

Celebration for the Year of Consecrated Life – 2015
Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary
October 7, 2015
Acts 2:42-47; Matthew 5:13-16

When Pope Francis announced that the special year for Consecrated Life would begin in December and continue through this year, it seemed a little senseless to try to gather a large group of people during the winter even though many dioceses honored members of consecrated life on February 2, which is the annual occasion to remember the gift that is consecrated life in the Church. We decided to wait until winter was over and the weather would be nice. No ice, no snow. From all appearances we are getting this in just in time. (Well, maybe it will be another month before we see snow.)

“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” Jesus encourages his disciples to be what he calls them to be. We celebrate today, in consecrated life, the fact that so many, including you who come together today, have chosen to strive with the commitment of your lives to follow him in living out those words.

It is a wonderful thing to be with you for this celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life here in our diocese. We gather in the glow of the memory of Pope Francis’ visit to us in our country. We are blessed in the diocese with a richness of forms of consecration, of people who live the evangelical counsels and point us beyond ourselves to the love of God. In our gathering today, I am reminded of the words of Pope Francis as he gathered at the cathedral in Philadelphia with the priests, religious and people of the Archdiocese. In a special way, he thanked the religious for the fidelity and joy of their commitment to the Gospel. He encouraged them “to be renewed in the joy and wonder of their first encounter with Jesus, and to draw from that joy renewed fidelity and strength.” In addition, he spoke of his own joy of being with them. I hope you take the time today at lunch to meet each other and learn of some of the ways in which God is being praised in the prayer, the contemplation, the works, the witness and the service being given by so many people for the good of the Church here in our diocese.

In announcing the Year for Consecrated Life, Pope Francis told us that he had three purposes for the year. It was to be a time for grateful remembrance of the past. It was to be a call to embrace the future with hope. And, finally, not only to live where we are, in the present but to summon those who are living consecrated life to live in that present with passion. Today, I want to talk about all three of these purposes. Our celebration calls us to

look back with gratitude, ahead with hope, but not to forget that we live in the present. That is the time we can transform.

Now, you have all probably heard along the way that I studied canon law, and many of the assignments I had as a priest involved me in projects related to law in the Church. It won't come as a surprise to you, then, that I often make reference to the canons of the Code of Canon Law when I want to understand, or explain, a particular reality in the Church. I find that law often succinctly states important principles. If we look, for example, at Canon 573, par. 1 which is the first canon in the section on Institutes of Consecrated Life, we find a description of what we honor today summarized in one paragraph with material taken from six different documents of the Second Vatican Council. Here we read that the foundation of Consecrated life is the profession of the evangelical counsels: poverty, chastity and obedience. They are not goals in themselves, but they are intended to help those who profess them to follow Christ more closely. Like Jesus, those in consecrated life seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that they can dedicate themselves to God "who is loved most of all." Living in that love they strive "for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom." This consecration is an integral part of the life of the Church and builds it up.

Each of us is formed in different ways in our experience and in our appreciation of consecrated life. Mine begins some 60+ years ago. I was young Robert heading to Sacred Heart School in Watertown, MA. Now, I must say, when Mary Deeley was walking this reluctant young Robert on that first day that long time ago, he had not yet heard that description of consecrated life from the Code of Canon Law. All he knew was that this school thing was not necessarily an experience he was embracing. In that moment, however, Robert was introduced to one of the true wonders of the Church - the gift of consecrated life. It became real to him in the person of Sister Dolores, C.S.J., first-grade teacher. School did not seem a positive thing on that first day, but the kindness of Sister Dolores and all who succeeded her in the following years made him change his mind on the second day, and all that followed. And as he stands here today, he can tell you that the many years which have passed since have never lacked the guidance, the kindness, the counsel, the direction, the collaboration in ministry of one who had professed the evangelical counsels and was living in a way which would strive to bring others to Jesus by following him more closely. The experiences have been deeply enriching spiritually and greatly helpful in ministry. Sister Paula Tinlin, S.N.D., always tells me that she got to me first when I was ordained and broke me in. She was the faith formation director in my first assignment.

