



THE IMAGO DEI AND THE VOCATION OF CONSECRATED LIFE: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY.

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Abstract:

This paper examines the intersection between the theological concept of Imago Dei (image of God) and the vocation of consecrated life within the Christian tradition, emphasising how this connection shapes both individual and community identities among consecrated persons. Understanding this relationship is timely and crucial, given the contemporary societal and ecclesial dynamics surrounding identity and vocation. The literature highlights key themes such as human dignity, holiness, and the significance of community life, categorising discussions from historical development to modern interpretations. Drawing upon primary theological texts, writings of early Church Fathers, and contemporary theological discourse, this work analyzes the essential elements of consecrated life as a lived expression of Imago Dei. Findings indicate that consecrated life is fundamentally rooted in the vocation to reflect God's image through acts of love and service; however, gaps remain in applying these frameworks in today's work, highlighting the need for further exploration of modern challenges faced by consecrated persons. The insights gathered suggest significant implications for the field of theology, particularly in shaping the identity and mission of consecrated individuals, with future research needed to innovate ways to embody the Imago Dei amidst evolving societal challenges.

Keywords: Imago Dei, Consecrated Life, Humanity, theological, Biblical.

Introduction

The question of human identity and vocation has always been central to Christian theology, particularly through the lens of Imago Dei; the belief that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This theological concept not only affirms human dignity but also provides a foundation for understanding the purpose and mission of individuals within the Christian narrative. Within this framework, the consecrated life characterized by the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience can be interpreted as a concrete embodiment of the “Imago Dei”, reflecting God's image through radical discipleship and communal witness.

Contemporary scholarship has explored the Imago Dei using the biblical, philosophical, ethical, and anthropological context, yet there remains a need to specifically examine how this doctrine shapes the vocation and identity of consecrated persons. The intersection of these two concepts raises critical questions: In what ways does consecrated life express the divine image? How does living out this vocation reinforce or renew one's participation in God's likeness? These questions gain urgency amid today's shifting cultural and ecclesial landscapes, where identity, vocation, and spiritual purpose are increasingly contested and reimaged.

This study addresses these questions by engaging with scripture, the early Church Fathers, theological anthropology, and canonical insights. It argues that consecrated life is not merely a



discipline of self-denial but a transformative vocation that mirrors the divine relationality, creativity, and love inherent in the Imago Dei. Methodologically, the paper draws on biblical exegesis, patristic interpretation, and contemporary theological reflection to elucidate how consecrated persons actualize their divine resemblance through community, service, and sanctity. In doing so, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing theological discourse on vocation and human dignity, offering a renewed vision of consecrated life as both a personal and prophetic witness to the image of God in a fragmented world.

The concept of Imago Dei, or the image of God, is foundational to Christian theological anthropology, offering profound insight into human identity, dignity, and vocation. Rooted in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:26–27, this doctrine affirms that humanity is uniquely fashioned to reflect the divine nature. However, the theological implications of Imago Dei extend beyond the Old Testament and find renewed expression in the New Testament, particularly in the person of Christ, who is described as the perfect image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). This study will examine the theological foundations of the Imago Dei as presented in both the Old and New Testaments, highlighting the continuity and development of the concept across biblical texts. By doing so, it seeks to establish a scriptural framework for understanding how the vocation of consecrated life embodies and actualizes this divine image in a contemporary ecclesial context.

Scholars have described various theological significance and implications of Imago Dei. Dan, (2024) in his opinion ascertains that every human being possesses inherent dignity and worth, derived from their creation in God's image (Dan, 2024). This understanding challenges our personhood as consecrated persons being examples of faith and beacons of hope to the faithful, we are therefore called as those sharing in the prophetic ministry of Christ, to bear witness as prophets by challenging some dehumanising ideologies and practices, emphasising the moral responsibility to treat every individual with respect and unities. Furthermore, the doctrine affirms that sin distorts but does not erase the Imago Dei, suggesting that embracing Christ's call fully restores the consecrated person's original purpose which is sanctification in Christ.

