promises. God has made a multitude of good promises. Divine promises are part of his covenant relationship with human beings. To the measure in which the human being is called to enter into covenant with God, in that same measure the Lord God makes his promises. Covenant and promise are two biblical categories that run through the entire Old Testament.

The promises of God take on a special intensity in his mouthpieces, the prophets. The typical texts are those relative to the promise of a new covenant (Jr. 31:31-34, 32:39-40; Ez. 36:25-27). But the answer to the promises of God, and especially to the promise of a new covenant, begins to be fulfilled only in the New Testament, not before it. This is said by some of the authors of the New Testament:

All of these died in faith, without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them, confessing that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth (Hb. 11:13).

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better... (Heb. 11:39-40).

The authors of the New Testament recognized that the main recipient of the covenant was the Church, the new Israel:

His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and power. Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire (2 Pt. 1:3-4).

They did not stand by my covenant and I ignored them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord... (Heb. 8:9-10).

The true Israel of the promises is the Israel of God, which is the Church of God, to which his promises belong, individually and collectively.

To fulfill the commands of the covenant, we must firmly believe in God's promises, which require trust, supplication, desire. They are part of a bilateral pact in which God promises his grace but the human being also acts by means of faith, desire and love.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10).

You have added to the text of Deuteronomy the phrase: "trusting in the Promise." Trust, surrender in faith, opens your heart to gratitude for the Promise of God that your Founder, Blessed James Alberione, expressed in an extraordinary way in the *Pact*.

### 4. THE MOTTO UPDATED: *WOMEN OF THE COVENANT*

From this perspective, the motto of your Chapter: "*Arise, go on your journey,*" is preceded by a worrying observation: the experience of idolatry, the tendency to flee from God. And, in the midst of this, the intercession of a man as charismatic as Moses, or your intercessor in heaven, Blessed James Alberione, as the text of the *Work Instrument* says very aptly:

The covenant that God made with Moses and his people is renewed in the Pact that Blessed James Alberione made with the Lord at the dawn of the Pauline Family and that today, more than a hundred years after our birth, enables us to discern “new signs” and inspires a renewed awareness of our mission (WI 1).

Hypothesize that you had an experience of the “night” and also an obligation and excessive work without results. However, the methodological key adopted in the *Work Instrument* is a method that, taking as its starting point the positive things that already exist, prompts us to look at reality from the perspective of the Spirit, opening ourselves to the positive things that are possible.

If you want to renew your covenant, it is not primarily because of your sin of idolatry but because of a desire to renew this pact in a time of paradigm change: discovering, dreaming, designing and offering. As the *Draft of the Work Instrument* says: “Only a positive outlook gives rise to positive change and allows us to discover that God is faithful to his covenant; that the Spirit is always at work, renewing everything; that ‘where sin abounded, grace has abounded all the more’ and that this grace dwells within us” (*Draft*, 3).

This intention explains the structure of your Chapter’s *Work Instrument*:

- The *first chapter* is a hymn of praise and gratitude to God for all that the Spirit did in these last six years in you and through your presence on the different continents.
- The *second chapter* looks at today’s reality as a multiple call of the Spirit of God: appeals that must be heeded, discerned, and to which you must respond.
- The *third chapter* focuses on the Chapter proposal to renew the covenant in a charismatic key, taking as a point of departure the *Pact* or *Secret of Success* that Blessed James Alberione proposed to you 100 years ago.
- The *fourth chapter* contains the proposal to start serious transformation processes in the next six years, with the aim of moving from dreams to a new congregational design.
- The *conclusion*: since St. Paul is for you an inescapable charismatic reference, father and founder, you want to update his letters and relate them to the Congregation in its different continental expressions. May you find in Paul a permanent invitation to live in covenant, to relive the *Pact* or *Secret of Success*!

## 2.

### RENEWING THE COVENANT

*This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you (Gn. 9:12-15).*

The rainbow is the “ring” of God, evoking his eternal covenant with humanity and with planet earth. It is a sign that reminds God of his covenant.<sup>8</sup>

Religions, each in their own way, evoke and cultivate this covenant. Above all today, there are groups, communities and people who are trying to live “in covenant” with God and with all that God includes in his covenant with us. Among these groups the form of Christian life called “religious life” or “consecrated life” stands out in a very special way.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. W.J. Dumbrell, *The Covenant with Noah*, in “Reformed Theological Review,” 38 (1979), 1-9.

