



Religious Life Today – A Gospel Path which Calls to us

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Loreto Primary School
Performing Arts Centre, Webster Street, Nedlands
Tuesday, 14 April 2015 at 7.30 pm

As we are all well aware, this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. There have been many commemorations of the event of the Council, both here in Perth and throughout Australia and the world, in the last few years. People have reflected on the changes which were ushered in by the Council and many challenging questions have been asked, and continue to be asked, about the meaning and legacy of the Council and how faithful or otherwise the Church has been to the Council in the intervening fifty years. It is almost a cliché these days to say that it will take at least one hundred years for a fair and balanced evaluation of Vatican II to emerge but it is, in fact, that case that this has been true in the past and may well be true of the Council which shaped the lives of so many of us.

I am 61 and so, when Vatican II concluded, I was an 11-year-old boy in my last year of primary schooling. I still remember the afternoon, a year or so before that, I think it was, when I saw the assistant priest in our parish racing towards me across the playground, cassock flying in the breeze, as he rushed to tell me that we had permission to celebrate the Mass in English. In many ways, the changes in the liturgy were the most dramatic, or at least the most obvious, results of Vatican II. Whether or not they were the most momentous or significant is a matter still open to debate.

Another obvious change ushered in by Vatican II was the change to religious life, or at least the external changes. Most dramatically, these were seen in the many changes in religious dress which appeared over a number of years. Many congregations of women religious, over a period of time, and more so in some countries and cultures than in others, arrived at a point where they believed it was more appropriate for them to wear secular dress. Other congregations decided to retain a more traditional, distinctive religious habit although most of these groups adapted their form of dress to a more simple style. Strangely, this question became, and for some still remains, almost a fundamental issue and there are still people who make judgements about the sincerity or commitment of various religious, or their views on all kinds of issues from the social to the theological, depending on their style of dress. I can't help thinking that it will be a sign of maturity for the Church when the legitimacy of the different decisions made by individual religious congregations in this matter of dress is recognised and respected and we cease judging each other on the basis of what we wear.

Of course, there were other major changes in the way religious life was lived and also in the way young religious were formed. I entered the Salesian novitiate in 1977 and already we were living our religious life according to the revised constitutions which had, in a sense, "replaced" the



original constitutions written by St John Bosco. The Salesians had never had many of the trappings associated with traditional religious life, most of which were expressions of a monastic style of life rather than a life adapted to the active apostolate. We prayed together as a community each morning and evening, but what we called the “practices of piety” were fairly minimal and adapted from the religious practices of the farmers and peasants of Don Bosco’s northern Italian rural upbringing. We had introduced what was for us the novelty of communal Morning and Evening Prayer from the breviary, and we had a short period each morning for meditation and a short period each evening for Spiritual Reading. The Salesians had never had a habit. From Don Bosco’s, time the priests wore whatever the local clergy wore while the brothers wore secular dress, so we were spared the need to make changes to our form of dress beyond deciding whether or not it was appropriate for young Salesians attending the local Teachers College to wear coloured jumpers rather than black ones when we were wearing the clerical collar. And I can assure you, with my hand on my heart, that, as novices, we never had to plant cabbages upside down!

I mention these few points almost as an aside as I believe very strongly that it is helpful to keep our own personal history and our communal history in mind as we seek to understand the past and the present and try to imagine and shape the future.

When Pope John Paul II sat down to write his Apostolic Exhortation on Religious Life after the Synod on Religious Life held in Rome in October 1994, nearly thirty years after the publication of *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Vatican II document on the renewal of the religious life, he chose the story of the Transfiguration as the Gospel text around which he wanted to base his reflections. Another twenty years on, this still has relevance for us today. I would like to take up one of John Paul’s thoughts as a launching pad for some ideas I wanted to share with you this evening.

As you read John Paul’s letter, you realise that among the many reasons for him choosing this particular text are the words found in Matthew’s version of the story as Jesus comes back down the mountain with Peter, James and John.

*But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear".
And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only (Matt 17:7-8).*

John Paul sums up his reflections on these few lines from the story with the following words:

From the standpoint of the Christian life as a whole, the vocation to the consecrated life is, despite its renunciations and trials, and indeed because of them, a path of light over which the Redeemer keeps constant watch: "Rise and have no fear".

