

The Gestures and Teachings of Pope Francis and Questions he Poses to Members of Institutes of Consecrated Life

Reflections by the Assembly of the Union of Superiors General
Rome – May 27-29, 2015

1. Gift and responsibility for the present day Church

Pope Francis is a gift to the Church and especially, a gift to the Institutes of Consecrated Life. With regard to religious life, the Pope has had direct experience of that reality. His exercise of the Petrine ministry is helping the whole Church to know and value consecrated life. At the same time the Pope gives hope to the members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and is helping them to move out from their isolation and from being their own point of reference.

Many have viewed consecrated life as dead, or at least it was seen as marginalized in the Church. The difficulties that consecrated life had to confront (and still faces) seemed to confirm that reality: aging communities, lack of vocations, rigid structures, abandonment of works, reconfiguration... the risk of discouragement and isolation was very real.

After a period of relative marginalization, Pope Benedict XVI initiated a process which called attention to consecrated life and its value. Now that the Church has a Pope who was (and is) a member of a religious congregation, there is greater recognition of the specificity of the consecrated vocation. The Pope has not forgotten that he is a religious and he invites all the members of consecrated life to a conversion of heart.

The witness of Pope Francis assists the Superiors General in motivating their members to live their consecrated vocation in a more radical manner, in a manner that is in accord with the gospel, in a joyful manner. He also supports the heads of religious congregations as they urge their members to place their relationship with Jesus and the following of Jesus at the center of their life. The Pope reveals a fascination with consecrated life and is able to place vocational questions before young men and women.

At this moment in history, consecrated life can make a specific contribution to the Church. Consecrated life is helping the Church to discover ways to proclaim God's mercy, ways to overcome a worldly

spirit, ways to give witness to a more fraternal lifestyle, ways to move out to the peripheries, ways to give preference to being with and accompanying people on their journey through life, ways of living a simple lifestyle and ways of serving those who are poor.

The language of Pope Francis is our language: simple, direct, understandable. It is the language of the people and therefore, it is a Christian language. He speaks to and guides the Church not just from the perspective of his role in the Church but more importantly he does this with his person, with his presence. He reveals himself as one who is close to God and his humanity reveals to us a God who is close to all people, but especially those excluded from participation in society. Francis' style is spontaneous and direct, not programmed or formal. He lives what he believes.

Pope Francis expects much from consecrated life and he sends us forth "to awaken the world". For some the image of the healing of the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17) seems out of place in today's world and yet consecrated life runs the risk of becoming crippled as a result of its isolation. Today, the Pope calls the members of religious institutes to a new and committed responsibility. Like the blind man from Jericho, we are invited to rise up and to walk.

2. Spiritual experience of the consecrated life

Pope Francis invites us to return to our first love, to give a primary place to God in our life, to follow Christ, to give witness to the gospel. The identity of the consecrated life is to be a sign and a reflection of Christ's life. The Pope insists on cultivating an intimacy with Christ, recognizing that such a relationship changes everything. The Pope's writings are a source of inspiration and encouragement for conversion; they provide assistance to the Superiors General; the Pope invites us to live our lives from the perspective of this fundamental option of life. The spirituality that the Pope places before us is the concrete spirituality of daily life, a spirituality that is lived with simple and authentic gestures, gestures charged with love and tenderness. The Pope refers to a spirituality that places us in the midst of the real world and not in some parallel imaginary world. Such a spirituality is revealed in courtesy toward others, in the manner in which we greet one another, ask permission, express our gratitude and ask to be excused... such spiritual experiences are not meant just for specialists in this area but are intended for everyone; they are a common and a popular reality. It is impossible to live the Christian life without a strong spirituality.

The Pope invites us to overcome the spirit of the world that is grounded in the search for power and privilege, in manifestations of prestige and superiority and ostentation and pride, in a desire for positions of prominence, in climbing the ladder of success, in a hunger for

money and comfort and ease. The concrete signs that indicate that one has engaged in the struggle to overcome that spirit are simplicity, humility, poverty, moderation and authenticity.

