

Homily: The World Day for Consecrated Life **February 6, 2011**

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Readings: Isaiah 58: 7-10
1 Corinthians 2: 1-5
Matthew 5: 13-16

In 1997 Pope John Paul II designated February 2 as World Day for Consecrated Life. It's usually observed on the Sunday following the Feast of the Presentation in parishes throughout the world. Three reasons for establishing the day were given: (1) to provide an opportunity to be grateful for the gift that consecrated life is to the Church, (2) to promote knowledge of this way of life, and (3) to provide a day for those dedicated to consecrated life to celebrate the gift and raise their own consciousness about their mission in the Church. For us, then, this is a day of reflection and re-commitment.

The universal call to holiness, the call everyone receives at Baptism, means that we are all called to participate in the many dimensions of Christian life. However, certain life forms – married life, religious life, ordained ministry - lift up one or more of the dimensions of Christian living and make them more visible by their corporate/communal expression. We have moved beyond thinking of consecrated life as a "higher state." Perhaps that's why we are a bit uneasy about a day that could be misconstrued to suggest that this life is on a different plane than other vocation choices.

There may be another reason why we are uncomfortable with this spotlight. Consecrated life is not primarily about those who are consecrated. It is about the message of our lives. We who choose to live a consecrated life do so for the sake of the Gospel, through the vows and a life dedicated to prayer and service. The focus, then, is not on us. The focus is on the message of our lived vows and on those we pray for and those we serve.

Today's readings, not chosen specifically for this commemoration but part of the regular cycle for the fifth Sunday of ordinary time, give us advice on how we are to live consecrated life. They tell us what we are to be about – the message. They also provide insights on motivation and method.

In the first reading, the passage from Isaiah makes it clear that certain behaviors are required if the blessings promised through the covenant are to be enjoyed: sharing bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and homeless, clothing the naked. These are immediate visible human needs to which one must respond. The second set of injunctions includes social issues: oppression, false accusation, malicious speech. Clearly, the message is that the good of all – the common good – is primary. Our lives are about others. We are to see and respond to human needs and unjust social conditions.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus uses common ordinary symbols – salt and light – to convey to his disciples that they are to be about something beyond themselves, that their lives are not to be wasted like salt that’s lost its taste or lights hidden under a bushel basket. Think about what happens when salt does what it’s supposed to do – whether it’s used as seasoning or preservative. It loses its separate identity; it becomes part of the food. Salt has value because of what it does to something else. The same holds true for the metaphor of light. The purpose of light – whether it’s a candle, a lamp, headlights on a car, or a spotlight on a building – is to change the environment so that it is safe for navigating. Light’s purpose is beyond itself. Our lives of discipleship are about sharing the Gospel message so that, indeed, although our lives are consumed, the message remains.

So this is what we are to be about – a challenging task for all Christians, and especially for those of us who have publically said that we’ve consecrated our lives to it. Why do we do this? How do we do this? In the second reading, St. Paul very concisely gets to the point of motivation and method. His motivation was clear: God’s mystery, Jesus Christ crucified and the power of the Spirit compelled him to share the message. His method was humble and unassuming. He came in weakness, with fear and trembling, rather than displaying the wisdom of the Greek orators that the people were used to. Paul did not want his manner of delivery to get in the way of the power of the message. He wanted the faith of the community to be grounded in God, not in his preaching ability.

On a day like today we draw inspiration from our foundress, Mother Xavier. Her words “We desire to put forward our best effort to that portion of God’s children who are as yet unprovided for”, challenge us to see and respond to the human needs and unjust social conditions of today. They are a call to broaden our circle of prayer and service – both are essential as we continue to live this vocation of consecrated life.

Message, motivation, and method – sometimes we think all of this would have been clearer in the days of Jesus, Paul, or Mother Xavier. But these are our times. This is the world to which we are called to be salt and light. In the letter that created the World Day for Consecrated Life, Pope John Paul II quoted from an earlier document on consecrated life: “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.”

And so we look to the future, confident in our call, supported by God’s grace and our sisters in community, with hearts and hands open and ready to share the message of our vowed lives of prayer and service to all.