

Reflection on Religious Life

Pope Francis wrote his apostolic letter to all consecrated people announcing that the Year of Consecrated Life which would commence on 30 November 2014 until the end of 2015. He said he wrote this letter at the constant request of religious priests, sisters and brothers. In it, however he addressed the whole Christian community:

“So I invite every Christian community to experience this Year above all as a moment of thanksgiving to the Lord and grateful remembrance for all the gifts we continue to receive, thanks to the sanctity of founders and foundresses and for the fidelity of their charism shown by so many consecrated men and women. I ask you all to draw close to these men and women to rejoice with them to share their difficulties and to assist them to whatever degree possible, in their ministries and works, for the latter are, in the end those of the entire Church. Let them know the affection and the warmth which the entire Christian people feels for them.

I felt this affection and warmth when I read the invitation from Fr. Gerry to attend this celebration of the eucharist, highlighting the significance of the many religious who have been part of St. Mary's Thornbury. Thank you Fr. Gerry for thinking of this.

Pope Francis chose this date, he said to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium (chapter six is about consecrated life) and also the wonderful Decree Perfectae Caritatis on the renewal of religious life by Pope Paul VI.

He then quoted Saint John Paul II words to consecrated people:

“You are not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things” No. 110

When we look at the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: numbers of vocations are decreasing ~ this is endorsed by recent statistics undergone in the USA: **in 1974 there were 114,932 men and women religious in the world and in 2014 there are 66,211.** Amongst these numbers members are aging, particularly in the Western world: So it is only natural to feel discouraged. Nevertheless, in his letter, Pope Francis encourages us to practice the virtue of hope:

“This is the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history who continues to tell us: “Be not afraid... for I am with you.” (Jer 1:8)

As we look at the past with gratitude, he reminds us that we are heirs to a history rich in charisms: **“At their origins (Religious Institutes) we see the hand of God who, in his Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church.” “The creativity of charity is boundless; it is able to find countless new ways of bring the newness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of society.”**

I have often been asked: **“Why so many Religious Orders?** Can’t you guys get together? When I heard this I would remember the story of Mother Teresa. She was a religious teacher but was called from her order by the Spirit to help respond to the plight of the poor. The story goes that while she was on her way by train in the hills of India for her annual retreat, she saw a beggar on the railway station and as she looked at him, she heard coming from his mouth the voice of Jesus saying as he did on the cross, “I thirst”. Like her, our founders and foundresses sought in different ways to be at the service of all those to whom the Spirit sent them.

Our **challenge** is to reflect on our origins and history and **preserve our identity**, by strengthening our unity as a family and our sense of

belonging. **To walk in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals and the vision and values which inspire us.**

In my own religious family, I am called to walk in the footsteps of Blessed James Alberione, who truly loved consecrated life. Beginning as a diocesan priest in Piedmont, Italy, he was to found five religious institutes and four lay institutes. Our particular charism as Pastorelle Sisters is to be like the Good Shepherd, dedicating our life to those who are like a flock without a Shepherd mainly by our prayers of intercession, our preaching of the Gospel, our works of catechesis, our service to the poor and the infirm.

In the Pope's letter he doesn't just give us a "pat on the head", he challenges us to examine our fidelity to the mission entrusted to us. We can take this, for not only is the Pope, our leader, he is as a member of the Jesuit Order and so our brother religious. He challenges us to have the same passion for our people, to be close to them to the point of sharing in their joys and sorrows, thus truly understanding their needs and helping to respond to them? He writes:

"The same generosity and self-sacrifice which guided your founders must now inspire you, their spiritual children, to keep alive the charisms which, by the power of the same Spirit who awakened them, are constantly being enriched and adapted, while losing none of their unique character."

We haven't always done that: We must honestly ask ourselves: **"Is Jesus really our first and only love? As we promised he would be when we professed our vows? Only if he is, will we be empowered to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path. For we will have learned from Jesus the meaning and practice of love. We will be able to love because we have his own heart."**

He challenges us **to live with Passion. To Wake up the World!** Listening closely to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today and

implementing ever more fully the essential aspects of our consecrated life.

To be joyful: Is that the old saying true: **“Where there are religious there is joy” – None of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for “a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom.”**

To live in Communion: Communion is lived first and foremost within the respective communities of each Institute.

A place where he says we must avoid: **“criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility as ways of acting. This is the “mystique of living together” which makes our life “a sacred pilgrimage. ~**

“Don’t be closed in on yourselves,” he says, “don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to our own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love.”

He also expresses the hope that there be a **growth in communion between the members of different Institutes,** **“Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization and social action.”**

As a young sister, together with Sr Rita, I attended the Mercy Teachers’ College. We had meals with the Mercy Sisters and at tea we would relate how they really tried to make us feel at home and how we had a feeling of belonging. A few in our community started to look worried, so we thought it better to stop this practice of praising another institute.

As you can see this was a long time ago. After The Vatican II Council, we religious of various institutes over the years have collaborated in our formation and training and on occasion worked together and recreated together. In our convent at Bundoora we are fortunate enough to have

Good Samaritan Sisters as neighbours. Although I don't live there, I have often seen these sisters sharing in our meals, the morning eucharist and retreat days and of course this is reciprocated.

In this letter the Pope also addresses **the laity, who share with consecrated life the same ideals, spirit and mission.**

Most institutes have lay people working with them who do share the same charism. We Pastorelle and other members of our Pauline Family (those founded also by Blessed James Alberione) have friends we call "Cooperators" who receive training in our charism and history and who join with us to celebrate our main feast days each year.

Pope Francis concludes his letter with this dedication to Mary:

"I entrust this Year of Consecrated Life to Mary, the Virgin of listening and contemplation the first disciple of her beloved Son. Let us look to her, the highly beloved daughter of the Father endowed with every gift of grace as the unsurpassed model of all those who follow Christ in Love of God and service to their neighbour."

It is therefore appropriate that we this morning celebrate this Year of Consecrated Life in this Church dedicated to Mary. As all of us who have worked here and have shared in the spirit of this place know, you are truly a wonderful community.

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