

Year for Consecrated Life... A time to:

“Take Care of Vocations”

Pope Francis will open the Year for Consecrated Life on November 30, 2014. We can ask, why this initiative and not another? If we could see into the heart of Pope Francis – who has the heart of a son of St. Ignatius of Loyola – it would be easy to answer. Trying to guess the reason, I like to think that Pope Francis has promoted the Year for Consecrated Life because his reasoning is like that of St. Teresa of Avila, who said: “*What would the world be like without the Religious?*” (Vita Consecrata, 105).

Consecrated Life, in fact, belongs, in an intimate way, to the life, holiness and the mission of the Church (VC, 3), to which it offers a specific contribution through the witness of a life given to God and to one’s brothers and sisters. This is why we suffer when we think of the present situation in Canada. As we know, at the beginning of the 1960’s the Church in Canada had over 60,000 men and women in religious life, but today that number has dropped to little more than 15,000. The median age is 80 years and vocations are scarce; the lack of vocations causes us suffering.

We are well aware that the problem of vocations to religious life – priestly and brothers and sisters – is one of “vital and fundamental importance for the community of believers and for all of humanity”;¹ a problem “located in the heart of the Church itself; in fact, from its solution depends its future, its development and universal mission of salvation”.² This is why the Church suffers, just like a couple who wish to have children but are unable. But we do not suffer like people who are resigned and have lost hope. No! We do not enclose ourselves in fatalistic-losing discouragement, nor do we just stop at complaining. On the contrary, comforted by faith, we renew our commitment to throw, in the name of Jesus, the nets of the Gospel-of-vocations (Lk 5, 1-11).

The miraculous catch of fish, which Peter and his companions experienced with immense joy and surprise – by obeying Jesus’s words inviting them to “throw out the nets” again (Lk 5, 4) – assures us that the fish were there, even if during the night of trial it seemed that they were absent. By throwing the nets out again, on the word of Jesus, the catch is abundant.

¹ John Paul II, Message for the XXI World Day for Vocations.

² John Paul II, Message for the XXII World Day for Vocations.

Dear religious men and women: in this year dedicated to Consecrated Life, I invite you to throw out the nets with confidence, trusting the word that Jesus addresses to each of you: “be vocation-promoters”, “take vocations to heart”.

What does it mean to take vocations to heart? I would like to explain this invitation by proposing five concrete actions, which I will introduce with a fundamental premise.

The Premise

He who calls, and is the author and first protagonist of a vocation is God. Therefore, one should not ask “Do I have a vocation or not?” but instead “What is God calling me to?”. The call is there for every person. Even if I am called in time, it is from eternity that I am chosen by God “*before the creation of the world*” (Eph 1,4), “*when I was in my mother womb*” (Gal 1, 15).

Therefore, from all time – from eternity – the vocation is engraved in each person’s heart. Yet this call – the voice of God – must be heard and recognized. If between God and the person who is called, there are obstacles, like impenetrable walls that block the voice, this person is not able to hear the call, even if it is present within them.

Until a few decades ago, life flowed within a familial social and religious context that acknowledged and favoured vocations. It is not like this today. The human and religious experience of the youth of today, because of the environment of the family, of school, and of the society in which they live and are surrounded by, is very different from that of years past. Today “the voice” of a vocation is very hard to hear because it risks being suffocated in the midst of many other voices which become obstacles. Is it possible to overcome them? Yes, and I will give an example. Just as a satellite connects two points on earth which cannot connect directly - the satellite receives a signal from one point and sends it to the other - in the same way the obstacles which make it difficult to recognize a vocation can be overcome if there is an “ally”, a person capable of being – so to speak – part of the “triangle”, namely to be a “satellite” or the “antenna” between the voice engraved in the person’s soul and the person himself.

I am convinced of one thing: also today young Samuels are not lacking (1 Sam 3, 1-10). But will each of them find an *Eli* who helps them to understand that it is the Lord who is calling them? In the context which characterizes the Canada of today, where it is particularly difficult to hear the call, the figure of Eli (1 Sam 3,1) is very important. Who is Eli? It is the person who, because he or she is familiar with the things of God, is capable of being like an “antenna”, in order to help the “young Samuels” to discern the call that

they, by themselves, are not able to perceive. Every religious man and religious woman can and should be an “Eli”, keeping watch and taking care of vocations.

Dear Religious men and women: in this Year of Consecrated Life Jesus addresses to each of you a heartfelt appeal. He calls you to take care of religious vocations. He invites you to do it with much trust and intensified passion: not only to answer an urgent need which is paramount for the life of the Church, but also, I would say even more, to thank Him for the gift you have received, a gift so great that it cannot but arouse an unquenchable desire to share and communicate it (“*bonum est sui diffusivum*”).