These words of Jesus are important and I would like to invite each one of us to allow ourselves to hear Jesus say directly to us this evening: “*Rise, and have no fear*”. And perhaps, as we do so, we might also keep in mind the words of Pope Francis who, in his letter announcing the Year of Consecrated Life, has challenged us as religious to “*wake up the world*”.

With these two invitations ringing in our ears, it is important for all of us to reflect on the situation of religious life, and for those of us who are religious to reflect in particular on our own experience



of, and living of, religious life. In common with all religious congregations and families throughout the world, we are being invited, not for the first time, to enter into the demanding and perhaps frightening, but also hopefully life-giving, project of reviewing our life and mission.

Whenever we do this, one of the things we have to do is to return to our origins and to the charism of our founders. This means, of course, that we are invited to return to the original divine inspiration which gave rise to our congregations in the first place. This call to return to the origins implies, I think, that we recognise and accept that, today, we find ourselves in a new situation, different in so many ways from the situation which gave birth to our religious families. It is precisely the reality of this new situation, and the need for us, as consecrated religious, to respond faithfully to this new situation, which means that we must always be open to the surprises God has in store for us. Another way of saying this is that we are being asked to continue to walk the path of renewal, a path which continues to throw up challenges but which also offers us the freedom to respond to the Lord in the ways that He is asking of us.

This is not an easy task. Perhaps it can help if we remember that it is a task in which the whole Church must constantly engage. Everyone here this evening is called to the same journey. What Pope Francis says to religious is also applicable to every Christian. As I will try to say a little later, it is especially relevant for religious because of the role we are called to play in waking up the world, yes, but in waking up the Church as well. And, in saying this, I don't just mean waking up the bishops, who I think can sometimes be easily viewed almost as caricatures of human beings, one-sided cardboard characters who, unlike everyone else, can't think for themselves, or form deeply held convictions, but who can only parrot the official line which comes from Rome and who live in fear of being rapped over the knuckles by Vatican bureaucrats. If religious are to wake anyone else up, we must first wake up each other so that we can then wake up the community of the Lord's disciples, of which we, and the bishops, and the clergy, and the laity, are all equally a part.

So what does Pope Francis say in this regard? He is quoted in the letter sent out by the Congregation for Religious to mark the inauguration of the Year for Consecrated Life:

Meeting the Lord gets us moving, urges us to leave aside self-absorption. A relationship with the Lord is not static, nor is it focused on self. "Because when we put Christ at the centre of our life, we ourselves don't become the centre! The more that you unite yourself to Christ and He becomes the centre of your life, the more He leads you out of yourself, leads you from making yourself the centre and opens you to others... We are not at the centre; we are, so to speak, 'relocated'. We are at the service of Christ and of the Church."

The truth is that, whether we want to speak of "waking up the world" or "rising and moving ahead without fear" or "launching out into the deep", we are talking about acting boldly, imaginatively, innovatively and courageously. But, of course, as religious, we are talking about doing this within



the community of disciples, the Church. We are talking about our following of the one who said *"the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* and who was celebrated by St Paul as the one who, *"though He was in the form of God did not cling to His equality with God but humbled Himself and became obedient to His Father, even to death."* If we are, as Pope Francis constantly reminds us, being called to go to the margins, the peripheries, we are called to do so as disciples of Jesus, and members of His Church, which is really saying the same thing in two different ways. As Pope Francis reminded people in a homily he preached in the chapel of his residence on his feast day:

The Church is a mother who gives us the faith, a mother who gives us an identity. But the Christian identity is not simply an identity card: Christian identity is a belonging, belonging to the Church. You see, it is not possible to find Jesus outside the Church. The great Paul VI said: "Wanting to live with Jesus without the Church, following Jesus outside of the Church, loving Jesus without the Church, is an absurd dichotomy." And the Mother Church which gives us Jesus gives us our identity... This belonging to the Church is a beautiful thing."

I want to reflect on this for a moment. When I used to teach theology, I often reminded my students that theology invites us to what I call a three-fold fidelity. This is because the living of the Christian life calls us to a three-fold fidelity. Christian life is ultimately a life of discipleship – of a faithful following of Jesus, not as we would wish Him to be but as He really is. Because religious life is a particular living of the Christian life, then religious life too is called to a three-fold fidelity.

What is this three-fold fidelity in theology, which must become a three-fold fidelity in life? It is this: firstly, fidelity to what God has done for us in the sending of His Son. There can be no Christianity worthy of the name which does not constantly renew itself in the image of the Jesus of the Gospels... what else could discipleship mean?

