

Diocese of Trenton

Convocation on Consecrated Life

The Year of Consecrated Life: Pilgrimage for Religious in the 21st Century

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Sr. Sharon Euart, RSM

Introduction

When Pope Francis announced a year devoted to consecrated life on November 21, 2014, he issued an invitation to consecrated women and men to reflect upon our vocation, the experience of forms of consecrated life over the past 50 years since the Second Vatican Council, and where the council's call to renewal is leading us in the years ahead. In describing the aims for the Year of Consecrated Life in his apostolic letter "To All Consecrated Persons,"¹ Francis proposes the same as those that Saint John Paul II proposed to the whole Church at the beginning of the third millennium reiterating 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"²

We come together this morning for the annual Convocation for Consecrated Life for the Diocese of Trenton. I am grateful to be with you to speak about the vocation we share,

¹Francis, apostolic letter "To All Consecrated Persons," (November 21, 2014) 1, (Hereafter *ACP*).

² John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Vita Consecrata*](#), (March 25, 1996), n.110.

the option we have chosen to live our lives. In our time together, I would like to address the pilgrimage of consecrated persons in the 21st century by offering reflections on the three aims Pope Francis has named for the Year of Consecrated Life: to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope (*ACP*, Part 1).

Look to the Past with Gratitude

Pope Francis urges consecrated women and men to reflect on the origins and history of their respective institutes, both to thank God for his many gifts and to become more aware of how our charism has been lived through past generations, the vision that inspired our founders, the challenges they encountered, and the ways in which they responded to their call (*ACP*, I, 1).

By the start of the twentieth century, religious life had recovered an even greater vitality than before and was experiencing unprecedented growth. Religious life, just prior to the Second Vatican Council, in fact, was characterized by remarkable stability: membership was high, religious life was marked by standard patterns of external behavior, identity was clear, and the purpose of religious life was self-evident. Geographic expansion, while more modest than in the early decades of the century, continued to be evident. New communities of religious were established.³ The status and role of religious were clear. Their status was described as a way of perfection; their role was to devote themselves to the apostolate – prayer and teaching, nursing, and care of orphans and the elderly. The diversity in apostolates was extraordinary. The future seemed to be assured. To some, these years were "the best of times." But periods of such stability have been rare.

³See John Padberg, SJ, "Memory, Vision and Structure: Historical Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Life in the Church," in Daly, R. et al, eds. *Religious Life in the US Church: The New Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 77.

Religious life developed and religious institutes arose in response to social change in the Church and in the cultural and political worlds around it. In fact, the conditions and uncertainties about the future of religious life were indeed present even before Vatican II: concerns about declining numbers of vocations, aging and overworked religious, loss of authentic spiritual life, questions of identity, the relationship of religious to the local church, and the nature and exercise of authority were issues in the first half of the 20th century, not simply following Vatican II.⁴

Vatican Council II, almost fifty years after the introduction of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, shifted the emphasis on religious life from uniformity and conformity, which characterized the 1917 legislation, to the guidance of the Spirit and the charismatic aspect of the Christian life. The early drafts of the conciliar documents reflected the pre-conciliar ecclesiology in which the Church was viewed as the perfect society with clear ranks and states. Within this society, religious life was a "state of perfection," for those strong enough to obey the commandments and Christ's counsels. The focus was on individual perfection achieved through acts of penance and separation from the world.

The Council's debate on religious life focused on the place of religious in the Church rather than on their role in the Church, that is, whether religious life is a structure of the church or in the church.⁵ Many council fathers considered religious life not to be a constitutive element of the Church and, therefore, unnecessary to be included in such a listing in *Lumen gentium*. Tension and uncertainty led to the intervention of Pope Paul VI and the inclusion of a chapter in *Lumen gentium* entitled *De religiosis*, highlighting the teaching that religious life belongs to the charismatic structure of the Church, its life and

⁴Mary Ann Confoy, RSC, "Religious Life in the Vatican II Era: 'State of Perfection' of Living Charism," in ed. David G. Shultenover (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015) 393, quoted in Massimo Faggioli, "Ecclesiology of Vatican II as a Framework for the Future of Religious Life," address to the CMSM Assembly, August 7, 2015, Charlotte, NC., manuscript, 3.