Imago Dei refers to the belief that human beings are made in the image of God. This concept was first introduced in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:26-27, where God created humankind in His own image, after his likeness. The imago Dei is only explicitly mentioned three times in the entire Old Testament (Gen 1:26–27; 5; 1–3; 9:6). The latter two references clearly echo the first, which is the primary text. It comprises four declarations: (a) God's statement: 'Let us make humans (in our image, after our likeness, v26a), (b) God's statement that humans shall rule over the animals (v26b), (c) God's creation of humans (in his image, 27a), (d) God's creation of humans (as male and female, v27b), followed by divine blessing and the commandment to be fruitful, multiply, fill and subdue the earth, and have dominion over the animals (v28). This expresses the unique status of human beings as bearers of God's image, as the psalmist expresses with apt surprise at the extent of the unimaginable love, thus he exclaimed; "what is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man that thou visitest him? Thou hast made him little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor and hast set him over the works of thy hands." (PS. 8:5-7). This foundational declaration of Genesis emphasizes not only the uniqueness of human beings among



creation but also sets a framework for understanding our relationship with God. The book of Genesis from a theological point of view and not a scientific account tells us of the account of the creation of the earth and its fullness, but in a more particular way, the creation of the human person, created differently from other creatures. This differentiation in the creation of the human person makes mankind unique and of a higher status than all other creatures. There are a number of importance that can be pointed out in God's plan of making humans a part of Himself.

The concept of *imago Dei* is not very frequent in the New Testament either, it was explicitly mentioned only in 1 Cor 11:7; 15:49, 2 Cor 4:4, Rom 8:29, Col 1:15–16, Jas 3:9, and assumed in the Gen 1:26 – allusions of Eph 4:24, Heb 1:2 and possibly Phil 2:6. At first glance the most striking fact is that none of these texts are about the human creature, but about Christology, soteriology and ethics. They do not address anthropology (with the possible exception of 1 Cor 11:7) or human dignity, except for Jas 3:9, where creation in the image of God, possibly alluding to Gen 9:6, is the basis for the admonition against cursing a fellow human being.

Most of all New Testament mentions of *imago Dei* are found in the Pauline letters, and for Paul, the starting point is a direct identification of 'the image' with Jesus Christ: (2 Cor 4:4). In the context of 2 Corinthians, the gospel is defined as 'the gospel of the glory of Christ', and the text clearly expresses a kind of identification of Christ with the Creator of Genesis 1, particularly emphasising the Creator's divine presence in the world, which is expressed through Christ's glory (2 Cor 4:6). The point, firstly, is that 'the one God of creation is himself revealed in and as his Glory and image, Jesus the Messiah, whose face Moses was not allowed to see (Exod 33.20) but Christians are allowed to see' as suggested by Kugler who terms this 'divine Christology' (Kugler, 2020). Secondly, that this entails a transformation of believers to resemble Christ/'the image', meaning that through faith which is the act of seeing Christ as the image of God, believers are transformed into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18). Similar to this first point is Col 1:15–20, which states the superiority of Christ over the 'thrones and rulers, powers and authorities. In contrast to this, v15 presents Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' and, hence, as the firstborn of creation. Thus, the text identifies Christ as mediator of creation and emphasizes that he exactly because of this is able to reconcile all things to himself through his blood on the cross (Maqoma, 2020). While a thought similar to the second (soteriological) point of transformation of believers according to the image can be found in Rom 8:29, which speaks of God predestining believers to be conformed to the image of his Son. In this text, St. Paul clearly presents the 'image of God's Son' as the paradigm and teleological goal for salvation of believers. St. Paul's reference to Christ as *imago Dei* is a way of saying that 'Jesus is the indispensable model or pattern' for the transformative process of salvation. In saving believers, Christ performs an 'Adamitic' act, for just as Adam's fall became prototypical for the sin and death of the entire human race, Christ's resurrection and exaltation became prototypical for salvation. Therefore, Jesus can be designated as God's 'image' just as Adam in Gen 1:26. This understanding implies that Christ accomplished the true human existence, which Adam failed Ps 110 in light of Ps 8. 'The divine program for man, which broke down with Adam, has been run through again in Jesus – this time successfully'. According to Greenberg et al., (2024) 'image of God' is solely a human category which expresses the true 'Adam-humanity', which Jesus fulfilled in his resurrection, and which is reproduced in believers



