

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

3. THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

(Catechism nn. 871-945)

The Church Community (Catechism n. 871-945)

Before reflecting on the different roles that people have in the Church, the Catechism (n. 871) speaks in general terms of 'Christ's faithful', quoting from the Code of Canon Law:

'The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfil in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one' (Canon 204.1).

The Catechism reflects on Christ's faithful under three headings. It speaks first of those who exercise organisational leadership in the Church (n. 874-896), then of 'the lay faithful' (n. 897-913), and then of those in the consecrated life (n. 914-933).

The Catechism defines the lay faithful:

'All the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church' (n. 897).

This definition is problematic. It puts too many diverse ways of life into one category, and it defines that category by what it is not, rather than by what it is. Someone interested in flowers would not find it particularly helpful to have them divided into three categories: roses, lilies, and flowers that are neither roses nor lilies. The word 'laity' comes from the Greek *laos* ('people'), and is perhaps best used to cover in general terms all members of the Church (the equivalent in our analogy of the word 'flower').

Christ's faithful people (Catechism n. 897-933)

We begin by reflecting on key aspects of the life of each and every member of the Church, whatever his or her ministry or role in the community. We will then look at those who exercise organisational leadership in the Church, and then on those who are living a consecrated life.

The Catechism focuses especially on the grace that makes each and every member of the Church share in 'Christ's priestly (n. 901-903), prophetic (n. 904-907) and royal (n. 908-913) office.'

Jesus said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5). His life, the life of the vine, is the Spirit of love that binds him in intimate communion with God. The branches share this Spirit and so share in his communion of love: the communion that is at the heart of what we have come to speak of as his 'divine nature'. Paul can say: 'It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). Disciples share in Jesus' life according to the special grace each is offered, and according to the way in which each responds to this grace. The Church is the Body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world with all the creative power of God, through his Spirit poured out into the community. The divinely powerful and effective grace-gift from Christ is realised in different ways in each disciple and together we contribute to living his life and carrying on his mission.

‘There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone’(1Corinthians 12:4-7).

Sharing in the life and mission of Jesus the king

Each member of the Church, through Baptism, is consecrated to share in the life and ministry of Jesus, the king, for each of us is to be an instrument of Jesus’ Spirit to bring about the reign of God in the world.

Sharing in the life and mission of Jesus the prophet

Each member of the Church, through Baptism, is consecrated to share in the life and ministry of Jesus the prophet, for each of us is to be an instrument of Jesus’ Spirit to reveal God to the world by ‘speaking and doing the truth in love’(Ephesians 4:15).

The church is a priestly community.

We are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’(1Peter 2:9).

‘Jesus made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’(Revelation 1:6).

According to the authors of the New Testament there is only one priest, one mediator (see 1Timothy 2:5): the exalted Christ. He speaks God’s word and draws everyone to himself that we might make of our lives, as he did of his, a self-offering to God. His priestly role is to mediate the sacred to the whole of creation, bringing about the will of God “on earth as in heaven”(Matthew 6:10).

Peter and John remind their readers that Christ has chosen to exercise his priestly mediation through them. Christ has chosen to share his Spirit with them, thus living in them and giving them a share in his divine nature. Sharing in his priestly mediation, they are to live their lives in union with him in the presence of God. They are to mediate God’s word, God’s will, and God’s blessing to the world. They are called to offer prayer and praise to God, to offer themselves as a spiritual sacrifice, and to draw others into communion with God. They are to show that God delights in those he has made. They are to mediate God’s forgiveness, to reconcile the world with God, to draw people to a life of faith in God and love for each other, and so, throughout all the epochs of time, to effect redemption for mankind.

The Church is an instrument of the priestly mediation of Jesus by:

- being a sanctuary of God’s presence in the world
- faithfully carrying out Jesus’ mission of revealing God to the world
- compassionately drawing the world into communion with God – sanctifying, consecrating the world.

Through Baptism we share in Jesus’ own communion with his Father, and each of us in our own unique way is graced to be an instrument of Jesus’ Spirit in bringing others into this divine communion. As with Jesus, so with us, the key to this sharing is a consecration of mind, heart, soul and body. We think of Paul’s prayer:

The Priesthood of the Faithful

‘If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:1-11).

Each baptised person is graced and called to share in Jesus’ priestly life and ministry, through the gift of self in love, to God and to others.

The church is priestly because it is living the life of Christ the priest, through the community of believers and through each of its members. It is with him in the presence of God sharing his Spirit. It is mediating God’s word and God’s blessing to the world. It is offering prayer and offering itself with Christ to God and drawing the world into communion with God. It is a royal priesthood, sharing the priesthood of the king whose mission it is to bring about the reign of God in the world.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Vatican II *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1) we read:

‘The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people.’

