

ABSTRACT

During the period following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church saw the birth of more than 750 new religious communities in no fewer than forty countries around the world. Among them, we find the so called new plurivocational communities, representing about 24 % of all new communities. Composed of men and women, they bring together in the same community and legal membership faithful representing all the states constituted in the Church: ordained ministers, in this case deacons and priests; lay people, single or married, some with their families; and singles consecrated to God by means of evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty, obedience). The ideal of the plurivocational communities is the communion of states. In this, they say they find in the teaching of Vatican II their source of inspiration and legitimation.

While for many plurivocational foundations the multi-state experience is marked by successes, other communities have experienced significant difficulties. The ideal of the communion of states was marked by various forms and degrees of confusion and tension between the states represented. What is the source, origin or cause of the difficulties encountered? Would there be more than one? What are the avenues of resolution to consider? Taking into account the psychosociological and canonical aspects related to the problematic, the study focuses primarily on the theological aspects, namely ecclesiological, involved. In this regard, the notion of “state” is central and is the frame through which issues are addressed.

The study presents an analysis of the notion of “state” at the Second Vatican Council with the ultimate goal of illuminating, in the light of the Council, the initial problematic. Its hypotheses attribute the confusion and tensions experienced by the members concerned to misunderstandings of their respective identities, to deficiencies relating to the various concepts of state, and to implicit but active theoretical and practical principles defining the different states.

Using a grid of analysis in ten thematic categories, the study reviews all the conciliar texts referring to the state of the clergy, to the state of the laity, to the state of the religious, to the state of celibacy sanctioned by the Church and to the state of sacramental marriage. The proposed method supports a series of three theses relating to the teaching of Vatican II with regard to the states of the faithful, from which stand out an equivalent number of concluding recommendations addressed to new plurivocational communities.

Firstly, thanks to the common and particular characteristic features which it attributes to the various states concerned, the Council makes it possible to shed positive light on the misunderstanding of identities pointed out at the outset. In this respect, the contribution of the study is to highlight these characteristic features disseminated in the conciliar texts. The first recommendation is to know the features of each state, based on the conciliar texts, read and interpreted through the descriptive presentations offered in this study.

Secondly, the Council, in that its texts contain a certain number of linguistic imprecisions and definitional gaps, can potentially or possibly contribute to the confusion and tensions experienced. In this respect, the study contributes to the resolution of the difficulties concerned by proposing distinctions and palliative definitions. A second recommendation emerges, which consists in making an informed use of the notions referring to the states of the faithful, a practice which requires, beforehand, to have clearly distinguished and unequivocally defined the terms used.

Thirdly, the Council, without offering immediate solutions, testifies to the often implicit presence of principled determinants of various kinds and unresolved issues needing to be looked at. In this regard, the study contributes to the resolution of the difficulties by pointing out a series of eight principles and naming their multiple natures, connecting them to the various states involved, and then exposing the contentious issues related to them. A final recommendation is to resume the exercise and to find appropriate solutions on that new basis.

Finally, in a prospective way, the study critically engages the notions of “new plurivocational community”, “communion of states [of life]” and “consecrated lay people”, in addition to proposing theological axes and canonical avenues for the benefit of married couples committed to the plurivocational foundations.