and which the consecrated person fashions themselves after. This ‘image’ of Christ as analyzed by St. Paul represents the divine pattern for creation, in accordance with which human beings are created and the consecrated persons should thus follow. In Col 3:10, Paul encourages being clothed in the newness of Christ thus, consecrated persons are exhorted to live in accordance with the reality that they have, through faith and baptism, and through their consecration put off the old human being and put on the new, which is being renewed in the image of its Creator as explained in "Can. 573 §1. The evangelical counsels, accepted by the profession of the evangelical life, are meant to free the consecrated person from the obstacles which hinder the following of Christ, and to make him or her more conformed to Christ, the supreme model of all perfection." This canon emphasizes that the ultimate goal of consecrated life is to follow Christ, and that the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) are meant to facilitate this goal by freeing the consecrated person from obstacles and making them more conformed to Christ (Barton, 2025). A similar thought can be seen in the Gen 1:26 allusion in Eph 4:24, where the new human being is described as being ‘created according to God’. As in 2 Cor 4:4.6, the likeness to the image of God is expressed in terms of knowledge. However, the specific content of this likeness is manifested in a certain ethical behaviour. Col 3:12–17 elaborates on this behaviour, which includes qualities such as compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. It takes on the character of imitating Christ (Imitatio Christi) which the consecrated persons are to be identified with). Therefore, Christ’s forgiveness serves as both the foundation and the model for consecrated persons forgiveness of one another (Col 3:13). ‘Conformitas and imitatio belong together’. The same thought can be found in the possible Gen 1:26-allusion in in Phil 2:6. From this Pauline explanations we will understand what Karl Ramah means when he says that there is no theology without an anthropology (Mackie, 2017). This is basically because of the singular reason of the Holy Exchange where God became man and made man Divine, thereby uplifting the place of humans.

Image of God and Human Identity

Understanding the image of God in the human person is of paramount importance in the life of every human person especially for consecrated persons who have dedicated their lives to spiritual service and community living. This understanding shapes the identity, mission and community relational dynamics of the consecrated persons equipping them to engage with the world in a transformative manner. It not only enriches their lives but also challenges them to respond to the needs of others with deep respect, love and compassion, consciously reflecting the divine presence in every encounter within their communities and the society. In addition, it can have deep implications for the identity of the consecrated persons and their relationships with others in the following ways.

- i. Foundation of Dignity and value: First we notice the invitation used, a divine communication was manifested: “let us make man in our image” (Gen 1:26). Which was not the case of other creatures. In creating other things, there was just a statement of a word “let there be” and it brought forth all created things into existence. Through this invitation “let us” the extent of attention, love and care God put into the creation of man, making man both the center of creation and an a dignified being is revealed (Ember & Aaron. 1905). Thus, recognising that every human person is created in the image of God gives a



background for inherent dignity and worth of each individual person and in a special way for consecrated persons, it creates the awareness and fosters deep respect for all members of the community and those they serve, promoting an environment of love and acceptance of all.

- ii. Motivation for service: The creation account in Genesis affirms the profound intentionality behind the formation of the human person: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen 1:26). The use of the verb *make* in this context suggests a deliberate and intimate divine act, distinguishing humanity as the culmination of creation. This theological insight has significant implications for consecrated life. It reveals that human beings, uniquely crafted in the image of God, are not accidental beings but are formed through divine intentionality and purpose. For those in consecrated life, this understanding serves as a compelling motivation for mission and service. Recognising that every person reflects the *Imago Dei* inspires consecrated individuals to engage in acts of love and self-giving. Their service becomes a vocation rooted in theological anthropology, manifesting through compassionate care, solidarity with the marginalized, and a commitment to embodying God’s love in the world (John Paul II, 1996; Nwachukwu, 2010).
- iii. Community and Communion: The biblical affirmation that humanity is created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen 1:26) conveys a profound theological truth about human dignity and relationality. The phrase signifies not only humanity’s resemblance to the Creator but also a call to reflect divine attributes in relationship with others. Herzfeld (2020) notes that the terms image and likeness imply a form of representation, akin to a mirror reflecting its source—suggesting that humans are designed to mirror God’s nature in both individual character and communal life. This understanding is particularly formative for consecrated persons, whose vocation is deeply rooted in imitation of Christ and communal witness. Recognising a shared divine origin invites them to transcend personal or cultural differences, fostering unity, mutual support, and communion within their religious communities and in broader ecclesial and social contexts. The *Imago Dei*, therefore, becomes not only a foundation for personal identity but a guiding principle for building authentic, inclusive, and loving relationships that reflect the relational nature of God.
- iv. Created with Purpose and Responsibility: The sequence of creation, with humanity formed last (Gen 1), does not imply insignificance but rather intentionality—God prepared creation as a suitable dwelling for the human person. This act affirms human dignity and the uniqueness of sharing in God's image. Despite the fall and its consequences (Gen 3:17–19), the *Imago Dei* remains, underscoring humanity’s role as steward and crown of creation (Chen et al., 2020). For consecrated persons, this understanding deepens their call to



