



## **World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life Mass**

### **Homily**

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth**

**Wednesday 2 February 2022  
The Chapel of St Michael the Archangel,  
Catholic Education WA**

This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Annual Day of Prayer for Religious Life which was begun by Saint John Paul II in 1997.

Over the years it has been celebrated in various parts of the Church, sometimes with enthusiasm and large crowds and sometimes in a very minimal way, if at all. I am very grateful to Father George for promoting the idea that we gather together this year here in a chapel which was once the very heart of the prayer life of a religious community, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, to celebrate this important moment, not extravagantly or with large crowds, but hopefully with both enthusiasm and gratitude.

As you would be aware mention is often made of Pope Francis's comment that we are living not so much in an *era of change* but in a *change of era*. This certainly rings true for me both as a member of a religious congregation myself and now as a bishop who is deeply conscious of the contribution of religious women and men to this Archdiocese of Perth from its very beginnings. The significance of religious in the life of a local Church is not something unique to this archdiocese but it is still worth acknowledging gratefully that we would not have the vibrant Church we have here in this archdiocese if we had not had the remarkable contribution of so many religious orders and congregations. Many, though by no means all, of these religious families are represented here today. On one of the walls in Griver House there are a number of plaques which represent the various religious orders that at one time or another have had members living and ministering in the archdiocese. I counted them the other day and there are sixty-two of them. Some of them are still present and active here in the archdiocese while many others, although they have withdrawn from Perth, are still an important part of the life of the Church in Australia and around the world. And some, of course, have no members present here in Perth or indeed anywhere else, except in heaven. Religious life has waxed and waned in the Church ever since its first appearance in the early centuries of the Church's life. But through all its ups and downs, including the challenges of our present day, religious life, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "*belongs undeniably to the Church's life and holiness*".

I entered the Salesian novitiate in 1977, when I was twenty-three, and made my first profession of vows on the feast of Saint John Bosco in 1978. I can hardly believe that 44 years have passed



since then! For the last 15 years of that time I have, as a bishop, been living away from my religious community. I remember very well how difficult it was for me to get used to living alone.

I was so used to getting up more or less at the same time each day, gathering in the chapel with the rest of my community for Morning Prayer and meditation, and then the celebration of the Eucharist, and then going with everyone else to the dining room for breakfast before the day got underway. At the other end of the day, after a busy day of apostolic work, we would all gather together again in the chapel for Evening Prayer and spiritual reading, and then for an evening meal together. Once a month we would have an afternoon and evening of quiet prayer and reflection together, every three months we would have a one-day retreat, and of course every year we would make our annual retreat with our fellow Salesians. It was a simple rhythm of community life, prayer, meals and apostolic work.

As I look back now, I realise that in its simplicity it was very sustaining: it has taken me quite a long time to adapt to a different rhythm of prayer and ministry. I must confess that it had never occurred to me to consider diocesan priesthood. I always had a strong conviction that I was called to the religious life. Now as a bishop, my daily life resembles that of the diocesan clergy for more than that of religious life, and I do believe that where I find myself today is as much God's will for me as was the initial call into religious life. And yet I am often reminded of two simple things which somehow or other express something rather deep in me. The first is something I said in the homily I preached at the Mass of Thanksgiving two days after my ordination as a Bishop. The Mass was celebrated in the chapel of the school which I had attended as a boy, in which I had taught as a young Salesian brother, in which I had been the RE coordinator for a number of years after my priestly ordination, and in which I had served as rector of the school and community in the first years of the new millennium. *"You can take the boy out of the Salesians"* I said, *"but you cannot take the Salesians out of the boy"*. And in a way this thought was confirmed by some advice I was given by the regional superior of the Salesian Congregation for the East Asia-Oceania region. *"Tim"*, he said to me, *"remember always to be a Salesian bishop rather than bishop who used to be a Salesian"*.

Both of these remarks, each in its own way, underlines something that I have always believed but about which I have become more and more convinced as time has gone by: the essence of religious life lies not so much in what we do as in who we are. I am certainly no longer involved in a full-time basis in the typical ministry of most Salesians: the care and education of young people and especially of those most in need. But the fact that my daily life is taken up with so many other things does not mean that I am any less a Salesian, any less a religious. For at the heart of the religious life is not the work we do but rather the witness we give. Most of us have taken the traditional vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. The values encapsulated by these vows, often referred to as the evangelical counsels, are better thought of, at least according to Father Frank Moloney whom many of you would know, as evangelical imperatives. They are values which lie at the very heart of any genuine Christian life and can and should be lived in whatever context a Christian finds him or herself. But because we are a sacramental people, who



both need to, and know how to, look beyond the external sign to the deeper truth that it both reveals and conceals, the Lord in the religious life provides a powerful sacramental sign to the whole community of the Church of the essential nature of these values. We religious are those who, in God's mysterious plan, are called to live obedience, chastity, and poverty, in such a clear and unmistakable way that all our brothers and sisters in the faith can recognise God's call to them to bring these values alive in their own situations. In this sense we are, to borrow a phrase from one of Elizabeth Johnson's books, *"Friends of God and Prophets"*. But because, as the first letter of St John reminds us, "our love should not just be words or mere talk but something real and active" (1 John 3:18) we do and must commit ourselves radically to the service of others in imitation of Jesus. However, surely the recent experience of the Church has taught us that what was once largely the preserve of religious in terms of education, healthcare, social out-reach and so forth can be, and often is, carried out with as much, if not more, expertise, commitment and faith by lay people as by religious. We must look, therefore, beyond what we do in the Church and in our wider society, important though this is, to who we are in the Church and in our wider society. We are called to be living sacraments, individually and especially together, of the essentially radical nature of Christian discipleship, not in order to relieve others of the need to respond to this call but rather to invite them, through our witness, our encouragement and our presence, to embrace the call which we all share because of our baptism.

This is, at least, what I have come to understand in my forty-four years as a religious. I have not always lived the religious life faithfully or been that clear and unmistakable sacramental person that my religious vocation calls me to be. I suspect none of us have. But we are still here, still doing our best, still trying to live with trusting faith in what can sometimes feel like a dark night of the soul. But if we can get in touch once more with the original impulse which led us into the religious life, and in that light recognise the presence of God leading us along the winding paths of our life's journey, we can quite simply and with confidence, commit ourselves to living our religious vocation faithfully now, leaving the future trustingly in God's hands.