

Review

# Inserted Religious Life as a Path to Authentic Consecrated Chastity—The Witness of Non-Violent Solidarity of Alice Domon and José Aldunate Lyon in Latin America 1967–1983

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**Abstract:** The reception of the Decree *Perfectae caritatis* in Latin America can be understood in connection with the emergence of the preferential option for the poor and the call for consecrated religious life to the insertion since the 1960s. As part of the existing link between conciliar texts and renewal movements, it is worth highlighting the testimony of religious life lived in solidarity with the poor as a way of practicing chastity and incorporating sexuality. This topic is explored through the life stories of two individuals, Alice Domon in Argentina (1937–1977) and José Aldunate Lyon in Chile (1917–2019), within the framework of related studies on ethnographic ecclesiology and the theology of renewed religious life. Amidst military governments, institutional violence, abuses of power, and human rights violations, the lives of these two consecrated individuals showcase an alternative path marked by self-emptying, unwavering fidelity, non-violent action, and prophetic denunciation. The pursuit of integration between contemplative and apostolic aspects in the love for God and the poor, along with the defense of human rights in solidarity with the victims and their families, are some of the keys that define an adapted understanding of religious life in the Latin American context.

**Keywords:** Perfectae caritatis; Vatican II; Latin American religious life; Alice Domon; José Aldunate Lyon; life stories; option for the poor; insertion; chastity; reception



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## 1. Introduction

Renewal in the religious life of Latin America and the Caribbean gained significant momentum in the 20th century, particularly with the occurrence of the Second Vatican Council, its documents, and the continental processes of reception (*Perfectae caritatis* 1–3).<sup>1</sup> In the decisive backdrop of the 1940s and 1950s, there is a recognition of a spirituality closely tied to the world of the poor, with connections to the French-Belgian ecclesial movement and the emergence of various spiritual charisms, notably that of Charles de Foucauld, along with the communities inspired by him ([Zeballos 1987](#); [Voillaume \[1962\] 2011](#); [Recondo 2012](#)). During Vatican II, these currents found a substantial outlet in the “Group Church of the Poor” and took on charismatic and public expressions in the Pact of the Catacombs of Santa Domitila, at the conclusion of the conciliar event. The Pact of the Catacombs, renewed in the Amazon Synod, was endorsed by a group of 500 bishops committed to being part of a Church ready to journey in poverty. Post-Vatican II, this prophetic stance materialized during the Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops in Medellín (1968), which was considered a pivotal moment in the reception of continental ecclesial life, particularly for consecrated religious life ([CLAR 1971](#); [Beozzo 1998](#); [Libanio 2008](#)).

This receptive, faithful, and creative process unfolded in tumultuous decades marked by intersecting violence linked to poverty and injustice, the emergence of various revolutionary tendencies, the interruption of democratic processes due to military governments, and the growing dynamics of neoliberal exclusion. Regional democratic instability, *de facto* governments, and unelected presidents were also prevalent in Argentina, with five such presidents in the seventeen years between 1955 and 1973. This period of state weakness,

military coups, and national liberation movements was further complicated by the tensions arising from the renewal of Vatican II and its reception in Medellín. The traditional forces within Argentine Catholicism, staunchly supported by a large part of the Episcopate, faced scrutiny from more progressive elements that denounced the connections between social injustice and the political regime (Albelda 2023, p. 222).

In the case of Argentina, the spiral of violence experienced between 1976 and 1983 must be attributed to both guerrilla terrorism and the severity of state terrorism. It is crucial to acknowledge the latter as a qualitatively superior form of violence since it was perpetrated by the state (Albelda 2022). The Argentine bishops have acknowledged that “in many decisions, actions, and omissions, the Argentine Episcopal Conference did not know how to respond as was to be expected in those circumstances” (Galli et al. 2023, p. 22). Consequently, they have initiated a historical and hermeneutical investigation to “understand the errors, omissions, alternatives, and circumstances in which the actions took place to ascertain the extent of responsibilities associated with them” (Galli et al. 2023, p. 22). The central aim of this research has been to strive to “comprehend and distinguish what occurred and how, without fear of the findings or conclusions, no matter how serious they might be” (Tavelli 2023, p. 25). Undertaking this task of historical and theological discernment, beyond radical ideological conflicts, has allowed it to confront the profound wounds of society and the lasting impact of the tragedy experienced as a nation. Unfortunately, the progressive and prophetic groups within the Church were not shielded but, rather, were subjected to suspicion (Azcuy 2023, pp. 269–78; Caamaño 2023, pp. 325–31; Duhau et al. 2023, pp. 372–80). This was the case for individuals like Alice Domon, as well as for a group of bishops, priests, religious, and lay people during the times of military repression (Viñoles 2014, pp. 307–8).