spiritual reflection, prayer, and responsible service. Their vocation thus becomes a visible extension of God's presence, marked by love, justice, and mercy.

- v. Witness to the World through Moral and Ethical Standards: A defining mark of humanity's exalted status in creation is found in Genesis 2:7, where God breathes life into the human person, setting them apart from all other creatures. This divine breath often understood as spirit or life-force imparts consciousness, moral awareness, and the capacity for relationship with God. For consecrated persons, this spiritual dimension becomes the foundation of their ethical and prophetic witness. It calls them to embody God's love through the pursuit of justice, peace, and human dignity. Rooted in this understanding, their vocation becomes a living testimony of faith and redemption, as echoed in St. Paul's theology of transformation through Christ (Rom 8:29). In this way, consecrated life not only reflects the *Imago Dei* but serves as a moral compass in a fragmented world.

Historical Context and Biblical foundations of Imago Dei

Historically, the Imago Dei can be traced back to the Bible. The creation account Genesis 1:26-27 states, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Gen2.7. "Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then He breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being". Consequently, the human person began to share in the image of God as a result of this Divine breath in them and this is the most distinguishing factor between humans and other creatures. From the explanation of the word breath, it has been found to mean Life or spirit, and spirit from the word spiritus means breath, courage, vigor, soul, life. It could also mean a life principle, especially in humans, regarded as inherent in the breath or as infused by a deity or as the thinking, motivating, feeling part of a man. Further studies on this, shows that it is this breath of God in man that makes the human person to be conscious and manifest in a cognitive and intelligible way. This spirit of God in man is therefore what directs the human person's specific purpose of serving God and returning back to Him. It gives the human person a complete centeredness, creative freedom, possibility for self-actualization and the ability for self-transcendent, and so makes man a co-creator with God, a small god. Theology speaks of man in his relationship to God as being less than the angels Heb 2.7 yet superior to the animals Gen 1:28. These blessings of God was lost at creation when man disobeyed God in sin thus also losing the friendship which he holds with God. In spite of sinfulness God's call, with which he must freely cooperate, destines him to abiding union in his totality with the triune God.

The early Church Fathers such as Augustine, Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, Augustine of Hippo, Basil the Great amongst others have expanded on this idea and its implications for our identity as Consecrated persons, interpreting the image of God as reflecting aspects of God's nature in humankind—such as reason, free will, and the ability to love. They highlighted that for consecrated persons to achieve this renewal of self the life of virtue, simplicity, and detachment, and of cultivating a deep relationship with God through prayer and spiritual discipline.

1. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202AD) he emphasized that the Imago Dei is the basis for human dignity and worth. He posits that the incarnation of Christ or the Holy Exchange where God became human and human became divine is the restoration of the Image of God in humankind lost



after human's had sinned. He also expresses the Consecrated life as a means of attaining holiness and participating in Christ restoration and salvation of humanity.

2. St. Origen of Alexandria (185-254AD) Origen developed the concept of the Imago Dei as a dynamic and relational reality, he expressed the Consecrated life as a means of cultivating virtues and growing in likeness to God. He recommended that Christians and consecrated persons should engage in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, asceticism, penance, etc. so as to enable them conform their lives to the Image of God.

3. St. Cyprian of Carthage (200-258AD) St. Cyprian made emphasizes on the importance of living a life of moral integrity and virtue as consecrated persons. He saw the consecrated life as a means of participating in Christ's priestly ministry and offering spiritual sacrifices to God. He thus, stressed unity and communion in the community as a means of building up the body of Christ.

4. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) St. Augustine of Hippo on his part developed a rich theology of the Imago Dei, he laid emphasizes its Trinitarian dimension. He explained the consecrated life as a means of participating in the divine life and growing in likeness to God. He also emphasized the essence of love, humility, and detachment in the consecrated life.

