

Pope's Message for the Year of Consecrated Life

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Consecrated Life,

I am writing to you as the Successor of Peter, to whom the Lord entrusted the task of confirming his brothers and sisters in faith (cf. Lk 22:32). But I am also writing to you as a brother who, like yourselves, is consecrated to God.

Together let us thank the Father, who called us to follow Jesus by fully embracing the Gospel and serving the Church, and poured into our hearts the Holy Spirit, the source of our joy and our witness to God's love and mercy before the world.

In response to requests from many of you and from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, I decided to proclaim a Year of Consecrated Life on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which speaks of religious in its sixth chapter, and of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the renewal of religious life. The Year will begin on 30 November 2014, the First Sunday of Advent, and conclude with the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple on 2 February 2016.

After consultation with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, I have chosen as the aims of this Year the same ones which Saint John Paul II proposed to the whole Church at the beginning of the third millennium, reiterating, in a certain sense, what he had earlier written in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: "You have 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).

I. AIMS OF THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

1. The first of these aims is to look to the past with gratitude. All our Institutes are heir to a history rich in charisms. At their origins 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. This initial experience then matured and developed, engaging new members in new geographic and cultural contexts, and giving rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic charity. Like the seed which becomes a tree, each Institute grew and stretched out its branches.

During this Year, it would be appropriate for each charismatic family to reflect on its origins and history, in order to thank God who grants the Church a variety of gifts which embellish her and equip her for every good work (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12).

Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. More than an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia, it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to

grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities. In this way we come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it encountered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted. We may also encounter cases of inconsistency, the result of human weakness and even at times a neglect of some essential aspects of the charism. Yet everything proves instructive and, taken as a whole, acts as a summons to conversion. To tell our story is to praise God and to thank him for all his gifts.

In a particular way we give thanks to God for these fifty years which followed the Second Vatican Council. The Council represented a “breath” of the Holy Spirit upon the whole Church. In consequence, consecrated life undertook a fruitful journey of renewal which, for all its lights and shadows, has been a time of grace, marked by the presence of the Spirit.

May this Year of Consecrated Life also be an occasion for confessing humbly, with immense confidence in the God who is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), our own weakness and, in it, to experience the Lord’s merciful love. May this Year likewise be an occasion for bearing vigorous and joyful witness before the world to the holiness and vitality present in so many of those called to follow Jesus in the consecrated life.

2. This Year also calls us to live the present with passion. Grateful remembrance of the past leads us, as we listen attentively to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today, to implement ever more fully the essential aspects of our consecrated life.

From the beginnings of monasticism to the “new communities” of our own time, every form of consecrated life has been born of the Spirit’s call to follow Jesus as the Gospel teaches (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). For the various founders and foundresses, the Gospel was the absolute rule, whereas every other rule was meant merely to be an expression of the Gospel and a means of living the Gospel to the full. For them, the ideal was Christ; they sought to be interiorly united to him and thus to be able to say with Saint Paul: “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21). Their vows were intended as a concrete expression of this passionate love.

The question we have to ask ourselves during this Year is if and how we too are open to being challenged by the Gospel; whether the Gospel is truly the “manual” for our daily living and the decisions we are called to make. The Gospel is demanding: it demands to be lived radically and sincerely. It is not enough to read it (even though the reading and study of Scripture is essential), nor is it enough to meditate on it (which we do joyfully each day). Jesus asks us to practice it, to put his words into effect in our lives.

Once again, we have to 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.

Our founders and foundresses shared in Jesus’ own compassion when he saw the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. Like Jesus, who compassionately spoke his gracious word, healed the sick, gave bread to the hungry and offered his own life in sacrifice, so our founders

and foundresses sought in different ways to be the service of all those to whom the Spirit sent them. They did so by their prayers of intercession, their preaching of the Gospel, their works of catechesis, education, their service to the poor and the infirm... The creativity of charity is boundless; it is able to find countless new ways of bringing the newness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of society.