The second fidelity is to the ways in which, over the centuries, the Holy Spirit has led the Church into an ever deeper appreciation of the riches to be found in the mystery of Christ. As I would say to my students, the Holy Spirit wasn't only at work during the time of Jesus or during the period of the establishment of the primitive Church: the Spirit was also at work, leading and guiding the Church all through its history, even at those times when many in the Church, including its leaders, had their hearts and minds closed to the Spirit. A good example of this ongoing presence of the Spirit throughout the ages is, in fact, the existence of religious life. There were no monks and nuns in the first years of Christianity. And, for most religious in the world, the origins of their particular religious families go back no more than five hundred years, and for many of us much less than that.

The third fidelity is to the present reality in which we find ourselves. It is not much use having the Gospel of Life, with all the deeper understandings which have come to us over the centuries, if we don't know how to offer that Gospel to the world in which we presently live in a way the world can hear and understand. It is no good wishing the world were other than it is: it is precisely the



world, as it is, which is so desperately in need of the word of life which we have been privileged to receive and which we have been commissioned to share.

I do think we can take this basic insight and apply it to the religious life, and to the life and mission of each religious congregation, particularly at a time like ours when we are still caught up in the process of renewal. We, too, are called to a three-fold fidelity. As I speak of it, however, I do want to stress that all that I might now say is meant to fit within the overarching notion of our fidelity to the Christ of the Gospels, to the ongoing work of the Spirit in the Church over our long history, and to our need to find new and effective ways to share the Good News of the Lord with the people of our own time. And this is the task of every baptised person, not just religious.

Within this overall framework, we religious might say that, first of all, we are called to fidelity to our founder and our founding charism. As we all know, you don't receive a vocation to the religious life as such: you receive a vocation to the Sisters of Nazareth or the Mercy sisters, to the Carmelites or the Benedictines, to the Salvatorians or the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, even sometimes to the Salesians. It is the same, of course, for marriage. There is a sense in which you don't receive a vocation to the married life in the abstract: you receive a call to commit yourself and all you have and are to the particular person who, in the providence of God, you have encountered and come to recognise as the person with whom you wish to spend the rest of your life.

For religious, what this means is that we each receive a vocation, a calling, an invitation, to a particular way of life, with a particular spirituality, a particular way of "seeing" the world and God's presence in the world, and a particular mission. It seems to me that we need to constantly return to the original vision, the original dream of our origins, and ask ourselves what really lies at the heart of the founder's dream for us. For many orders and congregations, the "work we do" will be an essential part of this dream, but I would argue that, beyond the particular concrete work, there is something deeper: we should not only ask ourselves "what should we be doing?" but, more fundamentally, "what are we called to be?"

Of course, in response to both questions, and particularly the latter, there will be elements common to all religious and elements which are particular to each religious family. For Pope Francis, for example, elements which are common to all religious include the call to radical discipleship, the profession of the evangelical counsels, and the common life. How each religious family understands and lives these common elements will vary from group to group.

In asking these questions, I think we need to recognise a danger into which many of us fall from time to time. To speak of the original dream of our founders is, before anything else, to speak of their conviction that they were being called by God to be faithful disciples of Jesus and to help others to do the same. They lived out that discipleship in different ways and gave expression to it in many different forms of apostolic activity. But we should never forget that it was because they wished to be faithful disciples of Jesus that they embarked on the journey that led to the founding



of the groups to which so many of us now belong. Perhaps another way of saying this is that, for our founders, the words of Jesus in John's Gospel would make perfect sense: "*You did not choose me, no, I chose you and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last*".

Let me reflect on this a little more. As we are well aware in Australia, many of our religious congregations have been and perhaps still are involved in the work of education. My own certainly is. We are proud of our traditions, of our institutions, and, in the face of ageing members and declining numbers, many of us are pouring resources, financial and otherwise, into what we see as the handing on of our charism or our traditions and spirituality to our lay collaborators or, in many cases, those who now pick up what we must lay down. I wonder how many of those who work at Iona College have made a trip to Ireland to visit the places associated with Nano Nagle? Or those who work in schools in the Mercy tradition have visited Baggot Street in Dublin in order to connect with the story of Catherine McAuley. I wonder how much time is spent in schools in the Edmund Rice tradition helping both the staff and the students to understand the spirituality of Edmund Rice. I know that my own congregation is working hard to pass on the spirituality of St John Bosco to those who work with us in our various apostolates.

