Shaping the Future of Consecrated Life in India— A Montfortian Gabrielite Response

Part-I. The Radically Changing aspects today

In this article I shall identify the areas that are changing rapidly and that are shaping our future. While situating the context I shall discuss the challenges on religious life and how things are shaping it and how we need to work to shape the future of Consecrated life.

1. The Efforts and Struggles:

In the last few decades, many congregations have reflected on various proposals and themes: consecrated life and renewal of life, the Emmaus journey, the preferential option for the poor, the horizon and the process of arriving at a mystical and prophetic life, economy at the service of the mission, new foundations in the periphery, processes of revitalization and reinvigorating the charismatic identity, the commitment for a just and fraternal society, passion for God and for Humanity, greater sensibility in regard to fraternity in life and in the apostolic activity, prayerful reading of the Word, the lay collaboration, restructuring and re-foundation, nearness to the young…. We have the impression of having wanted to change everything, and notwithstanding, we changed very little.

All over the world now, the Consecrated life, particularly in the Western nations is going through a difficult moment of transition: present structures no longer provide the answers like the past; and new structures must be born and emerge from a new spirit. So they need a new mould. But where to find this mould is the question. The responses to today’s needs are weak and fragile. The Conference of Religious of Brazil says, “Consecrated life today is suffering from an undeniable ‘evangelical anemia’ both personal and institutional…”1 I would like to pose another question here in this context. Have we suffered from a feeling of invincibility? José M. Arnaiz in his well-researched article says, “we are not as needed as we have believed ourselves to be, and maybe as we still believe. Neither our founders nor our spiritualities and missions have thought of us and projected us as unavoidable or essential, and yet, some of us tend to think in these terms. This explains the reason for a certain arrogance, corrupt use of power, contempt for or marginalization of the laity, the convenience of returning to the past, and even the repentance and displeasure for having changed so many things and renounced others during the turbulent years from 1960 to 1980”2.

2. The Radically Changing Context of today:

Do we recognize that the consecrated life in its present form—structures, organization, work methods, lifestyle—does not respond adequately to the needs and challenges of a society that is changed and is changing radically? This society that is changed and is changing is: pluralistic, multicultural, post-modern, post-Christian, globalized, shaped by modern information and communication technologies, producer of new forms of poverty and exclusion… In other words, the change of an era is taking place, and it presumes a change in our understanding of many things (the human person, the relation to the world, to God; the family, community,

1 Carlos Palacio, SJ in Magazine of the Conference of Religious of Brazil, in Convergencia, September 2011.
2 José M. Arnaiz, The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today in Capitale generale FSP, 15 Sep, 2013, p.3 3 Thirukkural. No.336
privacy, etc.); and it is a change leading us to a new pattern. The evangelical counsels in the present historical, cultural and social context is not much understood.

Undoubtedly, these contexts influence consecrated life and provoke a critical situation that manifest itself through various symptoms. For some, the actual form of consecrated life in the world is touching bottom. For others, it is suffering from evangelical “anemia” translated as diminished passion and weak conviction leading to frustration and disenchantment. Many questions are raised such as: Do we honestly re-look at the criteria on which we base and organize our activities? Is our preoccupation merely with making our system efficient and productive?

3. Decline and Destabilization:

In the business world, organizational cycles are well documented. The final stage of an organizational life cycle is Decline and Destabilization. Some have applied this life cycle to Consecrated life too. Ted Dunn says, in the final cycle:

The original vision loses its luster and participants lose their zeal. Inspiration and innovation are in short supply as what is predictable, controllable and manageable takes precedence over what is not. Those who offer a new way of thinking and the possibility for growth are judged and labeled disobedient, disloyal or crazy. The tried and true takes precedence over trial and error and the organization stops learning, adapting and growing. The system is struggling to survive. It seeks reassurance by writing well-polished mission statements, carving statues and naming awards to honor its past champions. While it takes pride in past achievements and reminisces over the glory days, it is all the while calcifying and decaying. Having lost its root energy and divorced itself from contemporary relevance, new members are no longer attracted....It places controls over innovation and experimentation so that adaptation to a changing world is prevented. Those who built and believe in the system are promoted and elected in order to keep it going. They serve and protect the system they believe in and unwittingly collude in its demise by preventing radical change.