⁵Joseph W. Tobin, CSsR, "A Great History Still to Be Accomplished? Prospects for Consecrated Life in the Church-*Communio*," *Origins* 44:15 (September 11, 2014) 256. See also Tobin, "How Did We Get Here? The Renewal of Religious Life in the Church Since Vatican II," in *A Future Built on Faith: Religious Life and the Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Gemma Simmonds, CJ (Dublin: Columba, 2014) 20

holiness. One of the many consequences of this action is that for the first time in the Church, an ecumenical council would treat religious life as a doctrinal issue and not simply as a disciplinary matter.⁶

The final drafts of *Perfectae caritatis* (PC 2) and the subsequent *motu proprio, Ecclesiae sanctae* (Part II), called for the adaptation and renewal of religious life which was to be centered on the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel and the spirit of the religious founder. This renewal was also to include an adjustment to the changed conditions of the time. There is no doubt that religious, especially women religious, took this call seriously, responding with zeal and generosity to the conciliar directives on renewal. Today, fifty years later, the call for renewal heard in the *aggiornamento* of Pope John XXIII and in Vatican Council II echoes still among consecrated women and men. Vatican II opened doors for a new role for religious in the Church.

At the same time that religious heard the call to renewal and adaptation, however, they experienced a period of breakdown. Religious witnessed and were part of the dismantling of institutional structures. Many found belief systems that served religious life over the previous half a century being questioned or even discarded. Large numbers of women and men left religious life in the late 60's and 70's; new vocation figures dropped drastically; the median age continued to rise. Today questions about witness, identity and purpose of community continue to be raised; ministry has become, in some instances, individualized and unfocused.⁷ A crisis of polarization, not unlike that in the broader Church, has emerged aligning those who believe in a more traditional form of religious life and those who envision a different future for religious institutes. Many institutes have been forced to discontinue long-established sponsored works or withdraw from parish service and diocesan ministries due to lack of human and financial resources. And today,

⁶Tobin, "A Great History Still to Be Accomplished? Prospects for Consecrated Life in the Church-*Communio*," 256.

⁷ See David Nygren, CM and Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ, *Religious Life Futures Project Executive Summary* in *ORIGINS* 22:15 (September 24, 1992) 257-272.

some institutes, especially of women, are moving into their last generation and toward completion. According to a recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the number of women religious in this country today is about the same as it was a hundred years ago.⁸

Does this picture sound familiar? If we are honest and realistic, most of us here can identify, to varying degrees, with this experience of the post-conciliar period. So religious ask, "What happens next?" If we look at the history of religious life, even in the very broad strokes, we recognize that throughout history drastic changes in religious life have preceded the emergence of new forms of dedication and a new vitality demanded by the needs of a new time and situation.⁹ Today at the beginning of the third millennium, religious life is experiencing a time of transformation.

When considering the recent history of religious life, it is important to remember that the experience of the last five decades of a marked decrease in numbers of religious and their advancing age, together with some unavoidable consequences, afflicts not only religious in the United States but also religious in many countries particularly in the West. Some church historians suggest that the growth of religious institutes in the 19th and early 20th centuries was in fact an anomaly and that the recent decline is a return to its traditional proportion in the Church.¹⁰ Even this experience is an invitation for religious to live with an attitude of faith and hope. A wonderful passage from the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* can inspire us:

⁸Eric Berrelleza, SJ, et al., "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women," *CARA Special Report*, Fall 2014, p. 2. The estimated Catholic population in the United States a hundred years ago (1915) was 16,309,310, Austin O'Malley, "The Holes in the Melting Pot," *America Magazine*, December 9, 1916, p. 197. The author argues that the number is significantly lower than the reality due to the large influx of immigrants at that time. The Catholic population in 2015 is 68.1 million according to *The Official Catholic Directory* 2015.

⁹David O'Connor, ST, "Seeking a Sense of Direction in a Time of Transition," *Review for Religious* 51 (September-October, 1992) 700-701.

¹⁰Tobin, "A Great History Still to Be Accomplished? Prospects for Consecrated Life in the Church-*Communio*," 255.

