

“Celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life”

2015 Pastoral Letter from the Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference

The Church celebrates the Year of Consecrated Life in 2015 (from November 21, 2014 to February 2, 2016). Pope Francis made this declaration at the end of the year 2013. He once again reminds us that consecrated life is a way of life indispensable in the Church. The people of God, as well as the big family of mankind, need this group of religious people. The Pope gives men and women living consecrated lives a great mission: “Wake Up the World!”

Our Lord Jesus Christ asks each of us to “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mathew 5: 48) This request is for all of us. So, let us together pursue the same ideal, which is to become daughters and sons of God, although there are various ways of achieving this goal. One way, which is the responsibility of us all, is by observing the Ten Commandments of God. Following the Ten Commandments of God is our duty in life. Moreover, another way to be perfect is through the way of the Gospel, “the evangelical counsels” (*consilia evangelica*). The Christian faith not only commands people to do things but it also persuades people to do them. To keep the commandments of God is a moral obligation of each person. To observe the evangelical counsels is a choice of those who are fervent, generous and courageous.

There are three kinds of temptations that weigh people down: money and possessions, bodily pleasure, and reputation and position. The evangelical counsels help consecrated people respond to these three temptations. Consecrated persons then encourage the faithful to imitate them in their struggle for sanctification, to arrive at Christian perfection (*perfectio christiana*), and to bear witness to the invisible God among people.

Present Condition

In Taiwan there are about 1,500 religious priests, brothers and sisters from various religious congregations that comprise 0.5% of the total population of the local Church. In other words, for every 200 faithful there is only one consecrated person at their service. Regarding the global Church, the ratio of consecrated persons is even less: 0.05%. For every 2000 faithful there is only one consecrated person at their service. Throughout this year, the Church wants to dedicate special attention to this small

group of brothers and sisters.

The Church has high expectations for consecrated people. In Taiwan there is a considerable number of religious congregations of men and women: some 100 different religious congregations. The religious congregation with the largest number of members has less than 100 members in Taiwan, while the congregation with the least number has less than 10 members. Furthermore, many congregations are somewhat spread out throughout the country. Foreign religious account for 40% of the total number of consecrated people in Taiwan, demonstrating the international makeup of consecrated men and women here and the “universality” of the local Church.

Using statistics of the global Church for analysis, the growth rate of Catholics in the past decade is more than the natural growth rate of the world population. The number of diocesan priests as well as seminarians has also increased, but the number of religious persons has decreased by 7%! In Taiwan, there have been very few local vocations to missionary religious congregations over the past decades, which may result in a crisis in the local Church. Therefore, we very much appreciate the announcement made by Pope Francis to dedicate the year to consecrated life. We hope that during the “Year of Consecrated Life”, through the power of the Holy Spirit, religious congregations will be inspired to reflect and to renew. May they also deepen the understanding and desire of the faithful towards consecrated life.

Future Direction

A few years ago, the International Association of Major Religious Superiors organized a congress. The purpose was to discern the will of the Holy Spirit as to what should be the direction of consecrated life in the future. The theme of the Congress was: “Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity.” Since Vatican II, the Church has shown her concern for the world through service to the communities of the world. Since Vatican II, consecrated life is no longer isolated from the world, but has boldly entered into the world to reveal the face of Christ to the world. Religious, like Jesus, are trying to establish a different kind of community within the secular world. They help people to discover and experience a way of life more worthy of being pursued, a truly humane way of life for individuals and communities.

Modern secular values are very attractive especially for those who live in a highly developed country like Taiwan. Most people are likely to receive high degrees in education, and as long as one works hard, one can have sufficient income to purchase

what one wants to buy, such as smart phones, vehicles and brand name clothes, and participate in a variety of recreational activities. Young people can rely on long-term financial assistance from their parents, or ask them to help babysit their grandchildren. Furthermore, they can live a comfortable single life for a long time, since marriage at a young age is not required. If one gets sick, there is a good health-care system. In the case of a large financial crisis, there are good social welfare networks that can provide assistance. This “well-off” environment in Taiwan is very attractive, pushes people to desire more, to the point of trying to buy happiness, and pay no attention to the basic questions of life, such as: the meaning of life, the needs of the poor, the plight of poor countries, and issues dealing with suffering and death.

The challenges that the religious communities in Taiwan must face are similar to the challenges other developed countries are dealing with. Fortunately, for a long time, in many highly developed countries, a large number of religious and religious communities have tried to re-affirm the positive values of consecrated life in today’s environment and developed innovative means of communicating those values.