The authors say that many big congregations are in the last stage now. A few have successfully re-founded centuries ago when death seemed imminent for them. It is said that ‘if your congregation is in the last stage, it is important to appreciate it as you are part of a larger movement and in good company’. Your current situation is neither unique to you, nor is the result of some kind of systemic flaw or improper planning. In the view of Ted Dunn no modern day congregation can claim public victory in their re-foundation efforts.

4. Stories of Inventing the future as we speak:

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3 José M. Arnaiz, p.3
4 The symptoms are such as: decrease of those who join, increase in departures, aging of the members, weighty institutions, excessive and stressful activism of those in charge of the works, the weakening of communitarian life, fraternity and the spiritual life, frequent financial scandals/problems, cultural frictions, power fights/struggles, together with the preoccupation over an uncertain future.
5 José M., p.4
Those of us here today (the present Generation) are in a time/world of increasing disruptive changes. Computers and the Internet are the ways these tools enable people to do things together in entirely new ways. We are in a VUCA world—one characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity— and traditional skills will not be enough to manage. Some Examples:

4.1. The Computers and Internet create a Digital future: A leading futurist offers an inspiring portrayal of how new technologies are giving individuals so much power to connect and share resources that we are entering a new era in which networks of individuals, not big organizations, will solve a host of problems by reinventing business, education, medicine, banking, government, and scientific research. As Silicon Valley thought-leader Marina Gorbis, head of the Institute for the Future, portrays, a thriving new relationship-driven or socialstructured economy emerging in which individuals are harnessing the powers of new technologies to join together and provide an array of products and services.\(^7\) Marina shares many interesting thoughts about how social groups, corporations, governments etc., are being reorganized by the internet and how that may change the future.

4.2. The Art of Living: Another Futurist Johansen talks about how skillful are we at dilemma flipping? It means turning problems that can’t be solved, into opportunities. It is possible soon it seems. Can you develop bio-empathy—the ability to learn from and apply the principles of nature in your behavior and leadership? Are you able to practice immersive learning—dive into very different-from-you physical and online worlds and learn from them? He also deals with two new forces that are shaping the future. The first is the “digital natives”— people fifteen years and younger who have grown up in a digital world. The second is cloud-based supercomputing, which will enable extraordinarily rich new forms of connection, collaboration, and commerce. “Men free as the clouds that sail high above the earth without hindrance…” (PM) Montfort already spoke about cloud computing and I-cloud people?). According to Google Public Data, a child born in the US in 2008 can expect to live over 78 years. But some futurists believe that a child born today (2018), might actually live forever. This necessarily takes us to the futuristic medical devices and technologies.

4.3. Future Medical Technology Breakthroughs: I would like to briefly sum up here some of the breakthroughs and attempts at medical field to drive home the point that our attempts to shape the Montfortian future is very demanding; we need many more ardent prayers from our Founder! Future medical technology breakthroughs will build from the incredible progress made in nanotechnology, biotechnology, computers, the information learned from deciphering the human genome and other scientific and technical areas. Here are some of the futuristic medical devices and technologies that exist, are in development or are predicted\(^8\).

- Brain-computer interface
- Care giving robots
- Computer aided diagnosis
- Drug delivery devices
- Regenerative medicine
- Emotional/physical control devices
- Slowing or stopping aging
- Gene therapy/manipulation
- Home/self-monitoring & diagnosis
- Minimally invasive procedures
- Molecular and genetic diagnostics
- Neural Stimulation
- Organ replacement/growing organs
- Personalized drugs
- Robotic surgery
- Bioengineered devices
- Virtual medicine
- Extended/eternal life
- Synthetic life

\(^7\) Marina Gorbis, a futurist and consultant, describes a new era she calls “socialstructuring,” in which individuals use technology and the collective intelligence of a large group of people, their social network, to take on jobs previously done by big businesses and organizations.