On 11 September 1973, the Popular Unity government in Chile came to an abrupt end with the suicide of its president, Salvador Allende, during the bombing of the Moneda Palace. Following this tragic event, thousands of people, predominantly government officials and supporters, as well as social and political leaders, were arrested, tortured, and disappeared. Between 1973 and 1990, human rights violations were committed in the name of protecting the homeland from the perceived threat of “Marxism”. Ideological polarization constructed adversaries characterized as dangerous entities endangering the lives of all. In this context, the response of the Christian churches and the leadership assumed by Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez in Santiago were pivotal. The formation of the Committee for Cooperation for Peace in Chile on 6 October 1973, less than a month after Pinochet’s military coup, and the establishment of the Vicariate of Solidarity on 1 January 1976, were crucial for the defense of human rights and the support of victims.

Striving to formulate a piece of empirical ecclesiology based on two life stories reconstructed from diverse ethnographic studies (Klein 1994; Healy 2000), the goal is to capture the essence of inserted religious life. This approach is rooted in the common observation that insertion stands out as one of the most characteristic—if not the most characteristic—forms of the renewal of consecrated life in Latin America and the Caribbean (Codina 1987; L. Boff 2002; Azcuy 2021). The two chosen testimonies are those of Alice Domon in Argentina (1937–1977), a French religious of the Foreign Missions who disappeared during the Argentine dictatorship, and José Aldunate Lyon in Chile (1917–2019), a Chilean Jesuit, worker priest, theology professor, and human rights defender. These two testimonies were selected due to their significance, which is supported by diverse empirical research conducted by the author of this article in their respective countries (Azcuy and Cervantes 2014; Azcuy 2017). In both cases, the presentation and reflection in this article focus on the years following the Medellín Conference, coinciding with the military governments that marked the period in Argentina (1976–1983) and Chile (1973–1990).

Regarding the innovation in the reception of *Perfectae caritatis* within religious life, we are referring to a process that surpasses mere adaptation (Tillard 1977; Schmiedl 1999). It is characterized as “the disintegration of a conception of religious life, of a historical model”, leading to the emergence of “an original and creative experience” (De Freitas 2003,

pp. 232, 235). Furthermore, there is a variety of experiences—including instances of non-reception—that explain the tensions, conflicts, divisions, and hardships encountered in many congregations.

In the two chosen life stories, the process of renewal observed in their respective general assemblies seems to have been a determining factor in the life paths of both religious individuals. To a somewhat lesser but still significant extent, the positions of the bishops of the local churches also contributed to this process. In both instances, one can discern a life of consecrated chastity and an experience of human sexuality, which have been translated into service and solidarity with the poor and the persecuted (Voillaume [1962] 2011, pp. 425–55; Viñoles 2014, p. 296; Odino and Labbé 2020, p. 45). Based on the written testimonies available to us, it is evident that both Alice Domon and José Aldunate underwent a transformative journey in their understanding of vowed life. This evolution occurred through the process of renewal within their communities and the impactful experience of insertion. Initially centered on the pursuit of personal perfection through vows, their religious life transitioned towards a more spiritual perspective, where the focal point became the love of God and love of neighbor at the core of evangelical life (PC 1, 6, and 12). Consecrated chastity ceased to revolve around the quest for individual perfection and instead acquired new meaning through its contribution to service and compassion for the least (Tillard 1977, pp. 89–147; Brunelli 1989, pp. 28–29; García Siller 2015, pp. 190–93).

## 2. The Testimony of a Missing Nun: Alice Domon (1937–1977)

Just as it happened in other Latin American countries, the reception of the Second Vatican Council compelled consecrated life to embrace insertion as a means of embodying the option for the poor (Lecaros et al. 2021; Llach et al. 2023b). A group of religious women, affiliated with the Movement of Priests for the Third World (Martín 2010), constituted what was referred to as the “Third Worldist constellation” (Touris 2021). This prophetic experience, characterized by a dual allegiance to both the Church and the people, generated tensions primarily addressed through spirituality. The political aspect of this commitment resulted in divisions, defections, and persecution, as demonstrated by the massacre of communities and consecrated individuals in Argentina. Notable cases include the French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, as well as the Salesian house of the Juan XXIII Institute in Bahía Blanca, the Pallottine house in the parish of San Patricio in Buenos Aires, and the complete disappearance of the Fraternity of the Gospel in 1977 (Llach et al. 2023b, pp. 578–81, 600–6).

### 2.1. “Chronotopes” of a Biography

Alice Domon was born in Charquemont, France, on 23 September 1937. She joined the sisters of the Foreign Missions in La Motte, France, in 1957.<sup>2</sup> While there are no autobiographical writings by the nun, there is a collection of 98 letters (Viñoles 2017). Among the studies dedicated to her, the biography written by Diana B. Viñoles stands out. The author employs an original philosophical method centered on various “chronotopes”, understood as spatial forms of identity (Viñoles 2014, pp. 82, 96).<sup>3</sup> While the circumstances of A. Domon’s death remain unknown due to her kidnapping and disappearance, we do have knowledge of how she lived. Her testimony as an inserted consecrated religious person reached its climax with her abduction and disappearance by the Argentine military government on 8 December 1977. It can be rightly said that Domon lived out the concept of insertion from her entry into the Sisters of the Foreign Missions until her death and resurrection.

In this presentation, the focus is on the last decade of her life (1967–1977), which can be explored through seven chronotopes of her life experience:

“Morón”, the initial mission on foreign soil on 5 February 1967 (Buenos Aires).