Return back to the center: Jesus

The most pressing need of consecrated persons and religious communities is to put the “Jesus of the Gospels” back into the center of their lives. Consecrated religious should rekindle their deep love for Jesus, just like couples who have been married for a long time need to rekindle their initial enthusiasm to sustain the love that will influence their daily lives, get to know Jesus again and try to imitate his way of life. It is necessary to pray more, and, for the consecrated persons and their communities, to reflect on life and its meaning. The time for prayer and reflection is more important than the time for apostolic work. It is better to be involved in fewer activities, in order to get closer to Jesus, and, together with Jesus, adjust the pace of their consecrated and community lives. After Vatican II, various consecrated groups (secular organizations) emerged that attach great importance to prayer, contemplation, bible sharing and life review.

Adjusting the focus of service

Communities of consecrated life have always given priority to care for the poor: various groups on the margins of society, such as those without financial resources, those with mental disabilities, the abandoned, inmates, the sick who have no one to take care of them, the illiterate, elderly people living alone, etc. Taiwan is no exception!

The early missionaries paid particular attention to the poor and responded to their specific needs. Eventually, the civil society and economic condition gradually improved. The government assumed more responsibility and many poor people received assistance, and, after a long time, were no longer poor. Some organizations of religious communities have lost their original prophetic mission. Sometimes, organizations of religious communities even work very hard to compete with organizations of the government (or big corporations). But in fact, there are new groups of poor people in our society who cannot obtain substantial relief, and they seem to be just “waiting” for religious communities to take care of them. Actually, the religious communities in Taiwan continue to show concern for those whom other people cannot effectively assist, such as girls who have lost direction in life, AIDS patients, people with severe disabilities, those suffering with dementia, etc. However, religious communities need to discern again whether they should give up some services in order to assist those groups who are in dire need.

For more than 60 years, in addition to founding and managing many parishes, religious communities also initiated many other apostolic works. This has always been the mission of religious communities, with a high degree of flexibility to respond to people's needs. Religious communities have worked much in the areas of education (from kindergarten to university), health care (from small clinics to big hospitals), media, social welfare, foreign labor, etc. Different religious communities, according to their individual charisms, implemented concrete actions to pay attention to and respond to various human needs. This is an extremely valuable tradition. However, because the number of consecrated religious has decreased and there are fewer vocations, most of the organizations founded and managed by religious communities now have no one to really run them (or if they do, they are not qualified or too old). Religious communities should discern, in light of faith and professionalism: Which works should be given up, or handed to the diocese or to more professional organizations in the diocese to ensure that the core values of faith are transmitted?

In addition, there are many significant social movements in Taiwan, and their scope is broad. In this context, there is no need for religious communities to establish or maintain their own small and similar social movements, but should consider participating actively in the social movements led by others: environmental protection, human rights, social justice, the abolition of the death penalty, and other international movements. This is also in line with the teachings of the post-Vatican II document, "The Church in the Modern World."

Reassurance

Due to the political environment in Taiwan, there has always been a feeling of instability in society and an unclear or questionable national identity, which has resulted in a general widespread psychological anxiety. While this affects everyone, our Christian faith can give people a deeper level of peace, because we are all one family, sons and daughters of God our Father. We should, therefore, be able to bear the existence of some tension among family members. Members of religious communities, because of their certainty of the existence of heaven and the lifelong choice they've made for the kingdom of heaven, can bring peace to society, rather than making political statements or defining the national identity. The future of humanity is not very clear, nor is the future path of Taiwan. But, as we move toward the Kingdom of God, relying on God's daily care for us, we can be confident. In this way, we will be able to discern, step by step, the direction in which Taiwan must proceed.

Expressing the three Evangelical Counsels

Finally, we encourage consecrated religious in Taiwan to, once again and with renewed vision, spend more time to explore the significance of the three evangelical counsels, especially on the expression of the vows. We hope that consecrated persons will find ways, in the spirit of the Gospel and suitable to Taiwan's present environment, to better manage the material needs of life, to properly exercise authority and to control one's sexuality, according to the example of Jesus, God's Servant, in terms of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In recent years, new books on consecrated life (especially in foreign languages) are particularly numerous and creative. Chinese traditional culture and the new culture of Taiwan also affect our comprehension and expression of the three evangelical counsels. There are positive and negative effects. It is asked of those who are directly involved to explore their impact again. The Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine will organize a workshop on "Consecrated Life" from March 20-22, 2015. We encourage all consecrated persons to join or read the special issue of "Collectanea Theologica."