The various difficulties stemming from the decline in personnel and apostolates *must in no way lead to a loss of confidence in the evangelical vitality of the consecrated life*, which will always be present and active in the Church. (...) New situations of difficulty are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those who know that what is required of each individual is *not success, but commitment to faithfulness*. What must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of the consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to one's personal vocation and mission.¹¹

Our priority, therefore, should not be the *ars moriendi* even though we recognize that death is an experience we will all share. Rather it is the *ars vivendi*, knowing that God is faithful to us and we to each other.¹² We know too that the witness of religious and their contributions remain vital and vibrant in the education, health care, and social service ministries throughout our country. We also know that religious have adapted to changing circumstances in the Church and in society and moved forward despite challenges to their way of life and ministry.¹³ We have only to look at the exhibit developed by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious on "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" that toured the U.S. from 2009-2012 to witness the countless contributions of women religious who exercised courage, innovative spirit, and strong faith during many dramatic moments in the history of our country. We are indebted to those who came before us, who, often in the face of struggle and against an uncertain future, lived out their lives in service to those in need, who founded institutions and created communities, networks and direct service ministries that gave witness to the Spirit's work and the charisms of their institutes. We are here today because of those women and men who

¹¹John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Vita Consecrata](#), n. 63.

¹²Tobin, "How Did We Get Here?" 41.

¹³Eric Berrelleza, SJ, et al. *CARA Special Report*, Fall 2014, p. 1.

went before us, whose legacies live on in the narratives and traditions we pass on to the next generations.

In looking to the past with gratitude, religious should not become discouraged by diminishing numbers or narratives of decline. *Lumen gentium* clearly affirmed that consecrated life, though it is not part of the hierarchical structure of the Church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to its life and holiness (*LG* 44). Consecrated life will continue to play a constitutive role in the life and structure of the Church. The history of consecrated life shows that new forms develop in light of new circumstances and bring a new vitality to the Church. During this time of transformation at the beginning of the third millennium, the seeds of new forms of consecrated life may be ready to sprout. As we celebrate the past and look toward the future with hope, Pope Francis invites all consecrated women and men to “look at the signs of the times through eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church.”¹⁴

Live the Present with Passion

Gratitude for the past leads us to live more fully the essential aspects of consecrated life. Pope Francis invites consecrated women and men, during this year, to reflect on how open we are to being challenged by the Gospel.¹⁵ He refers to the Gospel as the “manual” for daily life and discernment. It is the ultimate norm and the “highest rule” of religious life (*PC* II, 8). The spirituality of our founders and foundresses inspired generations of religious to respond to the call to follow Christ, to take up his way of life as his disciples. Their spirit and sacrifice motivates us to adapt our charisms to the needs of today and place them at the service of God’s people and the Church. For Pope Francis, the life of consecration, the *sequela Christi*, is a call to follow Christ to the margins of society and the Church. We celebrate this call with passion, a word that comes from the Latin *passio* meaning to suffer. Passion signifies two sides of the same coin – love and suffering. Both

¹⁴Francis, “To All Consecrated Persons On the Occasion of the year of Consecrated Life.”

¹⁵Ibid.

realities are closely connected to the life of consecrated religious and to the following of Christ.¹⁶

Perhaps at this moment of the pilgrimage, an important and essential question for the holiness and wholeness of consecrated persons suggests that we look at the place of religious in the Church, particularly women religious, for whom this is a crucial question. The development of *Perfectae caritatis* has a complicated history, perhaps most notable as an example of how the bishops dealt with the uncomfortable reality of the invitation and a call to religious to restore the legacy of their founders in tension with the general renewal of the Church. The absence of women in the discussions of the commission preparing the document is noteworthy given the importance of women religious in the Church.¹⁷

Though progress on advancing the role of women in the life and mission of the Church has not kept pace with the Church's call for increased participation of women in decision-making roles in the Church,¹⁸ nonetheless, the experience of many women religious attests to the reality that, within the Church, there exist today opportunities for increased participation of women in the mission and ministry of the Church that previously were open only to the ordained, a very positive development following the council and the revision of the Code of Canon Law.

Still fifty years after *Perfectae caritatis*, Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii gaudium* that “we need to create broader opportunities for more incisive female presence in the

¹⁶Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “Celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life: Gratitude, Passion Hope,” Reflection at CMSM Assembly, August 7, 2015, manuscript, 4.

¹⁷Massimo Faggioli, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II as a Framework for the Future of Religious Life,” CMSM Assembly, August 7, 2015, manuscript, 7-8.