5. St. Basil the Great (329-379) St. Basil made emphasizes on the importance of living a life of simplicity, humility, and detachment as a consecrated person. He explained the consecrated life as a means of participating in Christ's ministry of reconciliation and offering spiritual sacrifices to God. He stressed the importance of community life and mutual support among consecrated persons as a way of promoting God's image in humankind.

Throughout the Middle Ages (500-1500AD), theologians like Thomas Aquinas further developed the concept, linking it to human rationality, will and moral capacity. Making the Imago Dei a cornerstone for discussions on ethics, human rights, and the intrinsic value of human life.

Also St. Bonaventure emphasized the Imago Dei as a spark of divine light present in every human soul, and it is capable of being fanned into flame through spiritual practices and contemplation.

In contemporary times, the concept of the human person as Imago Dei—the image of God—has become the subject of extensive discussion and philosophical reflection. This understanding emphasizes the intrinsic dignity of every human being and has inspired various movements and religious communities dedicated to upholding and promoting this dignity. One such example is the Missionary Sisters of the Divine Image (MSDI), whose foundational charism is rooted in the belief that every person reflects the Divine Image and is, therefore, deserving of profound love, respect, and care. Their mission, as articulated in the MSDI Constitution and grounded in the Gospel (Matthew 25:40), is centered on promoting the dignity of the human person in God, a calling that informs their life of consecration and service.



Recent pontiffs have made significant theological contributions to the understanding of the *Imago Dei*. Pope St. John Paul II, in documents titled *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*, emphasized the centrality of the *Imago Dei* in affirming the dignity and worth of every human person. He articulated that human dignity is not merely a social construct but is intrinsically rooted in humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God (John Paul II, 1993, 1995). His reflections underscore the moral and ethical implications of this belief, especially in matters concerning life, freedom, and human rights. Following him, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have continued to explore and expand upon this theme in relation to anthropology, ecology, and social justice.

Pope Benedict XVI, also laid emphasizes on the *Imago Dei* as the basis for understanding human identity and dignity. He sees the *Imago Dei* as the reality of the human person rooted in being created in the image and likeness of God, and only having fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis, in his *Laudato Si* opines that the human person is the first point of care.....

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei* which asserts that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and thus possesses inherent dignity and worth shapes in many ways the personal identity and communal relationship of consecrated persons whose has been called to follow Christ and be configured to him. Can 575 and who has also been called to be mindful of their responsibility to promote the unity and communion of the Church, and to avoid anything that could harm it. Can 580. The different implications for this identity include:

- i. Understanding oneself as an image of God instills a sense of intrinsic value which encourages the consecrated persons to cultivate self-respect and esteem in themselves and their mission.

This idea of being created in God's image helps to the consecrated persons to align their life purpose with divine intentions. Which guides their decision making and sense of fulfillment and direction.

The consciousness of the image of God in the consecrated persons reminds them of their moral responsibilities in reflecting God's characteristics in their lives which they promised to live by through their profession of the evangelical vows.

This idea also fosters a sense of equality and respect among consecrated persons. Which depicts obedience.

The consciousness of being made in the image of God encourages relationships of love, service, care and support in imitation of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served and who instructs his followers to love as he has loved which expresses the vow of chastity.

The sense of every person as the image of God also leads consecrated persons to a communal responsibility for one another as seen in the lives of the Apostles who sold everything and brought the money for communal use (Acts 4:32-35) which expresses the vow of poverty.



Understanding Consecrated Life.

The term consecration is derived from the word holy or holiness which comes from the Hebrew word “qadosh” and the Greek word hagios which are translated in their verb forms as ‘to consecrate’, to make holy or to sanctify’ (Nwachukwu, 2010). It is an act by which a person or a thing is separated from secular or profane use and dedicated permanently to the sacred by prayers, rites, ceremonies. Consecration as an act effect an intimate transformation in the essence of the object and it is usually permanent and can be neither revoked nor repeated. The book of the Old Testament serves as the basis for many kinds of consecrations today. Ex 39, 1Sam 10, 1 Chronicles 16, Numbers 6: 5-7.12. Etc. Consecration makes the person or thing consecrated to become nearer to God and thus become an instrument to achieve the salvific plan of God and claim all creation back to God. They consecrated persons or things are holy in so far as they serve as God’s extraordinary channels of communication and revelation. Thus, the Church refers to the religious as those who make Christ visible and felt in the world. The rite of consecration introduces the person, thing, place into the realm of God’s holiness which signifies that these things and persons are not holy in themselves but are made holy through their involvement in the service of the holiness of God and His worship. Hence the religious life is consecrated because it is validated within the context of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist which inaugurates the consecration (Nwachukwu, 2010).

