

**Homily for Vespers with Religious for the Year of Consecrated Life
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for this liturgy of Evening Prayer with religious serving across the diocese as we celebrate this Year of Consecrated Life being commemorated throughout the Universal Church.

During this year, Pope Francis encourages the Church in general and the various religious communities in particular to “look to the past with gratitude”¹ for the many gifts that have been bestowed on the Church through the various forms and expressions of consecrated religious life. He also invites us to “live the present with passion,”² remaining ever faithful to the mission of the Church and the particular charisms of each community. Finally, the Holy Father urges us to “embrace the future with hope,”³ seeing the consecrated life as a vehicle by which the Holy Spirit will continue to build up the Church.

Our gathering here is an opportunity for us to consider the impact and importance of religious life here in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois by looking to the past with gratitude, to the present with passion, and to the future with hope.

We first turn our eyes to the past, and in doing so, the words of Psalm 114, which we just prayed, seem so appropriate for our reflection. In that psalm, we hear of how the Lord was with His people in their departure from slavery in Egypt, leading them on their journey through the desert to the Promised Land, protecting them and providing for all of their needs.

When we consider the history of our diocese, we have seen how the Lord has indeed been with us in a special way, providing for our needs, particularly through the great work and prayer of the many religious who have been a part of shaping our identity. Many of our parishes were founded by religious orders, including many by the Franciscan Friars who have a long history here in our diocese. Other parishes have been run by various religious orders, such as the Oblates of the Virgin Mary and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. We can recall the many young people who have come to know Jesus Christ and His Church, learning the

fundamentals of the Catholic faith in Catholic schools staffed by religious orders such as the Springfield Dominicans, the Ursulines, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Viatorians, and others. The healing touch of Christ's mercy and love have been given to the sick in our health care institutions, many of which have been the result of the dedicated work of religious, particularly members of the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, who have founded and/or served in many of the hospitals in our diocese.

A great variety of other orders have served the needs of this local Church in so many ways, such as the great work at Brother James Court by the Franciscan Brothers of the Holy Cross, offering loving service to those with developmental disabilities, respecting the dignity that belongs to all of God's children. Many other religious orders have served in various capacities, such as social outreach, catechesis, care for the elderly and dying, and campus ministry.

I'm afraid that if I tried to list all of the religious communities that have been a part of our diocese, we would be here for another hour! And even though not all were mentioned, our gratitude for their impact is not minimized in any way, for, in the end, all of the glory belongs to the Lord, who has been at work through these communities that have been a source

of such profound blessing. It is truly fitting, therefore, that I offer a heartfelt thank you in my name, and on behalf of all of my predecessors, to all of you for the gift that you have been for this diocese.

Turning our attention to the present, we give thanks to God for all of the work and prayer that is currently being offered through the dedicated service of so many religious. While it is true that the number of religious is not at the level as in times past, you have adapted to the needs and circumstances, not turning in on yourselves, but continuing to go out to meet the needs of the Church, as Christ instructed at the Great Commission.

The Holy Father encourages all of you consecrated religious to recommit yourselves to living with passion the gift of your consecration, in harmony with the specific charism of your communities. The words of our reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians offers a helpful point of reflection in renewing that passion as he reminds us: "In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ" (Ephesians 1:11-12).

As consecrated religious, you are called in a particular way to live your lives solely “for the praise of His glory,” directing all of your words and actions toward Him to whom you have been consecrated through the profession of your vows. The powerful witness offered through a life lived totally for, with, and in Christ is a visible sign to the world that points back to Him.

The Church is ever mindful of the challenging circumstances in which we live in our world today, dominated by so many ideas and philosophies that are opposed to the truth, beauty, and goodness of our Catholic faith. The world is in need of being redirected back to that light, and consecrated religious have a unique and privileged role in that task. This is what Pope Francis had in mind when he invited religious men and women to “wake up the world” and “[b]e witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!” He summarizes your call by saying: “It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.”⁴

The Holy Father called to mind how it has been consecrated religious throughout history who have provided that witness and have been the instruments of great growth in the Church. It is that tradition to which you

as religious are connected, and it is that to which you are called to continue. He quotes Blessed Pope Paul VI who connects this need for witness with the situation of the world when he said the following: “[w]ithout this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the ‘salt’ of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization.”⁵

Your mission, then, is to continue to live your consecration to Christ with great passion, all for His praise and glory, being that beacon of light which will draw people to Christ and His Church, the path which alone promises true and lasting happiness in this world and in the world to come.

Finally, we look to the future with hope. Again, we are not discouraged by numbers or the perceived obstacles that exist for our communities or for the Church. In fact, it was with great joy this past August 14th that three new sisters were received into the Novitiate for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George in Alton, Illinois. In addition, four sisters made their first profession of vows, followed by the final profession of three sisters to this community. I am also pleased to hear that

an additional four young women have just entered the community as Postulants. This is just one of the many signs of great hope that we have for religious life in our diocese.

But our hope is not in numbers alone. Our hope rests in God alone. Jesus promised His disciples that He would be with them until the end of time. (cf. Matthew 28:20) That promise remains with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit that He sends us.

This requires that we place our trust completely in the workings of His Holy Spirit to continue to provide for His Church. The specifics and details of how that will happen are not clear to us, nor is it required that we have that clarity, for, as St. Paul says, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). This is not a passive faith by which we let God take control and we do nothing. Rather, we must be prudent in our cooperation with the Holy Spirit, being as docile and adaptable as possible, while always trusting in God’s loving Providence for His Church.

Cooperating with the Holy Spirit requires the exercise of that important virtue of obedience. Obedience is an important element of the lives of each of your communities, and it should continue to be so. But you are also encouraged to see that your obedience necessarily extends to the

Church as well. It was to the Church that Christ promised to be present throughout history in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and we will share in that promise to the extent that we remain obedient to the Holy Spirit by maintaining communion with the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis offered a helpful explanation of this when he preached to his own community of the Society of Jesus on the feast day of their founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, shortly after his election as the Successor to St. Peter. He said the following:

Likewise the centrality of Christ corresponds to the centrality of the Church: they are two focal points that cannot be separated: I cannot follow Christ except in the Church and with the Church... For this reason creativity is vital, but always in community, in the Church, with this belonging that gives us the courage to go ahead. Serving Christ is loving this actual Church, and serving her generously and in a spirit of obedience.⁶

In conclusion, we direct our attention to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, in whom we see the perfect model of faith and obedience. We echo her words of praise to God in the *Magnificat* each day when we pray Evening Prayer. Pope Benedict, in his beautiful commentary

on this great hymn of praise, offers a fitting conclusion to our reflection as we direct our gaze to Our Blessed Mother, seeking to follow her example in our lives of consecration. He says that we, like Mary, are invited “to ensure that the Lord can find a dwelling place in our own souls and lives. Not only must we carry him in our hearts, but we must bring him to the world, so that we too can bring forth Christ for our epoch. Let us pray the Lord to help us praise him with Mary's spirit and soul, and to bring Christ back to our world.”⁷

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, §1.

² Pope Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, §2.

³ Pope Francis, *To All Consecrated People*, §3.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Wake up the World*, La Civiltà Cattolica, 17 March 2014, trans. Fr. Donald Maldari, S.J.

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 3.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Homily on the Occasion of the Feast of Saint Ignatius*, 31 July 2013.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 15 February 2006.