Pope Francis tells us to look back with "grateful remembrance." If we are here today, I believe we can all look back with gratitude to the women and men in consecrated life, in

religious institutes or secular institutes, or living another form of consecration such as the hermit life. They are the people for whom we are grateful. They are the ones who put flesh on words and showed us by their lives what consecration means. Today, we give thanks for the good grace of consecrated life in our church.

In his second purpose for this celebration, Pope Francis tells us that he wants those in consecrated life to embrace the future with hope. Consecrated life, by its very nature, looks forward. It is lived “in service to the kingdom” and foretells the glory of heaven. Hope is the grounding of faith. Those in consecrated life believe with all Christians, that, in Jesus, death in all its forms, including sin, is conquered. Their very lives witness to the fact of a new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ won in his self-giving death and answered in the Father’s loving response of Jesus’ resurrection (LG 44). As we read in the Office recently, in the sermons of the great bishop and martyr of the early Church, St. Ignatius: “Have a firm faith in the reality of the Lord’s birth, and passion and resurrection. All these deeds were truly and certainly accomplished by Jesus Christ, who is our hope.” Following Christ more closely means living as he did, with trust in the Father. Trust is grounded in hope. Hope is the source of our joy. There are times when we wonder where the world in which we live is going. The Gospels give us glimpses of Jesus’ own reflection on this question as he was in the Garden of Olives. Jesus’ fidelity, his trust in the Father’s will, his hope that God was with him, drove him forth, and so it will for the one who, by consecration, strives to follow Jesus. Trust, hope, a joyful spirit of abandonment to God’s love marks the life of consecration. It is, by its very nature one of hope. Today, as we honor consecrated life, we do it with confident hope that God watches over us and guides us in our living out of his will. The joy we have in that hope sends us forward.

And so, what of the present?

Here we are guided by the Scripture before us today. It shows us something about what consecrated life can do in the world today. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles describes a view of the early Christian community. It is, first and foremost, a community. It is grounded in mutual support and mutual assistance. A consecrated life is lived in relation to the community, first the community of the Institute, and, as well, the Church. Even the solitary or eremitic life is dedicated to prayer for the community and for the “salvation of the world,” and connects with the community of the Church, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist.

In this light, the Gospel for today is well chosen. It is Jesus’ invitation to the disciples to be salt and light in the world. It is taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ earliest

instruction to his disciples on what he wanted of them. Why was a community important to him? Jesus understood that we are important to each other. Is not God's very name, Trinity, a community? What Jesus wanted was a visible, dedicated community of people who would show forth in their lives together a witness to a new way of living. Living in Jesus' way means loving as God loves, forgiving as God forgives, serving as Jesus served. In their believing life together Christians would witness to the coming of the reign of God. Jesus' invitation to be salt and light is a call to be visible, to live out in a community the message that Jesus proclaims. It is the mission of the Church, but it is even more the mission of consecrated life within the Church. In a world which cherishes individual rights and personal autonomy, it reminds us that we need each other and depend on each other and are called not to serve ourselves but to serve one another. The invitation to be salt and light follows immediately after the Beatitudes. They describe the life of the follower of Jesus. The invitation to be salt and light invites the followers of Jesus to witness together to the power of his message to transform the world. Pope Francis has called on those in consecrated life in a special way to see this as their mission, "to wake up the world" as he puts it, and to do it with passion. Light up the world with your witness to the truth you have found in Jesus.

As we gather this morning in celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life, we do it on the Feast of the Holy Rosary. What a beautiful day to gather! Mary is our hope. When we pray her rosary we are in her presence, and, at the same time, in the presence of the Lord Jesus. Do we not pray as we pray with Mary, "the Lord is with you"? Being with Mary in this simple, prayerful manner, we relive with her the mysteries of the life of Jesus which are the mysteries of our salvation. These are the gifts of God's love for us and the gifts we are called to bring to others in joy. We pray today, then, in gratitude for the richness of consecrated life in our diocese, and through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, for the continuing grace to be witnesses of the message of love Jesus came to proclaim. Wake up the world with your witness. Be salt and light.

+Most Rev. Robert P. Deeley, J.C.D.