God mediates God’s love to the world through those who share in Jesus’ life. Each disciple shares in his or her own way in the priestly mediation of Jesus. We are not mediators independent of Jesus. We are not separate vines. It is Christ who mediates through us, as the vine bears fruit through its branches. The church and each member of the church shares in the one priesthood of Christ, and so in his consecration and in his mission. Each Christian is consecrated to Christ in a special communion, and so has a priestly ministry which graces him or her to mediate to others the grace of Christ.

There are as many different ways of carrying out Christ’s priestly mediation as there are disciples of Jesus in the Christian community. The essence of this ministry is the same as it was for Jesus. We are priests through the gift of ourselves to God and to others in obedience and love. From her communion in the life of God, a wife carries out her priestly ministry by mediating God’s love and God’s word to her husband and children, and by welcoming their loving response she helps draw them into the communion of love which is Jesus’ life. Likewise a husband for his wife and family. One can think of teachers, nurses, politicians and public servants. One can think of all the many simple ways in which we are a sacrament to each other of God’s love. Jesus is carrying on his priestly mediation through and in us, sanctifying the world through the holy lives that we live, lives which he makes possible by sharing his Spirit with us.

The Catechism (n. 901) quotes the following from Vatican II (LG 34). It speaks of the 'laity' and what it has to say applies to every member of the 'people (*laos*) of God':

'The laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are called in marvellous ways and prepared so that rich fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all they do, all their prayers and undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body – if they are done in the Spirit – indeed, even the hardships of life, if they are patiently borne – all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives.'

The Ordained leaders of the community (n. 874-896)

The Catechism reflects on those who are graced to lead the Christian community. It is important initially to remember that there are many aspects to leadership. In the Church the most important leadership is that of love, and, of course, a Christian does not need to be in a position of authority to exercise that kind of leadership. However, every community needs organisational leaders. In the Christian community we speak of a holy order (the meaning of the word 'hier-archy'), and we speak of those ordained into the sacrament of 'Holy Orders'. This is our topic here.

In his Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that during the mission of Paul and Barnabas to Southern Galatia, probably in 48AD (only 15 or so years after Jesus' death):

'they appointed elders (Greek: *presbyteroi*) in each church' (Acts 14:23).

The Jewish synagogues were led by such elders, and Paul and Barnabas were simply following the Jewish practice to which they were accustomed. Some organisational leadership was needed, so they chose older men who were held in respect by the community. The same thing happened c.65AD among the young churches of Crete, where the members, as in Southern Galatia, were predominantly Jewish. In his letter to Titus, Paul writes:

'I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you would appoint elders (*presbyteroi*) in every town as I directed you' (Titus 1:5).

In 49AD, the year after his mission in Southern Galatia, having attended the Assembly in Jerusalem, Paul set out with Silas and Timothy for Europe. One of the cities they visited was Thessalonica in Macedonia. In his First Letter back to the community, written from Corinth (50AD), Paul appeals to them:

'Respect those who labour among you, and who have charge over you (Greek: *proistamenoï*, 'those standing in front') in the Lord and admonish you. Esteem them very highly in love because of what they do (1Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Paul uses the same word in 57AD to speak of the leaders of the Christians in Rome. He exhorts them to carry out their ministry 'efficiently and conscientiously' (Romans 12:8). In neither letter does he describe their role in detail. Firstly, there was no need, for the Thessalonians and Romans knew how leadership was being exercised among them.

The Ordained Leaders

Secondly, we don't have to assume that the same people exercised leadership in every aspect of the community's life. In any case, both letters are written not to the leaders but to the community.

Writing from Ephesus (53AD) back to Corinth where he had lived from 50 to 51AD, Paul states:

'God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers'(1Corinthians 12:28).

He goes on the list a number of other ministries, including 'governing'(Greek: *kubernêsis*). Paul himself was an 'apostle'(one sent to them from the Risen Christ). There were members of the community ('prophets') who had a special gift of speaking from their experience of Jesus' Spirit, and others ('teachers') taught the essentials of what it means to follow Jesus. Others were gifted with special organisational skills and were graced to 'govern' the community – to keep the community working together in harmony, though a reading of Paul's letter reveals that this does not seem to have been working too well in Corinth.

Luke tells us of a speech given by Paul at Miletus to the leaders of the churches of Ephesus in 57AD. Addressing the 'elders'(*presbyteroi*), Paul says:

'Keep watch over yourselves and over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopoi* - 'bishops'] to shepherd [*poimainô* - 'pastor'] the church of God'(Acts 20:28).