All of this is worthwhile and even necessary, but we do need to be on our guard that those for whom we work, and the staff who work with us in our institutions, whether they be schools, hospitals, refuges, retreat centres or other places, do not end up knowing more about Don Bosco, or St Francis of Assisi, or St Mary MacKillop, than they do about Jesus.

This is just one example of the motivation that led the previous Superior General of the Salesians to say, in a phrase many of you have heard me refer to before, that "*the greatest challenge facing religious life today is to return the religious life to Christ and return Christ to the religious life*".

If, indeed, our doing as religious is meant to be an expression of something more fundamental – our being as religious – and that being is all to do with the fact that we have been called and chosen by the Lord to live a special way of discipleship in the Church, and that this was at the heart of the motivation of our founders, then the call to fidelity to our founders is ultimately for us a call to a radical and uncompromising fidelity to Jesus. And, of course, in the end, it is this which will wake up the world as Pope Francis is calling us to do.

One of the challenges inherent in all of this is the depth and breadth of the mystery of Christ. No one person can, on his or her own, give full expression to the richness of this mystery. Neither can any one group do so. In the light of this, and as a way of helping us to delve deeper into the question of this three-fold fidelity to which we are all called, I would like to pose to all the religious present tonight an important question. It is one which is posed to each of us individually as religious and to each of us as members of a community of religious: *What particular dimension of the Christian mystery am I, together with my sisters or brothers, called by our founding charism to embody for the whole People of God?*



This is not always an easy question to answer, because it is so easy to get side-tracked into the “doing” part of our lives and avoid and evade the “being” part of our lives. But, even though it is difficult, I think it is very necessary. Any attempts to renew our way of life will falter if we don’t find the courage to tackle this question. And of course, the place to begin is not so much our own present situation, or our own instinctive preferences, though both of these should certainly be listened to: the place to begin is, again, the dream of our founder. What particular Spirit-inspired insight into the mystery of Jesus Christ comes to expression in the story of our founder or founders? If the mystery of Christ is like a towering mountain which takes on different characteristics depending on the position from which you are viewing it, what does the life of our founder or founders, as it develops over, in some cases, a long period of time, reveal to us of this infinite mystery of Christ? Is it Christ’s compassion for the sick and suffering? Is it His passion for His Father’s will? Is it His simplicity and poverty? Is it His tireless commitment to His preaching and teaching? Is it His gentle embrace of sinners? Is it His profound interior communion with His Father? Is it the deep mystery of His hidden life in Nazareth? Each religious founder, in one way or another, is given an insight into the mystery of Christ and then seeks to give expression to that insight in the way of life and the type of mission he or she undertakes and bequeaths to his or her brothers and sisters.

We must learn how to re-read our founders in the light of the mystery of Christ. This is what fidelity to our founders, and to what God has done for us in Christ, is calling us to.

The second fidelity to which we must be faithful as we seek to renew our way of life is the story of our journey as a religious family in the Church. This takes careful discernment, of course. Religious congregations are made up of ordinary people: we all have our great strengths, we all have our serious failings, we all have our successes, we all have our compromises. And, if this is true of us, then it will be true of those who have come before us. Not every decision taken and every path followed in the past will necessarily prove to have been a fruitful one. But, at the same time, we can and should believe that the God who raised up the founder has also been faithful to the family He created. In spite of human weakness, the story of our congregations will be, primarily, a story of great fidelity to the Lord. It will be a story of an ever-deepening understanding of the mystery of the vocation which is ours. The call to renewal is not a call to bypass our history and simply go back to our origins: rather, it is a call to read the remarkable story of our Spirit-guided history in the light of our origins. And then, of course, it is a call to honour all that has been of the Spirit in our past, discern what is essential for true and radical fidelity to be assured, face honestly what may have been missteps along the way or even distortions, and then preserve and protect those essential elements we have identified as we continue the task of creating, under the guidance of God’s Spirit, the future to which God is leading us.

This, of course, is a complex task and one that will take time, patience, perseverance, sensitivity, and the difficult challenge of remaining open to the Spirit’s voice and breath, conscious that God may well be leading us in ways we do not understand, want to follow, or find congenial or in harmony with our own preconceptions and preferences. We are called to be, as our founders



were, guided by the Spirit of God. This requires of us the humility to recognise that it is all too easy for us to edge out God's plans and enthrone our own.