## 1. THE GOD OF COVENANTS

The word “covenant” (*berit*, in Hebrew; *diathéke*, in Greek) is a key category in the Bible: it is like a password that allows us to access the mystery of God both in the Old and New Testaments. The term “covenant” appears about 300 times in the Old Testament. Surprisingly, this recurrence is reduced to 33 in the New Testament; and this is explained because it is replaced by the expression “kingdom of God,” as can be seen in Luke 22:29. The expression “prepare a kingdom” is equivalent to “prepare a covenant.” “New covenant” and “kingdom of God” are correlative concepts.

### a) *The Decalogue*

“Covenant” expresses the type of relationship between God and his people (first Israel, then the Church), God and humanity, God and the earth. Covenant speaks to us about a twofold and tireless search: for God on the part of human beings, and for human beings on the part of God. “You hunt me like a lion!” Job exclaimed.... “Religion consists in the question of God and the reply of the human being.... If God does not ask the question, then all our searching is in vain.”<sup>9</sup>

The Decalogue (the 10 words) showed the Israelites, in a pedagogical way, how to live the covenant (Ex. 34:28). With the passing of time, some of the commandments received longer formulations: above all the first (Ex. 20:4-6) and the third (Ex. 20:8-11). The application of the Decalogue to the life of the people was made in the so-called “Code of the Covenant” (Ex. 20:22–23:33). The covenant with God requires:

1. breaking with the system of false gods and serving the one God (first commandment<sup>10</sup>);
2. not using the name of the true and only God to hide evil (second commandment<sup>11</sup>);
3. imitating God in the Sabbath rest and proclaiming his wonders (third commandment<sup>12</sup>);
4. recognizing one’s father and mother as the supreme authority (fourth commandment<sup>13</sup>);
5. respecting everyone’s right to life and not killing, conquering revenge with forgiveness and mercy (fifth commandment<sup>14</sup>);
6. being faithful to the spousal covenant, which represents the covenant with the one God (sixth commandment<sup>15</sup>);
7. not establishing systems of theft or the accumulation of goods (seventh commandment<sup>16</sup>)...
8. or corrupt systems that leave people defenseless and do not guarantee human rights or the truth (eighth commandment<sup>17</sup>);
9. not desiring what belongs to one’s neighbor, be it that person’s possessions (ninth commandment)...
10. or that individual’s wife or husband (tenth commandment<sup>18</sup>).

The Decalogue sought, first of all, to end the system of slavery and to initiate a system of freedom springing from the covenant with Yahweh. For this reason, the people exclaimed: “Everything the Lord has said, we will do!” (Ex. 19:8) The covenant, in its maximum expression, was manifested as a “bilateral covenant,” “a covenant of love,” “a spousal covenant.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A.J. Heschel, *Dio alla ricerca dell'uomo*, Borla, Torino 1969, pp.156-157.

<sup>10</sup> Ex. 20:3-6; Jn. 4:34; 19:10-11; 5:19-20; 6:38; Mt. 4:10; 6:24; Lk. 13:31-32; 23:8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Ex. 20:7; Mt. 7-21.

<sup>12</sup> Ex. 5:7, 14, 17; 20:8-11; Dt. 5:15; Lk. 13:12; Jn. 5:17.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 20:12; Mk. 7:9-13.

<sup>14</sup> Ex. 1:15; 20:13; Mt. 5:21-22, 38-45; 18:22; 21:24; Lk. 23:34; Jn. 10:10.

<sup>15</sup> Ex. 20:14; Mt. 5:27; 19:4, 8, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ex. 20:15; Lv. 25:8-34; Jr. 22:13-17; Lk. 12:13-21; 16:14; Mt. 6:24.

<sup>17</sup> Ex. 20:16; Jn. 8:44.