¹⁸ See, for example, John Paul II, apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatis*, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 18 (October 6, 1988); USCCB Committee on Women in Society and the Church, *Pope John Paul II on The Genius of Women* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997); John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifidelis laici*, (1988); USCCB, *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace*, (Washington, DC, 1995); USCCB, *From Words to Deeds* (Washington, DC, 1998)

Church” (EG 103). Similarly, in the Final Report of the Apostolic Visitation earlier this year, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, stated that the Congregation (CICLSAL) is committed to seeing competent women religious actively involved in ecclesial dialogue regarding “the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of church life” (EG 104).¹⁹

Women religious are a group within the larger set of women in society and women in the Church. As the role of women in society and in the Church continues to evolve today, it influences religious life in the United States. The growing consciousness of women in terms of societal structures, personal dignity, and patterns of relationship between men and women continues to influence how women religious see themselves within ecclesial structures.²⁰ This influence, however, is not without its concerns and tensions.

Since the Church is a mystery of communion, it is important to consider how each vocation in the Church relates to each other in order to glimpse how the wonderful diversity of gifts contributes to the building up of the body of Christ. How does the vocation to the consecrated life relate to other vocations in the Church, especially those of the laity and our pastors? How do they understand the vocation to consecrated life? Consecrated life is not an isolated reality; it stands in dynamic relationship with the ordained ministers and the laity. In living the present with passion, Pope Francis calls consecrated women and men to become “experts in communion, witnesses and architects” of communion creating a model of community built on the dignity of all persons and respect for each one’s gift (ACP, 3).²¹ “Be men and women of communion,”

¹⁹Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Apostolic Visitation Final Report*, n. 11 in Sharon Euart, RSM, et al., eds., *Roman Replies and 2015 CLSA Advisory Opinions* (Washington, DC: CLSA).

²⁰Margaret Brennan, IHM, "Bishops, Religious Face Postmodern World Era," 23:8 *Origins* (July 15, 1993) 123.

²¹See Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 97; John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 46; John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 55.

Francis tells us, with the courage to be a sign of the Spirit in the midst of conflict and in the struggle to find balance in the midst of inequalities and injustices. He urges consecrated persons to live the “mysticism of encounter” which involves listening to others and seeking together ways to proceed.²²

Pope Benedict XVI spoke of consecrated life as an integral part of the mission of the Church. In an address to the bishops of Brazil during an *ad limina* visit in 2010, he called consecrated life “a select portion of the People of God”²³ and, using an image borrowed from St. John Paul II, he compared consecrated life to “a plant with many branches which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church's life.”²⁴ In 2007, when addressing the UISG (international Union of Superiors General) representing almost 800 institutes of women religious on five continents, Pope Benedict called upon religious “to share the wealth of your charisms with those who are committed to the one mission of the Church, which is to build the Kingdom... To this end, establish serene and cordial collaboration with priests, the lay faithful and especially families, in order to meet the suffering, needs, poverty, and above all the spiritual poverty of so many... Cultivate, moreover, sincere communion and close collaboration with bishops, who are primarily responsible for evangelization in the particular churches”²⁵

Pope Francis, a religious himself, has also met with leaders of consecrated life. In 2013, for example, Pope Francis received the board of the CLAR (*la Confederación Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Religiosos y Religiosas*), the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Religious Men and Women. Later that year, Francis held an

²²Ibid., apostolic letter *ACP*, footnote 3: Address to Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and residences of Rome, May 12, 2014.

²³*Discurso do Papa Bento XV aos Prelados da Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (Regional Sul II) em visita «ad limina apostolorum», quinta-feira, 5 de novembro de 2010.* Quoted in Joseph Tobin, CSsR, “Religious in the Church of the 21st Century,” address to the religious of the Diocese of Green Bay, WI, April 25, 2015, manuscript, p. 3.

²⁴The Pope cites n. 5 of the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996).

²⁵Vatican City, Vatican Information Service, Superiors General, 7/5/07 (450).

extensive dialogue with members of the Union of Superiors General (USG), the association of the general superiors of institutes of men.²⁶ The Holy Father welcomed questions, spoke of his experience as a major superior and as a bishop and offered an enthusiastic invitation to religious to “wake up the world!” In April of this year, the Pope met with the leadership of the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) following the conclusion of the mandate from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. At the end of the meeting, Pope Francis expressed his gratitude and appreciation for all women religious in the United States and gave each leader a rosary and a bound copy of his apostolic exhortation *Joy of the Gospel*.