The third of the three fidelities of which I have been speaking is fidelity to the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves today. By that, I mean, primarily, the reality of the world in which, and to which, we are called to offer the gift of our own charism and spirituality. It seems to me that two things are very important here: firstly, we have to understand the nature of the world, the society and the Church in which we live today. Just as a teacher has to know the language of his or her students if those students are going to be able to learn anything, so we religious have to understand the "language" of the world in which we live if we are to have any hope of sharing with them the Gospel they so desperately need to hear. It would, for example, be pointless for a teacher to teach in English if the whole class only understood Japanese.

The task is not an easy one. The "languages" of today's society, and there are many of them, are complex. When I speak of these languages, I am really speaking of the values, the ways of thinking about things, the presuppositions with which people operate, and the needs which people identify as important for them in their lives. As Christians, we are not called to embody or embrace all these things uncritically, but nor are we called to dismiss them out of hand. Rather, we are called to discern, in the light of the Gospel, what is of value and what is in one way or another ultimately de-humanising in the various currents that help make up people's approach to life in our own time. It is really a question of inculturation. As religious, we must be ready and willing to allow the culture of our own religious families to encounter the culture of the Gospel and be challenged and transformed by that culture. And then, in a similar way, we must be a presence in our Church and in our society which allows the culture of our Church and our society to encounter the culture of the Gospel and be transformed by it. But this task, which is a prophetic task, calls us to radical fidelity and humility. It must truly be the Gospel culture, and not a distorted version of it, which we present to others. We wish our Church and our society to take on the image of Christ as He is, not as we have perhaps made Him to be.

For all of this to happen, we will need to be true experts in the reading of the Gospels, the reading of our history and the reading of the signs of the times. If we fail in this challenge, we risk becoming like some of the religious leaders of Jesus' own time, those whom He described as "blind guides".

This challenge will touch every aspect of our daily lives. We must ask ourselves some challenging questions. One such question is this: is our way of living the Gospel, of proclaiming and embodying the Gospel, making a difference to people? Is it impacting on them in any way? Is it even being noticed as something which raises some questions for them? As always, we have to be careful. We cannot afford to be too superficial about these things. We may not be "making sense" to people in the obvious sense of that phrase. We may, in fact, appear to be a perplexing riddle for them. But our aim is not to be so unremarkable that we pass unnoticed. Rather, our real aim might be well expressed as "getting under people's skin", leading them to ask some fundamental questions, unsettling people in those areas of complacency in their lives. As John



Paul puts it, “*if the consecrated life maintains its prophetic impact, it serves as a Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it*”. The prophets of the Old Testament were certainly relevant to their times, able to speak a language that the people could understand, sometimes with words but also often through actions. Think of Jeremiah shattering the clay jar he had so carefully moulded as a sign of God’s displeasure with His feckless people. And so we might ask ourselves if the way we live our lives as religious, the way we, as communities of sisters or brothers, organise our day-to-day lives of prayer and ministry, is a challenge to the less-than-human aspects of our own culture?

This leads me to the second point I would make about this third fidelity. It is a point which has relevance for the other two fidelities as well. We will not be a challenge to our own culture if we are not a challenge to each other. We will not be a sign of the Gospel of life to the world around us if we are not a sign of Gospel life to each other. We will not be able to purify and perfect our society, as John Paul puts it, if we are not a purifying and perfecting influence on each other.

This is the task that lies before all of us as we seek to be faithful to our religious vocation and our religious charism in the reality of the world in which we find ourselves. At this particular moment in our history, it is a task which God is putting before us with particular urgency.

It is a great challenge. It is almost as if we are being asked to go back to the beginnings of our own vocation and re-enter the novitiate so that we can, once again, discover the enthusiasm with which we set out on this journey. It is certainly a time when we are being asked to be as open and attentive as we can to the power and wisdom of God’s Spirit. It is almost as if we are being asked to make a new beginning – to set out on a new journey.

This is why the words with which we began our reflection this evening are so important. “*Arise and have no fear,*” the Lord is saying to us.

As we are all aware, the mysterious event of the Transfiguration is not the only time when these words, or similar ones, will be addressed to people in the Gospel story. In fact, they are almost like a refrain which keeps coming back as the Gospel story unfolds. They are spoken at the beginning of the unfolding of the mystery of Jesus, and they are spoken as that mystery comes to its fulfilment. And, of course, as that mystery unfolds over the course of the life and ministry of Jesus, they are spoken over and over again.