The leaders are called 'elders' and 'overseers', and are described in terms proper to 'shepherds'. Writing what appears to be a general letter to the Gentile communities of the East (possibly from Caesarea in 59AD), after mentioning 'apostles, prophets and evangelists', Paul speaks of 'pastors and teachers'(Ephesians 4:11). Each of these ministries makes its special contribution:

'to equip the saints (the members of the Christian community) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'(Ephesians 4:12).

Finally, writing probably from prison in Rome in 62AD, Paul addresses his Letter to the community in Philippi:

'To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers (Greek: *episkopoi*) and deacons (Greek: *diakonoï*)'(Philippians 1:1).

The title and functions of those responsible for organisational leadership in the early church would presumably have varied according to the composition, size and situation of each community. The larger the community, and the longer Paul (or whoever founded the community) was absent, the more there would have been a need to devise appropriate local leadership to organise the community's life, to relate to other communities and to the society at large. The organisational structure of the Church today should be that which best facilitates the life and mission of the Church today.

Reflecting on this special charism of leadership, the Catechism (n.876) states: ‘Intrinsically linked to the sacramental nature of church ministry is its character of service.’ It goes on to state (n. 879): ‘Sacramental ministry in the Church is at once a collegial and a personal service.’

Church communities are not autonomous, but are to be linked in a communion of love.

In n. 881, the Catechism focuses on the special role among the apostles given by Jesus to Peter. It goes on to link the role of Peter with that of the bishops of Rome. Peter was martyred in Rome, as was Paul. The heroic faith of the Church of Rome, which suffered the first State instituted persecution under Nero, along with the central importance of the city of Rome in the Empire, meant that other churches looked to the Roman Church for a certain leadership, and to its bishop as continuing the role of Peter in being a symbolic unifying focus for the Church.

Sadly, as we noted in the previous chapter when reflecting on Jesus’ prayer that the Church be One, the Church experienced breaks in her unity (‘schisms’). Constantine, the Emperor who embraced Christianity, moved his residence from Rome to Constantinople. Understandably, the Diocese of Constantinople saw itself as the new Rome, and rivalry broke out between the patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople. The division between the Western and Eastern Churches hardened in the 11th century with reciprocal excommunications being declared. Though both sides have withdrawn the excommunications, the schism persists to the present day. Another major break came with the emergence of nationalism in Western Europe in the 16th century. Nations broke away from the so-called Holy Roman Empire and took the churches with them.

For the churches in the West and in the East that are in communion with Rome, the Pope is still the focus of unity. Quoting from the Vatican Council, the Catechism (n. 882) states:

‘The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter’s successor, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful’ (LG 22).

The Catechism (n.886), again quoting Vatican II (LG 23) states:

‘The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches.’

It is wrong, therefore, to think of the Pope as a kind of General Manager with the other bishops as his Branch Managers. The Catechism (n. 895) insists:

‘The bishops should not be thought of as vicars of the Pope.’

Each bishop is graced to govern each local community in such a way that communion is preserved throughout the universal (‘catholic’) Church.

Earlier we noted that the Catechism speaks of each member of the Church sharing in the life and mission of Christ the priest, prophet and king. In n. 893-896 the Catechism makes more precise the way in which Ordained Presbyters (‘Priests’) exercise these ministries.

The Teaching office/authority exercised by bishops in the Church (n. 888-892)

The Catechism states: ‘The pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates’ (n.890). Ultimately this ‘truth’ is what Jesus revealed about God as love.

It is in this context that we speak of the ‘infallibility’ of the Church. The word ‘infallibility’ derives from the passive (‘falli’) of the Latin verb ‘fallere’ (to deceive). It means that Jesus guarantees the grace to preserve the Church from being deceived and so falling irretrievably into error. It is possible for individual Christians to be wrong, even seriously wrong, in what they believe and in how they live. This can happen to whole communities. It is conceivable that the whole Church could be in error on a particular issue at a particular moment in its history. Papal teaching justifying slavery is a particularly striking example. However, we are assured by Jesus that he will not leave us to our own devices, but will give us his Spirit to guide the Church into the fullness of truth (John 16:13). We have Jesus’ guarantee of this.

Quoting Vatican II (LG 12), the Catechism (n. 889) states:

‘By a supernatural sense of faith, the People of God, under the guidance of the Church’s living Magisterium, unflinchingly adheres to this faith.’

The power of God’s redeeming love will continue to break down resistance. Despite human failure, sin and infidelity, Jesus’ mission will continue – that is our belief. For this to happen Jesus promises the Church that the true faith will win through, because Jesus will be with the Church till the end of the world (see Matthew 28:20).