\(^8\) Taken from www.futureforall.org, future of medicine
Repairing/manipulating DNA, Designer babies/designer bodies, Biostasis - Cryogenic sleep, Human cloning, Virtual/robot medicine, Instant pain relief, Biosensors - implanted or in clothing, Bionic implants to allow for extreme strength, Morphing of the human body, Age reversal, Creation of organisms, Synthetic organs, Enhanced senses, alteration of our bodies in superhuman ways and possibility of a capsule that can be swallowed which will cure all diseases.

**Part - II. THE CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE AND THEIR DEMANDS**

1. **A TIME FOR HARD CHOICES:**
   “Some communities are in denial, some are in crisis and some are mired in chronic pain. In the midst of aging and diminishment, some are biting the bullet and making the hard choices. There are many ‘R’ options. Some communities are reconfiguring, joining with other communities with a common charism. Some are restructuring their governance as well as reorganizing, downsizing and simplifying their efforts. Some are redoubling their efforts to recruit new vocations. Some are regressing and returning to ways of the past in the hopes of solidifying their identity and attracting new members. Some are retiring and planning their legacy. And some are choosing re-founding believing that only this, the most radical of all options, can transform their lives anew.”

   Montfortians need to do some soul-searching in this line. This is a great challenge.

2. **Is it an Exciting time or a time of Gloom?**
   I am of the opinion that religious life is in a great amount of change right now and that's a good thing. It can be scary but it's a good thing. It is not by just looking at the externals. The declining numbers, the shifting ministries, many unemployed religious, some over-worked, power struggles, much money, extravagance, extravagant celebration of jubilees, ordinations, birth days, school events etc.—those are simply externals. The studies done on the history of religious life show that in every epoch it goes up, has this moment of stabilization, and then goes down. The key element is, as you're about to hit bottom, you have to look for the new life. It consistently and sometimes prophetically emerges. We all know the history of Religious life.

   Now what is that key? There was a time when we desperately needed schools and hospitals in India\Asia. Religious communities provided that, and they also helped parishes grow. Now we're in a different moment period. I think one of the challenges in religious life today in India\Asia is to give enough space to that kind of pondering. That requires a contemplative attitude, a way of looking at the world that says yes, we once had that and now we don’t have or we are just this for the past 30 or 40 years etc., but that’s not the problem. The question is, how are we called today? I wish to ask: Do we actually find this moment an exciting time because we can't say, "Just go on, keep going, our future is bright?" It is important for us to ask, "To what is the Spirit inviting us and how do we, together and personally, listen and respond?".

3. **Challenging the real challenges according to some:**

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Many religious have been expressing the current challenges they face. We don’t quite know what their statements mean, but they express the desire for significant change. It is the new face of consecrated life that they wish to see; it implies the replacement of lapsed structures, overcoming disenchantment, recognizing new meanings, returning to the Word of God and the foundational charism, responding to the signs of the times, the ability to dialogue, and the value of encounter especially with the poor and with the laity. For some, all this leads to a stronger alternative, one that goes beyond renewal, re-founding and restructuring. For others, the religious life must be reinvented, and a new model is to be found. Yet some others have other ideas\textsuperscript{10}.

**Part - III. MOVING BEYOND CHALLENGES FOR ‘SHAPING THE FUTURE’**

1. **Communities at the Cross roads stand a better chance**

   The changes in the vast universe is being assessed more accurately than changing speed of the present society. Regardless of the odds, religious communities at cross-roads will stand a better chance if their choices are proactive. The road ahead is challenging and the statistics are daunting. If history repeats itself, only 25\% of all communities survive this period to see a new cycle. Ted Dunn says that each community must decide if it will be among the 75\% that become extinct or will be among the most courageous and innovative communities risking it all to claim a future full of hope. The Union of Superiors General says, “the end of an Institute can also be regarded as a prophetic witness, like for example Pope Benedict XVI stepping down from the pontificate”\textsuperscript{11}.

2. **Where do we go beyond the “future” of religious life?**

   In 2004, I had conducted a study on the concerns of Religious Life in South India. A large number of the religious interviewed were of the view that religious life will survive into the future as people continue to search for ways to seek God and help their neighbour. However, what it will look like is uncertain, said many of them. I believe that there is a future for religious life,” said one. What it will look like I am not at all sure. Religious life has had many phases and re-births over the centuries,” said the other.

