

Reflection

*Offered by Sr. Lynn Schafer
February 8, 2015*

Happy World Day for Consecrated Life

I would like to begin my reflection by sharing an experience I had a number of years ago when I was in Cincinnati for the opening of the Women and Spirit /Catholic Sisters in America Exhibition. I came upon a part of the exhibit where I found two elderly sisters looking at the display of their congregation. They stood there together, holding each other hands and silent tears running down their faces. The one sister said to the other, "We never asked for this;" which I took to mean, they never asked to be recognized for the work they had done and the acknowledgement they were receiving through the beautiful exhibit. I was deeply touched at their exchange and at the many stories of such heroism, faith and courage that was visible throughout the exhibit.

I think many of us today feel the same as those two women religious. We are not asking for recognition by the Church throughout this year that is dedicated to the Consecrated Life. I personally believe this year for us, is about sharing our lives with you, letting you know who we are as this band of Wheaton Franciscans and hoping to grow in relationship with you by doing so.

I can imagine that many religious are grateful to Pope Francis for this gesture of making this year a year dedicated to Consecrated Life; raising it up again after it was trampled on by the investigation. I hope that this year will bring some healing to us who were deeply hurt by the message the investigation sent into our world through the press about who we are as a CHURCH. In some ways, it made us stronger in our prophetic call and created a bond among the faithful and women religious as a whole that I believe may not have happened at the magnitude it did without it.

"THIS IS A WONDERFUL LIFE, A BEAUTIFUL LIFE. IT IS A HAPPY LIFE. IT IS A PRODUCTIVE LIFE. IT'S A MEANINGFUL LIFE AND IT IS A DEEPLY SPIRITUAL LIFE. IT IS A LIFE WORTH GIVING ONE'S OWN LIFE FOR." This is what Sr. Joan Chittister, Benedictine Sister, says of consecrated life and I wholeheartedly agree. Today's readings have much to tell us about what the consecrated life truly entails in its deepest calling and commitment.

In our gospel this morning, we have several examples from the life of Christ that portray what consecrated life and what we, as Wheaton

Franciscans and religious throughout the world, have dedicated our lives to, and what we desire to BE more deeply each day.

First, in Mark's gospel the emphasis that seems to capture our attention most is Jesus being about his mission of preaching, "For this purpose I have come...to preach." What I would like to emphasize here is often in the scriptures we are made aware of Jesus waking early in the morning before dawn or seen late into the evening in prayer, solitude and communion with his God. This time sustained him and all that he was about in his mission. It was essential and necessary for him to seek out time with his God. It confirmed for him that he was never alone; he was in the Father and the Father in him.

Our lives as religious, first and foremost, are founded in a committed prayer life. For us, prayer is a time spent in solitude, as many of us live singly. We dedicate time daily in contemplation, meditation, and intentional prayer for those in need. Our prayer is one of listening in the silence of our hearts; of being in stillness and communion with the Divine, saying as we show up in our sacred prayer space, "We are here. How do you need me today? Use me!"

Our prayer is also communal, praying the Divine Office and sharing the Eucharist are significant and meaningful parts of our lives. Our prayer life sustains us. We cannot live this life without it. We cannot be joyful without it. We cannot honor this call without it.

A second aspect of the consecrated life we see in Mark's gospel is Jesus in community. Jesus formed a community of chosen apostles and disciples which were many, including women, who provided for him and the community from their resources. Jesus seemed to form community wherever he went, but he had a core community with which he surrounded himself.

This is the second most important aspect of our lives as Franciscans. It is part of our charism to be relational and live in community. As Franciscans we feel this same sense of community wherever we go. We live community quite differently from early days of religious life. We live in smaller groups. Many of us live singly, but we make a commitment to find each other and come together in small circles of what we call intentional communities. This intentional community circle makes a commitment to each other to gather regularly to pray, to discuss important and intimate aspects of our shared lives, and whatever is most pressing on our hearts. Community is an important way we support one another in our mutual commitment as vowed and covenant members of our community. You will be hearing more about covenant membership if you haven't already, at another time.

We regularly come together to share our lives in community as a Province. We come together for community meetings that include all the members of our Province. We hold regular community gatherings throughout the year and hold Chapter meetings every four years. This is a time to discern how we will BE in the next four years together and what we are to do as a Province as we reflect and pray upon what the "Signs of the Times" are calling us to. These times are about community soul searching, listening to Spirit within, and discerning what we are called to. Some among us are discerning a call to leadership for our Province. Since we are an international congregation, every six years, we participate at various levels in our General Chapter in Rome to pay attention to what Spirit is calling us to as a Congregation and how we can BE and witness within our Global World.

The third element of consecrated life that is modelled for us by Jesus in today's gospel is Jesus in ministry; a ministry that appears to have an urgent quality to it. I like what Sr. Sandra Schneider, IHM says; "Jesus, as God's prophet, comes proclaiming good news to the poor and announcing a new world. Jesus comes opening up a new world of God's absolutely inclusive love and unconditional mercy to the unclean, the sinners and the outcasts." Sr. Sandra further states, "We religious are perceived, correctly, as promoting the ecclesiology of Vatican II. But the real and deeper issue is that religious are participating in the prophetic ministry of Jesus announcing the Good News of salvation by their preferential ministry to the outcasts of society and church."

Our Franciscan Congregation is called to be a prophetic witness of the gospel, called to proclaim this love boldly—risking all as modelled by Jesus, Francis and Clare of Assisi, and our Foundress, Mother Clara.

We are dedicated to the Jobs of the world and those that struggle to stay true to the God that they know to be true, unconditional Love and not a giver of trials, a tester, a punisher, a God that comes with bad theology.

Sr. Joan Chittister, tells us in her book *THE FIRE IN THESE ASHES*, "The task of religious life is not a task at all. It is the application of the great questions of life to all of life's dimensions. The religious does not do charity without asking, 'Why this injustice?' The religious does not teach without asking, 'What must be learned that will change the world?' The real religious does not attempt to act before contemplating the reason for it, the consequences of it, the costs of it and the contribution of it to the coming of the reign of God. The religious life makes contemplation a very active thing."

We, in the consecrated life, and that includes all the baptized, are Christ for one another and our world. We are the living Body of Christ. We are the

voice to help and empower those to find forgiveness and understanding in our institutions and systems that oppress, discourage or blame. All of us, as Gospel people are called to take a prophetic stand, to be that different voice that is grounded in deeply knowing the Divine Source who is love, light, and a powerful presence always with us and in us. We share a ministry that brings hope, that cries out and as Sr. Joan Chississter writes, "...wails, if need be, against injustice and untruths."

THIS IS A WONDERFUL LIFE, A BEAUTIFUL LIFE. IT IS A HAPPY LIFE. IT IS A PRODUCTIVE LIFE. IT'S A MEANINGFUL LIFE AND IT IS A DEEPLY SPIRITUAL LIFE. IT IS A LIFE WORTH GIVING ONE'S OWN LIFE FOR.