The Year of Consecrated Life challenges us to examine our fidelity to the mission entrusted to us. Are our ministries, our works and our presence consonant with what the Spirit asked of our founders and foundresses? Are they suitable for carrying out today, in society and the Church, those same ministries and works? Do we have the same passion for our people, are we close to them to the point of sharing in their joys and sorrows, thus truly understanding their needs and helping to respond to them? “The same generosity and self-sacrifice which guided your founders – Saint John Paul II once said – 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. It is up to you to place those charisms at the service of the Church and to work for the coming of Christ’s Kingdom in its fullness”.[1]

Recalling our origins sheds light on yet another aspect of consecrated life. Our founders and foundresses were attracted by the unity of the Apostles with Christ and by the fellowship which marked the first community in Jerusalem. In establishing their own communities, each of them sought to replicate those models of evangelical living, to be of one heart and one soul, and to rejoice in the Lord’s presence (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15).

Living the present with passion means becoming “experts in communion”, “witnesses and architects of the ‘plan for unity’ which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design”.[2] In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression, where inequality abounds, we are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters.

So, be men and women of communion! Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one (cf. Jn 17:21). Live the mysticism of encounter, which entails “the ability to hear, to listen to other people; the ability to seek together ways and means”.[3] Live in the light of the loving relationship of the three divine Persons (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), the model for all interpersonal relationships.

3. To embrace the future with hope should be the third aim of this Year. We all know the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: decreasing vocations and aging members, particularly in the Western world; economic problems stemming from the global financial crisis; issues of internationalization and globalization; the threats posed by relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance... But it is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with so many of our contemporaries, that we are called to practice the virtue of hope, 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).

This hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust (cf. 2 Tim 1:2), the One for whom “nothing is impossible” (Lk 1:37). This is the hope which does not disappoint; it is the hope which enables consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future. It is to that future that we must always look, conscious that the Holy Spirit spurs us on so that he can still do great things with us.

So do not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in your own strength. In scanning the horizons of your lives and the present moment, be watchful and alert. Together with Benedict XVI, I urge you not to “join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light – as Saint Paul urged (cf. Rom 13:11-14) – keeping awake and watchful”.^[4] Let us constantly set out anew, with trust in the Lord.

I would especially like to say a word to those of you who are young. You are the present, since you are already taking active part in the lives of your Institutes, offering all the freshness and generosity of your “yes”. At the same time you are the future, for soon you will be called to take on roles of leadership in the life, formation, service and mission of your communities. This Year should see you actively engaged in dialogue with the previous generation. In fraternal communion you will be enriched by their experiences and wisdom, while at the same time inspiring them, by your own energy and enthusiasm, to recapture their original idealism. In this way the entire community can join in finding new ways of living the Gospel and responding more effectively to the need for witness and proclamation.

I am also happy to know that you will have the opportunity during this Year to meet with other young religious from different Institutes. May such encounters become a regular means of fostering communion, mutual support, and unity.

II. EXPECTATIONS FOR THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

What in particular do I expect from this Year of grace for consecrated life?

1. That the old saying will always be true: “Where there are religious, there is joy”. We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church, to families and young people, to the elderly and the poor, brings us life-long personal fulfilment.

None of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for “a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom”. Like everyone else, we have our troubles, our dark nights of the soul, our disappointments and infirmities, our experience of slowing down as we grow older. But in all these things we should be able to discover “perfect joy”. For it is here that we learn to recognize the face of Christ, who became like us in all things, and to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross.

In a society which exalts the cult of efficiency, fitness and success, one which ignores the poor and dismisses “losers”, we can witness by our lives to the truth of the words of Scripture: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

We can apply to the consecrated life the words of Benedict XVI which I cited in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction” (No. 14). The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as men and women who are happy! Similarly, the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends on the eloquence of your lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full.

As I said to the members of ecclesial movements on the Vigil of Pentecost last year: “Fundamentally, the strength of the Church is living by the Gospel and bearing witness to our faith. The Church is the salt of the earth; she is the light of the world. She is called to make present in society the leaven of the Kingdom of God and she does this primarily by her witness, her witness of brotherly love, of solidarity and of sharing with others” (18 May 2013).

