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YOUNG PEOPLE, THE FAITH AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

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Please be as frank as you wish: the superiors like to be challenged... if you would help us, from your experience, to perceive how young people are challenging us religious to be signs and instruments helping them to discover their vocation in the Church, in whichever direction that might take them, and indeed helping the Church and us to re-discover our vocations!

I've taken this advice from the USG literally, and hope to raise more questions than provide answers, but questions that have arisen from my experience of accompanying young people that may provoke reflection and discussion. My experience is obviously limited, and I speak within a certain cultural context and the Salesian tradition, but the reality of such experience transcends the particular situation to raise questions that are universally valid for our secularized and secularizing culture of today. To facilitate this exploration I would like to propose the encounter with Zacchaeus (Lk.19:1-10) as a possible framework for exploring the themes of faith, vocational accompaniment and discernment with the young. However, before doing that, I need to establish what is the essential foundation of any vocational calling:

Let yourself be loved by God¹

These words of St Elizabeth of the Trinity encapsulate **the primary vocation** of every human person. Each vocational choice is a response which ensues from this reality of being loved by God. As the beloved disciple reminds us, it is not primarily about our love for God, but about God who loves us first (1Jn.4:10). Hence, the Gospels are precisely as Pope emeritus Benedict says, a 'love story', the story of God's seeking out his lost love, the highest possible romance.²

¹ Elizabeth of the Trinity, *I Have Found God*, Complete Works Vol.1 trans. Sr Aletheia Kane OCD, (Washington: ICS Publications, 1984), 179.

² 'The Future of Love: A reading of Pope Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est*' in, John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (USA: Cascade Books, 2009), 366. Indeed, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI comments that 'God has chosen all of humanity for his love; more specifically, he has elected Israel and then Mary and the Church. Mary and the Church is the Bride of God the Son.' *Deus Caritas Est*, n.10.

Before we do anything for God, we are called to let ourselves be loved by God whose love gifts us with natural life (creation) and supernatural life (baptism) through which we participate in the Son's life as the Spirit of Love is poured into our hearts (Rm.5:5). As we enter our *Interior Castle*, and pass through various mansions to our deepest centre, we become aware of the indwelling God (St Teresa of Avila). Our heart is 'the paradise of God'³ (St Francis de Sales) for we are 'his dwelling and his secret inner room and hiding place (St John of the Cross) ... [we] cannot be without him. Behold exclaims the bridegroom the kingdom of God is within you.'⁴ One of the basic assumptions of spiritual accompaniment is, therefore, that we do not bring an absent God to young people, but rather, journey with them in their discovery of God who is already dwelling in their heart. Of course, this presupposes that the accompanist or spiritual director has made the journey into his or her own heart so as to walk with the young person in their discovery of God's presence.

Any vocation is, therefore, a living out of this mystery succinctly expressed in the Salesian maxim: Live Jesus! This is the living out of our baptismal vocation where we have been incorporated into Christ. Our 'whole life consists in making this reality come alive. We must become each day a little more what we are already at baptism and what Jesus Christ is by nature: a Son of God.'⁵ As St. Elizabeth of the Trinity expresses it, 'Spirit of Love ... create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word: that I may be another humanity for Jesus in which He can renew his whole Mystery.'⁶

That we are created out of love (archaeological) and destined for love (teleological) is the current that carries religious life forward as exemplified in the Ignatian principle and foundation (*The Spiritual Exercises*) or the monastic *reditus ad cor*. As Jean Marie Howe proclaims:

The journey home is a journey of the heart. Monastic life is a finger pointing within, indicating the path that leads to the deepest centre, to the true self: the path of *reditus ad cor*. When we return to the heart, we return to ourselves; we claim the interior landscape of the heart as our own. Monastic life is essentially a process of awakening the dormant heart, liberating the life within us, and following its lead.⁷

This is one of the primary aims of spiritual direction to enable young people re-connect with the core of their being, their heart and to make choices and decisions from there. It is in recognizing who they are as loved by God that they discover the giftedness that resides in their inner depth as a call of service to the world.

This insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.⁸

³ Original draft of *Treatise on the Love of God* by St Francis de Sales, ch. 5.

⁴ "The Spiritual Canticle", stanza 1, pars 7 and 8 in: Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. [Trans], *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS. Publications, 1991), 480.

⁵ François Corrigan, *The Spirituality of St Francis de Sales: A Way of Life* (Bangalore: S.F.S Publications, 1992), 12.

⁶ Aletheia Kane OCD, [trans.] *Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, vol.1 (Washington, ICS Publications, 1984), 183-184.

⁷ Jean-Marie Howe, *Secret of the Heart: Spiritual Being*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 35.

⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

Disconnected from his/her heart, the young person runs the risk of following a lofty ideal which is unreal and a distortion of their true self. They will 'end up living from the outside in, and not the inside out [...] It may indeed be a noble way to live, but it is not their own life, but a life imitating heroes instead of listening to their heart.'⁹ The journey to the heart is the journey to the true self where we discover God in-dwelling, *noverim me, noverim te* (St Augustine). As St Irenaeus reminds us, we give glory to God by becoming the person whom God has created us to be. Within this tradition, St Francis de Sales writes, 'let us be what we are and be that well, in order to bring honour to the Master Craftsman whose handiwork we are.'¹⁰ To another correspondent he writes even more tellingly: 'Don't sow your desires in someone else's garden; just cultivate your own as best as you can; don't long to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are... Believe me, this is the most important and least understood point in the spiritual life.'¹¹ Such advice is particularly relevant for young people in the throes of human and spiritual development. If disconnected from their heart, or deepest centre, the young person is quite likely to look for an external source or be tempted to imitate others. 'Be who you are' contains a call to *become* the person God has created you to be with the accompanying admonition 'don't long to be other than what you are'. The role of the spiritual accompanist is to draw out this potential within the young person and to 'prevent' anything that might be harmful to their development. Whilst it is true to say with St Francis de Sales that each young person is God's masterpiece,¹² the apex of creation¹³ and 'a work of art',¹⁴ it is equally true to say that each young person is 'an unfinished work of art'. In journeying with young people, so as to enable them to make choices that are reflective of their inner goodness, the spiritual accompanist is actively engaged with the young person in God's work of creation.

1. Jesus entered Jericho and was going through the town when a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance (Lk.19:1-2)

Jesus is *going through* the town, in other translations the idea of Jesus 'passing through' Jericho is highlighted. It is not his intention, therefore, to stop, but he does in response to Zacchaeus' desire to meet him. Immediately it confronts us with *the spirituality of interruption* – we can be guaranteed when involved in youth ministry that we will be often called to lay aside our plans in order to respond to the needs of young people. They do not operate according to our time-table and this involves **a real asceticism** on our part to be open and available to the young. More often than not young people do not approach us looking for spiritual direction but to help them solve some problem or difficulty that they are going through at that point in time. Consequently, the beginning of the journey often takes place in informal situations where the spiritual director and young person are engaged in other activities which are not directly related to spiritual direction. Over time, the meetings can become more formal, regularly spaced out and even carried out by appointment.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰ W. M. Wright and J. F. Power. Trans. Péonne Marie Thibert. *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 112.

¹¹ *Letter to Présidente Brulart*, June, 1607, *Oeuvres Edition Annecy XIII*: 289-292. Hereafter, OEA.

¹² OEA V:165.

¹³ OEA IX:343.

¹⁴ Eph. 2:10.

Initially, it may appear to us that we are wasting time, but you can be guaranteed that such 'wasted time' is essential for the young person to grow in trust. As the relationship develops we are often questioned by them as to why we have chosen this way of life. Such questions often mask their own search for meaning as they wonder about what path they should follow. We need to let ourselves be questioned by the young – and such questions can make us uncomfortable. If our way of life is too inaccessible to the young, then, we can protect ourselves from being questioned and challenged by them. Is this not what underpins Pope Francis' call that we become 'shepherds living with the smell of the sheep'¹⁵ and "open our doors so that if some-one, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door?"¹⁶ We may be engaged with young people in various activities, but do we separate ourselves from them when it comes to community prayer? How accessible is our community prayer to young people?

Although we begin with what concerns the young person, as the dialogue develops the presenting problem takes on less significance as we begin to explore what God is saying to them through that life situation. Often at the core of their dissatisfaction, discontent, frustration or dilemma is a disconnection with their heart. This might sound strange but it is often true that we can be living at a distance from ourselves. We are often not at home with God who is dwelling within us because it is we who are homeless. This is particularly true of young adulthood where the influence of peer pressure is so great that many young people find themselves having to live up to the expectations of others. There can be an all too human tendency to seek approval from others, 'afraid of how others see us, wishing to avoid their judgment or desirous of their admiration.' We will only truly achieve interior freedom when we begin to learn to look at ourselves the way that God looks at us through his Son, 'under the Lord's loving merciful gaze.'¹⁷

Disconnected from their own heart, without this interior harbour, they find themselves set adrift on the sea of life, and end up getting lost. This is particularly true in the area of human relationships. Young people who are searching for love often settle for less, accommodating themselves to the other person's wishes because of their *need to be loved*. Consequently, they find themselves either trapped in unhappy relationships or experience a sense of being used, and thus, emerge wounded by the experience. When relationships are problematic, the focus in spiritual direction is on what God is saying through the relationship. What is it revealing about my heart? am I seeking self-gratification, being asked to transcend myself for the good of the other, being called to tolerance, patience or forgiveness? The focus on what God is saying in and through this relationship makes spiritual direction distinct from counselling or other helping relationships.¹⁸

2. *Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man (Lk.19:2)*

In spite of his wealth, Zacchaeus remains dissatisfied. In a similar way, Young people today live in a culture which often postpones the deeper questions, especially regarding

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Chrism Mass, 28th March 2013.