Pope Francis’ invitation to religious to be “men and women of communion” suggests that religious reflect on the notion of *communio* and how *communio* influences our relationship with others. The Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the church as *communio* has led, among other things, to new forms of “common responsibility” at all levels of church life.²⁷ The idea of “active participation” in the church has led to a deepened awareness that we are all the church. The notion of *communio*, however, describes the church’s nature, its mystery, its participation in the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not a description of the church’s structure.²⁸ For the structures of the church are not an end in themselves but a means for helping the church to be more clearly the sign and instrument of fellowship or communion with God and with others. John Paul II, in the apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte*²⁹ describes the theology and spirituality of communion as encouraging a “fruitful dialogue between pastors and the faithful.”

²⁶A summary of the meeting was published by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which offers an English translation on its website (http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf)

²⁷Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 149-150.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 153.

²⁹John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, Jan. 6, 2000. *Origins* 30:31 (Jan. 18, 2000), n. 45, 489-508.

Becoming men and women of communion impacts our society, different cultures and ethnic groups living side by side as well as our relationships within the Church. Of particular importance in the Church is the relationship between religious and bishops. The 1978 post-conciliar instruction *Mutuae relationes*, the Directives for Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church,³⁰ which is in the process of being revised and updated under Pope Francis, was developed as a practical means to ensure an orderly and fruitful cooperation and collaboration between bishops and religious at all levels. Though the functions and responsibilities of bishops and religious appeared to be clear theoretically, there was at that time no single model to describe the relationship between bishops and religious.

Even though 37 years have passed since its promulgation, and despite the fact that its norms have not been fully implemented in many dioceses, *Mutuae relationes* retains its freshness because of its doctrinal depth and, above all, its practical scope.³¹ For example, after affirming that unity in Christ necessarily involves a communion of life among the members of the new People of God, the Instruction highlights the essential role of the bishop in the communion of the Church as Christ's representative with particular responsibilities for consecrated women and men (*MR* 6). The Instruction also addresses the critical issue of the ecclesial nature of religious life as a gift to the Church (*MR* 10) and develops a theological foundation for the relationship between bishops and religious superiors. It represents a first attempt to give expression to this relationship in the context of a theology of *communion*. It underscores the need for a solid relationship between religious institutes and diocesan bishops for the pastoral good of the Church while at the same time acknowledging the tensions and challenges inherent in the relationship (*MR* 45). *Mutuae relationes*, in fostering ecclesial communion between bishops and religious, teaches that dialogue and collaboration must be carried out in mutual trust and respect.

³⁰Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops, Instruction, *Mutuae relationes*, (April 23, 1978).

³¹Joseph W. Tobin, "Together in Mission," Presentation to the National Conference for Vicars for Religious, March 17, 2014, manuscript, 2.

During Pope Francis' recent trip to Paraguay in July 2015, he celebrated Vespers with the clergy and religious of the country. In his homily, he spoke about the antiphons of the Gospel canticles for the Liturgies evoking the sending out of the Twelve by Jesus and the awareness that apostolic work is carried out in communion. He encouraged the priests, religious, laity, and bishops to commit themselves to ecclesial collaboration and to work together in the service of the common good.³²

The strength of the Church is found in communion which is the real source for witnessing the mutual relations among the disciples of Jesus Christ. It is also the source for living the present with passion and for following Christ as his disciples; for making the narrative of the Gospel our narrative, to open our hearts to love with passion and not shy away from suffering; for embracing the teaching of Vatican II to read the signs of the times in light of the Gospel and the needs of our world, and for speaking the truth.

To Embrace the Future with Hope

The third aim for the Year of Consecrated Life, embracing the future with hope, will require, in part, accepting the reality and uncertainties of life as we experience them today. In addition to the changing demographics of numbers of religious and fewer vocations, especially in Europe and the United States, religious institutes along with our brothers and sisters in contemporary society face economic problems, issues of globalization, threats of terrorism, a sense of isolation and irrelevance (*ACP*, 3).