“Villa Lugano”, immersion in a popular milieu since 1969 (Buenos Aires).

“Perugorria”, engaging with the peasants since December 1973 (Santa Fe).

“France”, participation in the General Chapter of the Congregation at the beginning of 1975 (Le Motte).

“Plaza de Mayo”, involvement with the mothers of the disappeared in June 1977.

“Santa Cruz Church”, kidnapped on 8 December 1977 (Buenos Aires).

“Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada”, the disappearance of Alice Domon in December 1977, symbolizing the enormity of the genocide experienced in Argentina.

## 2.2. *The Itinerary of a Nun Inserted from Her Letters*

As early as 1967, during her first missionary assignment in Argentina at the Catechetical Center of Morón (Greater Buenos Aires), Alice Domon, or Sister Caty, discovered her inclination to evangelize in the homes of families: “I like to go to the poor neighborhoods (...) I go especially to people who have sick relatives” (Ltr. 12). Later, in 1969, her sister in the congregation, Montserrat Bertran, invited her to live with her in Villa 20 in Villa Lugano. The plan was not just to visit the villa but to reside there. Héctor Botán, a working priest (blacksmith) and founding member of the Priests for the Third World (MSTM), who undoubtedly served as a reference for the nuns (Ltr. 14), had already been living in this shantytown for two years (Viñoles 2014, p. 222).<sup>4</sup> Both nuns worked as domestic servants, sharing the circumstances of many women in that marginalized area, mostly from Paraguay and Bolivia. In her letters, Domon speaks of her “daily life among the poor”, involving visits to neighbors and the sick without haste (Ltr. 17). Among the signs of renewal, she highlights her decision to revert to her baptismal name, “Caty”, and the choice to discontinue wearing the habit (Ltr. 14 and 18). Regarding her services to the neighbors, she narrates acting as a nanny, accompanying them to the hospital, and praying the rosary in their homes (Ltr. 21 and 23).

Between December 1973 and June 1977, Sister Caty lived in the diocese of Corrientes, supporting the claims of tobacco workers with the backing of Bishop Alberto Pascual Devoto—who was among the signatories of the Pact of the Catacombs and played a prominent role in the reception of Medellín in Argentina. Similar commitments were undertaken by religious people from other congregations who, like her, chose to disassociate themselves from institutional structures (Viñoles 2014, pp. 261–63). In the rural context, the nun discovered another way of life that reminded her of her native land: “I know that the best way to evangelize is to sweat together under the rays of the same sun and eat at the same table (or on a crate of apples)” (Ltr. 89). Alongside the agrarian reform, violence as a political method began to surface in some sectors, both from the Peronist left and the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), which was the armed wing of the Workers’ Revolutionary Party. This coexisted with other priests and nuns who advocated a non-violent perspective (Viñoles 2014, p. 268). Sister Caty was not a supporter of violence, and she made this clear to her aunt, who had suspicions about the life of the nun: “I am not a ‘revolutionary’ as you believe” (Ltr. 77).<sup>5</sup> The first strikes by tobacco workers against cigarette companies arose to address the unjust situation of the prices that farmers received for tobacco. These strikes later led to persecution by the military.

Alice Domon’s life in Perugorria, Corrientes, was interrupted by the call to the General Chapter of the Congregation in early 1975 in France, as she had been elected as provincial, highlighting her leadership in the community (Perfectae Caritatis 3). This assembly led to a division in understanding the mission, and at the same time, Domon learned of the repression and disappearance suffered by workers in her absence. These events prompted Sister Caty to reflect, and she decided to disassociate herself from the congregation, though not from the community: “I am at peace because I know I am on the right path, and I feel solidarity with all who suffer unjustly for the same cause; I will even offer my life if necessary” (Welty-Domon 1987, pp. 59–60). Other sisters from the congregation living in Latin America also made this choice.

### 2.3. *The Insertion between the “Exodus” and the “Empty Tomb”*

In 1976, two events changed the national situation: First, the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón allowed the armed forces to take over “internal security”, initiating a plan of annihilation that included the kidnapping of tobacco leaders (Viñoles 2014, p. 283). Second, on March 24, the military coup took place, and the Argentine military government began. In this way, in the time-space of Perugorria, Alice Domon faced a double “exile”: crossing the boundaries of her congregational belonging and, a few months later, leaving the territory of Corrientes and returning to Buenos Aires “to demand the release of her detained-kidnapped friends” (Viñoles 2014, p. 284). The “departure” from the congregation was, for her, “for a deeper insertion among the poor” (Ltr. 67).

This marked the beginning of her commitment to human rights, hand in hand with Bishop Jorge Novak (Diocese of Quilmes), in solidarity with the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who were demanding information about their disappeared children and in readiness to follow the path of Jesus who gave his life (Ltr. 105). With her exile, paradoxically, Sister Caty not only experienced the wrenching separation but also lost protection: she knew she was “marked” and monitored by intelligence services. Why did she stay then? Why did she not return to France to be safe? How can this choice be understood? Her heart did not stop with exile, and to keep beating, she chose to empathize with the tragedy: “I feel very close to the situation of families destroyed by repression” (Ltr. 120).

