

**THE CHARISMS OF INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE  
PERSONAL CHARISMS AND TALENTS OF THEIR MEMBERS:  
Divine Gifts, the Tensions and Paths to Harmony for the Common Mission**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The basic focus of this article is the relationship that should exist between the talents and charisms possessed by individual religious and consecrated persons and the collective and permanent charism of the religious Institute to which they belong. God gives different charisms to different persons. While we acknowledge that, we also have to point to the difference between these personal charisms and the charisms on which the religious Institute is established and which gives it a peculiar character and identity.*

*This article intends to defend and promote the teaching of the church, especially in the Second Vatican Council, that consecrated persons should stick to their respective charisms. The question of personal talents is important to give attention too, because like personal charisms, talents may also be to the detriment of the Charism of the religious Institute, instead of enhancing it. We wish to state in this article that even though the collective charism of a religious institute should not suppress or destroy individual charisms and talents, personal talents and charisms on the other hand should not vitiate or destroy the charism of founders and of foundation of religious institutes.*

**INTRODUCTION**

A Novice under my care was very passionate about football. He openly asked me if the Order would allow him play professional football. In his view, professional football would be an avenue for evangelization and also a source of income for our religious Order. I had to take him through the demands and implications of the charism and spirituality of our order and the demands and implications of being a professional footballer. At the end our discussion he agreed with me that both are not compatible.

I have interacted with some religious who were full of complaint for the manner of life in their religious Institutes while comparing theirs to other Institutes. Further discussions with them revealed that such religious were in religious institutes that did not match their personal charism and spirituality. In the state of confusion and frustration of such persons, they begin to desire and even campaign for a change in the charism and spirituality of their religious Institute. In as much as such situations are really frustrating, the truth remains that personal charisms cannot alter the charism of foundation and of the founders of religious Institutes.

God gives charisms to persons for the good of the Church and humanity. Not all charisms are permanent and conducive to the formation of religious Institutes; some charisms are temporal. In like manner, God gives talents and natural endowments to different persons. All these are gifts of the same God. However, the

charisms of religious Institutes give them special characters and identity and the persons who join and share this collective charism have to adapt to it.

This article is, therefore, meant to explore the relationship between personal talents and charisms and the charism of an Institute of Consecrated life. We intend to look at the meaning of talent and that of charism and their implications, especially as they relate to the collective charism of a religious Institute. The basic question we intend to tackle is: What should be the appropriate relationship between personal charisms and talents and the charism of a religious Institute?

## CHARISM

Charism is the English equivalent of the Greek word, *charisma*, which means “free gift”. It is connected with the same root as *charis* (grace)<sup>1</sup> Charisms are gifts of grace; they are given freely to human persons by God through the Holy Spirit; they are not inherited or learned. One can only make charism more visible and efficacious by putting it into practice. In the scriptures and in theology, charism is understood as divine gift to human persons, understood to be gifts and spiritual endowments with altruistic purpose. In other words, they are special gifts of the Holy Spirit meant for the building up of the Church (cf. *1Cor. 12:7*). Charisms, according to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, are given to individuals for the good of the Church, the good of men and needs of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Charism can further be described as “a gift of a grace (internal and external) given by Christ to a persons, through the Holy Spirit”.<sup>3</sup> Charism can be in three forms:

- (a) Charism can be for the spiritual use of the recipient for the common good of the Church;
- (b) Charism can be temporary or permanent; it can be individual or collective. If it is permanent and collective, it gives rise to a stable ministry or institute, as in the case of consecrated life;
- (c) Charism can be ordinary or extraordinary. In this case, it is momentary and does not necessarily provide for an instituted ministry or a stable form of life.<sup>4</sup>

John Paul II affirms that irrespective of the form or nature of charisms, whether they are exceptional and great or simple and ordinary, they are graces of the Holy Spirit that have usefulness in the Church, either directly or indirectly.<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner describes charism as extra-sacramental grace which is very important for the Church. Charisms, in his view, are necessary, essential and permanent feature of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Xavier Leon-Dufour (ed.), (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. (21 November, 1964), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ogun Donatus Aihmiosion, *Foundation and Canonical Erection of An Institute of Consecrated Life*. (Benin City: TD Prints Nigeria Ltd, 2016), 272.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 272-273.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, (30<sup>th</sup> December, 1988), 24. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 799-800.

Church because they guarantee the constant presence and sustenance of the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church.<sup>6</sup>

St. Paul dwells extensively on the different forms of personal charisms that people receive through the Holy Spirit. According to him these different charisms are given for the well-being of all (cf. *1Cor* 12:4-12).