Theological Foundations of Consecrated Life- Biblical and Patristic Foundations:

The consecrated life is rooted in the baptismal consecration, through which the consecrated person was made a living temple of the Holy Spirit and was vitally incorporated into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ and into the Church. The creation of humanity in the image of God provides the foundation for consecrated life, which is a response to God’s invitation to live a life of holiness and dedication.

Biblical Foundations:

1. Old Testament Roots: The concept of consecrated life has its roots in the Old Testament, where we find examples of individuals dedicating themselves to God's service, such as Nazarites (Numbers 6:1-21) and prophets (cf 1 Samuel 3:1-21).
2. In the New Testament, Jesus' call to discipleship (Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11) provides a foundation for consecrated life. Jesus' disciples left everything to follow him, demonstrating a radical commitment to God's will.
3. Apostolic Life: The apostles' way of life, as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35), provides another biblical foundation for consecrated life. The apostles shared their possessions, lived in community, and dedicated themselves to prayer and ministry. Also, St. Paul's writings on the charisms (1 Corinthians 12:1-31, Romans 12:3-8) and the call to holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8) also provide a foundation for consecrated life.

Patristic Foundations

1. Early Christian Communities: The early Christian communities, as described in the writings of the Church Fathers, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch (Epistle to the Ephesians, 9.1-2) and St. Cyprian of Carthage (On the Unity of the Church, 6), provide a foundation for consecrated life.



2. The rise of monasticism in the 3rd and 4th centuries, exemplified by St. Anthony of Egypt and St. Pachomius, provided a new expression of consecrated life. Monasticism emphasized the importance of community, prayer, and work.
3. Consecrated Virginity: The early Church Fathers, such as St. Athanasius (Life of St. Anthony, 3.3-4) and St. Jerome (Epistle 22, To Eustochium), wrote about the value of consecrated virginity, which became a foundation for consecrated life.
4. Apostolic Life and Community: The Church Fathers, such as St. Basil of Caesarea (Long Rules, 7.2-3) and St. Augustine of Hippo (Rule for the Servants of God, 1.1-2), emphasized the importance of apostolic life and community, which provided a foundation for consecrated life.

From these biblical and patristic foundations, we can identify several key principles that underlie consecrated life:

1. Radical commitment to God's will: Consecrated life involves a radical commitment to God's will, as exemplified by Jesus' call to discipleship.
2. Community and communion: Consecrated life emphasizes the importance of community and communion, as seen in the apostolic life and the early Christian communities.
3. Prayer and contemplation: Consecrated life values prayer and contemplation, as exemplified by the monastic tradition.
4. Service and mission: Consecrated life involves a commitment to service and mission, as seen in the apostolic life and the charisms.
5. Holiness and sanctity: Consecrated life aims at holiness and sanctity, as emphasized by St. Paul's writings on the call to holiness. All these key elements make consecrated life in imitation of Jesus, the bedrock of our participation in the Imago Dei.

The Inter-relationship of Imago Dei and Consecrated Life:

The creation of humanity in the image of God provides the foundation for consecrated life, which is a response to God's invitation to live a life of holiness and dedication through the evangelical counsels. Many theologians have attributed that being made in the image of God is importantly related to the concept of vocation into the consecrated life because the consecrated life springs from the election of the Israelite's as God's holy nation, chosen people and royal priesthood. In the theology of Israel's election, the covenant serves as the framework that establishes the relationship between God and his people Israel who have been called to embody God's will and serve as light to the nations. This also is the case of the consecrated persons who are equally called to the holiness of God and beacons of faith to others. Just as the covenant binds Israel to God in a unique way, the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience binds the consecrated persons to Christ and so to God. The Canon law 573.p 1 describes the consecrated life as a state of life which by profession of the evangelical counsels, is dedicated to God. The covenant relationship of God and the Israelites is a relationship based on love and fidelity. This fidelity and love for the consecrated persons is assumed in Christ the first Image of the invisible God. VC, 15. Again, just as the covenant assures Israel of God's faithfulness rather than their merit, the consecrated person is only able to attain their identity as Imago Dei through Christ. Thus Redemptoris Donum, 7 describes the consecrated life as a special manifestation of Christ's faithfulness to the Church and



to humanity, and it is a means of deepening one's communion with God and with others through prayer, contemplation and service.

