



## Year of Consecrated Life

Dear consecrated

I am writing to you as the successor of Peter, whom the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of confirming his brethren in the faith (cf. Lc. 22, 32), and I address you as your brother, consecrated to God as you are.

Let us thank the Father, who has called to follow Jesus in full adherence to his Gospel and the service of the Church, and who has poured in our hearts the Holy Spirit that gives us joy and makes us bear witness to the world his love and his mercy.

I have decided to summon a year of consecrated life echoing the feelings of many and the congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, on the occasion of the 50 anniversary of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* about the Church, which in the sixth chapter deals with the religious, as well as the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* about the renewal of religious life. This year will begin on November 30th, first Sunday of Advent, and will end with the feast of the presentation of the Lord, on February 2, 2016.

After listening to the congregation for the institutes of consecrated life and the societies of apostolic life, I have indicated as objectives for this year the same ones that Saint John Paul II proposed to the Church at the beginning of the third millennium, in some way taking up what already had said in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: "You not only have a glorious history to remember and tell, but a great story to build. Put your eyes in the future, towards which the spirit drives you to continue doing great things to you" (n. 110).

### **Objectives for the Year of Consecrated Life.**

The first objective is looking to the past with gratitude. Every institute comes from

a rich charismatic history. In its origins, it is made present the action of God who, in his spirit, calls some people to follow closely to Christ, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read with the eyes of faith the signs of the times, to respond creatively to the needs of the Church. The experience of the beginnings has gone on growing and developing, incorporating other members in new geographical and cultural contexts, giving life to new ways of acting the charism, to new initiatives, and forms of apostolic charity. It's like the seed that becomes a tree that expands its branches.

It is opportune for each charismatic family to remember this year its beginnings and its historical development, to give thanks to God, who has given the Church so many gifts, that beautify and prepare it for all good works (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12).

To pay attention to the story itself is essential to keep the identity alive and to strengthen the unity of the family and the sense of belonging of its members. It's not a question of archaeology or cultivating useless nostalgia, but of traversing the path of past generations to rediscover in him the inspiring spark, the ideals, the projects, the values that have driven them, starting from the founders and foundresses and of the first communities. It is also a way to become aware of how the charism has lived through the times, the creativity it has deployed, the difficulties it has had to face, and how it was overcome. Inconsistencies can be discovered, the result of human weakness, and sometimes even the forgetfulness of some essential aspects of charisma. Everything is instructive and becomes at the same time a call to the conversion. Going through the story itself is praising God and thanking him for all his gifts.

We give special thanks for the last 50 years from the Second Vatican Council, which has represented a "blow" of the Holy Spirit for the whole Church. Thanks to it, the consecrated life has set in motion a fruitful process of renewal, with its lights and shadows, has been a time of grace, marked by the presence of the Spirit.

That this year of consecrated life is also an occasion to confess humbly, and at the same time with great confidence in the God of love (cf. 1 Jn 4.8), own fragility, and to live it as an experience of the merciful love of the Lord; an occasion to proclaim to the world with enthusiasm and to testify with the joy of the holiness and vitality that there are in most of those who have been called to follow Christ in consecrated life.

This year we are also called to living the present with passion. The grateful memory of the past impels us, listening attentively to what the Spirit says to the Church of today, to put into practice in a more and more profound way the constitutive aspects of our consecrated life.

From the beginning of the first monasticism to the current "new communities", all forms of consecrated life have been born from the call of the Spirit to follow Christ as taught in the Gospel (cf. *perfect Caritatis*, 2). For the founders and foundresses,

the rule at all has been the Gospel, any other rule wanted to be just an expression of the gospel and an instrument to live it in fullness. His Ideal was Christ, to join him totally until he could say with Paul: "For me, life is Christ" (Flp 1.21). The vows made sense only to make this passionate love.

The question we have to ask ourselves this year is whether, and how, we let ourselves be challenged by the gospel; if this is the Vademecum for everyday life and for the choices we are called to take. The gospel is demanding and needs to be lived with radicality and sincerity. It is not enough to read it (although reading and studying are still extremely important), is not enough to meditate (and we do it with joy every day). Jesus asks us to put it into practice, to live his words.

