

HOMILY FOR THE CLOSING OF THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

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It is interesting that in his letter for the Year of Consecrated Life Pope Francis reflects on celebrating the past with gratitude. He says that recounting history is essential for preserving identity. In terms of religious life, he invites us to grasp the ideals and the charisms of our founders, explore the vision and values, which inspired them, and to reflect on what attracted us to this life, in what ways have we made it our own.

Francis tells the religious, and the whole Church, to live the present with passion. To engage in a grateful, attentive remembrance, listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Of course the words of God in the scriptures are the key to that 'attentive listening'. He says it is not enough to read it (even though reading and studying is essential. The gospels demand we live radically and sincerely. It is not enough to meditate on it (which we do joyfully each day). It is how these words affect this thought of ours, these words, those actions which is the test of their effect on our lives. "To live in the present", the Pope says, means becoming "experts in communion". In a polarised world where people so often suffer from oppression, powerlessness and inequality, the offer of a concrete model of community is one of the greatest 'living signs' we can give as religious.

Anniversaries and special years also give an opportunity to embrace the future with the virtue of Christian hope. This is not the same as an optimism that somehow things will turn out for the best, but the belief that God is working

His purpose out in every circumstance, with our cooperation. In times of uncertainty and perhaps decline, the threat of relativism and the sense of isolation faced by our contemporaries can also face religious communities too. The practice of the virtues of faith, hope and charity is called for in a particular way during these challenging times.

What better day to give thanks for all that is past, the gift of the present and hope for the future than on this feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Simeon and Anna are surely models of the contemplative life, “waiting in joyful hope” for the coming of the Lord. Simeon “looked forward to Israel’s comforting”. Is it too much to say that he lived a life of reparation until he set eyes on the Christ of God. Too much to say that he was one of a long line of prophets in the Old Testament who foretold that the Messiah would indeed be the ‘suffering servant’ of the prophet Isaiah? Anyone following the Christ has to be able to engage with the cross, to embrace it, to grow through it. Cardinal Basil Hume used to say that only then will the cross yield up its mysteries. Reflecting on the prophetic role of the religious life, Pope Francis says “Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinise the times in which they live and interpret event because they are free, they are beholden to no one”. We don’t ‘scrutinise’ from the outside, but empathise from within as we exercise our apostolic ministry in solidarity with broken humanity. “A sword shall pierce your own soul too”.

“When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom. And God’s favour was with him”. The growth to maturity of so many of our young people is due in no small part to the members of those religious congregations, which have dedicated themselves to the formation of the young. Pope John Paul once said “They try to understand me from the outside in. I can only be understood from the inside out”. No doubt your work of education has been to help your young people to grow to maturity, to be filled with wisdom so that God’s favour is with them. The vocation of us all is, surely, to understand ourselves and other people “...from the inside out”.

As the Psalmist says:

O Lord, you search me and you know me.

You discern my purpose from afar.

My ways are always before you....

Before ever a word is on my tongue

You know it O Lord through and through...

It was you who created my innermost being.

Knit me together in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139)