We can surely hope that there will always be someone listening to grace, that there will always be holy people to draw us back from error, so that the Gospel, in its purity, will continue to be lived and proclaimed. At the same time, we cannot but wonder at the cry that came from Jesus’ heart when he exclaimed: ‘When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’ (Luke 18:8).

This ‘infallibility’ (inability to fail) that is guaranteed to the Church by Jesus is claimed by the Catechism for certain statements made by those who are graced to exercise teaching authority (‘magisterium’) in the Church. Of course no statement can express the whole truth. It is equally obvious that each statement has to be properly understood within its context, which includes the limitations necessarily involved in any human statement. Authoritative statements made by the magisterium are clearest when they define error in order to protect the members of the church from being deceived in matters of faith.

The aim of statements that purport to express the truth is not to lock reality into a proposition, comprehensively and once and for all. Rather, the aim is to point us in the right direction, so that we engage what is, in the final analysis, mysterious, and beyond human comprehension. It is essential to remember that all statements must be read in their historical context and necessarily carry with them the limits of the horizon within which they are made. This is stated in the following remarks from the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* in 1973.

‘In the transmission of divine revelation by the church, difficulties arise also from the historical condition that affects the expression of revelation. With regard to this historical condition, it must first be observed that the meaning of the pronouncements of faith depends upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances. Moreover, it sometimes happens that some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression. In addition, when the church makes new pronouncements it intends to confirm or clarify what is in some way contained in sacred scripture or in previous expressions of tradition, but at the same time it usually has the intention of solving certain questions or removing certain errors. All these things have to be taken into account in order that these pronouncements may be properly interpreted. Finally, even though the truths which the church intends to teach through its dogmatic formulas are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch and can be expressed without them, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the sacred magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions. In addition, it has sometimes happened that certain formulas in the habitual usage of the church have given way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the sacred magisterium, presented more clearly or more completely the same meaning’ (AAS 65, 1973, 402-403).

The First Vatican Council stated as an article of faith that in certain circumstances the infallibility granted to the Church by Jesus can find expression in statements made by the Pope in communion with the College of Bishops. The circumstances are repeated in the Second Vatican Council (LG 25), and are quoted in the Catechism (n. 891):

‘The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – who confirms his brethren in faith – he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals ... The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium.’

The Catechism adds the following words:

‘This happens above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine ‘for belief as being divinely revealed’ (Vatican II DV 10), and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions ‘must be adhered to with the obedience of faith’ (LG 25). This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself.’

When we note that the only time a Pope has invoked this level of authority in the years since it was defined in 1870, was in 1950 when Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary’s Assumption (we will look at this in the next chapter), and when we note that the bishops present at the Second Vatican Council never once invoked this level of authority in any of the documents that issued from that Council, we realise that the exercise of the infallibility of the Church in these ways is exceptional. It is clearly not a regular feature of Church life.

Obedience to the Magisterium

When those who exercise teaching authority in the Church do so through an infallible definition, members of the church must accept such teaching ‘with the obedience of faith’. This is because our faith in Jesus and in his will for the Church is at stake here. However, as is obvious, not all teaching of the Church is on the same level of certainty. The teachings of the Church can be thought of as a series of concentric circles. The inner circle contains those truths that are absolutely central to belonging. This inner circle is surrounded by a second circle, which contains those truths that must be embraced if we are to truly hold and consistently live by the truths of the inner circle. Then comes a third circle and a fourth, till we reach the outer circles, about which faithful members of the Church can hold a variety of opinions.

Francis Sullivan SJ reminds us:

‘The church cannot speak infallibly on every moral issue regardless of its connection with revelation. In order to be capable of being taught with infallibility, a moral doctrine must be either formally revealed, or so intimately connected with revealed truth as to be required for its defence or exposition’ (*Creative Fidelity* page 159).

A lesser degree of acceptance is required of the faithful for pronouncements that are declared to be definitive but that do not meet the conditions of infallibility. Sensible and humble respect for the gifts of the Spirit guiding those in authority requires of members of the Church that we follow teaching that is presented authoritatively and definitively, even though not infallibly. This happens when bishops collectively teach something as true, especially if they do so in council, or when the Pope speaks officially on matters that are essentially and necessarily connected to revealed truths. Such proclamations do not call for a response of faith, but they do call for a humble respect of the intellect in accepting such pronouncements as true, and of the will in acting accordingly.