Five concrete actions:

What does “*to take care of vocations*” mean? It means “giving them some thought”, namely keeping vocations present in your mind and heart and investing all of your personal resources for this purpose: spiritual, affective and behaviour. I would like to propose, in particular, five courses of action:

1. To take care means: to put our trust in the power of prayer.

We can do a lot with prayer. Our Lord advises us: “Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Mt 9,38). “Behind and before every vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life – Pope Francis reminds us – there is always the strong and intense prayer of someone: a grandmother or grandfather, a mother, a father, a community... Vocations are born in and from prayer; and only through prayer can they persevere and bear fruit” (Regina Coeli, April 21, 2013).

Workers in the harvest of the Lord cannot simply be chosen, as an employer seeks his employees, they must be called by God and chosen by Him for this service.³ The future of vocations is in God’s hands, but in a certain way it is also in ours. Prayer is our strength: “with it the vocations may not diminish, nor the divine voice fail to be heard”⁴. With this strong certainty, that cannot be denied because it rests on the promise of the Lord (see Mt. 7, 7-11), do not cease to raise your hands, with filial confidence: let your cry reach Heaven, asking the Father for what Christ wants us to ask Him.

2. To take care means: to manifest Jesus.

We know that vocational animation is centred on the golden rule of leading those who cross our path to the Lord (see Jn 1,40-42): in fact, it “*seeks to present the fascination of the person of the Lord Jesus, and the beauty of the total gift of self for the sake of the*

³ See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.204

⁴ John Paul II, Message for the XXIV World Day for Vocations.

Gospel".⁵ This becomes possible if the glory of the Risen One is reflected on our face as in a mirror (see Cor 2, 3-18). It is necessary, then, as Pope Francis said to the International Union of Superior Generals, to "continuously make an 'exodus' from yourselves in order to centre 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)" (May 8, 2013).

Dearest religious women and men: if – to use a wonderful image from the theology of the Fathers – we do not become a "moon" that refracts the light of the sun that is Christ, we are in danger of becoming an "eclipse" of God. An eclipse – as we know – happens when the moon comes between the earth and the sun, thus causing a great darkness. In that darkness that swallows everything, nothing is seen anymore; neither the sun nor the earth, nor the moon. Let us remember: one can become an "eclipse of God" not only because of evil done, but also because of the good which was not done or badly-done.

Instead, "Where there is joy, fervour, a desire to bring Jesus to others, genuine vocations arise".⁶ May no young person ever cross the road of your life in vain! May the "signal" sent out by the presence of Christ in you, reach and put into action the "signal" of the presence of Christ in every young person! Then the voice of the Lord-who-calls will be heard, and, with the grace of God, followed.

3. To take care means: to speak openly of the vocation to consecrated life and to ministerial priesthood, and call courageously.

- Speak openly. We must leave aside any inappropriate embarrassment and suspicious reticence, that can be born from the unjustified fear of disturbing the interiority of the other, and adversely influencing their freedom of choice. In fact, to echo the voice of Him-who-calls is never an attack on the autonomy of the young, but on the contrary, is a source of light and freedom, as well as an act of esteem and confidence in them. It is time, therefore, to "pass from a pastoral approach that waits to a pastoral approach of proposal".

Now is the time to speak courageously of the vocation to Consecrated Life, as a splendid and privileged form of Christian life. It is up to you, dear women and men religious, to show this vocation and also – if the Lord suggests it interiorly – to propose it explicitly. How many occasions Providence offers every day so that you can meet the young: on the road, in school, through a talk, a letter, an e-mail, or the telephone... Do not be afraid of conditioning or limiting their freedom! On the contrary, a precise proposal,

⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Consecrated Life* Roma 1996, n. 64.

⁶ Francis, Message for the CI *World Day for Vocations 2014*.

made at the right time, can be decisive to stir in the young a free and authentic response (see *Pastores dabo Vobis* n.39).

- Call courageously. Certainly, God can send a “direct” call into the heart of a young person, “but generally he calls through our personhood and our words. Therefore – St. John Paul II exhorts us – do not be afraid to call. Go among the youth. Go personally to them and call. The hearts of many of the young, and not so young, are ready to listen to you. Many of them are looking for a purpose for their life; they are waiting to discover a mission that is worth consecrating their life to. Christ has tuned them into his and your call. We must call. The Lord will do the rest, he who offers to each one his particular gift, according to the grace that he has been given (see *1 Cor 7,7; Rm 12,6*)”⁷.