Jesus, we have yet to ask, is it the first and only love, as we have proposed when we profess our vows? Only if so, can we and must love in truth and mercy to every person we find in our way, because we will have learned from him what love is and how to love we will know how to love because we have the same heart.

Our founders and foundresses have felt in themselves the compassion that seized Jesus by seeing the multitude as stray sheep, without a shepherd. Just as Jesus, moved by this compassion, offered his word, cured the sick, gave bread to eat, delivered his own life, so also the founders have been put to the service of humanity wherever the Spirit sent them, and in the most diverse ways: intercession, gospel preaching, catechesis, education, service to the poor, the sick... the fantasy of charity has not known limits and has been able to open countless paths to bring the breath of the gospel to the cultures and the various areas of society.

The year of consecrated life calls us on fidelity to the mission that has been entrusted to us. Do our ministries, our works, our presences, respond to what the spirit has asked of our founders, are appropriate to address their purpose in society, and in today's Church? Is there anything we need to change? do we have the same passion for our people, are we close to him to share his sorrows and joys, as well as to truly understand his needs and to offer our contribution to respond to them? "The same generosity and selflessness that impelled the founders -said St. John Paul II- must move you, your spiritual children, to keep your charisms alive, which, with the same force of the spirit that has aroused them, continue to enriched and adapt, without losing its genuine character, to be in the service of the church and to bring to fulfillment the implantation of his kingdom. (1)

When the memory of the origins comes to light another dimension of the project of consecrated life. The founders and foundresses were fascinated by the unity of the twelve around Jesus, of the communion that characterized the first community of Jerusalem. When they have given life to the community themselves, all of them have tried to reproduce that evangelical model, to be one heart and one soul, to enjoy the presence of the Lord (cf. Perfect Caritatis, 15).

To live the present with passion is to become "experts in communion", "witnesses and artificers of that" project of communion "that constitutes the top of the history of man according to God." (2). In a society of confrontation, of difficult coexistence between the different cultures, of the arrogance with the weakest, of the inequalities, we are called to offer a concrete model of community that, through the recognition of the dignity of each person and of sharing the gift that each one carries with him, allows to live in fraternal relations.

Thirst, then, women and men of communion, make yourselves present with a decision where there are differences and tensions and be a credible sign of the presence of the spirit, which infuses in the hearts the passion that all are one (cf. Jn 17.21). Live the mystical meeting: the ability to listen, to listen to other people. The ability to look together for the way, the method (3), leaving you enlightened by the love relationship that goes through the three divine people (cf. 1 Jn 4.8) as a model of any interpersonal relationship.

Embracing the future with hope. He wants to be the third target this year. We know the difficulties facing consecrated life in its various forms: declining vocations and aging, especially in the western world, economic problems as a result of the serious global financial crisis, the challenges of internationality and globalization, the dangers of relativism, marginalization and social irrelevance... precisely in these uncertainties, which we share with many of our contemporaries, our hope rises, the fruit of faith in the Lord of history, which continues to repeat: "Do not be afraid, that I am with you" (Jr1.8).

The hope that we are talking about is not based on the numbers or the works, but on the one in whom we have placed our trust (cf. 2 Tm 1.12) and for whom "nothing is impossible" (Lc 1.37). This is the hope that does not disappoint and that will allow the consecrated life to continue writing a great story in the future, which we must keep looking, aware that toward him is where the Holy Spirit leads us to continue doing great things with us.

We must not give in to the temptation of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in our strengths. Examine the horizons of life and the present moment in vigilant. With Benedict XVI, I repeat: "Do not join the prophets of misfortunes that proclaim the end of the nonsense of the consecrated life in the Church of our day; rather, put on Jesus Christ and carry the weapons of light - as Saint Paul exhorts (see Rm 13,11-14) - staying awake and vigilant. " (4)

Let us continue and always re-start our journey with confidence in the Lord.