Though Charisms are given to individuals (and groups as well), it is the responsibility of the Church to discern all charisms. In fact, this magisterial function is a necessity and no charism is exempt from the scrutiny and approval of the Church. "No charism is exempt from being referred and submitted to the Church's shepherds".<sup>7</sup> The implication of this point is that the authenticity and usefulness of a charism, individual or collective, is not subject to private interpretation. This supervision and discernment is very vital in forestalling confusion and division instead of harmony and promotion of common good.

Some other authors have made extensive researches on the theme of Charism in its biblical, patristic and ecclesial perspectives.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note the following points before we leave off our discussion on the definition, meaning and implication of charism in catholic theology and practice.

- First, Charisms are free gifts which are given to individuals or groups. The gift of charism is the prerogative and initiative of God, the giver, not the recipient. Therefore as we noted earlier, they are not learned or inherited from one's parents.
- Secondly, charisms are meant to benefit the Church and humanity. In other words, God benefits people other than the recipient(s) of the Charism so given. The people to whom these gifts are given are channels through which God reaches other members of the Church or of humanity.
- Thirdly, certain charisms are temporal while some others are permanent. As St. Paul notes, certain gifts of the Holy Spirit can cease (*1Cor*. 14:8)
- Fourthly, certain charisms, the ones that are permanent and collective, can lead to permanent ministries or institutions like the case of institutes of Consecrated life. We shall return to this kind of charism when we shall be considering charism in relation to Institutes of Consecrated Life.

## TALENTS

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, (Karl Rahner, ed.), (Kent: Burn & Oates, 1993), 184.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 800. The same points are echoed in *Lumen Gentium*, 12 and John Paul II's *Christifideles Laici*, 24. St. Paul spoke of the importance of discernment of Spirits in *1Thesolonians* 5:12, 19-21. Since Charisms are gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is important that their authenticity and genuineness be ascertained by the Church.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance: Oseni J. Osilama Ogunu, OMV, "Consecrated Persons and Charism", in *Consecrated Life: The Past, the Present, the Future and the Constant Demand for Renewal*, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthonly (ed.). (Ibadan: St. Paul Publications, 2015), 141-182. Anthony Akinwale, OP, *Charism and Contradiction: Theological Reflections on Consecrated Life*. (Ibadan: St. Paul Publications, 2016), 7-11. Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*. (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1996), 108-115.

Talent is any natural or special gift, special aptitude or eminent ability. Talent describes an innate ability or endowment which enables one to perform above average, for instance, the ability to cook or dance or perform one form of sport or another.

Talents and charisms are gifts given to the faithful, to human beings, but they are not exactly the same. We can inherit talents from our parents but we do not inherit grace – charisms are graces. Even though natural talents may appear in charismatic activities, we cannot simply identify charisms with natural talents. One major point of meeting between charism and talent is that in bestowing charism on a person, the Holy Spirit builds on and perfects that person's natural abilities. In other words, God confers charism on us as a gift which helps to bring out our natural talent and indeed, perfect it.

Persons with natural endowments and talents are not obliged to use these gifts for the benefit of others, though in natural ethical relationships, different cultures emphasize the need to be altruistic and generous with one's gifts. In the case of charism, altruism is a necessary requisite for the possession of it. As we have seen in St. Paul's Letter to Corinthians (12:7), gifts of the Holy Spirit are meant for service towards others and the Church. Possession of natural talents does not in any way lead to a ministry or Religious institution, without the gift and presence of charism.

Having explored briefly what charisms and talents are and having looked at the similarities and dissimilarities, we wish to note that consecrated persons possess natural talents and they obviously possess personal charisms. Religious communities are actually made up of people with variegated enormous talents. In the same vein, many religious men and women possess personal charisms and spiritualities. We also wish to keep in mind that there are also collective or institutional charisms. It is now important to consider these collective charisms, vis-a-vis the personal talents and charisms of the persons who make up these religious institutes. First of all we will explore the permanent and collective charisms of Institutes of consecrated life before we pay attention to the need to harness and harmonize collective charisms with individual charisms and talents.