¹⁶ *Joy of the Gospel*, n.47.

¹⁷ Philippe, *Time for God*, 46.

¹⁸ In relation to how the spiritual director can benefit from exposure to contemporary psychological research see, Carolyn Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 1996).

commitment, and encourages the *L'Oréal syndrome* of beautifying one's image, amassing material wealth and having a good time since "I'm worth it!" Is God calling less people today or is it more difficult to hear his call today? With all the competing voices that emanate from our culture, social media, internet and with a distinct aversion to silence, how is it possible to hear the still small voice of God as he whispers in our heart? As Fr Pascual Chavez writes:

Young people today are often living in an environment which hardly favours the spiritual life. They are immersed in a culture of consumerism and profit, of personal enjoyment and the immediate satisfaction of desires. On the other hand we do find in adolescents and young people a search for an inner life, an effort to discover their own identity and an openness to seeking after an experience of the Transcendent."¹⁹

We live in a world where religious values are often at odds with what is being promoted and people often describe themselves as being 'spiritual not religious.' This acknowledgement of the spiritual is a testimony to the fact that there is deeper reality than the material, and yet, even the spiritual is an ambiguous notion which often feeds a certain narcissism. Unlike religion, which is relational and community-oriented, spirituality like any 'product' is there to make me feel better.

We live in a rapidly secularised, and secularizing world, from which consecrated life is not immune. M.P. Gallagher argues that in this millennium apathy has become the dominant type of disbelief, not just in Ireland but across the Western World. There is a new generation of 'baptised young adults whose formative experiences with religion or Church are so thin as to be non-existent' and for whom 'God is missing but not missed.'²⁰ Those who do take the faith journey seriously often feel isolated and unsupported as they witness the "greying and emptying" of the Church.²¹ Youth, today, are "inheritors of a 'modernist' condition that experienced the death of God, the collapse of Christendom, and the lost certainty of the truth." Earlier generations managed to "stave off the sense of cataclysm by ignoring it, by getting on with the business of living, or by telling ourselves that things are getting better all the time."²²

David Walsh offers an intriguing analysis of how 'the revolt against God and the correlative divinization of humanity are not purely modern phenomena (Voegelin) but the end point of a process that has been unfolding in Western civilization since the collapse of the medieval synthesis of spiritual and temporal orders. The whole process of secularization, therefore, is not so much the removal of the sacred but "the absorption of the sacred into the human being, through Gnostic experiences in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of (wo)man."²³ We have no need for God because I have become God. This happens because the otherness of God is abolished which

¹⁹ Pascual Chavez Villanueva, *Come and See, The Need for Vocation Ministry in ACTS*, 409, (Rome: 2011) 30.

²⁰ M.P. Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (London: Darton-Longman-Todd, 2003), 130-1.

²¹ Cf. Daniel O'Leary, *New Hearts, New Models: A Spirituality for Priests* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 1997), 22.

²² D. Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 179.

²³ D. Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual foundations of Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 99.

leads to a fusion of human-divine essences, simultaneously abrogating the transcendence of God and dispensing with my creaturely status. This is particularly evident in the phenomenon of New Age spirituality, from which religious life has not been immune. We need to interrogate ourselves and ask: has such pseudo-spirituality replaced a true authentic Gospel spirituality in the formation of young religious? Has religious life in its desire to be relevant sought what is new and novel and dispensed with what is essential? Has there been a psychologization of the Gospel? In the drive towards holistic development and formation has the spiritual been replaced by the psychological? I raise these questions because it leads us onto an important question: What are we feeding the young?

You give them something to eat (Mk.6:37) ... Young people are hungry. Not unlike the woman at the well who remained dissatisfied even though she had drunk from the well of many relationships, yet, she still longed for 'the water of life' (Jn.4:14). There is a thirst in the human spirit that will not be quenched by anything other than God. The rejection of, or neglect of, traditional Catholic practices among the young, and the turn towards other spiritualities, still point to this inherent thirst of the human spirit. The NSYR (National Study of Youth and Religion) reveals *the faith of young people today, along with the practices and beliefs of both teens and their parents.*²⁴ The conclusion is unsurprising: "The actual dominant religions among U.S. teenagers is centrally about *feeling good, happy, secure, and at peace* ... about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."²⁵ Reflecting on this, Kenda Creasy Dean argues that 'Churches seem to have offered young people a kind of "diner theology", a bargain religion cheap but satisfying, whose gods require little in the way of fidelity or sacrifice, easier to digest than 'to lay down one's life for others'...The importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies.'²⁶ The operative image of God in this is God the butler or lifeguard, who watches from the side-lines until called upon, listening non-judgmentally and helping youth feel good about themselves. 'Most teenagers were not concerned that they would fail God. As long as God demands little, teens are free to invest little. Everyone is happy.'²⁷ From personal experience with young people, I would add that this form of **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** can be summed up in the phrase that God loves us unconditionally. We learn from Scripture that God's enduring love is unchanging (Jm.1:17), steadfast (Ps.136), faithful (Dt.7:9), but is such love portrayed as unconditional? Is this Scriptural or something that has been transferred from psychology to spirituality in the sense of unconditional positive regard? If, in the past, we suffered from a Jansenistic mind-set which instilled an unholy fear of God, has the pendulum swung in the other direction today? Being fed on a staple diet of God's unconditional love often translates, for the young person as implying *it doesn't matter what you do, God will always love you*. Does Gospel love make demands of us? Telling the Christian story today will involve us facing up to "a crisis of credibility."²⁸ The changing times have left some feeling out of tune with the world of the young. How many of us are now as secular as the world

²⁴ The study (2001-2005), performed by sociologist, Dr. Christian Smith, Melinda Lundquist Denton and colleagues at the University of North Carolina.

²⁵ Christian Smith and Melanie Lundquist Denton, *Soul-Searching* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005), 262.

²⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, USA: OUP, 2010), 10.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 77.

²⁸ Pascual Chavez, Acts of the General Council, 'Da Mihi Animas, Cetera Tolle'; Charismatic Identity and apostolic zeal, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, no. 394 (July-September 2006), 9.

around us? Have we opted to live a form of mediocrity that lacks energy and challenge? Have we turned to hyper activism?²⁹

3. He was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was... but could not see for the crowd (Lk.19:3)

Like Zacchaeus, this anxiety of heart drives us on to refuse the finite as a resting place because the human spirit is made for the infinite. And yet, this movement forward can be easily short-circuited by 'the crowd.' Does the living out of our consecrated life always give witness to this thirst for the transcendent or have we become too comfortable and settled for less? Would it be an indictment of our way of life if we fulfilled this function of *the crowd* in preventing a young person from truly encountering Jesus?

Young people today are calling us back to being women and men of prayer. They are not impressed by what we do because there see many secular organizations do similar work, they want to know why we do it. Do they see in us men and women who have "put aside personal prayer, saying we have to search for God in humanity; and in looking for God, we have abandoned God."³⁰ In many ways God is disappearing or becoming eclipsed in our world. Our task is to bring God back into normal conversation. I don't mean necessarily talking about God but witnessing to God so that our way of life provokes the God-question. Young people want us to answer the question for them that Jesus put to his disciples: Who do you say I am? (Mk.8:29). They want to know do we have a relationship with the living God and, if so, how does this relationship impact on our lifestyle, choices, decisions etc.

Lord teach us how to pray (Lk.11:1) ... The witness of Jesus absorbed in loving communion with his Abba-Father immediately awakens the hunger for prayer in his disciples hearts. Does our way of life evoke a similar response among the young? Especially congregations that are involved in active ministry is prayer a real value or a notional value?³¹ Speaking as a Salesian, I believe our fundamental heresy is that we look at Don Bosco and try to imitate the work that he did, without having the union with God that he had. We, often, are simply active, whereas, for Don Bosco, his work was an overflow of his relationship with God (*ecstasy of action*). Those who knew Don Bosco well described him as a man of prayer: "If you want to live according to Don Bosco's spirit, you must never lose sight of his interior life... the interior life is the spiritual sense which must always accompany us, it is the presence within us of God who is remembered, invoked and loved." (Blessed Philip Rinaldi).

Prayer, accordingly, is understood not as something *we do*, but as a *response* to God, who draws us continually. It is God who takes the initiative. We are invited to respond in love to God who has first loved us into being. As St Therese of Lisieux expresses it, 'prayer is not primarily an activity but a way of being with God. Prayer has to do with where our heart is at every moment of our life, the trials as well as the joys.'³² In short, prayer is *allowing*

²⁹ Fr Patrick Hennessy SDB, 'Salesian Youth Ministry in Ireland Today within an European Context' in *Journal of Salesian Studies* 15 (2007), 136.

³⁰ Ignacio Larrañaga ofm Cap, *Sensing Your Hidden Presence: Toward Intimacy with God* (Quebec, Editions Paulines, 1992), 25.

³¹ John Henry Newman distinguishes between a *value* we give lip service to as being important (*notional value*) or a value that we live in our daily life (*real value*).