I'm addressing you all, young people. Thirst the present living actively within your institutes, offering a decisive contribution with the freshness and generosity of your choice. You are at the same time the future because soon you will be called to take in your hands the guide of animation, training, service, and mission. This year you will have a role in the dialogue with the generation that precedes you. In

fraternal communion, you will be able to enrich yourself with your experience and wisdom, and at the same time you will have the opportunity to propose again the ideals that you have lived in your beginnings, to offer the strength and freshness of your enthusiasm, and thus to develop together new ways of living the gospel and answers more and more appropriate to the demands of the testimony and the announcement.

I am glad to know that you will have opportunities to meet among yourselves, young people from different institutes. May the meeting be made the usual way of communion, of mutual support, of unity.

### **Expectations for the year of consecrated life**

What do I expect in particular of this year of grace of consecrated life?

That is always true what I once said: "Where there are religious there is joy". We are called to experiment and prove that God can fill our hearts and make us happy, without needing to seek our happiness elsewhere; that the true fraternity lived in our communities feeds our joy; that our total dedication to the service of the church, the families, the youth, the elderly, the poor, makes us as people and gives fulfillment to our life.

Let us not see sad faces, dissatisfied people, because "sad follow-up is a sad follow-up". We too, like all other men and women, feel the difficulties, the nights of the spirit, the disappointment, the sickness, the loss of strength due to old age. Precisely in this, we should find the "perfect joy", learn to recognize the face of Christ, which was done in all similar to us, and feel therefore the joy of knowing us like him, who has not refused to submit to the cross for our love.

In a society that holds the cult of efficiency, the plethoric state of health, success, and marginalizing the poor and excludes the "losers", we can witness through our lives the truth of the words of Scripture: «When I am weak, then I am strong » (2 Co 12.10).

We may well apply to consecrated life what I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, citing a homily of Pope Benedict XVI: The church does not grow by proselytism, but by attraction (n. 14). Yes, consecrated life does not grow when we organize beautiful vocational campaigns, but when young people who know us are attracted to us, when they see us, happy men and women. Nor does its apostolic efficacy depend on the efficiency and power of its means. It is your life that must speak, a life in which the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and of following Christ are transparent.

I repeat to you what I said the last vigil of Pentecost to the ecclesial movements: The value of the Church, fundamentally, is to live the Gospel and bear witness to our faith. The church is the salt of the earth, it is the light of the world, it is called

to make present in the society the yeast of the Kingdom of God and it does above all with its testimony, the testimony of the fraternal love, of the solidarity, of the sharing (18 May 2013).

I hope that "wake the world" because the note that characterizes the consecrated life is the prophecy. As I said to the general superiors, "evangelical radicalism is not only of the religious: it is demanded of all. but the religious especially follow the Lord, prophetically". This is the priority that we are now asked: "To be prophets like Jesus has lived in this land... A religious should never renounce prophecy" (29 November 2013).

The prophet receives from God the ability to observe the history in which he lives and to interpret the events: it is like a sentry who watches at night and knows when the dawn comes (cf. Is 21,11-12). Meet God and meet the men and women, their brothers, and sisters. Is capable of discerning, and also of denouncing the evil of sin and injustices, because it is free, it must not be accountable to more masters than to God, it has no other interests but those of God. The prophet is generally on behalf of the poor and the helpless because he knows that God is on his side.

I hope that you will maintain the "utopias" alive, but that you know how to create "other places" where the evangelical logic of the gift, of fraternity, of the reception of diversity, of mutual love, is alive. Monasteries, communities, spirituality centers, cities, schools, hospitals, foster homes and all those places that charity and charismatic creativity have founded, and that they'll be founded with greater creativity yet, there must be more and more yeast for a gospel-inspired society, the "city on a mountain" that speaks of the truth and power of the words of Jesus.

Sometimes, as happened to Elijah and Jonah, you may be tempted to flee, to avoid the mission of the prophet, because is too demanding, because is tired, disappointed in the results. But the prophet knows he's never alone. Also to us, as to Jeremiah, God assures us: "Do not be afraid, that I am with you to deliver you" (1.8).

Religious, like all other consecrated persons, are called to be "experts in communion". I hope, therefore, that the "spirituality of communion", indicated by St. John Paul II, come true and that you are on the front lines to welcome "The great challenge before us" in this new millennium: "To make the church the house and the school of communion".(5) I am sure that this year you will work seriously so that the ideal of fraternity pursued by the founders and foundresses grows at the most diverse levels, as in concentric circles.