On 24 February 1976, she joined the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (MEDH), co-chaired by Bishop Novak. In this context, Caty lived her faith to the last consequences, as written in her last surviving letter: “I am totally convinced that this situation of Passion is profoundly united with the faith of Christ and precedes the Resurrection” (Ltr. 121).

According to the frequent representation of “inserted religious life” in Latin America, one might think that Alice Domon’s insertion began in 1969 when she decided to live in Villa 20 in Villa Lugano, Buenos Aires (Perfectae caritatis 13). It continued when she moved in 1973 to Perugorria, near the city of Goya in Corrientes, to live among the peasants and their struggles in the Ligas Agrarias and later in her exile from the congregation and the lands of Corrientes. Also, in a broader sense, encompassing the entirety of her life, her entire religious journey delineates the figure of an insertion (Codina 2008a; Eckholt 2011, pp. 145–48).<sup>6</sup> Without a doubt, Sister Caty lived her insertion as an “exodus” (C. Boff 1989; De Freitas 2003), especially in the shantytown of Villa Lugano and on the ranch in Perugorria. However, this exodus progressively transformed into “exile” (Viñoles 2014, pp. 289–95), traversing successive frontiers: from the congregation to the public square, from the security of the community to the exposure of denunciation, from the Church of the Holy Cross to the Navy Mechanics School, and from there to her disappearance at sea and the “empty tomb” because her body was not buried but recovered as a narrative of life (Viñoles 2016, pp. 167–68).<sup>7</sup>

What Alice Domon constructed in her experience as an inserted religious person, following de Certeau, was “the poverty of a journey that only relies on the richness of the relationship, of an experience, or a discovery” (Viñoles 2014, p. 135). In other words, it is a permanent “exodus”, embodying the gesture of departure (De Certeau 2006, pp. 27–30).<sup>8</sup>

## 3. José Aldunate Lyon (1917–2019)

### 3.1. *A Pilgrim Tells His Story*

In the case of Jesuit priest José Aldunate, there are writings of various genres, including autobiographical accounts well-suited to a theological biographical perspective. The following highlights some key milestones in his life, with a focus on the period between 1973 and 1983, particularly the chronotopes of Calama, Misión Obrera Team (EMO), and the inception of the Movement Against Torture Sebastián Acevedo (MCTSA):

In 1946, he was ordained to the priesthood in San Miguel, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In 1947, he underwent his third probation in Paray-le-Monial, Saône-et-Loire, France.

From 1948 to 1949, he pursued doctoral studies in Moral Theology in Rome and Louvain.

From 1951 to 1952, he collaborated with Alberto Hurtado in ASICH (Acción Sindical Chile).

From 1951 to 1963, he served as a professor at the Faculty of Theology in Chile.

From 1952 to 1962, he was the master of novices in the Society of Jesus.

From 1954 to 1959, he served as the director of the magazine Mensaje, founded in 1951.

From 1963 to 1968, he held the position of provincial of the Society of Jesus in Chile.

From 1965 to 1966, he participated in the General Congregation with Pedro Arrupe.

In 1973, he had his first experience as a worker priest in Calama, until the military coup.

From 1974 to 1976, he edited the semi-clandestine newspaper “*No Podemos Callar*”.

In 1983, he initiated the Sebastián Acevedo Movement Against Torture.

The General Congregations of 1965 and 1966, led by Pedro Arrupe with the active participation of José Aldunate as provincial, played a decisive role in providing the Society of Jesus with a fundamental orientation for renewal. The experience of living as a worker priest in Calama, almost a decade later, became possible within this new horizon of openness. The chronotope, where his third month of exercises occurred in August 1973, held profound significance in the life of this consecrated individual: “Calama marked a turning point in my life” (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 85). This truth resonates equally for both the inserted life and theology.

### 3.2. Accounts of José Aldunate’s Years of Insertion

José Aldunate’s biography indicates that the period of insertion commenced with his experience in Calama in August 1973 and extended until 1983. However, it is plausible to discern the impact of this insertion in the actions of the religious figure throughout the military government of Pinochet, particularly concerning the Movement Against Torture (Cavanaugh 1998; Azcuy 2017). In 1984, Aldunate became a part of a Jesuit community in La Palma, positioned three blocks from General Velásquez, five blocks from the Jesús Obrero parish, and the Padre Hurtado Shrine. The religious figure acknowledges, “It marked a significant change: religious obedience removed me from the insertion into the world of work and the precarious neighborhood, a path I had pursued since 1973, and from the Calama initiative” (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 132). The renewal of religious life does not preclude the practice of obedience (*Perfectae caritatis* 14).