³² Aloysius Rego, *Holiness for all: Themes from St Thérèse of Lisieux* (Oxford: Teresian Press, 2009), 100.

ourselves to be possessed by the love of God who wants to enter into a deep mutual friendship with us. To create this friendship, we need not only time for prayer, but also, an awareness that certain lifestyles either facilitate or hinder prayer.³³ St Teresa of Avila emphasizes this aspect of prayer as friendship with Christ³⁴ which counteracts the narcissistic tendency of *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. Through the practice of prayer, the centre of gravity gradually shifts from self to God. It is always important to help young people become aware of their operative image of God on this prayer journey. There will often be a conflict between their ideas of God and the God they meet in prayer; the God they have created in their own image and likeness and the God of surprises who breaks through in prayer. It has been my experience that young people are often illiterate when trying to communicate what is happening in their prayer. It is important, therefore, to encourage them to reflect on their experience, review their prayer and keep a prayer journal. Introducing young people to different methods of prayer is of inestimable importance and at the early stages of mental prayer, some particular method or structure is essential. Like any building that needs scaffolding, mental prayer at the beginning requires supports which can later be abandoned as one advances in prayer. Praying with Scripture is pivotal because 'the Word of God gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God.'³⁵

Why is prayer so essential to our consecrated way of life, however, it is expressed? Quite simply because

the less we pray, the more God vanishes into the distance. He slowly becomes a meaningless and lifeless "idea." No one wants to be, to relate, or to live with an idea; nor does it stimulate us in times of struggle or challenge. This is how God stops being Someone and is diluted to the point of being a distant and absent reality... if we stop praying for a long period of time, God "dies!" ... not in himself, but He dies in our hearts. God "dies" like a withered plant we have neglected to water.'³⁶

As St Bernard reminds us;

The wise person will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal. The canal simultaneously pours out what it receives; the reservoir retains the water till it is filled, then discharges the overflow without loss to itself ... Today there are many in the Church who act like canals, the reservoirs are far too rare ... You too must learn to await this fullness before pouring out your gifts, do not try to be more generous than God.'³⁷

4. So He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way (Lk.1:4)

God respects the nugget of desire in his heart and the effort he makes to put himself into a position to encounter Jesus. He has never met Jesus but he has a desire to do so. As

³³ 'There is no doubt that if we give God our time, we will be able to find time for others, too. By paying attention to God, we learn to pay attention to others. Prayer gives us the grace to live each moment of life with ever greater fruitfulness.' Jacques Philippe, *Time for God* (London: St Paul's, 2005), 30.

³⁴ 'Prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.' "The Life," Chapter 8 par. 5, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.D.C., *Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, Vol.1 ((Washington: ICS Publications, 1976), 167.

³⁵ St John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n.94.

³⁶ Ignacio Larrañaga ofm Cap, *Sensing Your Hidden Presence: Toward Intimacy with God* (Quebec, Editions Paulines, 1992), 27-28.

³⁷ St Bernard, *Commentary on The Song of Songs* (Germany: Jazzybee Verlag, 2016), 88.

consecrated religious, no doubt each of us has our own personal sycamore tree where God has encountered us, but at a deeper level, we can ask, is religious life today a sycamore tree for the young? Do we offer them a vantage point from which they can look at things differently, discover what is true instead of the counterfeit truths that are often peddled to them? Are our religious communities willing to go out on a limb for our faith? Do we not only provide opportunities for meeting Jesus but also, for accompanying the young on their journey with the Lord? Pope Francis writes:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”³⁸

Creating a sense of community where young people can share their faith is becoming increasingly essential in a world where such faith is relegated to the private sphere and often, ridiculed. Indeed, young people have a great desire for community, a sense of belonging and security in a world where relationships have become quite fragmented and lack commitment.

For the idealistic young person, the very human reality of community life can lead to a certain disappointment, and even, disillusionment. How do we respond to their criticisms? It is necessary to be discerning as regards their criticisms: 1) As a community, we must resist becoming defensive as such criticisms may very well be ‘prophetic’, challenging us to rekindle the initial enthusiasm of our original commitment and challenging various lifestyles that we may have grown accustomed to. 2) On the other hand, the criticisms may emanate from an idealism that does not appreciate our wounded and broken humanity that requires compassion. St Bernard is reputed to have said, “if there isn’t a difficult member in your community, go out and get one!” If such criticisms emerge from a judgmental, blaming or angry spirit, then, they may well be an invitation to the young person to look within at what is going on inside their own heart. Are they being invited to grow in compassion, tolerance, acceptance and even forgiveness, towards those with whom they are sharing their lives? This is where spiritual accompaniment is essential, because there can be a narcissistic tendency to see community existing to meet my needs, rather than, learning self-transcendence so as to become a gift for others. There is a need to achieve a balance between accommodating the new demands that are being made to us through the young, and gently challenging them with the inherited wisdom of the ages that demand practices whose value is not immediately apparent.

5. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today.’(Lk.19:5)

Something new happens in the life of Zacchaeus, it’s the first time that anyone ever had to look up at him! But what happened in that look between Jesus and Zacchaeus? What was communicated? What was exchanged? I would hazard a guess that the ‘look’ communicates the love of God that transforms the heart of Zacchaeus which had shrunk because of various reasons, but will expand once again with love. Zacchaeus experiences himself as being loved

³⁸ *Joy of the Gospel*, n.3.

by God which will later prompt his generous response because he is now in a position to listen to his heart.

