



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Church Ministry

Bishop Leslie Tomlinson (Chair)
Bishop Peter Comensoli
Bishop Peter Ingham
Bishop Vincent Long
Bishop Michael McCarthy
Bishop Bill Wright

Pastoral Letter on the Consecrated Life

26 February 2015

Wake Up the World, Celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life

"I have called you by your name; you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1)

Each of our Brothers and Sisters in the consecrated life, recalls a word, an event, a priest or religious who inspired them; something as simple as a word of Scripture or the kindness of a dedicated religious. With a simple and humble 'yes', they began a journey by which the Lord drew each one into a deeper relationship with himself, so that his word was deeply understood and cherished: 'I have called you by name; you are mine.'

On the first Sunday of Advent last year, Pope Francis proclaimed 2015 a Year of Consecrated Life. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which speaks of religious in its sixth chapter, and of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the renewal of religious life. This Year will conclude with the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple on 2 February 2016.

We welcome the invitation of Pope Francis to make this a year of thanksgiving and of deeper reflection on the calling of the consecrated men and women among us. Pope Francis, who identifies himself as a Religious, shares with us his hopes for this year of consecrated life. 'May this Year be an occasion for bearing vigorous and joyful witness before the world to the holiness and vitality present in so many of those called to follow Jesus in the consecrated life.'

Australia is blessed to have had so many religious sisters, brothers and priests living and ministering here for almost one hundred and seventy five years. Their particular apostolates and charisms have included education, healthcare, prison chaplaincy, working with the marginalised and forgotten, inter-Church work, care of the elderly and helping those with special needs. Religious today are actively engaged in many apostolates, past and present, seen and unseen, great and small, both in the church and the wider society; others dedicate their days to prayer and contemplation. We know that despite their various expressions of the consecrated life, our sisters and brothers are united in pointing us to God; by the way they dedicate their whole lives to the Lord. We thank God for their incalculable contributions as they witness amongst us.



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This year provides the opportunity to acknowledge Religious who have consecrated themselves to God. We are grateful for who you are, for what you do, for your spirit of faith and your pursuit of service, your stewardship and for your witness to the Gospel. However, let us remember, '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' (Vita Consecrata N110).

We must emphasise that those who have consecrated their lives to God are not primarily the workforce for the Church. Rather, they are catalysts for renewal; exploring new frontiers and possibilities. Their task is to inspire and to keep the fire of the Gospel burning for the sake of the Church and of the world. Saint Mary of the Cross is an example of hope, renewal and creative fidelity in times of transition; critical yeast for crucial times.

Our Holy Father challenges consecrated women and men to be 'experts in communion: - to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters'. Those who live the Gospel in this way radiate a joy that can only come from God, a joy that is attractive to those around them.

'I am counting on you to 'wake up the world' said Pope Francis. He is forever urging Christians to be people of joy, not prophets of doom. 'I thank you for the witness you give as stewards of God's mysteries and for how you consistently face up to the challenges posed by modern-day culture in such a cosmopolitan and secular society, as you live the Gospel in your everyday lives'.

St John Paul II wrote that religious are first and foremost called to be the icon of the transfigured Christ. The transfiguration here is the result of the deep and personal union with Christ and at the same time the result of the suffering with Christ. Religious life will change in its expressions, shapes and sizes. We should not fear these changes. The only thing we should fear is the failure to bear the wounds of the suffering Servant and to be the icon of the transfigured Christ for our Church and for our world.

A Gospel passage which strikes right at the heart of the matter of true discipleship is in Matthew 16 where we read a recurring theme: '*Take up your cross*', the cross of the everyday commitments, the everyday demands in which we meet God. In following Christ, we must also take up the cross of Christ. We must take up also, the triumphant assurance that God has given us all we need, and will give Religious all they need for their consecrated lives.

As we just get on with life, this does mean a daily dose of realism. In the short term, the



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Church may seem deeply unpromising in any number of ways to many of us; the Church also may disappoint. And yet God remains the God He has always been. The Church is real today, and the promise of God is still as powerful, wonderful and joyful, as it was yesterday, is today and will be tomorrow and forever.

Religious congregations, some old, and maybe even some new, will continue to quietly inspire us by selfless lives of poverty, chastity and obedience; offering a humble, yet powerful, counter-witness to the emptiness that so often surrounds us. If we are to 'wake up the world', there is much work to be done, but we need not fear. With joy and love in our hearts we will find ways of bringing the newness of the Gospel to all our people.

For many busy and harried Catholics, it is often the human presence of those in consecrated life, as well as their houses and prayer centres, which provide important reminders, occasions and resources for personal prayer, reflection and quiet. The great 'schools' of Christian meditation and contemplation have long been the tradition of apostolic societies and religious institutes, with many continuing to provide leadership and formation in the techniques of prayer and meditation. *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"* and *"spent much time together in the temple"* (Acts, 2.42,46).

Marvelling at how God the Father always provides the Church with the testimony of the consecrated life, we thank each religious institute and apostolic society in our country, and all of you who are their members, for your generosity and faithfulness. We pray that the Lord Jesus will continue to call men and women to be his evangelical witnesses.

This pastoral letter was prepared by the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Church Ministry to celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life during 2015.

Media queries, please contact Aoife Connors on 0450 348 597 | media@catholic.org.au