<sup>18</sup> Ex. 20:17; Lk. 12:16-21.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. K. Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular*, WMANT 4. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Neukirchen-Vluyn 1964; R. Feuerlicht, *The Fate of the Jews*, New York 1983; G. Herion, *Sacrament as “Covenantal Remembrance,”* in “Church Divinity,” ed. J.H. Morgan, Notre Dame 1982, pp. 97-116; P. Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant*, AnBib 88, Rome 1982; G. Mendenhall, *The Covenant Formula after Thirty Years. Near Eastern Elements in Western Law*, Salt Lake City 1989; E.W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant Theology in the Old Testament*, Oxford 1986.

Through the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, a new and definitive covenant can be glimpsed, in which God proposed to give human beings a new heart and a new spirit, and to purify them from all their idolatries.<sup>20</sup>

#### b) *The New and Definitive Covenant Inaugurated by Jesus*

By means of his words and works, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the new definitive covenant and invited everyone to enter into it: all Israel, including publicans, prostitutes, the sick, children and the poor; as well as all those who carry the unbearable “yoke” of slavery (Mk. 2:15; 10: 15-16). His offer would also be extended to other peoples:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 8:11).

Jesus:

- modified the prologue of the covenant story; instead of speaking of past actions, he preached “the future of the kingdom of God”: “Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides” (Lk. 12:31);
- expressed the content of the new covenant in his first discourse on the mountain in Galilee (Gospel of Matthew);
- gave warnings instead of curses, to instruct his listeners on the dangers to be faced in case of infidelity to the covenant;
- preached conversion of heart—a change of mentality made possible by the Spirit: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15)<sup>21</sup>;
- presented himself as the prototype of the perfect fulfillment of the principal commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34);
- when he established the new covenant in his blood (at the Last Supper), he offered the cup of wine explaining that it was blood shed for all (Lk. 22:20).

The new covenant is described as “the bond between God and the human being, established with the blood [the sacrificial death] of Jesus, on the basis of which the Church of Jesus Christ began to exist.” The Letter to the Hebrews offers us an extraordinary meditation on the goal of this covenant.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus did not come to abolish the Decalogue but to fulfill it. Thus, when the rich young man approached him and asked what he should do “to gain eternal life” (Mt. 19:16), Jesus reminded him of the principal commandment and its conditions: “You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 19:18-19). That is to say, he invited the young man to leave the world of slavery and entrust himself to the “only One who is good” (Mt. 19:17; 22:36-40). But he also offered him the chance to strengthen the covenant with this “One Good” even more by following him [Jesus] and giving everything he [the young man] had to the poor.

#### c) *The Protagonism of the Holy Spirit*

Origen said: “The days of Pentecost are always.”<sup>23</sup> Note well the plural! The Fathers of the Eastern Church were convinced that the goal of the Incarnation of the Son of God was to make it possible for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on humanity.<sup>24</sup> Pentecost also takes place in this time and in every context.

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<sup>20</sup> “I am the Lord, your God... You are my people... Therefore my people shall know my name; in that day they shall know that it is I who say, ‘Here I am!’” (Is. 51:15, 16; 52:6; cf. Is. 62:4-5; Jr. 31:31-33; Ez. 36:24-28; Ho. 2:16-22)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. P. Hünermann, *Cristología*, Herder, Barcelona 2009, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. Fisher, *The Covenant-Idea as the Heart of Hebrews and Biblical Theology*, in “Calvin Theological Journal,” 48 (2013), 270-289.

<sup>23</sup> *Contra Celsum*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> St. Athanasius said that “God became incarnate so as to bring the Spirit to human beings”: *De Incarnatione et Contra Arianos*, VIII; PG 26: 996c. And St. Irenaeus maintained that the whole economy of salvation is given to us in the Spirit: *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, nn. 5, 42, 49; SC 62: 34-38; 98; 99; 109; 110.

We believe in Jesus and follow him—in any class or condition of life—in response to the mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Holy Spirit has been sent to us. He makes the permanent renewal of the covenant possible; he enables us to enter the Trinitarian communion in many forms and in the most unexpected circumstances:

The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you (Jn. 14:26).

The Spirit—in us and with us—brings to fulfillment the kingdom of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus; the new and definitive covenant established in his blood.

