



## **Homily - Inauguration of the Year for Consecrated Life**

**By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth  
Monday, 2 February 2015

*Readings* Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 95; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

When I was a young boy attending a Catholic primary school in Melbourne in the 1960s, a large number of the teachers were religious sisters, Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. When I started secondary school in 1966 at a Salesian College in Melbourne, there were only two or three lay teachers among the staff. However, when I finished Year 12 in 1971, the Salesians, though still a significant presence, were certainly not in the majority. Today, in the seven secondary schools the Salesians administer in Australia, all the principals are lay people. I have no doubt that most religious orders, no matter what apostolate they are engaged in, could tell a similar story.

Many people lament this situation, while others suggest that it is precisely this situation which has created the necessary space for lay people to begin to assume their rightful place in the Church's life and ministry. Personally, I try to hold both perspectives together. Religious life, according to Vatican II, represents a vital dimension of the Church's life and holiness (LG44). For this reason, the apparent diminishment of religious life and its less visible presence in the daily experience of our people is, at least in my opinion, a great source of sadness and concern. At the same time, the presence of extraordinarily committed lay Catholic men and women in all areas of the Church's life and ministry is both a wonderful thing and simply the way things should and must be.

What we have discovered in recent years, of course, is that so much of what we religious have done, and continue to do, can be done, and is being done, at least as well and often much better, by lay people. This is a challenge for us as religious, because it helps us to realise that our identity cannot be focused simply on what we do, but must also, and more fundamentally, be based on who we are called to be in and for the Church, and therefore also in and for the world. It is this I really want to reflect on in this homily this evening.

What I want to suggest is that religious, by virtue of our unique way of life within the community of faith, are consecrated by God to be "sacraments", living signs, of some of the most essential aspects of the Christian life. If I am right, then by calling us to religious life, God is asking us, as individuals and as members of our religious communities, to be like mirrors for the Church, keeping alive and reflecting back to our brothers and sisters certain values which are essential for every Christian but which are easily lost sight of in the busy-ness and stresses of life. Those values, as Pope Francis would express it, are encapsulated in the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity which most of us publicly profess, in our shared common life, and in our total giving



of ourselves to the mission of our own communities, whether we belong to contemplative or active communities.

Some at least of this is expressed in my own Salesian tradition in one of our constitutions which I suspect, will find parallels in the Constitutions of most congregations.

*In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess and the freedom to control one's whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour.*

"Our way of life bears witness...". This is the key phrase. Salesians, who as much as, and perhaps more than most other religious congregations, could be accused of falling into the trap of thinking that what we do is the most important thing about us, nevertheless remind ourselves often that it is not our apostolate alone, but our whole way of life, with all it involves, which can give meaning to our place in the Church and in the world. This is true for every religious. What is vital for us is the difference which the vow of poverty makes to the way we live our daily lives, the difference which the vow of chastity makes to the way we conduct our relationships with others, the difference which our vow of obedience makes to the way we read the signs of the times and the way we respond to them. This should be what marks us out as religious - not better than others, not holier, but very conscious nonetheless that the Church, that the Lord, is depending on us to live our lives in such a way that the Gospel values of obedience to the Father, fidelity to life-giving and deeply respectful relationships, true simplicity and detachment, and the daily sharing of all that we have and are with our sisters and brothers in community, are always there before all God's people as the values God is calling everyone to live by. In this we can say, but only with deep humility and an awareness of our frailty, that we are indeed, as Elisabeth Johnson's book on religious life would remind us, friends of God and prophets.

One of the reasons why we are gathering this evening is to give thanks, first of all to God, that so many religious women and men have done precisely this in our Archdiocese for so long. It is hard to imagine where the Church in our diocese and in our state would be had we not had the presence and contribution of so many faithful religious men and women. At the same time, it is to our shame that we must recognise that our history is marked by terrible betrayal on the part of some. As we do all we can to deal with this terrible legacy, we might make the words of one of our Lenten hymns our own: Lord, what we have darkened heal with light, and what we have destroyed make whole.

As well as looking to the past, both in sorrow and also in profound gratitude to all those who have lived their religious lives with extraordinary fidelity, courage and self-sacrifice, the Year of Consecrated Life also invites us to look forward. We do not know what the future of religious life will look like, either in the Church as a whole or in our own Archdiocese. Without adopting a "quietest" attitude, we must remember that the future is God's rather than ours. Profound trust in providence has always been a hallmark of the founders of religious orders. In this regard, as in so many, we must return to our origins in order to move into the future with confidence. But, at the same time, we must continue to do our part for we are partners with the Lord in the unfolding of God's plan for His people.



And so I want to repeat again what you have heard me say so often. The greatest challenge facing the religious life today is to return Christ to the religious life and return religious life to Christ. It is an urgent call for each one of us. Christ is, as St Paul would remind us, "the head of His body, the Church" and, as religious, we are women and men of the Church. In Christ, St Paul would also have us remember, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell". He is, as He himself tells us in John's Gospel, "the Way, the Truth and the Life". If Christ is not at the very heart of our religious life, both individually and as communities, if Christ is not the Way we follow, the Truth we proclaim and the Life which gives us life, then we must ask ourselves if we have lost our way. Apostolates may change, forms of dress may change, styles of community life might change, but the central place which Christ must have in religious life must never change. Every Christian, and therefore and in particular every religious, must be able to say with St Paul, "for me, to live is Christ". And, as religious, we need to be able to say it with simple and transparent honesty, so that our lives can be a reminder to everyone that this is the invitation to every Christian.

As we now set out on the journey of this year dedicated to Consecrated Life, may Christ be our light. May He shine in our hearts and in our darkness. May He, through us, shine in His Church gathered here today and present and alive here in our Archdiocese. May our lives give witness to the truth that the deepest needs of the human heart all find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour.