

General Assembly - Canadian Religious Conference
(Montréal May 29 – June 1, 2014)
Homily of the Apostolic Nuncio, Msgr. Luigi Bonazzi
Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ
(June 1, 2014)

OPENING GREETING

Dear Men and Women Religious,

With this Eucharistic Celebration, we wish to live the moment which brings to a conclusion the 2014 Assembly of the Canadian Religious Conference and at the same time, the moment giving to this Conference its true beginning. Indeed, by communicating to us the Holy Spirit, the Eucharistic Jesus sows within us that grace which, despite our own personal poverty, enables us to flower and to bear the fruit of that which we have received in these days.

The Ascension is not a celebration of farewell of the Lord who leaves us. On the contrary, it is the celebration of a presence, of a new beginning. From this time onward, the Crucified and Risen Lord is no longer bound to space and time; He is with us always and everywhere. There is not a moment, nor a place where He is not with us.

Dear religious, the Ascension of the Lord is especially your Feast. In fact the Consecrated Life is “*an abiding re-enactment in the Church of the form of life which the Son of God made his own when he came into the world*” (LG 44). Therefore, if the Consecrated Life prolongs at all times and in all places the living example of the life of Christ, then the Ascension of the Lord marks the beginning of your vocation and your mission. This is your Feast: Let us live it with this Faith!

HOMILY

The event that we celebrate and which we want to bring into our lives is described in the Acts of the Apostles with these simple words: “*...as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*” (Acts 1:9). In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul states that upon the heights the Father of glory “*seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion... And he has put all things under his feet*” (Eph. 1:21-22). In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus confirms His heavenly inauguration, saying: “*All authority has been given me in heaven and on earth*” (Mt. 28:18).

What does this Feast of the Ascension of the Lord tell us? It does not mean that the Lord has gone to a place remote from men and from the world. In teaching us “*Our Father who art in*

heaven” Jesus helps us to understand that in returning to heaven He returns to the Father. The Ascension of Christ means that He no longer belongs to our world of corruption and death that affects our lives; it means that He belongs completely to God. And since God embraces and sustains the entire Cosmos, the Ascension means that Christ is not far from us but that now, thanks to His Being-with-the-Father, He is close to each of us forever. Everyone can turn to Him; everyone can call upon Him. The Lord is always within ‘earshot’ of us. We can separate ourselves from Him inwardly; we can live by turning our backs on Him. But He ever awaits us; He is always close to us.

He is not only with us, but He is relying upon us. He entrusts to the Church His own ‘powers’, which are in a special way His Word and the Sacraments, and He says to His disciples and to each one of us: ‘Now, carry out what I myself have done’, and He says “*I am with you always*” (Mt. 28:20).

With the Ascension begins the mission of the Church called to be in Christ, “*a sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men*” (LG 1). In the mission of the Church, with the Church and through the Church, the mission of Consecrated Life also begins. For indeed, Consecrated Life belongs 'strongly' (LG 44) to the life and holiness of the Church. This is so true that as history shows, when the Consecrated Life flourishes, then the Church flourishes and grows, whereas when the Consecrated Life withers, the Church also suffers. And vice versa.

What is the service, the testimony that the Consecrated Life is called to give to the Church? Summing up in one word the bi-millennial history of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has affirmed with conviction and determination: “*The consecrated life is prophecy... men and women religious are prophets... They must be men and women who are able to wake up the world*” (cf. Exchange of Pope Francis with the Superiors General, November 29, 2013, interview in *Civiltà Cattolica*, September 19, 2013).

This “vision” is shared also by your Conference in the following terms: “*Through various activities related to social justice, research and communication, the Conference invites its members to read the signs of the times and to respond in a prophetic way to contemporary issues concerning religious life, the Church and society.*”

Yes, the religious is a ‘prophet’. We must understand and live this title not as a “slogan” or a theory, nor as a ‘function or duty’, but as a ‘gift’ that descends from above, a gift placed with confidence into our hands by Him who is the source of every good gift (James 1:17). It is a gift which must be received and renewed every day in your Consecrated Life. Thus you will be capable – by grace – to do things that have the taste and value of Him who, because He is on high, is profoundly close to everyone.

Dear religious men and women of Canada: to you who live the charism of the Consecrated Life in this great country, in the name of Pope Francis, I wish today to call and invite you to live in a particular way:

the prophecy of the primacy of God;

the prophecy of the Church as communion;

the prophecy of the preferential option for the poor.

The Prophecy of the Primacy of God. At the heart of the Consecrated Life is **quaerere Deum**, to search for God, to live in God.

It is necessary to reaffirm the primacy of contemplation over action. As Pope Francis said to religious women, this requires “*continuously making an ‘exodus’ from yourselves in order to center your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans in order to say with St. Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20)*” (the Superiors General (IUGS), May 8, 2013).

Pope Francis calls this continuous exodus: to adore, adoration. He recalls that worship, or, if you like, prayer, which means “to be in God” is the first movement of the Church which he invites to ‘go out’ and become missionary. The Pope used this incisive formula: “**Prayer is the first work of the apostle, and the second, is to announce the Gospel**” (General Audience of October 16, 2013). So first of all, it is necessary to be one with Christ (prayer is precisely coming before God, standing in his presence); then to evangelize.

The primacy of God in the Consecrated Life could be seen as something obvious. It is not always so. Indeed, gentrification, the need for social status, the search for returns for the Institute and personal autonomy have – quite often – strongly undermined the primacy of God in religious life. Yet, without this primacy, religious life has no meaning. The essence of consecration lies precisely in relation to God, in the recognition of Him as the One and All, in welcoming His love, in the total gift of self to Him loved more than anything to the point of saying, as the Council reminds us (cf. *Lumen gentium* 44), that men and women religious “*live for God alone*”, “*give themselves over to God alone*” (*Perfectae caritatis* 5,7).

Dear men and women religious, I implore you, “Be new wine in new wineskins. Invest only into the realities that truly matter. Allow God to be born in your communities so that it is He who speaks. And then move aside! When “I” am at the centre, God cannot be found. God alone must be at the center. God is the center!

Prophecy of "Church as Communion." It is well known that the "ecclesiology of communion" is "*the central and fundamental idea within the documents of the Council*" (n.19 ChL). The Church sees itself as "*the home and the school of communion*" (NMI n. 43).

Communion has an essential relationship with the core of the Consecrated Life which is the search for God and his primacy. In fact, the God who calls and to whom religious men and women devote themselves is the God of Jesus Christ, a God of love, of relationship, a Trinity, which, in its very dynamic, calls for a life of love and unity. How could one belong to the God who is communion if not sharing in that communion and not expressing in practical and concrete ways a life of unity?

As consecrated persons, you must be 'critics', willing to confront that individualism which is one of the fundamental causes for the actual difficulties we face in all sectors of social life and which has even inserted itself into the life of men and women religious, who are also children of the present age. All too often, the witness of the consecrated limits itself only to personal witness. On the contrary, witness to the faith always has a communitarian and a public dimension. I invite you to ask yourselves: how can religious life be ordered so that religious institutes witness publicly to an authentic communitarian faith through assiduity to prayer, in listening to and proclaiming the Word of God, in the breaking of the Eucharistic Bread, in fraternal union and in service to the poor? Then you will become a "living prophecy" of the Church as Communion. This is precisely what the Church expects of you: "*The Church entrusts to communities of Consecrated Life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence*" (Vita consecrata, n. 51).

Prophecy of the preferential option for the poor. Saint John Paul II has warned us that "*as the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us, there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them*" (NMI, 49).

For this reason, no less than individualism, it is necessary today to "shake up" the consumer society that abandons the poor and the weak to their destiny, obscuring the sense of the gratuity and primacy of "being" over "having." You can do this by living the "prophecy" of the Church of the poor, by a lifestyle lived as poor, with the poor and for the poor.

"Oh! How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor", said Pope Francis when speaking to journalists after his election.

In *Evangelii gaudium*: "**We have to state without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them**" (48).

Naturally, the preferential option for the poor on the part of religious must be *evangelical* (that is to say, practised by living detachment from everything in order to follow Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord), and *ecclesial* (lived in the Church, in communion).

With this in mind, religious congregations who are more favoured financially are invited – for example – to open themselves to help those who are less fortunate by assisting in particular new religious families (I think of those in Central America, Latin America and Africa...) who are blessed with numerous, generous and authentic vocations, but are deprived of the necessary means.

Dear men and women religious, as the Gospel of today reminds us, we are debtors of the Gospel for humanity. The Church was born for this: to bring the Gospel to all humanity and thus fulfill the aspiration of Jesus: "*That all may be one*" (John 17:21). This must create a dynamic tension within you: to be evangelizers, heralds of the love of God for all. You are Consecrated Persons - according to the different charisms proper to each congregation - precisely for this: to proclaim the gospel of God, Three in One.

You can be assured that precisely by 'going outside', by loving, proclaiming and living the prophecy of the primacy of God, the prophecy of the Church-Communion, and the prophecy of the Church for the poor, you will grow in your identity as Consecrated Persons and you will realize the purpose for which each Congregation is born: *the glory of God and the salvation of the world*. This is the commitment to which Pope Francis calls you on the threshold of the Year of the Consecrated Life. Amen.