## 2. LIVING IN COVENANT: THE “WHY” OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE

Normally we question ourselves about the “what” of the religious or consecrated life: what must be done to be a religious. Less frequently we ask ourselves questions about “how,” which refers to the modalities, the forms, we adopt. But we almost never ask ourselves “why.” We are people who “do” a lot of things and who try to do them in the best way possible. But how many times do we ask ourselves “why”? Life in covenant is the answer.

### a) *The Pericope of the Rich Young Man and Its Interpretation*

Jesus points out to the rich young man that the covenant and its principal commandment are fulfilled and observed when one undertakes the path of discipleship. One follows Jesus in order to fully live the covenant. Jesus teaches that love of neighbor is as important as love of God; the two loves form a single love. And one’s neighbor is any human being who needs help, as can be seen in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:29ff.). The principal commandment Jesus gave to his disciples was: “Love as I have loved.” No one has loved God like Jesus; no one has loved his/her neighbor like him.

It is interesting to recognize that the monastic life drew its great inspiration from this Gospel scene. What is wrong is that, with the passing of time, the text was used as if it referred only to the religious life. There is not one path of the commandments given to ordinary Christians, and another of the evangelical counsels given to those who want to attain greater perfection. That’s not how it works. Jesus offers everyone the unimaginable gift of abandoning idols to love the one good and beautiful God in an intimate covenant of love. And Jesus shows us that the way to reach the highest point of this experience is to follow him (“like I have loved you”) and to passionately love the most needy. This is the dynamism of the new covenant.

The covenant shows us that our God is not an *anchorite* God—hidden, closed within himself, hermetic, inaccessible. He is a God who, from the beginning, came out of himself to create new spaces, new beings with whom to enter into relation and establish a covenant:

The divine God is interested in human beings, not in just any way, but in an infinite and divine way. God reveals himself as One who bends over human beings with all his love, and he has invested his very being (his identity) in this inclination.<sup>25</sup>

The opposite of an anchorite God is a *perichorite* God (if you will allow me this barbarism). The word corresponds to the Greek term *perichóresis*, used by Christian theology to define intra-trinitarian relations. *Perichóresis* is the opposite of *anachóresis*!

The perichorite God, in his tri-unity, is this way also toward the reality he created. The divine Tri-unity has extended its relations to humanity and all creation. The most particular covenants between God and individual people (for example, Abraham, David), or between God and human communities (the People of Israel, the Church), are a part of this great divine-human-cosmic covenant.

God continues to offer his covenant to all humanity. The Church of the followers of Jesus explicitly and publicly welcomes it. Within the Church there are groups, communities, which feel as their own the mission of being living signs—for everyone—of the covenant.

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<sup>25</sup> P. Hünermann, *Cristología*, p. 91.

## b) *Religious Profession as "Covenant": Experience and Witness*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* says that ecclesial tradition

has also emphasized in the consecrated life the aspect of a particular covenant with God, indeed of a spousal covenant with Christ, of which St. Paul was a master by his example (cf. 1 Co. 7:7) and by his teaching, proposed under the Spirit's guidance (cf. 1 Co. 7:40) (VC 93).<sup>26</sup>

"Covenant" is also a central category for the religious or consecrated life.<sup>27</sup> The elements that constitute the consecrated life—mission, evangelical counsels, community life—are ways in which the covenant takes form and is publicly expressed.

God's covenant of love with his people Israel excluded the adoration or following of any other god, considering it "prostitution," "for I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God" (Dt. 5:9).

Religious profession is, first of all, a covenant of love, a commitment to the principal commandment and a search for the kingdom of God and his justice; it is a profession of anti-idolatry and a renunciation of the gods that enslave.

In the DNA of the religious life, in its genetic code, from its origins up to today, there is a non-negotiable motivation: "to seek God" (*quaerere Deum*). A philanthropic desire is not sufficient motivation: the consecrated life is not an NGO (non-governmental organization). Its characteristic is the ceaseless search for God and the desire to identify with his will. This is done by a person who has previously been touched by God's presence. The search of a candidate to the religious life is already a response to another—invisible and mysterious—search. God seeks the human being, who in turn seeks God in response. Thus a bilateral covenant is established.

In its classic formula, religious profession is one in three: unlimited self-consignment through a triad: obedience, chastity, poverty. It is a promise of fidelity and an absolute rejection of idols of any sort, which tradition has reduced to three: the idols of power, sex and money, and which is further characterized by the fact that these vows do not have an expiration date: they embrace the whole future.

If the consecrated religious life is—like every form of Christian life—a way of living "according to the new covenant," and if the principal commandment—as interpreted by Jesus—is the supreme rule of life, then the religious or consecrated life is therefore "life according to the commandment of love." This is the fundamental vow that characterizes it: the vow to love God and one's neighbor with all one's heart, all one's soul and all one's strength.

The so-called "three vows" are not three different vows but a single vow in three perspectives, in *perichóresis*. As a consequence, they can be explained together, in parallel, with the same schema and in a complementary way. For this reason, I want to underscore that they are variations of a life according to the new covenant of love and that each of them emphasizes a dimension of the principal commandment: whether it is love of God or neighbor, whether it is love with all one's heart (chastity), with all one's soul (obedience), with all one's strength (poverty), without being perfectly distinguishable, but also in *perichóresis*.<sup>28</sup>

The principal commandment of the covenant begins with this appeal of God to his people: "Listen, Israel!" and the first reply to that appeal is: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening," that is to say, obedience.

## c) *Life in Covenant as a Vital Process Toward the Culmination of Mysticism*

Rather than a "state of life," the consecrated or religious life is a "process," a journey, a following of Jesus that incorporates us to an always greater degree into the mystery of covenant with God. Its goal is mutual identification, "mystical betrothal," unification of the will (between God and the human being).

<sup>26</sup> The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* speaks of a "covenant" in only two texts: VC 93 and 70; in the second it says that in difficult times the consecrated person must rediscover "the meaning of the covenant which God originally established, and which he has no intention of breaking."

<sup>27</sup> This was the approach and the focal point of my theological vision on religious life, which I expressed in my work *Teología de la Vida Religiosa*, BAC, Madrid 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J.L. Espinel, *Fundamentos bíblicos de la vida religiosa*, in "Ciencia Tomista" 99 (1972), 51-67; P.G. Cabra, *Amarás con todo tu corazón (Celibato)*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1980; *Amarás con todas tus fuerzas (Pobreza)*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1982.

The consecrated life does not have a mission: it *is* a mission. It identifies itself more and more with the *missio Dei*, with the missionary will of God, and collaborates with it to the measure of the gift received.<sup>29</sup>

Contemplating the history of the consecrated life, from consecrated virgins and early monasticism up to today, we discover that its *raison d'être* in the Church and in society is not that of constituting a “superior caste” but of being an attractive and paradigmatic sign of what the whole Church, all humanity and even mother nature is called to do: namely, to enter into covenant with God. This is what consecrated life can offer today in contexts of secularism, atheism or idolatry.

But we need a kind of “road map” in order to live in covenant and bring covenant to its culmination. Life in covenant with God is not a bed of roses: temptations, concealments, uncertainties and doubts arise. Just as happened in the history of Israel, so too our life goes through dramatic and turbulent moments. Life in covenant is an adventure begun, conducted, directed protected and brought to completion by the Holy Spirit.

It leads to the most unexpected destination that a human being can aspire to here on earth: the summit of covenant in union. It is worthwhile to embark on this journey, which will contain a lot of new and adventurous elements for each person. This is the *raison d'être*, the radical guideline, that explains our form of life and that can serve in its turn as an explanation and guide to the Christian life.

In the formative processes, we present the journey, commitments and obligations [of the religious life] but never, or almost never, its goal. Or else we do this in a very abstract way, with the flavor of something that is almost unattainable: identification with Christ! In other times, the goal of the religious life was treated in a very generic way, saying that one had to reach “the summit of perfection,” or personal sanctification, or to “become a saint” or “recover the mystical dimension.”

All these expressions must be re-translated: the protagonist in the work of attaining this goal is the Holy Spirit in alliance with us. It is a communal task—never a task of one partner without the other.

We need a new formation with regard to fidelity, to faithful love (*hesed*), to covenant as a journey of life and a goal-oriented path. The most painful thing would be a religious life in which there are just a few who care about covenant and many who are more concerned about the work they carry out.

### 3.

## TO LIVE IN COVENANT IN OUR TIME

It is not easy to live in covenant in the global context characteristic of our era: atheism, new forms of atheism, new idolatries.

### 1. THE IDOLATROUS CONTEXT AND THE “NEW ATHEISM”

Is humanity today aware of this covenant? Does it keep it? Does it take care of it?

We find ourselves in a moment described as “the eclipse of God”;<sup>30</sup> a “crisis of God”;<sup>31</sup> a “post-religious” and post-Christian” era. Diverse historical reflexes remind us of this: the masters of suspicion (Marx, Freud, Nietzsche), today’s “new atheism (Gary Wolf), with the explosion of best-sellers in defense of atheism against violent monotheism (Regina Schwartz), against religion considered as a “mental illness” (Richard Dawkins). The dimming or darkening of the face of God—in the personal

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. J.C.R.G. Paredes, *Cómplices del Espíritu. El nuevo paradigma de la Misión*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. M. Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, Harper and Row, New York 1952; M. Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*, Harper and Row, San Francisco 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. J.B. Metz, *Memoria passionis. Una evocación proवादora en una sociedad pluralista*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2007, pp. 77-126.

and public spheres—is like a larva of “interior atheism.”<sup>32</sup> Our God never forgets his holy covenant, but humanity does to a certain extent, and the Western world to a large extent.

Two Jewish philosophers, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, who know Sacred Scripture very well, have written that “the fundamental principle of the Bible is the rejection of idolatry.”<sup>33</sup>

When we speak of idolatry, we are not referring only to the worship given to an image but to any person or thing that is not the true God. St. Thomas Aquinas treated idolatry as a kind of superstition, which is a vice opposed to the virtue of religion and consists in giving divine honor (*cultus*) to realities that are not God, or to God in the wrong way.<sup>34</sup> Idolatry gives a creature the reverence due to God alone. It does this in very different ways. The creature is often represented by an image, an idol (Rm. 1:23-25). Nietzsche said that “there are more idols than realities in the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Dieties are human creations and, because of this, idolatry changes over the course of history. When idolatry approaches modern times, it becomes more “secular” and the “gods of heaven” are replaced by “the gods of earth.”<sup>36</sup> As the Bible says, idolatry is always *idolatry of heart*. The human heart is a factory of idols. They are internal idols erected in one’s heart, as God said to his prophet Ezekiel: “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts” (Ez. 14:3).<sup>37</sup> Three words activate idolatry in us: *to love*, *to trust* and *to obey*:<sup>38</sup>

- *love* for the idol leads to spiritual adultery;<sup>39</sup>
- *trust* in the idol leads to distrust in the true God;<sup>40</sup>
- *obedience* to the idol leads to betrayal of the true King and sole Lord.<sup>41</sup>

An idol is something one cannot live without. Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible ills.

## 2. PRIOR TO IDOLATROUS DEVIATIONS

Faced with idolatrous deviations, there are always people who never give up: men and women firmly anchored in the faith even at the risk of their own lives, like the mother of the Maccabees and her children (2 Mc. 7).

The religious life receives special inspiration from Elijah, the prophet who combatted idolatry (1 Kings 17-19). This prophet, on fire for the covenant and for fidelity to the law of the Lord, was considered a point of reference for the monastic life and continues to be so for the consecrated life:

The Patristic tradition has seen a model of monastic religious life in Elijah, a courageous prophet and friend of God. He lived in God’s presence and contemplated his passing by in silence; he interceded for the people and boldly announced God’s will; he defended God’s sovereignty and came to the defense of the poor against the powerful of the world (cf. 1 Kgs. 18-19)... Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin (VC 84).

Another model of fidelity to the covenant in the midst of a people that worshipped the idols of fecundity (cf. Ho. 1-3; 4:6-14) was the author of Psalm 16, an anonymous Israelite at the time of the prophet Hosea (beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) This person confesses that he too fell into the trap

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. M.G. Baró, *Ensayos sobre lo absoluto*, Caparrós, Madrid 1993, pp. 93-102; *La novedad de Dios y la vejez de nuestro mundo. Una perspectiva sobre la actualidad de la cuestión de Dios*, in Instituto Superior de Pastoral, “¿Dónde está Dios? Itinerarios y lugares de encuentro,” Verbo Divino, Estella 1998, pp. 13-15.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. M. Halbertal - A. Margalit, *Idolatry*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 94.