In my recent work with leaders of religious institutes that are moving into their last generation or toward completion, I have been amazed and deeply affected by the profound faith of the members of these institutes and their hope and trust in the future. To be sure, though moving toward completion is a transforming experience with doubts, pain and a sense of loss, many sisters have described the experience as a most grace-filled

³²ZENIT, July 11, 2015, para. 7, www.zenit.org.

time in the life of the institute. In one situation in which an institute of Franciscan sisters accepted a small Carmelite congregation in a covenant relationship, the superior of the Carmelites told me her sisters are so happy and truly believe God led them to the Franciscans. When the Carmelites can no longer provide for the governance of their institute, they will petition the Holy See to appoint the superior of the Franciscans as their canonical superior. Both institutes consider themselves a single institute though each retains its own identity. They are an example to others of not losing heart and doing what we are capable of doing to meet the challenges that God sends our way. Like all religious, they remain in mission until God calls them home.

For some people today, the words “our future” and “hope” seem almost incompatible. In his Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, Pope Francis makes the words of Pope Benedict XVI his own in urging religious not to become prophets of doom; but rather to keep awake and watchful.³³ Though the numbers may be small, the women and men in formation offer freshness to religious institutes. Their world experience is different from the world you or I experienced when we entered religious life. The needs of the world to which our founders and foundresses responded are different, yet the same - the poor are always with us; people are still excluded and marginalized; children need to be taught, the sick healed, and the Gospel preached. It is important that newer members of religious institutes are enriched by the memory and wisdom of previous generations and at the same time inspire the elder members with their enthusiasm and passion for the Gospel. Pope Francis urges those in formation to look to the elder members of their institutes for example.³⁴ Both offer a source of hope for all people.

In an address to the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life this past November (2014), Pope Francis reflected on

³³Francis, “To All Consecrated Persons On the Occasion of the year of Consecrated Life, footnote 4: Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2013.

³⁴Francis, Speech to Directors of Formation for Consecrated Men and Women, April 11, 2015 in *Origins* 45:2 (May 14, 2015) 31.

the current state of consecrated life fifty years after the conciliar documents *Lumen gentium* and *Perfectae caritatis*. He described that part of the Lord's vineyard occupied by those living consecrated life as a place where "new grapes are matured and new wine is obtained."³⁵ He reflected on the opportunity to discern the "quality and aging of the 'new wine' that has been produced" during the years of renewal and the time to evaluate whether the wineskins that contain it are adequate today to hold it. He told the assembly that we should not be afraid to put aside the 'old wineskins' – by revitalizing our structures that are no longer responsive to furthering the Kingdom of God in the world; by changing those practices that distance us from those we are sent to serve. He urges religious not to "hide those areas of weakness" or challenge that face many religious institutes today; but rather, to listen to the Spirit, "that opens up new horizons and leads to new paths" always, the Holy Father reminds us, "beginning with the supreme rule of the Gospel and inspired by the bold creativity of your founders."³⁶

The task of evaluating new wine and testing the quality of the wineskins is not an easy one. Pope Francis offers us some criteria for this task: fidelity to our charisms, the primacy of service, attention to the least among us and the most fragile, and respect for the dignity of all people. This year of consecrated life reminds us that the process of renewal continues – while much has been accomplished in the past 50 years, much remains to be done in the years ahead. We must continue to discern what is new in light of the Gospel and the contemporary needs of our world and embrace the future with hope. The God who was with our founders and foundresses in the past and hears our cries and concerns today will be with us in the future.

Pope Francis reminds us that, "Where there are religious, there is joy" and "with Christ joy is constantly born anew."³⁷ He is counting on religious "to wake up the world," to

³⁵Vatican City, Vatican Information Service, November 27, 2014, "Serve New Wine in New Wineskins"

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Francis, "To All Consecrated Persons On the Occasion of the year of Consecrated Life, II, 1.

witness to how Jesus lived on earth, and to go out into the world and proclaim the Good News. In so doing, he tells us, “You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, and love by giving love.”³⁸

Conclusion

I hope I have offered you something to think about in light of the aims Pope Francis has offered us during this special Year of Consecrated Life. Pope Francis has entrusted the Year of Consecrated Life to Mary, who he describes as “the Virgin of listening and contemplation, the first disciple of her beloved Son” (*ACP*). May we continue to look to Mary as the model of discipleship and service to God’s people.

Let us return to where we began this morning with the words of St. John Paul II “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.”³⁹

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³⁸Francis, “To All Consecrated Persons On the Occasion of the year of Consecrated Life, II, 4.

³⁹John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, n. 110.