The Pope insists on spiritual discernment as an attitude toward life. Such an attitude involves developing an ability as a spiritual guide and being attentive to what is happening in one's surroundings, thus giving credence to his belief that reality is more important than ideas. Discernment helps members of consecrated life to listen, interpret situations, and point out alternatives that prove to be prophetic. Discernment leads us to the conversion that is demanded of us as a result of the freedom that has been bestowed on us through the "exodus event".

All of this allows the Holy Spirit to be free and creative and allows us to be open to God's surprises. At times there is a tendency in the Church "to domesticate" the Spirit. Yet if we are open to the Spirit then we must also allow ourselves to be surprised by God and this means that we must allow our own lives to be a surprise. The fruit of such openness to the Spirit is revealed in our attention to others, especially our attention to unexpected and/or inopportune visitors. The fruit of that openness to the Spirit is also manifested by maintaining calmness in the midst of unforeseen situations and by maintaining a joyful disposition.

3. Building up the fraternal life through means of the consecrated life

The Pope insists on the fact that we, as religious, ought to collaborate in building up the Church as a *house and school of communion*. The Pope's ability to listen to and to accept advice from others is an encouragement for the Superiors General to build up the community. It is more important to care for the person than to provide for the organization and its structures. It is most important to care for all people, especially young people, the elderly and the infirm.

The *service of authority* in consecrated life is to gaze upon the cross of Christ and to serve even when that involves the offering of one's own life. Patience is a virtue that superiors need in order to build up community. The ability of those who exercise the service of authority to recognize themselves as sinful and with limitations facilitates the building up of a fraternal life and also facilitates fraternal correction. One must know how to speak to the heart of one's brothers and sisters: *cor ad cor loquitur*.

The *culture of the encounter* ought to promote communication. For this to happen a mystique of fraternity and a spirituality of communion are necessary... these in turn will facilitate a sharing of life and a sharing of one's experiences, a sharing of true friendship and dialogue, acceptance of differences, an ability to overcome divisions and

to engage in a search for reconciliation, an openness to the possibility of fraternal correction. Without an *encounter* it is impossible to travel through life as brothers and sisters.

The witness of fraternity in consecrated life is the first service of the mission. This demands that we work together, that we plan and evaluate as members of a team. Fraternity implies an ability to reach out to others in a common apostolate. Fraternity that is learned and built up in the community reaches out and ultimately becomes communion/union with the laity who share our spirit and mission, communion/union with the local church, a network of communion that extends to people living in the same area. Such fraternity implies the possibility of establishing new relationships, mutual relationships.

We have not been *formed in fraternity*: that requires time, commitment, proper attitudes and abilities. The religious community is an *apostolic community* and our conversations often revolve around our apostolic ministry... but we must also admit that we frequently have time to create fraternal bonds. Pope Francis (look at his lifestyle in Saint Martha's House) teaches us the importance of community and of relationships. The fifteen diseases of the Roman Curia see https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html could also be applied to the General Councils of our congregations. We must overcome gossip and slander.

4. The service of consecrated life on behalf of the mission

Pope Francis invites us to engage in our mission and to put aside those structures that do not respond to present day demands. We are to avoid the danger of identifying the mission with our works. The Pope evangelizes with gestures and words. He knows how to be with people because he views the *encounter* as a privileged means of evangelization. Francis invites us to go to those places where we will encounter the most fragile people in the world... and there we are exhorted to heal them with the medicine of acceptance and mercy.

The charism is not packaged or bottled and thus preserved; it must be frequently renewed. The spirit of the origins of an institute cannot be viewed as encompassing the totality of the charism. The charism has to be developed and implies growth but there can also be a sclerosis and a decline. Nonetheless, we are invited to give new life to the charism, to reach out, to put behind us our habitual routines and to go beyond our acquired positions.

This tension between pastoral ministry, community life and prayer can only be overcome through a *mystique of service* and a spirituality of apostolic mission. When this occurs the members are able to live in union with one another and in harmony with the identity of conse-

crated life. For this to happen we need to build up communities for the mission that do not close in upon themselves, communities for the mission whose members are able to put aside their own comfort and thus allow themselves to be questioned by the needs of the people.

