

## Presentation of the Lord

Today marks the close of the Christmas season. In some places it is customary to celebrate the occasion with a solemn procession and a blessing of candles. The light that lit up the heavens and the earth on Christmas night is now taken out to the whole world, as foreseen by Simeon in today's Gospel. As Mary and Joseph were consecrating their child to God in the temple, Simeon held out his arms to welcome and embrace him. So today we open our arms to embrace Jesus, welcoming him into this church, into the temple of our bodies and into our community. We welcome the fire of his love to enlighten us and to purify us that we may be holy, and we commit ourselves to carry this light out into the world, each of us according to our state in life.

In 1997, Pope John-Paul II wrote a letter asking us to set this day aside each year to reflect upon and thank God for his gift of consecrated life to the church. This followed upon his apostolic exhortation of the 25<sup>th</sup> March 1996 on the subject of Consecrated Life - a more accurate term for what we have generally referred to as 'Religious Life' - the life lived by sisters, brothers, priests, single people, widows and widowers who have consecrated their lives to God by the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In obedience to the Pope's request, I would like to take this occasion to reflect with you on the nature of consecrated life as a gift of God to the Church.

The Pope reminds us: 'All those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit's gift, the chastity which is appropriate to their state in life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable detachment from material possessions; for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love. But Baptism in itself does not include the call to celibacy or virginity, the renunciation of possessions or obedience to a superior, in the form proper to the evangelical counsels. The profession of the evangelical counsels thus presupposes a particular gift of God not given to everyone, as Jesus himself emphasises with respect to voluntary celibacy'(n.30).

All of us are called to follow Jesus in a life of holiness. Most are graced to do this in what we might call the normal way of married and family life or through the friendships and commitments of a single life. I don't have to tell you how much of the pain of the cross and the joy of the resurrection is experienced in such graced lives. From the very beginning of Christianity, however, there have been those who have responded to the call to leave this normal involvement and to consecrate their lives to Jesus in a special commitment of love.

The Pope writes: 'The consecrated life consists in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus, and in him of every member of the human family'(n.3).

For this reason the Pope states that the first and essential commitment is that expressed in the vow of chastity, for it is in this vow that the consecrated person expresses his or her commitment of love to Christ (see n.14). There is a challenge here: 'The first challenge is that of a hedonistic culture which separates sexuality from all objective moral norms, often treating it as a mere diversion and a consumer good and, with the complicity of the means of social communication, justifying a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences of this are before everyone's eyes: transgressions of every kind, with resulting psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families. The reply of the consecrated life is above all in the joyful

living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition'(n.88).

The Pope gives a brief definition of the essential features of the consecrated life: 'By professing the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons not only make Christ the whole meaning of their lives but strive to reproduce in themselves, as far as possible, "that form of life which he, as the Son of God, accepted in entering the world" [LG n.44]. By embracing chastity, they make their own the pure love of Christ and proclaim to the world that he is the only-Begotten Son who is one with the Father. By imitating Christ's poverty, that he is the Son who receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love. By accepting, through the sacrifice of their own freedom, the mystery of Christ's filial obedience, they profess that he is infinitely beloved and loving, as the one who delights only in the will of the Father to whom he is perfectly united and on whom he depends for everything'(n.16).

Every life has its contemplative dimension and its active dimension. Each of us is called to live in communion with the Blessed Trinity in the depths of our heart and to join in carrying out God's mission of love in the world. The contemplative and the active dimensions are essential to the lives of those consecrated to God in what we have been used to speaking of as 'Religious Life'. I hope it is obvious that there is a special spiritual intimacy in the lives of those who have made a commitment of love, not to the man or woman of their choice, but to Jesus himself. Those consecrated in this way are a sign to the church and the world of the call that each of us has to love God first and with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. A woman or a man who chooses this way of life, does so out of the desire to love with Jesus' heart and to love the same way he loved, free to love whomever God brings into their lives - to be available to be everyone's brother, or sister, as was Jesus.

As the Pope says: 'The sense of mission is at the very heart of every form of consecrated life. To the extent that consecrated persons live a life completely devoted to the Father, held fast by Christ and animated by the Spirit, they cooperate effectively in the mission of the Lord Jesus and contribute in a particularly profound way to the renewal of the world'(n.25).

'The fact that consecrated persons fix their gaze on the Lord's countenance does not diminish their commitment on behalf of humanity; on the contrary, it strengthens this commitment, enabling it to have an impact on history, in order to free history from all that disfigures it. The quest for divine beauty impels consecrated persons to care for the deformed image of God on the faces of their brothers and sisters, faces disfigured by hunger, faces disillusioned by political promises, faces humiliated by seeing their culture despised, faces frightened by constant and indiscriminate violence, the anguished faces of minors, the hurt and humiliated faces of women, the tired faces of migrants who are not given a warm welcome, the faces of the elderly who are without even the minimum conditions for a dignified life'(n.75).

I would like to conclude where the Pope concludes, with an image taken from the Gospel of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. John tells the story of Jesus at table with his friend Lazarus. In an act of sheer love, Mary comes in and anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfumed oil. John remembers that 'the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume'(John 12:3). One of the disciples complained of what he saw as waste, but Jesus corrected him. There are those today who see the consecration of young lives to Jesus and to his mission as waste. The Pope says:

'The precious ointment (John 12:3) poured out as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all 'utilitarian' considerations, is a sign of unbounded generosity as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to his person and his Mystical Body. From such a life 'poured out' without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house'(n.104).

Let us pray for a renewal of the Consecrated Life in our Church, and encourage those who are drawn to this life of sacrifice and love with all their hearts to Jesus' invitation. They will, indeed, experience the hundredfold promised by him to those willing to offer their lives in such close discipleship.