Communion is practiced primarily in the respective communities of the institute. In this regard, I invite you to reread my frequent interventions in which I do not tire of repeating that criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, antagonisms, are attitudes that have no right to live in our homes. But, sitting on this premise, the path of charity that opens before us is almost infinite, for it is about seeking the welcome and

reciprocal attention, of practicing the communion of material and spiritual goods, the fraternal correction, the respect for the weakest... It is "the mystic of living together" that makes our life "a holy pilgrimage". (6) We also have to ask ourselves about the relationship between people from different cultures, taking into account that our communities become increasingly international. How can everyone express themselves, be accepted with their specific gifts, be fully stewarded?

I also hope that the communion between the members of the various institutes will grow. Could this year not be the occasion to go out with more value of the confines of the institute itself to develop together, at the local and global level, common projects of formation, evangelization, social interventions? This will enable a true prophetic testimony to be offered more effectively. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations is a path of hope. No one builds the future isolated, nor only with its forces, but recognizes itself in the truth of a communion that always opens up to encounter, dialogue, listening, mutual help, and preserves us from the sickness of self-referentiality.

At the same time, consecrated life is called to seek a sincere synergy between all vocations in the Church, beginning with the priests and the laity, as well as to "foster the spirituality of communion, above all within it and, also, in the community Ecclesial, and beyond even its confines". (7)

I hope of you, moreover, what I ask of all the members of the church: to leave themselves to go to the existential peripheries. "Go to the whole world," was the last word Jesus addressed to his own, and he continues to direct us all today (cf. Mc 16.15). There is a whole humanity that expects: people who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without any future, sick and old abandoned, rich tired of goods and with an empty heart, men and women in search of a sense of life, thirsty for the divine...

Do not retreat in yourselves, do not let the small fights of home you starve, do not be prisoners of your problems. These will be resolved if you are going to help others solve their problems and announce the good news. You will find life-giving life, hope-giving hope, love love.

I hope of your concrete gestures of welcome to the refugees, of the closeness to the poor, of creativity in the catechesis, in the announcement of the gospel, in the initiation to the life of prayer. Therefore, I hope that the structures will be lightened, the large houses reused in favor of works more in line with the current needs of evangelization and of charity, the works are adapted to the new necessities.

I hope that every form of consecrated life is asked about what God and humanity today are asking for.

Monasteries and contemplative orientation groups could meet each other, or be in touch in some way, to exchange experiences on the life of prayer, on how to grow in communion with the whole Church, on how to support Christians persecuted, on how to welcome and accompany those who are in search of a more intense spiritual life or need moral or material support.

The same can be done by institutes dedicated to charity, teaching, the promotion of culture, those who are launched into the gospel announcement, or develop certain pastoral ministries, secular institutes in their capillary presence in the social structures. The fantasy of the Spirit has created forms of life and works so different that we cannot easily catalog or fit them into prefabricated schemes. I can't refer to each of the forms charismatic in particular. However, no one should avoid this year a serious verification of their presence in the life of the church and their way of responding to the continual and new questions that arise around us, to the cry of the poor.

Only with this attention to the needs of the world and with the meekness of the spirit, this year of consecrated life will be transformed into an authentic kairos, a time of God full of grace and transformation.

### **Horizons of the year of consecrated life**

1. With this letter, I address, in addition to the consecrated persons, to the laity who share with them ideas, spirit, and mission. Some religious institutes have a long tradition in this regard, others have more recent experience. Indeed, around each religious family, and also of the societies of apostolic life and the same secular institutes, there is a larger family, the "charismatic family", which comprises several institutes that are recognized in the same charism, and above all lay Christians who feel called, precisely in their lay condition, to participate in the same charismatic spirit.

I also encourage you, lay faithful, to live this year of consecrated life as a grace that can make you more aware of the gift received. Celebrate with the whole "family" to grow and respond to the calls of the Spirit in today's society. Sometimes, when the consecrated of various institutes meet each other this year, try to be present too, as an expression of the only gift of God, to know the experiences of other charismatic families, of the other groups, lay and enrich and help you reciprocally.