## **CHARISMS AND INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE**

Every Religious Institution has a peculiar charism and spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Such a charism belongs to what we described above as a collective charism and it is permanent. The Second Vatican Council's decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, recognises that there is a variety of charisms and refers to the charism of the religious institute as "special Character"<sup>10</sup> The charism of a religious institute is a

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<sup>9</sup> At times charism and spirituality are used interchangeably because of their similarity in nature. (See Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, 109). They are both gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, while Charisms are the basis of the peculiar character and identity of a religious Institute, spirituality is the peculiar way these basic charismatic gifts are lived out by a given religious institute. The Spirituality of an institute arises from its charism. Spirituality is the motivating force and manner of interpreting and living the charisms. See Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, "Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay associations in Nigeria". September, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. (28 October, 1965), 1.

special character in the sense that it denotes its peculiar identity among other institutes and religious communities. The quiddity and *raison d'être* of any institute of consecrated life depends on its charism. Each Religious Institute is individuated and identified by its charism.

It is on account of this essential nature of Charism that the Vatican Council II Fathers taught that the distinct character of each religious institute should be preserved and fostered by the Church.<sup>11</sup> The same document further states that the Religious and consecrated persons have the obligation of remaining faithful to the spirit of their founders.<sup>12</sup> The spirit of the founder here refers to the same charism and inspiration of the founder or founders of the Religious institutes. The Council recognizes that the charisms of the founders of religious life are gifts of God and that the gifts were given and received within the church. This is why it is essential to maintain and preserve them as spiritual patrimonies. On a practical note, preserving and maintaining each Institute's charism is meant to prevent indiscriminate proliferation of religious Institutes in the Church.

To further reiterate the importance of identifying and remaining faithful to the peculiar charism and spirituality of a religious Institute, Pope Paul VI in a post-conciliar document, insisted on a reawakening of religious life in accordance with the charism of their founders: "Only in this way you will be able to reawaken hearts to truth and to divine love in accordance with the charisms of your founders who were raised up by God within the Church"<sup>13</sup>

The Code of Canon Law also speaks of the charisms of religious Institutes, even though it prefers to apply other expressions instead of the term "charism". Terms like "gifts", "nature", "character" and "end" are used to describe the distinctive charismatic gifts of religious Institutes.<sup>14</sup>

The International Association of Superiors General describes Charism of religious Institutes in this way: "Charism implies a specific mode of being, a specific mission and spirituality, style of fraternal life and structures of the institute at the service of the ecclesiastic mission".<sup>15</sup> This assertion is in line with the teaching of Vatican II as noted above.

Collective charism and spirituality is born because some people decide to associate with inspiring religious leaders, like Augustine, Benedict, Francis, Theresa of Avila, etc. The style of life and the way these religious leaders practice parts of the evangelical demands form the charism and spirituality which is willingly shared by those who are willingly inspired by them.<sup>16</sup> There can be no collective charism (that is the religious institute, in this regard) if the founder did not recognize and put to

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<sup>11</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio*, (29 June, 1971), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Code of Canon Law, (1983), 577, 588 & 605. Donatus Ogun, (Op Cit.) notes, with references the technical reason why such terms are preferred to the term "charism" in post-conciliar documents. See foot note no. 86, on page 272.

<sup>15</sup> The assertion of the Superiors General at an International Congress in November 1993, as cited by Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, 108

<sup>16</sup> Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, 111.

use the charism of foundation. On the other hand, collective charism will not exist if people do not key into this charism.

### **CHARISM OF FOUNDER(S) AND CHARISM OF FOUNDATION**

Before we proceed, it is important to dwell briefly on the convergence and difference between the personal charisms of the founders of religious Institutes and the charism of the Institutes founded or brought into being by their inspiration. On this point, I find the research of Donatus Ogun very rich and pertinent.<sup>17</sup>

He notes that authors consider the “charism of foundation” as synonymous with the charism of the founder even though they also make a distinction between both: “At the beginning of each institute there is the charism of the founder, which we referred to as *personal charisma*, as well as the collective charism given by the Lord for the foundation of the Institute”.<sup>18</sup> He further explains that personal charisms are those qualities that God gives to a person for his own good (with all the implications and obligations that go with such charisms). These gifts include the way a person responds to the message of the gospel of Christ, personally. This is different from the charism of foundation. The charism of foundation is “the particular gift or experience of the Holy Spirit given to the founder for the establishment of a new institute of consecrated life in the Church. It is a specific way of making Jesus Christ of the gospel present in the Church, through determined historical situations”.<sup>19</sup> The personal charism of the founder may have some influence on the charism of the institute founded by the founder. Nonetheless, all the members of the institute founded by this founder are not obliged to possess or to practice the personal charisms of the founder.