When the angel Gabriel greets Mary, the young virgin of Nazareth, and calls her “highly favoured one – full of grace”, we are told that Mary was deeply disturbed and, in fact, terrified. As the angel goes on to reveal to Mary what God is asking of her, we are told that she is confused and worried. “How can this be?” she asks the angel. It is as if what she is hearing just doesn’t fit in with what she had up until then understood God’s plan for her to be. It is in this context that the angel says



to Mary, *“Do not be afraid”*. And, of course, it is only when Mary is able to take into her heart the other words of the angel, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”*, that she is able to find within herself the courage to say, and to say from the heart, *“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”*.

I began this evening by suggesting that I wanted to invite us all to hear Jesus speak the words to us that He spoke to Peter, James and John on the mountain: *“Rise and have no fear”*. Now I want to add another invitation. If we are going to be able to respond in faith as Mary did – if we want to respond in faith as Mary did - then we need to allow ourselves also to hear the assurance that comes to Mary from the angel and ultimately, of course, from God. In all that lies ahead for us as religious in this time and place, the angel’s words hold true: *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”*.

We find the same words of assurance on the lips of Jesus when He calls the first disciples. In Luke’s Gospel, the story of the disciples’ call is told in the context of the miraculous catch of fish. We know the story well. The men have been out all night fishing, but have caught nothing. Jesus, who has used one of the boats to preach to the crowd, then tells the fishermen to cast their nets into the sea. They do so, and Luke gives us the sense that they are almost humouring Jesus because, after all, He may be a great preacher and healer, but He probably doesn’t know much about fishing.

Of course, when they follow the word of Jesus and make their catch of fish, their self-assurance crumbles. They thought they were in control of the situation: now they find that they are not as on top of things as they thought they were. Peter gives expression to all this: *“Leave me Lord,”* he says, *“for I am a sinful man”*.

As the rest of the Gospel story will show, this was not false humility on Peter’s part. He was absolutely right – he was a sinful man. But notice what Jesus does. He doesn’t say, *“Actually, you’re right. I was going to call you but now I realise it would be a mistake. You are probably not up to the task”*. Rather, he says to Peter and to all the disciples He intends to call, *“Do not be afraid, because from now on you will be fishers of people, not fish”*. And what happens? Once they realise that, in spite of everything, Jesus still wants them, still has confidence in them, still intends to call them, they find the courage to leave everything at once and follow Him.

Mary was filled with the assurance of the Lord’s presence by the word of the angel. The disciples are filled with the same assurance through the clear choice of Jesus in spite of their limitations. And because the Gospels are not just a history of Jesus dealing with people in the past, but a window into Jesus’ dealing with us as well, we, too, hearing these stories, can be filled with the same assurance. He has called us, and He is with us – we do not need to be afraid.

The trouble is, of course, that we often are. In spite of the assurances of our faith, we still get frightened. Things still manage to overwhelm us. We still lose our way.



This was the experience of Mary, and it was the experience of the disciples, too. Our faith in the presence of Jesus in our lives is not always as strong and unshakeable as we would like it to be. Mary herself had the terrible experience of losing Jesus, and of searching desperately trying to find Him again. As Luke tells the story in his Gospel, even when she eventually found Him in the Temple, she still did not understand the mystery which had invaded her life. Let us listen to Luke's words:

Jesus said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

And they did not understand the saying which He spoke to them.

And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and His mother kept all these things in her heart (Luke 2:49-51).

It seems to me that this story reflects something of our own experience of faith. We, like Mary, have tried to respond to God's call. We, like her, have tried to make the following of Jesus the centre of our lives. And we, like her, sometimes discover that we have lost or are losing Jesus. He seems to recede into the background. We search for Him in prayer but can't find Him. We know we are supposed to see Him in others but can't recognise Him. And sometimes, even when we do rediscover His presence in our lives, we begin to suspect, rather frighteningly, that we haven't really understood Him, or the mystery of His presence, or the challenge of His call. We are in good company – Mary, too, experienced these things. But we need to remain in good company. We need to keep alive the sense of Mary's presence as a companion on our journey. And, perhaps most importantly of all, we need to allow her to remind us to "keep all these things in our hearts", to ponder over them, and to invite the Lord to gradually, in His time and in His way, lead us into the deeper understanding of His presence and His call.

If Mary is presented in the Gospels as a person who is on a journey of faith – if she is presented, in other words, as someone who doesn't have all the answers, and who doesn't always understand and who has to grapple with confusion and doubt – then the same is true of the disciples.