   A Religious who works with young people, said they often find the teachings of the Church unintelligible and that to many, “religious life has lost its cultural logic. It doesn’t fit, it doesn’t make sense as part of the tapestry of their life”. He also said, “but I believe it’s not over, because there will always be this desire of some young people to give themselves to this call to radical commitment with Jesus”.

3. **Charismatic Families as the expression of revival of Consecrated life**

\textsuperscript{10} The main opportunities which today’s world can offer to the religious life are: the inter-congregational collaboration, the increasing involvement of lay people who are trained and properly motivated; Mission based on the new forms of poverty; Recapture the charismatic dimension of the Religious life and thus of the Church too; the increasingly multicultural aspects within certain religious Institutions etc.

\textsuperscript{11} The Union of Superiors General in its recent General Assembly had discussed this matter, May 2016.
The real encounter with the laity in the life and mission, in action and spirituality, will be transformed into a journey and a process of rejuvenation for the consecrated life and for the Church. The missionary and charismatic integration of laity with religious is a gift of the Spirit for the whole Church. Montfort requests God to muster the chosen men/women from every corner of the earth (PM.no.26). Montfort envisages people of all races, languages, castes, colour and nationalities from everywhere to come together. Certainly this challenge requires different steps: collaboration, participation and belonging—steps that clarify the degree of sharing. All are possible. Of course, what we share is a charism in its twofold dimension: mission and life/spirituality. According to me, on this integration depend the genuine renewal and revitalization of the laity and of the Montfortian consecrated life itself.

4. Prophecy of Fraternity:

The recently held USG Assembly has strongly spoken about this aspect. The prophecy of consecrated life must be manifested in community life. We have to shift from an individual to a community prophecy. Communion in the community renders the prophecy of fraternity visible; the group more than the individual is prophetic in religious life. The prophecy of fraternity must be more visible in the Montfortian congregation which is living in an intercultural experience. The time is coming when the communities in the institute has to open its doors to the lay people, families, young people, and other religions… The USG is cautioning us, that, the concern with the number and size of our works, the display of strength, power and efficiency and becoming pathologically attached to spaces, institutions, formal lifestyles are all counter-witnesses and they thwart prophecy. It says that Consecrated life must strengthen community life, to which new generations are very sensitive. It must accommodate the cultural and spiritual diversity of its members, knowing that living community is already mission. The nature of the community of the future is that it must transmit to others the appeal of living together, united in diversity, creating heartfelt and humanizing spaces that are open and joyful for each person and for others.

5. “Courageous Followers”: Leaders and Members as Partners in A Shared Vision

This is another significant area the ‘future shaping’ has to take into account. It is believed that if a new vision for a congregation is going to be prophetic, it will require the full efforts of both leaders and members as partners. Ira Chaleff, in his book “Courageous Followers” offers a helpful, reframed image of leaders and members as partners orbiting around a shared vision. In other words, instead of thinking of leaders as creating a vision and then leading the way while members follow along, think of leaders and members as partners in the enterprise of visioning. In this way they both orbit around the vision, enabling, facilitating and empowering each other on

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12 USG, Group discussions on Prophecy of the Consecrated Life, May 2016, Rome
13 A study of the NRVC survey report, US is helpful. See NRVC, Feb 2013. Religious institutes are more likely to attract newer members if they have a strong Catholic identity, if they are hopeful about their future, if their members live together in community, and if they have a structured prayer life. (70%).
behalf of the vision. To the degree you strengthen the partnership between leaders and members, you will strengthen whatever prophetic vision you claim during your re-founding efforts.

According to Chaleff, many blunders could have been prevented or mitigated if those lower in the hierarchy were successful at communicating to leaders the risks they saw in the system. Ira Chaleff’s Courageous Follower model has facilitated healthy upward information flow in organizations. One chapter on, “The Courage to Speak to the Hierarchy” is very interesting. Everyone is a follower at least some of the time.

