



Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

Homily

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**Friday 02 February 2024
Chapel of St Michael the Archangel, Leederville**

Last week I celebrated the opening school Mass for Mercedes College. The Mass also incorporated the commissioning of the new school principal and the commissioning of some senior students who had accepted the invitation to become Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist.

As I was reflecting on what to share with the school community on that occasion, an incident from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi came to my mind and it occurred to me that it might provide some useful reflections for us as religious as we gather to acknowledge the annual World Day for Consecrated Life.

Many of you will be familiar with this story so let me offer you just the bare bones to remind you. One night Saint Francis, together with one of his companions, set out to go into the countryside near Assisi in order to find a quiet and secluded for prayer and reflection. In doing this, Saint Francis and his companion, Brother Leo, were really following the example of Jesus who, the gospel tells us, often went into the hills at night to pray.

At a certain point Francis told Brother Leo that he was going off on his own and that Leo was not to follow him. Leo, however, was curious and wanted to see what Francis did when he was praying on his own. He followed him and when he found him discovered that Francis was on his knees, saying over and over again, *“Lord who are you, and who am I?”* According to the story, Francis spent the whole night praying in this way.

This afternoon I wanted to offer just two simple reflections which occur to me from this story. The first is this. In one way or another, either explicitly or implicitly, at some stage in our journey of life and faith we found ourselves asking this question. The question may have been prompted by an encounter with a sister, a brother, or a priest, whom we admired and whose life and witness spoke to us in our hearts. For some of us the impulse to consider religious life may instead have come during a time of prayer. For some others a personal crisis might have led us to search for something more in life, something deeper. In reality, of course, it is quite likely that there are as many different vocation stories as there are individual religious.



The annual celebration of religious life which occurs on this Feast of the Presentation of the Lord invites us to look back and reconnect with the story of God's presence in our own lives, a presence which led us into our religious congregation. But even more, perhaps, this annual celebration invites us to reflect, not just on why we joined but why we stayed. It is no reflection or judgment on those who joined and then made other choices that we recognise and thank God for the grace of fidelity, more often than not in the face of our infidelity, which has enabled us to continue along the path to which we believe God called us. God's ways are infinitely more mysterious than we can understand, and it often seems that God calls some into religious life because it is in this way that God is preparing them for the next thing God might ask of them. But for us who have stayed, it is this path which we believe God is asking us to follow.

If the question of Saint Francis - *Lord who are you and who am I?* - can help us reflect on the strange ways of God as they have been made known in our own life and in the initial stirrings of our vocation, the very same question is one which each of us, as individual religious and as members of our own religious family, is being invited to ask of our present situation. For so many of us the future is not clear and for some of us, on the contrary, it does seem to be very clear.

However we might seek to explain the reality of few vocations and diminishing numbers, the reality is clear. Religious life as we have experienced it is changing and with it people's experience of the Church is changing. The question which the crowds in Jerusalem asked the apostles after hearing them preach is the same question we ask of ourselves today: *what must we do?* It seems to me that another Saint Francis, Saint Francis de Sales, whose feast day we celebrated last week, might have some advice for us in this regard. When a young widow, who came to him for spiritual direction, kept insisting that God was calling her to religious life, he gave her this piece of advice: *If you want to know what God is asking of you today, look around you.*

This young woman, who would eventually found the Order of the Visitation with St Francis, was the mother of a number of young children whose father had died. Francis's message was clear: whatever about the future, the present reality was that she had responsibilities to her family which constituted for her a clear indication of God's will for her. She was called to respond to the realities of her life, and entrust the unknown future to God, trusting in God's wisdom, providence and fidelity.

We know that God is faithful. We know that God constantly visits us in loving kindness, like *"the dawn from on high"* as the Benedictus expresses it. And we know that it is in the usually ordinary and sometimes extraordinary events of our daily life and circumstances that the will of God is revealed to us.

For some of us there is a sense, perhaps, that the words of Simeon are words we are called to make our own: *now let your servants go in peace according to your promise for our eyes have seen your salvation.* For others perhaps it is the words of Zechariah which are being addressed



to us: *you shall be called prophets of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways before him.*

Today we pray that whatever words the Lord decides to address to us, we are ready and eager to embrace the call with hope and trusting faith.