

General Assembly of the Canadian Religious Conference
(Montreal, May 26-29, 2016)
Address of H.E. Luigi Bonazzi, Apostolic Nuncio

My Dear Religious,

Your General Assembly which brings all of you together every two years, is for me, a much anticipated gathering; a much desired and important gathering. It allows me, in fact, to meet and connect with and through you, all the consecrated men and women of Canada; connecting with all the members of your respective communities who enrich the Church of Christ that is in Canada with your various charisms and through your services and ministries.

I greet you with affection and I thank the Lord for who you are, and for what you do, within the Church and for the world.

Looking at you today, the first thing that spontaneously arises is my desire to share with you two personal “preferences” one could say – of Pope Francis.

The first preference is for women religious: “What would the Church be without nuns?”¹ “What would the Church be lacking if there were no longer women religious? May would be missing on the day of Pentecost! There is no Church without Mary! There is no Pentecost without Mary!”²

The second preference is for consecrated persons of advanced age. Says Pope Francis: “I’ll tell you something. I so enjoy when I come across those elderly women and men religious with eyes that shine, because they have the flame of spiritual life alight. It hasn’t gone out, that flame has not gone out! Go forth today, each day, and keep working and look to tomorrow with hope, always ask the Lord to send us new vocations, so our work of consecration can go forward. Memory: do not forget the first call! Daily work and then the hope of going forward and sowing well, so that others who come after us can receive the legacy that we shall leave them.”³

In preparing for this meeting I asked myself: What is it that I could say to the consecrated men and women of Canada? Frankly, I have already been able to share some things with you during the Year of Consecrated Life and on the occasion of visits and meetings. I think, for example, of the meeting of the “Benjamins of the Consecrated Life” last November at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, and visits – which I would like to do more frequently – to your houses and your communities.

¹ Extemporaneous address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016

² Address of Pope Francis to the International Union of Superior Generals (UISG), May 12, 2016

³ Comments of Pope Francis, Conclusion of Mass, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2016.

Ultimately, because I do not represent myself but represent, notwithstanding my limitations, the person and pastoral ministry of the Pope, the Successor of Peter, I thought that the most easy thing for me and the most useful for you, would be to call to mind the ‘three words’ that Pope Francis bequeathed to you at the conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life. I will accompany them with a few brief reflections.

The first word is that of **prophecy**. You know that the favorite image of Pope Francis to define the identity of a consecrated person is that of a prophet: “Religious people are prophets.”⁴ “What prophecy does the Church and the world expect from you? You are called, first of all, to proclaim with your life, even before your words, the reality of God: to speak God. If at times he is rejected or marginalized or ignored, we must ask ourselves whether perhaps we have not been transparent enough to his Face, showing our own instead. The Face of God is that of a Father “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103 [102]:8). In order to make him known it is important to have a personal relationship with him; and for this it takes the capacity to adore him, to cultivate friendship with him day after day, through a heart of heart conversation in prayer, especially in silent adoration.”⁵

I perceive in these words a faithful echo of the fundamental points of the “pastoral program” that Pope St. John Paul II gave the Church when it entered the Third Millennium: “No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a “new program”. The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem.”⁶

My dear religious: the more you live faithfully, preserve, deepen and develop your “charisma”, that is to say, that particular “*experience of the Spirit*” that your Founders transmitted to you (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 11), the more you will ‘speak’ God and the more you ‘will make Him known’. It is precisely through these “charisms” that the Holy Spirit enlivens the Church and transforms humanity. Your founders, the saints, are the true artisans of authentic human progress. “Remember, my spiritual director would tell me during my years in seminary, that only saints build up the Church and humanize the world.” This is what you can and should do, as well!

“People seem to live ignoring the supernatural realities, indifferent to the question of salvation – so taught Blessed Ildefonso Schuster, a Benedictine, and a great Archbishop of Milan

⁴ Interview with Pope Francis by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, September 19, 2013

⁵ Written Address of Pope Francis at the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016

⁶ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29

(1929-1954) – But if an authentic saint, alive or dead, passes by, all will flock to see him on his way.”

We can ask ourselves this question: if today the Founders of your Congregations returned and visited your communities, would they recognize themselves in them? Would they rejoice in seeing that the work they started has grown and that you are doing “even greater works” (John 14:12)? Dear women and men religious, are you conscious of the “spiritual energy” that your Founders have placed into your hands? “Energy” capable of igniting in many hearts the light of faith, fueling the fervor of charity, and sustaining the strength of hope?

The second word that Pope Francis has given you is that of **proximity**. “God, through Jesus, made himself close to every man and every woman. He shared the joy of the spouses at Cana in Galilee and the anguish of the widow of Nain; he entered the house of Jarius, touched by death, and in the house of Bethany, perfumed with nard; he took sickness and suffering upon himself, until giving his life as a ransom for all. Following Christ means going there where he has gone; taking upon oneself, as a Good Samaritan, the wounded whom we meet on the street; going in search of the lost sheep. Being like Jesus, close to the people, sharing with them their joys and their sorrows; showing, with our love, the paternal face of God and the maternal caress of the Church. May no one ever feel distant, detached, closed and therefore barren. Each of you is called to serve your brothers and sisters, following your own charism: some by praying, some through catechesis, some through teaching, some by caring for the sick or the poor, some by announcing the Gospel, some by performing various works of mercy. The important thing is not living for oneself, as Jesus did not live for himself, but for the Father and for us.”⁷

Two questions.