6. To Choose Life Montfortians Must Let go of What no Longer Gives Life

The Montfortian family has to identify the realities they can no longer escape. If we begin to list them now: let us say for example, the diminishing numbers, advancing age, and maintenance responsibilities that cast a larger shadow over mission, the funerals outnumbering new vocations (in some sectors), the shrinking pool of available and able members for leadership, more building space and property than what is utilizable or justifiable, the brokenness of our communities, the cultural and personal tensions that cries out for relief, the frustration of the good intended and the joy of the easy going ones, the irrelevance of certain presence and the inevitability of certain absence etc.

In this process what must spur Montfortians on is their faith in the great mystery of life, death and resurrection. We all of us, particularly those of us who wish to be relevant, know deep down inside of us that in order to begin again, we must let go and let die what needs to die. We must surrender in faith and thus in order to choose life we must let go of what no longer gives life. It is left to us the members of the institute to identify them and deal with them.

Based on the study of the history of many congregations, it is discovered that despite having recognized the signs of diminishment and destabilization and having made the choice for renewal and repair, most communities do not succeed. While they may wax eloquent about a new vision, most will simply not do any serious and hard work of deep change required to put their words into action. Instead, they will choose incremental over deep change and they will die a slow death”.15 Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam’s advice is useful here: “You Cannot Change your Future. But you can Change your Habits. And Surely Your Habits Will Change Your Future”. We need to identify what are the habits to be changed!

7. Reach Across Boundaries and Borders: What gives us Montfortians a sense of being larger/complete than our being Indian? It is our international character that gives us completeness, wholeness, longevity and strength in the Church/world today. Indeed, as part of a “worldwide religious life movement”, our religious communities and the three congregations can reach across boundaries and borders to support “compassionate and just institutions” and reorganize others. It is also a responsibility on the part of those sectors that have begun to experience increasing numbers to train and convince its members to move out of their countries and

15 Ted Dunn, p.11
Provinces (even within the same country) towards those sectors that can guarantee the future and survival of Montfortian charism and dynamism.

It also involves setting up religious life in frontier areas, as an expression of its mystical aspect, and its prophecy. It involves making one’s own the boldness of the Founders, the evangelical response where life calls, the commitment to migrants/refugees, the trafficking of persons, the environment, the poor, the elderly, the indigenous people, and the woman; a response to integral and sustainable human development, and a systemic change that can humanize and unite.

8. **Formation:** Initial formation is crucial. It must contain genuine spiritual experience. Contact with the poor must become a key element of formation, both initial and ongoing. Formation must not be exceedingly academic. It must cultivate human capacities for the mission. We must first of all work on the human dimension of every religious especially these days when many enter consecrated life “wounded by modern day life” (USG Assembly).

The task before the senior Montfortians (ongoing formation) is to evaluate everything we do, not from the perspective of what can be reduced or removed, but from the perspective of what we must do. We must shape our activities to support our priorities, guided by boldness and discernment and our existing strategic commitments. The secret is to hold constant to our core values and identity; base priorities on anticipated societal and ecclesial needs, focus on significant issues, build upon Montfortian lived experience and reputation as an international congregation/s. In general, we will have to reaffirm the priority of our mission; focus on issues with the most potential for addressing existing and long-term circumstances.

**CONCLUSION:** As I conclude my attempt to shaping a Montfortian Gabriellite future in India, we can describe it in many words. Montfort believed that the congregation/s are Lord’s own doing and it is the work of the Lord (PM)! It is not easy to talk about the shape of the future. All the same one has to do so with firm faith and hope, and continue to rebuild. The present cannot be neglected.

The words of the Sufi poet Rumi (13th century) sheds light on this: “The past and the future hide God from our sight; burn them with fire.” What reveals the future is the living present. When we embrace the present, the past and the future are included. In a paper in 1972 mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz termed something as the *butterfly effect*, saying that the flapping of a butterfly’s wings in one location could potentially affect the weather patterns in other locations. If that is the case with one butterfly, the Golden Jubilee Occasion of St. Gabriel Novitiate, Sitagarha can be an event to create a butterfly effect for shaping our future our life and mission in the years to come.

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