The Year of consecrated life not only affects the consecrated people but the whole Church. I, therefore, address all the Christian people, so that he may become increasingly aware of the gift of so many consecrated, heirs of great saints who have forged the history of Christianity. What would be the Church without Benedict and St. Basil, St. Augustine and St. Bernard, St. Francisco, and St. Domingo, without St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila, St. Angela Merici and St. Vincent de Paul? The list would be almost infinite, until St. John Bosco, the Blessed

Teresa of Calcutta. The Blessed Paul VI said: "Without this particular sign, the charity that encourages the whole church would run the risk of cooling down, the salvific paradox of the gospel of losing salt, the "salt" of the faith to dissolve in a world of secularization" ( Evangelica Testificatio, 3).

I, therefore, invite all the Christian communities to live this year, first of all giving thanks to the Lord and recognizing the memory of the gifts received, and which we still receive, through the holiness of the founders and foundresses, and the fidelity of so many consecrated to the own charism. I invite everyone to unite around the consecrated people, to rejoice with them, to share their difficulties, to collaborate with them as much as possible, to carry out their ministry and their works, which are also those of the whole Church. Let them feel the affection and warmth of all the Christian people.

I bless the Lord for the happy coincidence of the year of a life consecrated to the synod on the family. Family and consecrated life are vocations carrying wealth and grace for all, areas of humanization in the construction of vital relationships, places of evangelization. You can help each other.

With this letter, I dare to direct myself to the consecrated persons and the members of the fraternities and communities belonging to Churches of a tradition different from the Catholic. Monasticism is a heritage of the undivided Church, still very much alive in the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. In it, like other experiences after the time when the Church of the West was still united, similar initiatives have been inspired in the field of the ecclesial communities of the reform, which have continued to generate in their bosom other expressions of fraternal and service communities.

The congregation for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life has programmed initiatives to foster encounters between members belonging to the consecrated and fraternal life experiences of the various churches. I strongly encourage these meetings to grow mutual knowledge, esteem, mutual collaboration, so that the ecumenism of consecrated life is an aid in the broader project towards unity among all Churches.

Nor can we forget that the phenomenon of monastic life and other expressions of religious fraternity also exists in all the great religions. There is no shortage of experiences, also consolidated, of inter-monastic dialogue between the Catholic Church and some of the great religious traditions. I hope that the year of consecrated life will be the occasion to evaluate the way forward, to sensitize the people consecrated in this field, to ask us about new steps to give towards a reciprocal understanding deepening and for collaboration in many common areas of service to human life.

Walking together is always an enrichment, and it can open new ways to the relations between peoples and cultures, which in this period are plagued with

difficulties.

Finally, I address my brothers in the Episcopate. May this year be an opportunity to welcome cordially and joyfully consecrated life as a spiritual capital for the good of the whole body of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 43), and not just of religious families. "Consecrated life is a gift for the Church, born in the Church, grows in the church, is Church-oriented." (8). From here, as a gift to the Church, it is not an isolated or marginal reality, but it belongs intimately to it, it is in the heart of the Church as a decisive element of its mission, as it expresses the intimate nature of the Christian vocation and the tension of the whole Church, wife towards the union with the only husband; therefore, "he belongs without discussion to his life and his holiness" (*Ibid.*, 44).

In this context, I invite the ministers of the particular Churches to a special request to promote in their communities the different charisms, be they historical, be new charisms, holding, encouraging, helping in discernment, becoming close with tenderness and love to the situations of pain and weakness in which some consecrated persons may be found and, in particular, by enlightening with their teaching to the people of God the value of consecrated life, to make their beauty and holiness in the Church shine.

I commend Mary, the Virgin of listening and contemplation, the first disciple of her beloved Son, this year of consecrated life. To her, the Father's favorite daughter and clad in all the gifts of grace, we proceed as an unparalleled model of follow-up in the love of God and service to others.

Thankful from now with all of you for the gifts of grace and light with which the Lord wants to enrich us, I accompany everyone with the Apostolic Blessing.

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

Francisco

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