The chronotope of Calama is situated within the quest for a closer relationship between the Church and the working world—a realm that Aldunate had previously explored alongside Alberto Hurtado in the years 1951–1952. Juan Caminada’s vision aimed to construct a bridge from the working world to the Church, rather than the reverse. Specifically, this experience entailed four steps: first, the shedding or “exodus” from bourgeois-ecclesial culture; second, immersion in the workers’ world—Chuquicamata Mine, in this case—embracing their work, union and political struggles, and their unique perspective; third, the exploration of forms of faith expression stemming from the workers’ experiences; and fourth, dialogue and collaboration with the hierarchy to establish base communities where workers feel at home (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 85; Carrier 2014).

In Aldunate’s case, the initial intention was to think and teach from the reality of the working-class world. However, the call turned into a commitment to solidarity with the situation of the poor and exploited. The religious person recounts, “It was a call to an existential conversion. And I said yes to that call” (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 87). The religious person describes it as follows: “It was a summons to undergo an existential conversion, and I embraced that summons” (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 87). It represented a fundamental

practical choice, following his initial decision to become a Jesuit; it was a conscious choice to embrace poverty. One could argue that Calama signified a simultaneous spiritual, moral, and religious commitment that would leave a lasting impact. The experience itself ended abruptly with Pinochet's military coup. Fortunately, due to a temporary suspension of the process, "on 11 September 1973, all the worker-priests were out of Calama" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 88). Caminada, who topped the list of those sought by the military, could not return to Chile. Therefore, at the beginning of September, Aldunate was in Concepción, meeting with others of his companions and seeking work, which he found as a carpenter's assistant.

### 3.3. Insertion as an Action of Active Nonviolence

According to Caminada, the "exodus" demanded the suspension of all priestly and religious practices: mass, communion, biblical readings, and apostolates. And the insertion, for Aldunate, "is done, above all, through labor work" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 90); it was completed in the town, with other activities, without the exercise of ministries. Reflecting on his two-semester experience in Villa Nonguén, Father Pepe—or simply Pepe, as his friends called him—affirms that the experience affected him at the level of his fundamental option: "The option I had for the working and marginalized world was ratified, verified; it was not an identification, but a solidarity" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, pp. 90–91).

Given the persecution and repression, upon returning to Santiago in 1974 and definitively in 1975, Aldunate participated in various activities, such as assisting people or groups in seeking refuge in embassies and initiating clandestine publications like "No Podemos Callar, among others (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 96; Odino and Labbé 2020). These activities discredited him before the authorities, providing him with inner freedom (Perfectae caritatis 1). In this new context, seeking to regroup with the comrades of Calama, he joined Master Vergara, a Jesuit who studied in Louvain and then, due to disagreements with Cardinal Silva Henríquez, became a master blacksmith. Also on this return, to continue with Calama, the survivors of the experience organized themselves into EMO, Equipo Misión Obrera: there were six priests, and later, religious and lay people joined them until they reached a total of forty (Costadoat 2015, p. 147).

In this phase, the "insertion was not only labor, but also housing, political, social, cultural and also, increasingly, pastoral" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 100). A particularity of EMO was that, according to the methodology of Calama-exodus, insertion, reflection, and recreation, it included a reflection on the action in view of an ecclesial renewal in the direction of the working world and it took place in the context of the defense of those persecuted by the military, together with Bishop Don Enrique Alvear, known as "the bishop of the poor" (Aldunate Lyon et al. 2000, pp. 81–87).

In the religious journey of José Aldunate, the Equipo Misión Obrera (EMO) played a pivotal role during the years of dictatorship in Chile. It served as a force for liberation both in the civil and ecclesiastical realms (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 101). In civil matters, EMO engaged in a non-violent struggle for human rights, while in ecclesiastical matters, it sought a more concrete commitment to human well-being without severing ties with the hierarchy. Within the EMO community, Elena Bergen raised the issue of systematic torture, leading to the proposal of a nonviolent denunciation and the formation of the Movement Against Torture (Aldunate Lyon 2018, pp. 124–28). Looking back, José Aldunate underscores the immersion in praxis and a commitment to the welfare of tortured individuals (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 127). He also mentions that, during the dictatorship, his actions were on the fringes of the activities of the Society of Jesus, noting that no Jesuit participated in the MCTSA (Costadoat 2015, pp. 152, 156).

José Aldunate's journey, characterized by his request to live the experience of Calama as a working priest and a theologian, reflects his dual role as an "inserted theologian" and a participant in non-violent action. This dynamic engagement alternates between reflection and action, finding its space of embodiment in the Equipo Misión Obrera (EMO) group, a continuation of the Calama experience that he describes as a "movement of reflection and

action" (Costadoat 2015, p. 146). The Movement Against Torture (MCTSA), particularly in its non-violent denunciation, is portrayed by Aldunate as "an authentic act of love, of self-giving for others" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 127), embodying a mysticism in action (Perfectae caritatis 8). This approach aligns with a theology of action that serves as inspiration for his entire pastoral ministry.

#### 4. Discussion on Adapted Renewal of Religious Life

The evolution in the understanding of consecrated religious life in the 20th century witnessed a profound shift from the notion of a "state of perfection" to that of "a way of life" shared with others in the Church (Codina 1968; Quiñones 1999; Azcuy 2021). This transformation was shaped by various factors, including the renewal spearheaded by Pope Pius XII, evident in both his magisterium and the Congresses on the States of Perfection held in the 1950s. Notably, the emergence of new spiritual charisms, particularly those inspired by the life and writings of Charles de Foucauld, exerted a significant influence, especially in Latin America (Voillaume 1972; Casaldáliga 1978; Palmés 2005).