Peter is a case in point. The story of his encounter with Jesus on the lake is a good example.

The story comes in the context of the feeding of the five thousand. In Matthew's Gospel, it is important to notice that, when Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fish, He gives them to the disciples to give to the crowds. The disciples, and Peter is included, of course, are not bystanders watching Jesus at work: they are intimately involved with His mission. Jesus entrusts His own mission to them, in other words. In this sense, the disciples are good models of what the religious life is all about. We, too, are entrusted with the mission of Jesus – or perhaps it is better to say we are invited to share His mission with Him.

After the miracle of the feeding of the crowds, the disciples set out for the other side of the lake, while Jesus goes off on His own to pray. They are in the middle of their journey when a violent storm overtakes them, quite possibly unexpectedly, as storms on lakes apparently often do. It seems to me that this, too, parallels the mystery of our own lives. Things may seem to be going



on quite well when, all of a sudden, for no immediately apparent reason, we are overtaken by a storm – of doubt, of confusion, of exhaustion, of sinfulness. And, like the disciples, we can easily become disoriented, afraid, unsure if we are going to survive.

It is precisely in this situation that Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on the water – walking towards them, in other words, through the very heart of the storm. They are terrified, both by the ferocity of the storm and by the unexpected appearance of a vision which they cannot explain or understand. And it is in the midst of their fear, and in the midst of the storm, that Jesus speaks the words that we, too, need to hear over and over again: *Have courage, it is I, do not be afraid.*

Here is the same message of assurance. Mary received it from the angel. The disciples at the start of their adventure received it through the confidence which came with the Lord's call. Now the disciples receive it, this time when they need it most – in the midst of a crisis. And Peter, as he so often does, represents the response of the rest. He is filled with confidence with this coming of the Lord into his need. *If it is you, Lord, tell me to come to you over the water.* And Jesus tells him to come. This is often the result of an awareness of the Lord's presence in our lives. We are filled with a new courage, a new determination, a renewed enthusiasm. And, like Peter, we spring out of our boat of safety and comfort and security and set off ready for anything.

But this is where Peter's story really helps us. For Peter, for all his enthusiasm and courage and determination, only gets so far before it all falls apart. He suddenly becomes aware, in a way that he hasn't been up until now, of the ferocity of the storms which are raging around him, and threatening him. Up until this moment, he has had his eyes fixed on Jesus – and he has, perhaps, also been relying on his own strength, his own faith, his own gifts. But, then, the inevitable happens. He comes to the realisation that his own gifts and strengths are not enough and, at the very same time, in his fear and his realisation of his limitations, he takes his eyes off Jesus. And he starts to sink. It seems to me that this is the pattern of the life of most disciples. We are filled with enthusiasm and with love for the Lord. We offer ourselves with generosity and in faith. We set out on the journey – and then a storm blows up around us. We are brought back to the reality of our own weakness and our own insufficiency, and we realise that we are in danger of sinking. Peter knew what to do – and we need to learn from him. In his desperation, he cried out with the words which could well become a regular prayer for us. *Save me, Lord, I'm sinking.* And, of course, we know what happens. Matthew tells us that "*Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, 'O man of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased*" (Matt 14:31-32).

The message of the story is clear, I think. We will often, in the journey of our religious lives, both as individual religious and as members of communities, provinces, and congregations, find ourselves battling against heavy winds and violent storms. We should not be surprised or ashamed by this, or allow ourselves to doubt the truth of our vocation. What we should do is allow ourselves to be addressed by Jesus: *Have courage, I am with you, do not be afraid.* And if we find that, in spite of all of this, there are still times when it all seems to be too much and we are in danger of going under, then, like Peter, we need to cry out with a faith that is maybe more hope than certainty, *Lord save me, I'm sinking.* We can be sure, we can afford to trust, that Jesus will reach out and take us by the hand and lead us to safety.

In the challenges that lie ahead for us, and this applies not just to religious but to every Christian, as we respond to the invitation to open our hearts and our lives to renewal and a certain



refounding of our way of life, let the words of Jesus to the disciples after the transfiguration become a source of hope: *Rise up, do not be afraid.*

I would like to finish off these reflections with a comment which I hope will tie things together.

In much of what I have been saying, I have been speaking quite directly to those who are living the consecrated life. But, of course, we live this way of life in the Church and for the Church. Our way of life is special, but it does not make us better, superior to, or holier than, those who are called to other ways of life.