The Catechism (n.892) speaks of a third level of teaching and so of obedience. It quotes Vatican II (LG 25):

‘When in the exercise of the Ordinary Magisterium, a teaching is proposed that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals, the faithful “are to adhere to it with religious assent.”

We are to adhere with religious respect of intellect and will to the teaching proposed universally by the bishops, or by the Pope teaching in harmony with bishops, when they exercise their authoritative teaching office, even though they do not intend to proclaim those doctrines by a definitive act.

The humble and obedient respect is of a lesser degree than that required by infallible or definitive teaching. Such teaching itself has degrees of importance, being proposed as definitive in the light of all available knowledge or by way of exhortation or warning.

Then there are teachings of individual congregations of the Vatican, individual bishops and moral theologians. If there is a consensus among moral theologians, this will require a more respectful hearing than if we are dealing with the ideas of a particular theologian, however expert.

To sum up: the obligation to accept the teaching of the Magisterium, in judgment and in practice, depends firstly on the status of the teaching. Is it an infallible definition? Is it a definitive teaching? Is it a declaration made in the light of available knowledge? Is it supported by an approved consensus? Does it express a position agreed to by a consensus of theologians? Is it an exhortation, rather than a teaching? Is it a word of warning, a caution? Does it simply declare that a contrary teaching is ‘offensive to piety’? This is discerned from the expressed intention of those proclaiming the teaching. In the Vatican Council we read (LG 25):

‘The manifest mind and intention is made known principally either by the character of the documents, or by the frequency with which a certain teaching is proposed, or by the manner in which it is formulated.’

As one would expect, there have been advances and so changes in official Church teaching on many matters over the centuries. We are being led into fullness of truth. We do not have it given on a platter from the beginning. All of us, including popes and bishops, need to re-examine our assumptions and learn from advances in knowledge.

In Chapter 14 we noted the huge change in the Church’s understanding of the working of grace ‘outside the church’ and the offer of salvation made not only to non-Catholic Christians, but also to non-Christians. By way of example we note here two other examples of a development in Church teaching in the light of changed circumstances and deeper insight. These examples should act as a warning to use our discernment when it comes to what is claimed as ‘Church teaching’. The first concerns military service. Pope Pius XII proclaimed (Christmas 1956):

‘A catholic citizen may not appeal to his conscience as grounds for refusing to serve and fulfil duties fixed by civil law.’

The Vatican Council states (GS 79):

‘Laws should make humane provision for the case of conscientious objectors who refuse to carry arms, provided they accept some other form of community service.’

A second example concerns the use of nuclear weapons. Many bishops, especially in the USA, strongly supported their use. Many lay people opposed. It was the insights of those faithful that led to a development in Church teaching. The Vatican Council (GS 80) declared:

‘Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and humanity. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.’

The reader will be aware of other issues, too, where the Church, at least in the Church’s official statements, is out of touch with the insights of good people, including Christians, on what we need to do to liberate people from oppressive systems, to enhance people’s lives, and to save our planet which is threatened by human greed and neglect.

If the Church is to connect with people’s hunger for spirituality, the world will need to see in the heart and on the face of the Church, the heart and face of Jesus, reaching out to everyone with a sacred, inspiring, healing, forgiving and all-embracing love.

The Consecrated Life

Those living a consecrated life (Catechism n. 914-933)

The Catechism defines the consecrated life in the following words (n. 915):

‘Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every disciple. The perfection of charity, to which all the faithful are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practicing chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, poverty and obedience. It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognized by the Church, that characterizes the life consecrated to God.’

There is a great variety of forms of consecrated life in the Church. The Catechism mentions hermits (n. 920-921), consecrated virgins (n. 922-924), religious (those making a public profession and living the common life, n. 925-927), those belonging to secular institutes (committed to the values of the counsels but who do not take vows, n. 928-929), and those belonging to societies of the apostolic life (n. 930).

To give some idea of the rich variety in the Church in Australia, an examination of the Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia shows that there are 80 Institutes of Religious Women, 37 Institutes of Clerical Religious (that is, male religious institutes that include ordained priests), 6 Institutes of Religious Brothers, 6 Secular Institutes, and 8 Societies of Apostolic Life.

The radical change that is happening in the Church is demonstrated by the fact that in 1992 there were 16,000 people living a consecrated life in Australia. Twenty years later there are about 7,000 and the mean age is climbing.

Conclusion

Having spoken in general terms of the life and ministries of the baptised, we have, following the Catechism, highlighted the way in which two groups in the Church carry out their priestly, kingly and prophetic ministries: the hierarchy and the religious.

A comprehensive coverage would, of course, look at the other rich and varied ways in which the baptised live their life. The Catechism leaves this important matter to others, as will we in this Companion.