Within the framework of these elements, further fortified and deepened by the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, religious life experienced a compelling summons to return to its roots and undergo *aggiornamento* to align with the contemporary context (Perfectae caritatis 2). In this regard, it is affirmable that religious life, in tandem with the entire Church, underwent both challenges and moments of celebration in glimpsing a Copernican turn in the comprehension and application of its way of life. This is precisely what M. Carmelita de Freitas refers to in Latin America when she speaks of "a creative and innovative process with a tendency to configure a new image of religious life, or, as it has been expressed, a Latin American way of religious life". (De Freitas 2003, p. 232; Bidegain 2009).

The renewal of Latin American religious life in the mid-20th century was closely tied to the socio-political developments of the continent, intertwining with the influence of Vatican II. This renewal found a distinct expression in the General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate held in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). Within these documents, an ecclesiology of human promotion emerged initially, followed by the shaping of an evangelization framework rooted in the preferential option for the poor (Ellacuría 1984; Scatena 2007). These principles served as the guiding coordinates for the self-understanding that religious life embraced during that era.

While it is true that only a minority of religious communities adopted these orientations, leading to their involvement in popular environments marked by injustice and poverty, it is equally true that this shift, particularly among female religious communities, became a defining characteristic of the renewal (L. Boff 2002; Nápole 2014). The complex transitions and debates that unfolded were not without tensions, conflicts, divisions, and instances of abandonment (Bidegain 2008; Aldunate Lyon 2018; Suárez 2019). However, amid these challenges, there emerged genuine evangelical choices, courageous adaptations, and collective quests that flourished with a particular vitality and impact.

The presence of martyrdom among consecrated individuals and communities stands as evidence of a prophetic mystique that thrived during those years, setting the course for the subsequent decades. This period witnessed a fusion of spiritual commitment and social engagement, exemplifying a dedication to justice and preferential care for the marginalized—a legacy that continued to shape the trajectory of religious life in Latin America (Palacio 1990; Codina 2008b; Temporelli 2014).

The endeavor to return to the Gospel and the foundational charism, in order to address the challenges of the times, formed the basis for the emerging changes within religious communities and their places of mission or insertion, often characterized as an "exodus" (Tillard 1977, pp. 118–19; Voillaume [1962] 2011, pp. 217–37). This drive for renewal prompted a re-evaluation of various aspects within these communities, including forms of community organization, structures of authority and obedience, and modes of expressing consecration and apostolate in response to the contemporary context.

#### 4.1. Changes in the Understanding of Religious Vows

The reforms undertaken encompassed a thorough revision of the way vows were lived. Obedience, for instance, transitioned towards greater flexibility and dialogue, while authority became less hierarchical, mitigating the risk of authoritarian situations. The concept of poverty underwent a transformation from a more personal and extreme perspective to a more communal understanding. Even though congregations had resources, often through donations and state funding, the practice became more community-oriented, fostering a sense of solidarity. Chastity, once carrying a puritanical 19th-century undertone with a focus on the sense of sin related to the body, underwent a reevaluation. This led to a tendency towards exaggerated self-control and occasional repression. While conventual life was traditionally seen as a conducive environment for preserving purity, the renewal of inserted life called for a more integrated approach to sexuality and a deeper, more personalized understanding of chastity with anthropological and social implications (Brunelli 1989, pp. 26–31; L. Boff 2002, pp. 17–21).

A. M. Bidegain, particularly when referring to feminine religious life, succinctly captures these changes: “Obedience transformed into a dialogue within the communities (. . .) chastity meant women were free to dedicate themselves to their mission, [and] poverty was embraced as a form of freedom, facilitating the understanding of the poor they aspired to serve” (Bidegain 2008, p. 146). This encapsulates the transformative nature of the renewal efforts within religious communities, reflecting a commitment to adapt and deepen their connection with their foundational values in response to the evolving needs of the world.

René Voillaume, a profoundly influential figure in the Latin American context during the decades under consideration (Recondo 2012), candidly addresses the rigors of leading a chaste life and the recurrent pitfalls observed in seminaries and formation houses during the processes of discernment and vocational training. What Voillaume astutely observes is the inadequate attention given to the aptitudes of candidates for a life of chastity, despite the consideration of numerous other qualities. This issue is particularly grave as, in Voillaume’s words, “without the witness of consecrated chastity, religious life would cease to exist, and the Church would lack a certain emulation of Christ and His Mother, the Virgin Mary” (Voillaume 1972; Recondo 2014).

