

Pope Francis on Religious Life

Only a few months after his election, Pope Francis gave a wide-ranging interview to Antonio Spadaro, editor-in-chief of the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. It was published simultaneously in six languages and caused a sensation. In November of that same year, he met with the Union of Major Superiors of Men gathered in Rome for their 82nd General Assembly. As we have now come to expect, it was an informal and wide-ranging conversation, devoid of the usual trappings of a papal audience. It concluded with his announcement that 2015 would be dedicated to the consecrated life. Almost exactly a year later, Francis issued an apostolic letter to all consecrated persons setting out the aims for this year-long celebration. Together, these three documents provide us with important insights into his conception of religious life in the Church today.

He is the first member of a religious order elected to the papacy since Gregory XVI in 1831. As a former Jesuit provincial and subsequently as an auxiliary and then residential bishop in Buenos Aires, he brings a particular understanding of the dynamics of religious life and its relationship to the Church.

Called to Live the Charism of Prophecy

A preliminary question concerns the distinctive character of the consecrated life. *Lumen Gentium* forcefully taught that all Christians are called to holiness through a deeper relationship with Christ. For Francis, the core element that distinguishes religious life as a special vocation is its prophetic dimension. Consecrated men and women are called to live the charism of prophecy:

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. 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 powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side. (Pope Francis. Apostolic letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life. November 21, 2014. §2)

Prophecy carries within it a discomfiting element of public witness. As he pointed out to Spadaro, the prophetic dimension does not coincide with the hierarchical structure of the Church, and is occasionally even boisterous. “I do not know how to put it... Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say a mess.” (Interview with Pope Francis, August 19, 2013)

The ecclesial character of the consecrated life was addressed by Pope Francis when as an auxiliary bishop he made an intervention at the 1994 Synod on consecrated life: “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.” (J.M. Bergoglio, *Intervention at the Synod on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World*, XVI General Congregation, October 13, 1994)

The relationship between the ecclesial and prophetic dimension of the consecrated life is an area that may well require further reflection: How is religious life at the same time a fully ecclesial reality and something that provides an evangelical critique of the Church's life and mission?

The Periphery a Privileged Setting

The importance of prophecy necessarily leads to our next question: Where does one need to go to live a prophetic vocation? For Francis, the periphery constitutes the privileged setting for consecrated women and men. I would suggest that this has become one of the central themes of his pontificate:

I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the center but rather from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical question... (Pope Francis. 'Wake up the world.' Meeting with 82nd General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General of religious men, November 29, 2013)

A religious is necessarily sent out from a place of relative comfort and security to the existential and geographic periphery. For historical reasons religious often find themselves in positions of power and authority. A shift to the margins of society leads to greater clarity of vision and analysis not possible when one is at the center. Pope Francis suggests that the year of consecrated life calls us to a serious examination of conscience: "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." (Apostolic letter §5)

The periphery is both existential and geographical and constitutes a setting that privileges direct contact with the poor. It is the place that superiors should send their best and brightest members. Lest the challenging demands of ministry at the existential periphery become onerous, Francis reminds us that a true ecclesial witness has a particular character: "...where there are religious there is joy" (Apostolic letter §1). However, he is not unaware of the real challenges to joy in the lives of religious today. As he put it rather bluntly: "When there's no joy in the life of priest or nun, 'people can smell it'." (Pope Francis. Address to priests and religious in Naples, March 21, 2015)

Commitment to Common Life

The other distinctive witness of consecrated persons consists in their commitment to the common life. Francis proposes that religious should be "experts in communion." There will always be conflicts in any form of common living, but "...a life without conflicts is not life" ("Wake up the world"). Here again, on the character of our life in common, there is matter for an examination of conscience: "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." (Apostolic letter §5)

Embracing the Future with Hope

The apostolic letter calls us to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope. Our final question: What will the future hold for consecrated women and men? Francis cites a homily of his predecessor Pope Benedict published only nine days before he announced his resignation in 2013.

Do not join the *prophets of doom* who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light... (Pope Benedict. Homily on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2013)

In his opening address to the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Pope John XXIII used the same expression to describe the pessimists of his age. For all the challenges we face, together Benedict and Francis are reminding us that religious life remains a place of hope and promise. In a short phrase that brings to mind *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis insists that Gospel joy is only discovered in service to others: “You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love” (Apostolic letter §4).

I am writing this in Rimouski, Quebec, following the beatification ceremony for Elizabeth Turgeon. Bringing together a small group of like-minded women, she began a mission of Christian education for young children amid conditions of extreme poverty in rural Quebec. Dogged by ill health, she died in 1881 less than two years after she took vows to found the community that later became the Sisters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary. Her life incarnated everything that Francis describes: service to the poor, a commitment to the common life, a joyful prophetic witness. In this year dedicated to the consecrated life, we can have no better intercessor than this latest Canadian to join the ranks of the blessed.

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