<sup>35</sup> In his work *Twilight of the Idols* (1895).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. A.J. Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, London 1956.

<sup>37</sup> When the Jews became “rebellious children” who did not trust their God, they automatically deified the military power of Egypt or Assyria and the goods of this world.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. B.S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI (USA) 2007, pp. 43-46.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Jr. 2:1-4; Ez. 16:1-63; Ho. 1-4; Is. 54:5-8; 62:5.

<sup>40</sup> “Where are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them rise up! Will they save you in your time of trouble? For as numerous as your cities are your gods, O Judah!” (Jr. 2:28; cf. Is. 45:20; Dt. 32:37-38).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. 1 Sm. 8:6-8, 12:12; Jdg. 8:23; Rm. 1:25-26.

of idolatry but that afterward he found the Good above every good and now rests in him;<sup>42</sup> he is the God who inspires him, teaches him like a father teaches his child, who guides him and will never abandon him, who points out to him “the path to life.” Inseparable bonds of covenant were reinforced between God and the psalmist.

The current situation of humanity needs the presence of witnesses and servants of the new covenant. God’s covenant with humanity and even that of Jesus with his Church are threatened by new deviations or new versions of idolatry: money, power, sex and their terrible consequences, such as poverty, violence, marginalization. Even though money, sex and power are in themselves positive and beneficial realities, they easily become seductive idols, which absorb the human being’s capacity for self-giving and adoration, and progressively separate the person from covenant with the true God. Perverse economic systems, “pornocracy,” violent and sophisticatedly invasive power and religious power favor these idolatries and leave the human being in a deplorable state of emptiness and meaninglessness.

We must recognize, however, that we live the covenant in tension: that it is not possible to live only in the Spirit without living in the flesh, nor live in the flesh without living in the Spirit. There is a coexistence in us between the flesh and the Spirit and between the Spirit and the flesh.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. THE ANTI-IDOLATROUS RESPONSE OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE

The Holy Spirit—through our Founders and Foundresses and the most lucid moments of our renewal—configures the consecrated life as an *anti-idolatrous group*:

- that does not prostrate itself before other gods but instead worships the thrice-holy Lord of Hosts (cf. Is. 6:1-7): these gods were—for the prophet Hosea and for the author of Psalm 16—Baals, which the people considered “powerful” because they believed that they would ensure fertility, life (a vain hope);
- that publicly professes the covenant and witnesses to it through actions of love and compassion toward the most disadvantaged and through new forms of communion. The principal commandment of love for God “with all one’s heart, all one’s soul and all one’s strength” is embodied in love for the brothers and sisters *who are one in heart and soul and hold everything in common* (cf. Acts 4:32).

The Spirit, who “spoke through the prophets” and carried out a work of anti-idolatry through them, continues to speak and act today through the prophetic groups of the new covenant. And among these a very important place is occupied by the consecrated life, with the wide variety of charisms that configure it. The Spirit uses the charism of the consecrated life—with all its internal charismatic biodiversity—to *clearly point out* to others the project of the “great covenant.”

The profession of the evangelical counsels 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. (...) It clearly shows all people both the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ the King and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvelously at work in the Church (LG 44).

The consecrated life—always rooted in Baptism—makes profession of the covenant public, brings it to its highest level, and emphasizes it before the Church itself in the often idolatrous context of today’s society. The consecrated life dreams of organizing itself “starting from the Spirit,” so as to be able to live the covenant in its fullness and to be a permanent memorial of it in society and in the Church. The Holy Spirit leads [the consecrated life] to believe and proclaim that Jesus is the Lord and to live in covenant “in him, with him and through him.”

The charisms of each Institute of consecrated life are gifts of the Spirit to the Church. For this reason, consecrated persons today realize that they must insert themselves in their Local Churches and take care of the spiritual and material needs of the universal Church.

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<sup>42</sup> “*Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*” (“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you”): St. Augustine, *Confessionum libri tredecim*, PL 32, 661.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. L. Boff, *La crisis como oportunidad de crecimiento. Vida según el Espíritu*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2002, pp. 73-86.