2. I am counting on you “to wake up the world”, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.” This is the priority that is needed right now: “to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy” (29 November 2013).

Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events: they are like sentinels who keep watch in the night and sense the coming of the dawn (cf. Is 21:11-12). Prophets know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side.

So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create “alternate spaces”, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive. Monasteries, communities, centres of spirituality, schools, hospitals, family shelters – all these are places which the charity and creativity born of your charisms have brought into being, and with constant creativity must continue to bring into being. They should increasingly be the leaven for a society inspired by the Gospel, a “city on a hill”, which testifies to the truth and the power of Jesus’ words.

At times, like Elijah and Jonah, you may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the task of being a prophet because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless. But prophets know that they are never alone. As he did with Jeremiah, so God encourages us: “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jer 1:8).

3. Men and women religious, like all other consecrated persons, have been called, as I mentioned, “experts in communion”. So I am hoping that the “spirituality of communion”, so emphasized by Saint John Paul II, will become a reality and that you will be in the forefront of responding to “the great challenge facing us” in this new millennium: “to make the Church the home and the school of communion.”[5] I am sure that in this Year you will make every effort to make the ideal of fraternity pursued by your founders and foundresses expand everywhere, like concentric circles.

Communion is lived first and foremost within the respective communities of each Institute. To this end, I would ask you to think about my frequent comments about criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility as ways of acting which have no place in our houses. This being the case, the path of charity open before us is almost infinite, since it entails mutual acceptance and concern, practicing a communion of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction and respect for those who are weak ... it is the “mystique of living together” which makes our life “a sacred pilgrimage”.[6] We need to ask ourselves about the way we relate to persons from different cultures, as our communities become increasingly international. How can we enable each member to say freely what he or she thinks, to be accepted with his or her particular gifts, and to become fully co-responsible?

I also hope for 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? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.

Consecrated men and women are also called to true synergy with all other vocations in the Church, beginning with priests and the lay faithful, in order to “spread the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries”.[7]

4. I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries. “Go into all the world”; these were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us (cf. Mk 16:15). A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine...

Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your 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.

I ask you to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the poor, and finding creative ways to catechize, to proclaim the Gospel and to teach others how to pray. Consequently, I would hope that structures can be streamlined, large religious houses repurposed for works which better respond to the present demands of evangelization and charity, and apostolates adjusted to new needs.

5. I expect that each form of consecrated life will question what it is that God and people today are asking of them.

Monasteries and groups which are primarily contemplative could meet or otherwise engage in an exchange of experiences on the life of prayer, on ways of deepening communion with the entire Church, on supporting persecuted Christians, and welcoming and assisting those seeking a deeper spiritual life or requiring moral or material support.

The same can be done by Institutes dedicated to works of charity, teaching and cultural advancement, to preaching the Gospel or to carrying out specific pastoral ministries. It could also be done by Secular Institutes, whose members are found at almost every level of society. The creativity of the Spirit has generated ways of life and activities so diverse that they cannot be easily categorized or fit into ready-made templates. So I cannot address each and every charismatic configuration. Yet during this Year no one can feel excused from seriously examining his or her presence in the Church's life and from responding to the new demands constantly being made on us, to the cry of the poor.

Only by such concern for the needs of the world, and by docility to the promptings of the Spirit, will this Year of Consecrated Life become an authentic *kairos*, a time rich in God's grace, a time of transformation.

III. THE HORIZONS OF THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

1. In this letter, I wish to speak not only to consecrated persons, but also to the laity, who share with them the same ideals, spirit and mission. Some Religious Institutes have a long tradition in this regard, while the experience of others is more recent. Indeed, around each religious family, every Society of Apostolic Life and every Secular Institute, there is a larger family, a "charismatic family", which includes a number of Institutes which identify with the same charism, and especially lay faithful who feel called, precisely as lay persons, to share in the same charismatic reality.