Therefore, dear Religious women and men: lend your voice to Him who also today calls many to follow him! Don’t disappoint them and their expectations. Be the messengers of the Will of God and call with courage! Remember: young men and women have the right to be helped to discover and live the call from God. In fact, it is only in responding to this call that every person can find happiness.

4. To take care of means: to devote oneself with generosity to spiritual direction.

We are aware that “*neither he who plants, nor he who waters counts for anything; only God, who gives the growth*” (*1 Cor 3,7*); we also know, that we are not exempt from doing our part because the Spirit has established us as “God’s collaborators” (*1 Cor 3,9*).

We all know how important, the work of a spiritual guide, so that the seeds of vocation sown “with full hands” by the grace of God may develop and mature. This leads us to scrutinize, with wisdom and promptness, what the Spirit writes in the hearts of today’s youth (see *2 Cor 3,2-3*), by tracing the signs imprinted by the God-who-calls.

Therefore, it becomes essential to rediscover the great tradition of personal spiritual guidance, which has always brought many and precious fruits into the life of the Church. Those who exercise this role – because they have received an appointment or because Providence has put them in the condition to be close to young people – must commit themselves to perform it with courage and competence, accompanying the young person in his journey and, at the same time, promoting his necessary autonomy in responding, without forcing him or taking his place.

⁷ John Paul II, Message for the XX World Day for Vocations.

Please, direct with your counsels, but first and foremost with your witness. It is above all with your life, example and words, with joy and qualitative apostolic work – dear Religious men and women – that you educate others, especially the young people, to discover the joy of serving the Church. You can, then, wait with confidence as the vocational-seeds sown in their hearts bear fruit (see *Gc* 5,7-8).

5. To take care means: Propose paths of communion

The vocation to consecrated life is never a private matter to manage enclosed in oneself. In reality if it is true that every vocation is a personal and an original occurrence, it is similarly true that it also constitutes a communitarian and ecclesial fact. No one is called to walk alone. The call from God reaches me in and through the Church: “Every christian vocation comes from God, and is a gift of God. However it is never bestowed outside or apart from the Church but always passes in and through the Church... and it takes shape – in fundamental service to God – as a service to the Church.” (*Pastores dabo Vobis* 35).

This awareness immunizes us from the risk – which always recurs – of a privatised attitude which thinks and deals with the history of a vocation exclusively in terms of God-and-me. In reality, every authentic vocation – while respecting the inalienable aspects of each individual – develops and takes shape within the frame of the “we-Church”, in which the Risen Lord is present and acts (see *Mt.* 18,20).

For this reason, it is of particular importance to help our youth to learn ‘the art of arts’, namely the art of loving. Charity, in fact, is the charism which is “the greatest of all” (*I Cor* 13,13). They will learn this fundamental art to the degree they find in you, people who do not live for themselves, but persons transformed by love.

To help the family discover the gift of the consecrated vocation

The Christian family – as we know – “is the natural ‘nursery’ of vocations”.⁸ The Council who defines the family as the “Domestic Church” (*LG* n. 11), indicated that it is also the “first seminary” (*OT* n. 2). Among the most important “services” that parents are called to provide their children is that of helping them to discover God’s call, including a religious one (see *GS* n.52).

It is good that the Year for Consecrated Life walks together with and gives a hand to the celebration of the Ordinary Synod on the Family. Dear religious men and women: keep the Family at the heart of your prayer and daily offerings. Pray particularly so that the

⁸ John Paul II, Message for the XXXI World Day of Vocations. .

vocation of a son or daughter to Consecrated Life or to the Priesthood may be understood not only as a gift from the family, but also as a special gift to the family.

Entrust to Mary

Dear religious men and women: let us feel “Sustained by the certitude that the heavenly Father continues to call very many young people to follow more closely in the footsteps of Christ his Son in the sacred ministry, in the profession of the evangelical counsels and in missionary life”.⁹ And let us hope that many will answer “yes, here I am” (cf. Lk 1,38). We pray and work for this.

With unshakable confidence, in this Year of Consecrated Life, let us entrust to the Virgin Mary the *great cause* of Consecrated Life. Let us entrust to Her, the Mother of the Vocations, our young men and women, the hope for the Church in Canada, praying so that they may imitate her in their readiness to say “yes” and may follow her invitation: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2,5).

And let us never cease to ask the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to be able to contemplate our Church in Canada as the mother of many sons and daughters who, in the sign of their consecrated life, proclaim with joy the “*better part*” (Lk 10,42) of God.

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⁹ John Paul II, Message for the XXXII World Day of Vocations