The author contends that the crux of this witness lies in its quality, not its quantity. It is not merely about recruiting vocations to meet numerical targets but rather conducting a judicious and discerning evaluation of those who feel called to this way of life. The emphasis should be on discerning the suitability and genuine commitment of individuals, transcending a mere numerical increase. Voillaume underscores the importance of a thoughtful and considered approach to ensure that those choosing a life of chastity contribute meaningfully to the depth and authenticity of religious life, thereby enriching the Church’s reflection of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

#### 4.2. Two Testimonies of Inserted Religious Life in Latin America

The dedicated lives of Alice Domon and José Aldunate distinctly exemplify the profound commitment to consecrated chastity within Latin American religious life. Their life stories, narrated within the specified periods, embody experiences of profound theological significance, marked by the courageous proclamation of the Gospel amid a non-violent struggle during times of injustice and repression. This witness does not stand out for the heroic living of virtues but for the fruitfulness of a life marked by faith, hope, and love, devoted to serving the Kingdom of God amidst the least, sharing the fate of the persecuted (Perfectae caritatis 6 and 12). Rather than perfection lived in a heroic way, what is demonstrated is solidarity without pre-established limits (García Siller 2015, pp. 196–97).

When Alice Domon expresses her desire to leave her congregation, she articulates her commitment, providing insight into her understanding of consecration:

“It is for a deeper insertion among the poor that I take this step, after having prayed long and matured this decision. I want to continue to live in the same poverty, sharing the fate of the poorest, with whom I am already engaged in the

struggle for liberation; I also want to continue to live the same chastity for a more fraternal and supportive world; and the same obedience to Jesus Christ, who acts in a particular environment today. I believe in a new form of consecrated life and I take this step in the name of my faith in Jesus Christ, which I received on the day of my baptism". (Viñoles 2014, p. 296; Ltr. 67)

Similar to other religious individuals, Sister Domon leaves her congregation not as a renunciation of her consecration but as a way of reaffirming it (Viñoles 2014; Temporelli 2016). What becomes apparent in her communication with her community is a preferential love for the poor—those persecuted within her context—and the emergence of an expansion of her community bonds (Perfectae caritatis 15). Even though she departs from her religious community, which she does not abandon, her poor brothers and sisters become integrated into her community of belonging, providing support to families shattered by the disappearance of their loved ones (Llach et al. 2023a, pp. 650–61).

In a comparable context, characterized by a more prominent institutional and public presence of the Catholic Church, José Aldunate demonstrates his commitment to the social and ecclesial body affected by institutional violence (Cavanaugh 1998). In response to the violation of human rights under the government of Augusto Pinochet, Aldunate engages in the practice of non-violent denunciation in solidarity with the detained, tortured, and disappeared, as well as their families. He firmly states that "human rights are not a permitted or tolerated activity for the Church but its own policy, a necessary expression of the Gospel" (Aldunate Lyon 2004, p. 43). This stance became the foundation for his explanation to the then-new Archbishop Francisco Fresno, clarifying why nuns and priests were taking to the streets in protest.

In José Aldunate's case, his leadership in these actions was linked not only to his seniority among the participants but also to his extensive experience as a "worker priest" since the time of Calama. It is noteworthy that the theme had been circulating since the forties and fifties, with the presence of communities inspired by the charism of Charles de Foucauld and the vibrancy of post-conciliar priestly movements supporting such initiatives. Aldunate recounts that, as the novice master between 1962 and 1972, he introduced "a new modality: the month of the factory, which was a serious endeavor; a month of insertion in the world and in the work of the workers (. . .) until a prohibition came from Rome because at that time the figure of the priest-worker was in conflict" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 57). These were the initial attempts that would later find consolidation in Calama.

What characterized these groundbreaking struggles and initiatives regarding consecrated chastity? One could describe them as mysticism in action, representing an exodus or departure from oneself (Perfectae caritatis 5). This manifested in "an authentic act of love, of giving oneself for others (. . .) an experience of genuine love and, therefore, an experience of God" (Aldunate Lyon 2018, p. 127). This perspective aligns with the essence of Perfectae caritatis 12. In a more detailed explanation, Aldunate provides insights into the features of this mysticism in action:

"It was the sacrificial action for the tortured that opened our hearts and enabled us to truly love that tormented humanity, even without knowing them personally. As Christians, we find ourselves loving in them that Christ who was also tortured and identified himself with them: "Whatever you do for them, you do for me". (Aldunate Lyon et al. 2000, p. 172)

What becomes evident in the testimonies of Alice Domon and José Aldunate is the absence of opposition but the presence of unity between the love of God and the love of neighbor, God, and people (Perfectae caritatis 8 and 12). She lived this unity through unending solidarity until persecution and martyrdom; he bore witness to it through a theology of action in favor of the poor and tortured. Both religious people approached their sexuality within the framework of exodus and mission, embracing a life of chastity in service to the Gospel during times of resistance. If consecrated chastity involves a self-giving that renounces human conjugal love, in these testimonies, both Domon and Aldunate bear witness to a self-giving that extends to universal love in solidarity with the

least. Authentic love within communities allows for a more robust experience of chastity (*Perfectae caritatis* 12 and 15). Authentic religion, as highlighted by Soler (2023, p. 30), consistently bears witness to solidarity.