I find this distinction particularly interesting and necessary for the purpose of this article because a founder may have the tendency to force his/her personal charisms on the members of “his” or “her” Religious Institute. On the other hand, certain members of a Religious institute may feel obliged to conform their lives to the image of the founder instead of living out the charism of the religious institute. Furthermore, if this distinction is not made, and the delicate balance not well maintained, certain members of a religious institute may begin to promote their personal charisms and spirituality within a religious institute, thereby creating a confusion and deliberate disregard of the charism of their founder, that is, the charism of foundation. This is contrary to the vision of the Second Vatican Council regarding the renewal of religious life.

The basic point we have to keep in mind as we proceed is the fact that every religious institute has a distinct character which is guaranteed by its charism. The question of having a peculiar charism or spirituality is related to the question of possessing a particular identity. The self understanding of a religious Order or Congregation depends on this particular identity. If the members of an institute follow different kinds of spirituality, and disregard the collective charism and

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<sup>17</sup> Ogun Donatus Aihmision, *Foundation and Canonical Erection of An Institute of Consecrated Life*, 273-274.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 273.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 274.

spirituality of the institute, this common self-understanding is undermined and destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

I think it is also important to point out that the peculiarity and distinctiveness of the charism and spirituality of a religious institute should not be overstretched. A healthy balance is necessary here as well because “all spiritualities are related to one another, since all are based on the gospel”. Nearly all the elements of one spirituality can be found in other spiritualities. The specific charism of a religious institute determines how the spirituality is lived out.<sup>21</sup> The spiritualities of contemplation, community life, prayer, preferential option for the poor, apostolic service, etc., are not special reserves for only one religious institute. The difference is actually on the level of emphasis and the way they are ranked by the different Religious Institutes. The similarity is rooted in the same gospel of Christ; the distinctiveness is influenced by the respective charisms of the Religious Institutes.<sup>22</sup>

### **PERSONAL CHARISMS AND TALENTS AND THE CHARISM OF A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE**

So far we have sought to understand Charism in its different ramifications and application in the Church. We have paid much attention to collective and permanent charism because it is most suited for the purpose of this article. We have also briefly looked at the meaning of talent and the points of convergence and divergence with charism. It is important now to explore the kind of relationship that should exist between talents and personal charisms on the one hand and the charism of a religious institute on the other.

I would like to situate this discussion within the context of the relationship that should exist between a religious community and the individual members of same.<sup>23</sup> The religious community should not crush a person and the individual aspects of the personality should not destroy the community. A community is richer and healthier when the community is respected and promoted and the persons who form the community also respected and promoted. It is important to promote personality, freedom, privacy and responsibility, but not to the detriment of the community. A proper equilibrium and balance is required for a true community to exist and have value<sup>24</sup>.

With regard to charisms and talent, therefore, it is pertinent to say that there should be a healthy balance: The charism of the religious institute should not subdue, suppress and destroy the personal talents and charisms of its members. On

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<sup>20</sup> Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See Jude A. Ossai, “Community Life among Consecrated Persons” in *Consecrated Life: The Past, the Present, the Future and the Constant Demand for Renewal*, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthonly (ed.). (Ibadan: St. Paul Publications, 2015), 126.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Not all is really “common” in Community life, in the sense that the individual persons have to be protected so that they are not “swallowed up” by the common life. See the thoughts of Cilleruelo Lope. *Caratteri del Monacato Agostiniano in Sanctus Augustinus Vitae Spiritualis Magister I*, Roma, 1959, 44-45. Carlos Moran Fernandez, OSA gave a summary of Cilleruelo’s point of view in his article, “The Community in St. Augustine, Philosophical and Theological Perspectives” in *Elements of an Augustinian Formation*. (Rome: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, 2001), 286.

the other hand, it is important that individuals who make up the religious institute do not destroy or obfuscate the essential quality and character of the religious institute. As we have noted earlier, the essence and identity of a religious institute is guaranteed by its charism. Therefore, destroying it affects the essence and nature of that Institute.

Personal charisms are not ruled out by common or collective charism; both of them can coexist. However, everyone who wishes to live in a group, a Religious Institute in this case, has to accept the guiding principle, that is, the charism and spirituality of the institute.<sup>25</sup> If this delicate balance is not maintained, there can be no community. The charism of the religious institute has to be the common inspiration and guiding principle of all its members.

Right from the time of initial formation, especially at the Novitiate, candidates who aspire to join a religious institute have to be made to confront their personal charisms and talents with the charism and spirituality of the institute and decide whether they will accept the charism and spirituality of the institute. Should the student in formation decide to go ahead and be part of the Institute, he or she has the responsibility of adapting to the charism and spirituality of the Institute, aware of the implications and demands. The adaptation to the charism and spirituality of the religious institute has to be done by the candidate in formation; the religious institute cannot adapt to the personal charism or talent of the intending or *bona fide* members.