The first: “Who is the first neighbor for a religious?” You know the answer: it is the brother or sister within your community; these are your first neighbors. For this reason, allow me to call you to compete in love, seeing your brother or sister within your community as a person who belongs to you: I am in this sister; this sister is in me; this brother lives in me; I live in this brother (cf. Romans 12:10).⁸ Living ‘proximately’, you will make room for God’s presence among you, and then you will truly be prophets.

My second question is: are we spiritually and materially close to people? Are our lives and our religious houses close to the standard of people or are we far away? So then, let us transform our houses and our communities so as to live a genuine ‘proximity’. And verify afterwards, where we are in this regard.

⁷Written Address of Pope Francis for the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016

⁸ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43

Now we come to the third word of Pope Francis, which harmonizes well with the theme of your Assembly: **hope**. “In bearing witness to God and his merciful love, with the grace of Christ you can instill hope in this humanity of ours marked by various reasons for anguish and fear and at times tempted to be discouraged. You can make felt the renewing power of the Beatitudes, of honesty, of compassion; the value of goodness, of the simple, essential, meaningful life. You can nourish hope in the Church. I think for example, of ecumenical dialogue. The meeting a year ago among consecrated people of various Christian confessions was a beautiful innovation, which deserves to be carried on. The charismatic and prophetic witness of the life of consecrated people, in its various forms, can help to recognize all of us more united and foster full communion.”⁹

Of course, a strong temptation against hope might arise – and sometimes arises – due to the lack of vocations, which is a “problem of vital and fundamental importance for the community of believers and for all humanity.”¹⁰ A community without vocations is indeed “like a family without children.”¹¹ Consequently, “we must consider as impoverished, an ecclesial community deprived of the witness of consecrated persons.”¹²

At this point, the painful question arises again: “Why are there so few vocations?” We could of course reply: because even today, more than ever, there is one who just got married, one who bought a field, and one trying a pair of oxen (Luke 14:18-20); in other words, the lack of vocations is due to the refusal or polite excuses given by the person who is actually called. This is true! But is it not also true that vocations diminish because the call from our side is soft, weak? We cannot simply say that young people lack generosity. It must also be added that our life – religious or priestly – is perhaps, not always lived out with joy, enthusiasm, the fullness of love vis-à-vis the cross, with the total gift of self, with the brightness of our example, with the strength of unity and love, and with the certainty that living in community is the way by which we are sanctified, and thus, truly human.

About hope and on this theme of vocations, let me repeat what I wrote to you during the Year of Consecrated Life: “As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake... He said to them: “Come follow me...” (Mark 1:16-17). It is Jesus who calls. The Lord is the author of a vocation. Wherever He is, the call resonates. So if no one comes, one can only wonder and ask: “But is he there?” In other words, one has to wonder if Jesus is present in us and within our communities, because we know that where the Lord is present, He works, He calls. It is true that problems are not lacking; it is also possible that we have passed through a testing time... but if nobody comes, it probably means there is something to consider from our side. Because if Jesus is there, he makes things happen.

⁹ Written Address of Pope Francis for the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016

¹⁰ Pope St. John Paul II, Message for the 21st World Day of Vocations

¹¹ Pope St. John Paul II, Message for the 23rd World Day of Vocations

¹² Pope St. John Paul II, Message for the 24th World Day of Vocations

Jesus in each of us, Jesus among us – that is to say – in the community: this is the true and the only net that brings forth vocations.”

This is why the Church asks you, persons of consecrated life, to be the “experts of communion” (*Vita Consecrata*, 46). That is, “to grow the spirituality of communion” above all “**in**” your communities, and “**between**” the different Religious Families, then “**to**” the entire fraternal community and to all humanity. So with unanimous charity, you will unite your voice to the chorus and confident invocation of the Church: Maranà-tha, Come Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:20). You will attract new vocations and, like the disciples on the lake, you will have “one hundred and fifty-three large fish” (John 21:11).

It is communion, always best lived and constantly renewed in your communities which is both the source and the sure hope of new vocations. Prayer also: it is as important as the first. An insistent and trusting prayer like that of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who cried with her whole heart to God: “I want a son!” (cf. 1 Sam. 1:9-18). “I ask you: does your heart, facing this drop in vocations, pray with this intensity? Are you crying out to the Lord: ‘Our congregation needs sons, our congregation needs daughters...’? The Lord, who has been so generous, will not fail in his promise. But we have to ask him for it. We have to knock at the door of his heart.”¹³

I am going to conclude once again with the words of Pope Francis and I would like each and every one of you to welcome them as words addressed to you personally: “Dear brothers and sisters, in your daily apostolate, do not let yourselves be conditioned by age or by number. What counts most is the capacity to repeat the initial “yes” to the call of Jesus who continues to make himself heard, in an ever new way, in every season of life. His call and our response keep our hope alive. Prophecy, proximity, hope. By living this way, you will have joy in your heart, the distinctive sign of the followers of Jesus and more so of consecrated people. Your life will be more attractive to so many men and women, by the glory of God and through the beauty of the Bride of Christ, the Church.”¹⁴

Finally, do not forget to bring the greetings, affection, esteem and gratitude of Pope Francis – and mine – to your sisters and your brothers. Thank you!!

¹³Extemporaneous address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016

¹⁴ Written Address of Pope Francis for the Jubilee for Consecrated Life, February 1, 2016