Witness is a fundamental form of service on behalf of the mission. Pope Francis invites us to reveal the fact that it is possible to live the gospel on a daily basis and in the midst of our daily life. In this way the gospel becomes contagious and attractive. *It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but "by attraction"* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #14). Witness that rises up from the depths of the interior, witness that is beautiful and creative makes consecrated life visible and meaningful... the variety of its forms gives witness to the richness of the gospel.

Members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life should place themselves in situations of the greatest and most urgent need, especially among those who are most poor. The movement toward the peripheries gives new meaning to consecrated life and implies the need for reinvention. Members of religious congregations must go out to the peripheries and become involved with the laity and young people and families. It is often difficult to find confreres who are willing to move out from their comfort zones and minister to people on the peripheries. Today religious life is maintaining the western churches and is creating inter-cultural communities.

The member of the institutes of consecrated life are called to situations of lesser security, called to live closer to people, called to embrace an ethic of compassion and relatedness which involves listening to people, allowing the humanness of people to question us, being slow to propose and define moral behavior. We are to identify ourselves with Christ's way of ministering, a style of life that gives new meaning to the encounter between people and that fills our own lives with joy and meaning.

5. The encouragement of the General Council regarding the life of the Province

The challenge of this call is to participate fully in the renewal of the process of evangelization and this, in turn, should lead the members of the institutes of consecrated life to develop new strategic plans. This is a call to develop a "spiritual" approach in order to confront the challenges and the risks of present day evangelization. It is an invitation to develop a creative spirituality that is grounded on the hope for communion. It is a spirituality derived from the generous gift of self and from the courage to accept risks (preferring to accept defeat rather than embrace the false security of immobility).

[A] *Some final observations*

- The diversity of institutional forms, the history and the traditions of Institutes and the diversity of its organizational modalities resulting from the number of members that belong to the institute should make each person question himself in a different manner.
- Nevertheless, it is also recognized that an historical process has led to a very clear autonomy of provinces with regard to the central government. On the one hand, this has been determined by the need for a central government that is more charismatic and inspiring, but it also reveals the risk of fragmenting the unity of the institute.
- Various experiments have been undertaken in order “to reduce the distance” between the central and the provincial offices: meetings of the general council with the provincials, meetings of the general council with the provincial councils of a region, participation of the general councilors in the gatherings of a province (retreats, assemblies, etc.), organization of thematic forums, and international meetings and collaboration.
- Value has been placed on various forms of communication including utilizing modern technology in this area. At the same time, primary importance must always be given to a personal relationship with the confreres and with provincial superiors.
- If it is true that the “messenger is the message”, it is obvious that unity and co-responsibility experienced and lived by the members of the General Council will become a point of reference for the Provincial Council and a model for the life of the institute.

[B] *Present day priorities for the members of the general council of the institute*

- To guard and to insure the growth of a sense of belonging to the Institute as an international community, and to do this through maintaining a focus on the charism (or as Pope Francis reminds us, “the whole is more important than the part”).
- To give priority to the building up of a community spirit among the distinct parts, always respecting, however, the autonomy and the differences present in those sectors. The various forms of autonomy ought to serve the communion of the body.
- To build up a culture of encounter by maintaining an open and permanent dialogue with the provinces (especially, Visitors and their Councils).
- To keep the vision alive; to help the members read and interpret the present moment in light of inspiration provided by provincial

and general assemblies. Thus, the institute is able to offer its charism and its mission as a service to the Church and the world through its unique perspective as an institute with an international character.

- To encourage provinces to reach out and extend themselves: to courageously look beyond merely sustaining their existence and to persevere by embarking on new paths, despite the fragility of its resources.
- To help the members read and interpret the present information and to then project themselves into the future as a result of a clearer, global, transparent understanding of the available resources, thus promoting and strengthening co-responsibility.
- To promote and sustain new projects on the peripheries, and to do so with the participation of the provinces.
- To always make more visible and effective the sharing of the goods of the institute: ideas, personnel, financial resources, etc.
- To give prominence to the international character of the institute as the globalization of fraternity.
- To offer unified lines of initial and on-going formation.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.