The aspiring members of a religious institute, either novices or persons in temporary vows, have to be sincere to themselves in considering the adaptability or otherwise, of their personal talents and charisms before making perpetual and solemn vows.

For instance, the talent to play football, dance, do gymnastics or acrobatics, etc, have to be considered on their level of adaptability to the life of the religious institute one aspires to join. The same can be said of the personal charisms and spiritualities of persons who aspire to join a religious Institute. It is obvious that the way we understand, appreciate and live out the gospel of Christ is different from person to person. It is, therefore, important to consider whether my personal charism or talent is adaptable to the charism and spirituality of the religious Institute I desire to join.

The person who desires to make use of his football talent to play professional football needs to think twice because that is not compatible with religious life. Recently we heard of a former Manchester United footballer who abandoned professional football in order to become a Dominican Friar. It was also on the news, recently, that one former beauty pageant had to give up that way of life so as to join the convent. This discernment is significant because there are certain things that are not just compatible.

In the same way, the person whose personal charism tilts towards silence and a secluded/contemplative life is not suited for a mendicant order or a society of apostolic life. A contemplative community will be more suited for such a person.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Van Bavel T.J., *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, 110.

Though contemplation is part of the spirituality of Mendicants, they also need to reach out to people and be disposed to serve the Church and humanity. In like manner, the person who has the charism of active apostolate is not suited for a contemplative/monastic life. It does not make any form of sense for one to join a religious Institute where his/her personal charism and spirituality is not compatible and then attempt to twist the hand of the religious Institute to suit his/her talents and charism.

There are situations today where certain religious appear to possess and exhibit traits of spiritualities that do not match the charism and spirituality of their institutes. An example is the inclination towards and open promotion of a "Pentecostal spirituality of prayer" by some religious whose charism and spirituality are actually centred on meditative prayer, interior journey and the promotion of Catholic liturgy. Some of such religious even disregard liturgical norms and rubrics in a bid to appear current and popular. Or as some would claim, express their spiritual gifts. The point here is not the case of condemning a certain way of praying. It is rather meant to address a concern regarding the subtle ways consecrated persons veer off the charism and spirituality of their Religious Institutes. Even though it is important that we recognize the charismatic gifts and personal preferences of individual religious men and women, it is equally essential to keep an eye on, and to live according to what makes a particular institute *that* Institute. One should be free to practise and make use of one's talents and charism, but without doing harm to the collective charism and identity of the religious institute or of the Church.

## CONCLUSION

There is a great need for proper discernment of vocation, identification and internalization of the common charism and spirituality of one's religious institute. This discernment process should be sincere and objective. Candidates who aspire to form part of any Institute of Consecrated Life should endeavour to understand their personal charisms and talents and ensure that they are compatible with the charism and spirituality of the Institute. This process is very important because it helps to forestall preventable frustrations that may occur in the future. There are some personal charisms and talents that are very good in themselves but are just not compatible with the collective charism and spirituality of the Institute one belongs to.

The Church recognizes and acknowledges the presence of different charisms, individual and collective. In particular, the Church sees the different charisms of Religious Institutes as marks of God's abundant blessings on the Church. Therefore, it is natural that the Church insists on maintaining the nature and value of these different Charisms without confusion or unnecessary multiplication of religious Institutes that share the same charism. Each consecrated person has to bear this in

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mind and make efforts to promote the renewal efforts of the Church since the Second Vatican Council.<sup>26</sup>

Individual talents of members of religious Institutes contribute to the beauty of religious life. We know from experience that in the absence of variety of talents religious communities becomes boring and uninspiring. We can also say that personal talents contribute to the success of our apostolates as religious men and women. However, it is pertinent to ensure that talents, like personal charisms, do not negatively affect or destroy the prophetic values of the charism of one's Institute of Consecrated life.

Insistence on maintaining one's identity as a consecrated person of a particular religious Institute in not anti-progressiveness, nor is it crass rigidity. Renewal and progress, *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, adaptation and modernization, are, in fact, the basic thrusts of Vatican II's renewal project, and these can be done without doing harm to one's peculiar character and identity as a religious and member of a specific Institute.

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<sup>26</sup> Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, and other post-conciliar documents on the subject are attempts of the Church to make religious institutes more adaptable to modern age and the Church's understanding of the place and value of Religious Life within the Church. One major concern of these documents is the re-discovery of the true nature of the different religious Institutes and the importance of living according to their charism and original source of their being.