I urge you, as laity, to live this Year for Consecrated Life as a grace which can make you more aware of the gift you yourselves have received. Celebrate it with your entire "family", so that you can grow and respond together to the promptings of the Spirit in society today. On some occasions when consecrated men and women from different Institutes come together, arrange to be present yourselves so as to give expression to the one gift of God. In this way you will come to know the experiences of other charismatic families and other lay groups, and thus have an opportunity for mutual enrichment and support.

2. The Year for Consecrated Life concerns not only consecrated persons, but the entire Church. Consequently, I ask the whole Christian people to be increasingly aware of the gift which is the presence of our many consecrated men and women, heirs of the great saints who have written the history of Christianity. What would the Church be without Saint Benedict and Saint Basil, without Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard, without Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Angelica Merici and Saint Vincent de Paul. The list could go on and on, up to Saint John Bosco and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. As Blessed Paul VI pointed out: “Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the “salt” of faith would lose its savour in a world undergoing secularization” (Evangelica Testificatio, 3).

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 from the fidelity to their charism shown by so many consecrated men and women. I ask all of you 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.

3. In this letter I do not hesitate to address a word to the consecrated men and women and to the members of fraternities and communities who belong to Churches of traditions other than the Catholic tradition. Monasticism is part of the heritage of the undivided Church, and is still very much alive in both the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. The monastic tradition, and other later experiences from the time when the Church in the West was still united, have inspired analogous initiatives in the Ecclesial Communities of the reformed tradition. These have continued to give birth to further expressions of fraternal community and service.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life has planned a number of initiatives to facilitate encounters between members of different expressions of consecrated and fraternal life in the various Churches. I warmly encourage such meetings as a means of increasing mutual understanding, respect and reciprocal cooperation, so that the ecumenism of the consecrated life can prove helpful for the greater journey towards the unity of all the Churches.

4. Nor can we forget that the phenomenon of monasticism and of other expressions of religious fraternity is present in all the great religions. There are instances, some long-standing, of inter-monastic dialogue involving the Catholic Church and certain of the great religious traditions. I trust that the Year of Consecrated Life will be an opportunity to review the progress made, to make consecrated persons aware of this dialogue, and to consider what further steps can be taken towards greater mutual understanding and greater cooperation in the many common areas of service to human life.

Journeying together always brings enrichment, and can open new paths to relationships between peoples and cultures, which nowadays appear so difficult.

5. Finally, in a special way, I address my brother bishops. May this Year be an opportunity to accept institutes of consecrated life, readily and joyfully, as a spiritual capital which contributes to the good of the whole body of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 43), and not simply that of the individual religious families. “Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church”.^[8] For this reason, precisely as a gift to the Church, it is not an isolated or marginal reality, but deeply a part of her. It is at the heart of the Church, a decisive element of her mission, inasmuch as it expresses the deepest nature of the Christian vocation and the yearning of the Church as the Bride for union with her sole Spouse. Thus, “it belongs... absolutely to the life and holiness” of the Church (*ibid.*, 44).

In the light of this, I ask you, the Pastors of the particular Churches, to show special concern for promoting within your communities the different charisms, whether long-standing or recent. I ask you to do this by your support and encouragement, your assistance in discernment, and your tender and loving closeness to those situations of suffering and weakness in which some consecrated men or women may find themselves. Above all, do this by instructing the People of God in the value of consecrated life, so that its beauty and holiness may shine forth in the Church.

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 for all those who follow Christ in love of God and service to their neighbour.

Lastly, I join all of you in gratitude for the gifts of grace and light with which the Lord graciously wills to enrich us, and I accompany you with my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 21 November 2014, Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

[1] Apostolic Letter to the Religious of Latin America on the occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Evangelization of the New World *Los caminos del Evangelio* (29 June 1990), 26.

[2] SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Religious and Human Promotion* (12 August 1980), 24: *L'Osservatore Romano*, Suppl., 12 November 1980, pp. i-viii.

[3] Address to Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residences of Rome (2 May 2014).

[4] POPE BENEDICT XVI, Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (2 February 2013).

[5] Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), 43.

[6] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 87

[7] JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), 51.

[8] BISHOP J.M. BERGOGLIO, Intervention at the Synod on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, XVI General Congregation, 13 October 1994.