If I have been right in suggesting that each religious family has its own special insight into the mystery of Christ, given initially to the founder or founders by the Lord through the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, then it is important to add that the Lord has done this so that these various dimensions of the great mystery of Christ might be kept alive, visible and powerful, in the whole Church and for the whole Church. If the Franciscan family, for example, is called to keep alive and active in the Church the values of simplicity and poverty, it is because these are values essential to the well-being of the Church, not just the Franciscans. If the Benedictine family is called to keep vibrant and attractive the values of hospitality and prayer, they are called to do so not just for themselves but for all of us. The gifts we are given are gifts to be shared for the good of all, not hoarded for our own benefit. And the mystery of Christ is so vast that it cannot be fully expressed by any one individual or any one group. We need each other if we are to understand and embrace this great mystery of Christ and live it out as fully as we can.

Religious life itself, in all its variety, is indeed a great gift of Christ to His Church. Through the common life and witness of those who embrace it, religious life keeps before the eyes of the whole Church, in a particularly eloquent and “unmissable” way, some fundamental dimensions of the Christian way of life. These are encapsulated in the three vows which the majority of religious profess: obedience, chastity and poverty.

Every baptised person is called to live in loving obedience to the will of God, constantly seeking to understand what God is asking of us and trying our best to respond with generosity and courage. The vow of obedience which religious profess and live by becomes a “sacrament”, a living sign of and witness to what God asks of all of us: that we make the words of the *Our Father* come alive in us – *thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* The lives of obedience which religious live are their gift to the whole Church – a powerful prophetic call to us all to be faithful to the God who gives us life.

Every baptised person is called to live a life of chastity. We are called to recognise the dignity which every human person has because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. We are asked to treat each person with profound respect and to ensure that we never use others to



satisfy our own selfish needs or desires. The celibate chastity which religious profess and live is a clear and, for many, startling and perplexing, sign of and witness to this determination never to treat people as objects but always to treat them as persons. It is a special gift of religious to the whole Church – a powerful prophetic call to all of us to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Every baptised person is called to live a life of simplicity and poverty. When Jesus said, on the mountain, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs”*, He was not speaking to monks and nuns. He was speaking to all those who would wish to be His disciples. In a world and culture in which the accumulation of things can easily become one of the most important goals of our life, the vow of poverty which religious profess and live by becomes a “sacrament” – a living and powerful sign – of our need to make Christ and His kingdom the treasure on which we set our hearts. It is a precious gift of religious men and women to us all.

And, of course, every baptised person is invited by Jesus to accept His call to *“Make your home in me as I make mine in you”*. It is not only religious who are called to put Christ at the centre of their lives and to look to Him for strength and grace. But the radical, and total, giving of their lives to Christ in such a clear and unambiguous way makes religious a very powerful reminder that a life in which God is relegated to the margins or completely ignored is really only a life half lived. In this way, too, the life of religious is a precious gift to and for the whole Church – it is the way in which we religious really can “wake up the world”.

One last comment: Although we do not have time to develop this tonight, the thoughts I have presented this evening obviously invite all of us, married people and single, young people and older people, religious men and women, priests and deacons, to ask ourselves what aspect of the rich mystery of Christ our particular way of life puts powerfully before the Church. For married people, of course, it is, in a special way, the faithful love of Christ for His Church and the love of the Church which means, of course, the people, for Christ. Perhaps, too, it might be the unique and whole-hearted forgiveness which was so much a feature of the life of Christ and which inevitably must be a feature of married life as well.

People who choose to remain unmarried might ask a similar set of questions. So might priests or deacons. So might bishops. People with chronic illness, people who are battling life-threatening diseases, people coping with all kinds of disabilities, people who work in different fields of human endeavour – all of us, no matter our particular life situation, have a precious gift to offer the whole Church. There is a providence at work, and a call of God embedded in the real-life situation of every single one of us. We are called, in our own unique life situation, to be a gift for others and to unveil for them something of the mystery of Christ.

In this sense, every Christian person, and every Christian way of life, is sacramental. We are called to be living, powerful and effective signs of the mystery of God in the world. We are all, in a certain sense, “sacraments” living in a sacramental Church – religious, who are in this no different, are a particularly eloquent example of this sacramental and, we might add in this context,



prophetic, life. In this year dedicated to the Consecrated Life, it is especially important that we acknowledge their role, thank them for their fidelity, and recommit ourselves to supporting them in every way we can.