The Contemplative is God's Church without borders

Within the Church there is a form of consecrated life that constitutes a relatively unique vocation: the "contemplative lifestyle" to which some people are called. These religious are separated from the world to live a contemplative, at times solitary, consecrated life that is total and irreversible, similar to Jesus, who went to the

mountains to pray. They live out and express Christ's paschal mystery. We can say that these persons, in an exemplary manner, manifest the mystery of union with God, showing how they are a unique grace and precious gift in the mystery of the holiness of the Church. (ref. *“Verbi Sponsa, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, 1 and 3)*

The Second Vatican Council clearly affirms the noble value of this form of consecrated life: *“The monastic life, that venerable institution which in the course of a long history has won for itself notable renown in the Church and in human society, should be preserved with care and its authentic spirit permitted to shine forth ever more splendidly both in the East and the West. The principal duty of monks is to offer a service to the divine majesty at once humble and noble within the walls of the monastery, whether they dedicate themselves entirely to divine worship in the contemplative life or have legitimately undertaken some apostolate or work of Christian charity. Retaining, therefore, the characteristics of the way of life proper to them, they should revive their ancient traditions of service and so adapt them to the needs of today, that monasteries will become institutions dedicated to the edification of the Christian people”.* (*Perfectae Caritatis, 9)*

The heart of the contemplative religious is undivided, not only purified from sin but also totally turned to God; it is a heart of love thoroughly undivided and complete, reflecting the pure love of the Blessed Trinity. (ref. *“Verbi Sponsa, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, 5)*

St. John of the Cross wrote: *“For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul, and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together.”* (St. John of the Cross, *“Spiritual Canticle” 29.2)* St. Teresa of Jesus said: *“I would have laid down a thousand lives to save a single one of all the souls that were being lost there.”* She clearly told her daughters: *“If your prayers and desires and disciplines and fasts are not performed for the intentions of which I have spoken (that is, for the Church and for the benefits of consecrated persons), reflect [and believe] that you are not carrying out the work or fulfilling the object for which the Lord has brought you here.”* (*Way of Perfection Chapter 1:3; 3:10)* *“Love does not consist in great sweetness of devotion, but in a fervent determination to strive to please God in all things, in avoiding, as far as possible, all that would offend Him, and in praying for the increase of the glory and honor of His Son and for the growth of the Catholic Church.”* (*“The Interior Castle” 4.1.7)*

Therefore, the life of the contemplative "*is really a gift, placed at the center of the mystery of ecclesial communion, accompanying those who have the mission of preaching the Gospel.*" (Pope John Paul II, to the cloistered nuns of Loreto (1995.09.10), 4) (ref. "*Verbi Sponsa, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns*, 7)

Conclusion

Consecrated life is closely related to each of us, and is associated with the evangelization and structure of the Church. In this "Year of Consecrated Life" religious groups will organize different events, both separately and conjointly. The faithful are encouraged to take part in these events, and, together with all the consecrated persons of the local Church, give thanks to the Lord with unbounded gratitude because consecrated life is deeply rooted in God's infinite love. It is His love that draws all men and women. Those who have been drawn by this love joyfully embark on the journey of consecrated life.

May Mary, our Blessed Mother - the first believer who offered her body, mind, and spirit for the Kingdom of God - during this "Year of Consecrated Life," accompany all those, who like her, responded to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ, in their effort to be faithful to their particular vocation, so that this year's celebration of consecrated life will become a year of grace and renewal in the life of faith in the Church.

Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference

November 16, 2014

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

"Year of Consecrated Life" Activities:

1. At the Opening and Closing of the "Year of Consecrated Life": Each diocese will offer a novena with Eucharistic adoration and gather together all consecrated persons on the 'Day of Consecrated Life.'
2. Each religious community will make a novena for the opening of the "Year of Consecrated Life." The novena will start on November 21, 2014.

The prayer intentions for each day of the novena are:

Day 1: For all the activities of the "Year of Consecrated Life"

- Day 2: For men and women religious
- Day 3: For bishops and diocesan priests
- Day 4: For contemplatives
- Day 5: For consecrated virgins and secular institutes
- Day 6: For consecrated religious communities
- Day 7: For the youth who are considering a vocation to religious life
- Day 8: For consecrated persons experiencing struggles and difficulties
- Day 9: In response to and gratitude for love

3. Each religious group will decide on a day to have an “Open House,” so that others may have an understanding of their particular life style.
4. In February and September, 2015, the Men and Women Religious Associations will jointly offer formation workshops for novices on the consecrated life.
5. On March 20 – 22, 2015, the Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine will sponsor a workshop on “The Consecrated Life: Theology of the Evangelical Counsels.”
6. In May and November, 2015, (twice both in the north and south of Taiwan) a workshop on sexuality and the consecrated life will be offered for men and women religious.
7. Each religious group will strengthen the spiritual lives of its members by setting up prayer groups and *lectio divina* on the Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People.
8. The topic for priestly formation in August 2015 will be the Consecrated Life.
9. A novena will be offered before the closing of the “Year of Consecrated Life,” beginning on January 24, 2016. The prayer intention for the novena will be consecrated life and vocations.

(For more details and the latest news, please visit the Bishops’ Conference website www.catholic.org.tw)