The fact that Jesus stops and notices him points to the essence of compassion and a necessary first step in vocational guidance. What is the spot where the young encounter Jesus? In the world of young people today, this is most likely to be the zone of relationships and media. We need to stop, become aware, see them. Of course, Jesus uses it as an opportunity to educate the crowd as it brings their prejudices to the surface. Jesus knows how to read hearts, but he also knows his name – he calls him Zacchaeus! In so doing, he challenges him ‘to recognize the one who recognizes you. For I know you, not in some general way along with other people, but personally.’³⁹ Each vocational invitation is a personal call and we are called by name, it is our task as consecrated religious to facilitate such a meeting. Vocational accompaniment should not aim merely at group spiritual formation for young people, but should ultimately aim at this very individual spiritual companionship. Personal spiritual companionship of the young person is “the fundamental element in all youth and vocation ministry.”⁴⁰ Without, this individual spiritual companionship all group formation will be left incomplete.⁴¹

The Zacchaeus story illustrates many of the elements that we find in the vocational calling and journey of many a young person. There is a longing to be accepted and loved. Just as we cannot bypass the cultural context in which young people are called, so too, we cannot bypass their personal story which has brought them to this point of searching and questioning. Usually something is missing, they are searching, their hearts too have shrunk because of various life experiences. Especially in Western society, there is a break-down in family life, and in particular, from my experience of spiritual direction with young people, there is what I would call a ‘father-wound’. Many young people who experience their fathers as physically absent, emotionally unavailable, or distant look to the director as a substitute father-figure. There are often mother-issues, but it appears to me that the ‘father-wound’ is more prevalent for both young men and women. Of course, this unrealized need for affection and recognition in the young people is replayed with the spiritual director as the young person desperately seeks the approval/attention that s/he has not received at home. This is not without its dangers because if this caring relationship is not carefully guarded, there is the potential of a co-dependent relationship which can develop into seduction and/or abuse. The focus must remain on the young person’s relationship with God, not upon the young person’s feelings and life situation, but on what God is communicating to them in and through such experiences. This requires a correct understanding of ‘spiritual friendship’ as evidenced in the Salesian tradition. One of the defining qualities of a spiritual friendship, that sets it apart from natural friendship, is that it is centered on the love of God. Since the primary relationship which is to be shared with others is the love of God, then, this relationship is always triangular in that it involves the director, directee and most importantly God. St Francis de Sales concludes that the Holy Spirit is ‘the author of such friendships’ and persons whose hearts are in the heart of God

³⁹ Pope St Gregory the Great, *Homily 25.4-5*, in *Divine Office III*, 121*.

⁴⁰ Pascual Chavez Villanueva, *Come and See*, 32.

⁴¹ Fr Louis Grech SDB, *Salesian Spiritual Companionship with Young People Today Inspired by the Praxis and Thought of St John Bosco*, Malta University, Unpublished doctoral thesis, 2017.

draw others into a like union.’⁴² Such an approach requires on-going supervision to prevent the spiritual direction relationship from degenerating into self-gratification for the director where his or her needs are being met.

As with the Johannine ‘stay’ (μενω), the Lucan invitation to Zachaeus acknowledges the need to go deeper than welcoming Jesus to remaining, abiding, staying with him. In the Emmaus story the disciples also invite Jesus to stay with them, but here we have an interesting reversal where it is Jesus who *stays* with Zacchaeus and will brook no delay – today. How many missed opportunities have we had, as consecrated religious, because we have failed to respond to this divine urgency of *today*? Within the Salesian tradition, we have been encouraged by St John Bosco in our accompaniment of the young to enter the front door of their house with them, but to leave the back door of our house with them. In short, we need to begin where the young people are at and journey with them so that their encounter with and staying with the Lord will allow them to listen to the call of their heart.

What is essential for young people who are discerning their vocation is that as consecrated religious, we walk the talk. More than ever, young people need witnesses to the Gospel. As Pope St John Paul II writes:

People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission⁴³ [He continues] Jesus proclaims the Good news, not just by what he says and does, but by what he is⁴⁴ ... [It follows] “we are missionaries above all because of what we are as a church whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries in word and deed.”⁴⁵

What is of utmost significance for ‘awakening the faith of young people is not ‘how hard we press young people to love God, but on how much we show them that we do.’⁴⁶

6. Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed him joyfully... They all complained when they saw what was happening... but Zacchaeus stood his ground (Lk.19:6-8)

In many ways this vignette with Zacchaeus offers us a bird’s eye view of the vocational journey. Initial enthusiasm is often followed by obstacles and temptations which seek to derail the young person on their vocational journey. The negative voices of complaint will arise either externally from friends, acquaintances and even family or from internalized voices of doubt within the young person. Here we need to make a distinction between the negative voice and the prophetic voice. The negative voice will have its source other than God and lead the young person away from God provoking feelings of discouragement, unworthiness and doubt. The prophetic voice never deprives the young person of hope because at the same time as it challenges the young person it points to the possibility of a

⁴² W.M. Wright and J.F. Power, *Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, Letters of Spiritual Direction*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 59.