## 5. Final Reflections

The impact of Vatican II and the decree *Perfectae caritatis* has catalyzed an ecclesiology that lived within local churches and communities, a phenomenon yet to be fully explored and theologically interpreted (Healy 2000). This study revisits biographical and ethnographic studies, utilizing qualitative research tools to explore the life narratives of Alice Domon and Joseph Aldunate between 1967 and 1983. Through these narratives, the study illuminates the landscape of religious life in the context of southern Latin America (CLAR 2010).

Firstly, Alice Domon's life of mission can be characterized by the 'exodus' movement inherent in insertion and the metaphorical 'empty tomb' corresponding to her disappearance. Her journey of going beyond herself led her to cross borders, becoming one among the thousands of disappeared individuals. In doing so, she lived out her solidarity by reaching out to families shattered by the separation of the detained. Her physical body disappeared, but her narrative remains—a collection of stories that materialize her existence. The plaques memorializing her in the gardens of the Santa Cruz Church in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and the cemetery of Le Motte (France) symbolize an empty tomb, signifying the living presence of Sister Caty among so many (Viñoles 2016).

José (Pepe) Aldunate Lyon embraced insertion as a Jesuit and theologian, integrating "reflection" and "action" in his experience as a working priest. He collaborated with others, first with fellow priests in Calama and later expanding to include religious and laypeople in EMO. During the years of dictatorship, Aldunate led initiatives of non-violent denunciation in solidarity with the tortured bodies, notably through the MCTSA (Azcuay 2017). His moral theology was shaped by practical theology, expressed through clandestine newspapers, bulletins, and articles, advocating for human rights even in the face of persecution (Odino and Labbé 2020).

In an era when the Church grapples with crises of power abuse, conscience, and sexual abuse, the testimony of religious individuals who have lived authentic consecrated chastity serves as a reminder of the often-overlooked dedication of religious life. Their lives become parables, speaking to various aspects of inserted religious life, reflecting diverse facets of learning, and kindling the joy of a "Church in going out" and a "theology in action" (Francisco 2013, pp. 15, 107; Tillard 1969, pp. 82–84). Religion transforms into a compassionate force, attuned to the signs of the times, and stands in solidarity with the human rights of the impoverished (Soler 2023, pp. 413–14).

Certainly, there remain several aspects to be studied in greater depth: the relationship between the local Church and personal commitment, the reconfiguration of community life in insertion, and the extension of bonds of belonging. Additionally, there are the impact of the General Chapters of the congregations on personal and community itineraries, the characteristics of the option for the poor in the Latin American context, and the specific notes pertaining to the renewal of religious life. Furthermore, exploration of the new forms of consecration that emerged in the post-conciliar decades is warranted.

The lives of Alice Domon and José Aldunate Lyon bear witness to the Gospel, serving as an existential narrative about inserted religious life and its dimensions. Through their commitment to overcoming fear and violence, they embody various aspects of learning, igniting the joy of a 'Church that goes forth' and a 'theology in action'. In these biographies, one can discern the manifestation of a universal love that emanates from a life dedicated to chastity (Voillaume [1962] 2011, p. 442).

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## Notes

- 1 The term “religious life” encompasses the various forms of consecrated life recognized in the Church. The history of drafting the decree *Perfectae caritatis* reveals an evolution of this concept, shifting from its association with the states of perfection according to CDC-17 to a more revitalized understanding. This paper focuses specifically on “inserted religious life”, viewing it as an outcome of the Latin American reception of the Council. It originated from a brief paper presented at the Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology XIV, held from 8 to 11 November 2023. The theme of the conference was ‘60 Years Vatican II: The End of the Western Church?’ The content has been expanded and adapted to incorporate unique aspects of this unpublished article.
- 2 The institute functioned under diocesan authority, under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Toulouse, granting the sisters a certain level of freedom in their lives and actions. The central administration, or motherhouse, of the sisters of the Foreign Missions (*Soeurs des Missions Etrangères*) was not situated in Rome or Paris but in the convent of La Motte.
- 3 The concept of “chronotope”, translatable as “time-space”, generally aligns with Viñoles’ idea of a “narrative construction: an identity process open to the constant questioning and search for meaning of a narrated subjectivity”. This approach incorporates insights from Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Mijail Bakhtin. It also integrates other elements related to the use of Christian biography in theology and engages in dialogue with contributions from various disciplines.
- 4 The MSTM arose in Argentina as a reception of the Second Vatican Council and Medellín and expressed the desire for renewal of the clergy in various dioceses. Alice Domon admires and appreciates it but also expresses her discrepancies with the political party option of the priests. Botan remained in the villa until 1977, the year of Alice Domon’s death.
- 5 It is worth noting that, during that time, the use of the word “revolution” did not necessarily imply the violent use of weapons and was associated with the hope of liberation (cf. Ltr.105).
- 6 I share this interpretation with Diana Viñoles, that of comprehending her entire life as insertion, and I would emphasize the progression, an increasingly assimilated crescendo into the mystery of Christ dead and resurrected.
- 7 The notion of the “empty tomb”, drawn from Michel de Certeau, indicates the non-place of resurrection.
- 8 For de Certeau, the two gestures that can summarize the enigmatic figure of religious life are the departure and the community practice.

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