Consecrated life as an expression of Imago Dei:

Every vocation recalls a history of a journey with God and consecrated life in a special way mirrors God's intended relationship with humankind who were created in his image. St. Paul highlights the gracious nature of God's action in Christ by calling attention to its character as gift. In his letter to the Romans, 3,24, Paul explains salvation as God's gracious gift of justification to sinners and this justification is gotten based on the new relationship established in the righteousness of Christ who liberates humanity from the bondage of sin and restores them in the image of God through baptismal consecration and the vocation to consecrated life. (Rom 6-8). As described in Rom 3,21-26; 4, 24-25 and 8,32, grace is basically the nature of God's saving work in Christ on behalf of sinful humanity. This is clearly seen in consecrated life which is described as grace and which is attained by obedience from the heart to the gospel and liberation from sin for a new form of service to righteousness. This is because the consecrated life is a means of imitating Christ, who is the perfect image of God (Heb 1:3) and it serves as a means of perfection of charity, which is the fulfillment of the imago Dei (1Jn 4:8). Consecrated life also, stands as a sign of eschatology to the world reminding human beings of their dignity as image of God and their special essence to return to God (Nwachukwu, 2002).

The Future of Consecrated life and Imago Dei

The Imago Dei reflects the Trinity, which is the source of all holiness and dignity and is fulfilled in Christ the perfect image of God the Father. The consecrated life is a means of participating in Christ's mission and of imitating his exemplary life through the evangelical vows old means of fulfilling it while the Imago Dei is the foundational belief for understanding the call to holiness demanded of consecrated persons. Vatican II's Lumen Gentium emphasizes that all Christians are called to holiness, yet consecrated persons embody this call in a distinctive manner, reflecting the divine image through their commitment to God and service to humanity. The future of consecrated life must therefore be situated within the context of this theological understanding especially as the world faces challenges such as secularism, pluralism, relativism and indifference to spiritual matters, consecrated life can offer a prophetic witness to the Imago Dei through their acts of love, community living, service, etc.

Challenges to identity in Consecrated life

A number of contemporary issues, poses significant challenges to consecrated life, including decline in vocation and need for adaptation in ministry. However, these challenges also present opportunities for renewal and reimagining the meaning of the call to consecrated life today. The post-synodal Apostolic exhortation Vita Consecrata No. 5, highlights the importance of being rooted in the word of God and open to signs of times (John, 1996). This call is a call to consecrated persons to seek innovative ways to live out their charisms while engaging with contemporary issues as the future of consecrated life lies in its ability to embody the love of Christ in a way that recognizes and uplifts the dignity of humankind. Therefore, the future of consecrated life must embrace a holistic understanding of the Imago Dei that transcends individualism and embraces



communal engagement as Pope Francis says, if we want to be true witnesses of the Risen Lord, we need to live together (Vatican News, 2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the Imago Dei as it pertains to the vocation of consecrated life illuminates the profound relationship between the divine and human experience. The notion that consecrated persons embody God's image emphasizes their unique dignity and purpose within both the Church and society. By adhering to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, consecrated individuals are not only called to follow Christ but also to model his virtues in their interactions with others. The emphasis on community and communion further enhances the understanding of their identity, inviting them to foster environments of mutual respect, love, and service. Moreover, the insights drawn from scripture and teachings of the early Church Fathers underscore the ongoing relevance of this theological framework in contemporary discussions about identity and mission in a rapidly changing world. It becomes evident that embracing the Imago Dei fosters a deeper commitment to justice, peace, and the promotion of human dignity. Therefore, the calling to live out the Imago Dei remains a vital aspect of spiritual formation and the prophetic witness of consecrated persons, challenging them to reflect divine qualities in their everyday lives and contribute meaningfully to the world around them.

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