⁴³ *Redemptoris Missio*, 42

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

⁴⁶ Creasy, *Almost Christian*, 120.

new way forward. A simple question to ask at this point is: is this negative voice coming from God? Is it leading to God? Or is it coming from another source and leading me away from God? Discerning a vocation in a time of change adds extra difficulty for the spiritual director when young people themselves are often changing as they mature in their faith and vocational journey. If it is our task to bring them back to their heart, where they experience themselves as being loved by God, then, we must also be aware of what keeps them at a distance from God.

Here we have arrived at one of the key elements of vocational accompaniment which is discernment. The word discernment is often bandied in religious circles, but maybe it should be always prefaced with the word 'prayer.' It is important to gather information, reflect on it and discuss it, but, it is a *sine qua non* that is brought into personal and communal prayer, because God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts' (Isa.55:8). If we plan events, organize and strategize and plot our course of action – will this bring about a renewal of religious life? Are decisions in religious life merely rationalistic where agreement is based on the lowest common denominator? Even more importantly, what happens to the voice of prophecy within communal gatherings? Did Jesus operate with a 'democratic principle' when he gathered his disciples to discern the Father's will? If he had listened to the group consensus would he have taken the way of the cross? It follows that communal discernment is as good as the personal prayer of those gathered. Prayerful discernment is a major challenge to religious life today. Such prayerful discernment is rooted in personal and communal prayer that allows us 'stand our ground' on Christ the rock. If this is not happening personally and within our communities how is it possible for us to accompany young people on their vocational journey to discover the ground they stand on?

7. "Look sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount." (Lk.19:9)

What the story of Zacchaeus illustrates for us, in contrast to the story of the rich young man (Mk.10:17-31), is that our hearts can only be transformed through the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is a living out of the Pauline challenge to 'adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect.' (Rm.12:2). Whilst an encounter with Jesus is essential for the journey of faith and vocational discernment, in itself, it is not sufficient. Take, for example, the apostles. Even after their encounter with the Risen Lord, they have not been transformed, but are told to 'wait in the city to be clothed by a power from on high' (Lk.24:49). The *Acts of the Apostles*, therefore, gives witness to their transformation when clothed with the Spirit.

If discerning the 'negative voices' to see if they are coming from God or another source is essential to discernment, then, even more so is identifying and living out the inspirations of God. As St Francis de Sales says, this is the quickest path to holiness.⁴⁷ Along with helping the young person to identify the inspirations of God which speak to their heart, we also need to read the signs of the times where the Spirit is moving today. Where would we

⁴⁷ See 'Graced inspirations' in Eunán Mc Donnell, *The Concept of Freedom in the Writings of St Francis de Sales* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2009), 280-301.

identify inspirations at work communally today? Is the decline in religious life simply a consequence of the decline in religious practice generally or is it a 'wake-up' call as Pope Francis likes to remind us? In contrast to the established religious orders we find that there is a new spring-time in various lay movements that are springing up, along with some new forms of religious life. Take, for example, FOCUS⁴⁸ whose mission field is university campuses; Youth2000⁴⁹ who are involved in peer to peer ministry with young people; Pure-in-Heart⁵⁰ who encourage young people to live the Church's teaching on sexuality in the midst of the 'dictatorship of moral relativism'(Pope Benedict XVI). Once the preserve of consecrated life, young lay movements are responding to the needs of young people on the ground in a way that leads to birth of vocations in Christian marriage, committed single people, and indeed, become tributaries that also flow into consecrated life. As religious life apparently enters into its autumnal season, there is a new springtime among many lay movements within the Church. How can consecrated life respond creatively to such movements? Are we being invited to a new spirit of co-operation? Being used to operate from a place of power and influence, how does it feel to take up an ancillary role where we are at the service of such lay movements?

Religious life, as an institution, is being challenged by such movements which offer a prophetic critique to our institutions. When an organization seeks to promote itself and defend the status quo, it ends up being focused on maintenance rather than mission. As McLaren points out:

when institutions fail us members of a community arise, organise and confront those institutions by forming a *movement*. Movements, we could say, exist to propose positive change to institutions. Movements organise people to articulate what's wrong with current institutions and propose what should be done to make things right⁵¹ [...] Movements can simmer on the margins for years, knocking on doors that are never opened. But sometimes an institutional leader opens one of those doors. When a door opens so movement leaders and institutional leaders can begin working together, breakthroughs occur.⁵²

If we are to be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, then, the young are not calling us to make cosmetic changes, but are calling us to genuine renewal. It is the *inner life*, not simply the externals, of religious life that is undergoing a profound transformation. Religious life is at a *graced crossroads* wherein God's invitation to choose life is once again revealed.⁵³ In accompanying the young on their vocational journey, they 'are participants in God's mission rather than targets of ours!'⁵⁴ Attracting young people cannot be about our survival, it must

⁴⁸ FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) is a lay organization that forms young adults for campus ministry who evangelize other students through spiritual multiplication – that is, a student is trained to befriend a small group and then, each member of the group befriends and disciples another student so that there is a ripple effect. www.focus.org

⁴⁹ Youth 2000 is a spiritual initiative established to draw young people through Mary to a deep and lasting union with Jesus Christ, especially in the Eucharist, the 'source and summit of the Christian life.' In short, it is a gateway that leads young people into the everyday life of the Church. www.youth2000.ie

⁵⁰ In a world where sex is often viewed as a recreational activity rather than an expression of personal self-giving, Pure-in-heart aim to educate, inspire and empower young people to live the theology of the body so that they can appreciate their sexuality as gift. www.pureinheartireland.com.

⁵¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the Worlds' Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 141.

⁵² *Ibid*, 143.

⁵³ Ted Dunn, *Journey of Transformation: Challenges offered by "Younger" members*, submitted to 'InFormation' (March 2017), 3.

⁵⁴ Creasy, *Almost Christian*, 97.

be a genuine discovery as to what God is calling them to. Today, as religious, we are being invited into a spirit of co-operation among ourselves and among lay movements as never before. We are being called to this co-operation not simply because it is pragmatically necessary, but because it allows a two-way exchange of energy which 'is the only antidote to entropy, the inevitable slow decay and death of closed systems.'⁵⁵

8. Today salvation has come to this house ... for the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost. (Lk.19:10)

Young people are not a homogenous group: some are like Zacchaeus *before* his encounter with Jesus with a vague sense that something is missing and they are looking for more; others like Zacchaeus have encountered the Lord, but since the soil has not yet been prepared they are not quite rooted; and still others, are like Zacchaeus who have journeyed with the Lord and find themselves being sent by Him. It is these committed young people who challenge us today. Their enthusiasm, idealism, desire to share the Lord with others is a challenge to the cynicism of those of us who have settled for a comfortable way of life. They do not go with the current because they have received new life. 'Only a live fish can swim against the current, the dead go with it.' (G.K. Chesterton). They awaken within us our original calling:

In calling you God says to you: 'You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you.' Jesus says this to each one of us! Joy is born from that! The joy of the moment in which Jesus looked at me. Understanding and hearing this is the secret of our joy. Feeling loved by God, feeling that for him we are not numbers but people; and we know that it is he who is calling us."⁵⁶

Earlier I posed the question: are consecrated religious a sycamore tree for the young? I would now like to re-frame that question and ask: are committed young people a sycamore tree for consecrated life? What is the Lord teaching us through them? In many ways young people have re-discovered essential truths that we have neglected or failed to fully appreciate. There can be no doubt that these youth movements are calling us back to a renewed sense of devotion and honour to the Eucharist and Mary. In many ways it is the fulfilment of St John Bosco's vision where he saw the Church of the future as a boat on turbulent seas being guided by the pontiff through the twin pillars of the Eucharist and Mary. It is refreshing to observe the great reverence that these young people have for the Eucharist and their thirst to spend time in Eucharistic adoration. Why is adoration so important to these young people? Perhaps, it is *one of the few experiences* that is offered to all of us where the focus is not on ourselves but on the other, on Jesus, on God. Adoration *decentres* us and places God back in the centre. For young people, who have grown up in a world of individualism and self-interest, this is particularly significant. We can begin to understand that *we are called to enter into communion* with God and with others. It is in this heart to heart dialogue with the Lord who is really present in the Eucharist that the work of transformation takes place.

When we have allowed ourselves to be found by God, we cannot but sing of his mercy. This is true of Zacchaeus. His journey with the Lord has bestowed on him the gift of new life

⁵⁵ Dunn, *Journey of Transformation*, 10-11.

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Rejoice: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women in Preparation for the Year Dedicated to Consecrated Life* (2014), 16.

which he wants to share with others. He no longer needs to hold on to material possessions as compensations because now he experiences himself as being loved by God. Is there a fundamental calling for us as consecrated religious in this story? We are only too aware of the diminishment of religious life in the Northern Hemisphere today where 'we often witness an "apology for the decline"... the decrease in numbers and symbols have given rise to a sense of uncertainty and disorientation.'⁵⁷ However, if religious practice is decreasing why should religious life be increasing? There are obvious problems where communities are ageing and the number of young religious is decreasing. And yet, I think of the words of Léon Bloy who declared:

We have places in our heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.

Could this be an apt description of consecrated life today as we enter more deeply into the Paschal Mystery? In what way have we become rich and are being called like Zacchaeus to let go? Ultimately it is not about holding on but handing on. *What are we handing on?* What do we need to let go off if we are truly to hand on what is life-giving to the young generation of today?

⁵⁷ Nicla Spezzati, ASC, *Consecrated Life in the Particular Church: An On-going Ecclesiological Reflection* presented at International Meeting for Episcopal Vicars and Delegates for Consecrated Life, 28-30 October 2016.