

“Religious Consecration and the Extravagance of Love”
Homily for the World Day of Consecrated Life
Feast of the Presentation of the Lord; St. Matthew Church
February 2, 2020

What is it that moves a young person to embrace a vocation to the religious life? It is such an extraordinary call, in which one renounces all that this world has to offer and commits to living life by an entirely different set of standards that truly set one apart from all others.

The religious vocation entails great sacrifice, sometimes even to the point of heroic sacrifice, and while our current cultural context, unlike times past, militates against young people giving their lives to religion – and even aggressively so, with the numbers showing the effect – still, there are young people in our own time, too, who freely make this extraordinary commitment.

The heroic sacrifices of consecrated religious are certainly not unknown to us here in San Francisco. Religious life has indeed been at the heart of our Archdiocese throughout its entire history. It was Franciscan friars who first preached the Gospel here and established the mission from which our city takes its name. Our first Archbishop, Joseph Sadoc Alemany, was a Dominican. The first Catholic schools, colleges, hospitals and orphanages were begun by women and men religious.

In the pioneer days, San Francisco was really “the ends of the earth” to those devoted sisters, brothers and priests who left everything dear to them – home, family, country – to carry out the great commission of the risen Christ. The journey to this remote outpost was long and arduous. I think we too easily fail to recognize what it was like for them, and how truly extreme was the hardship they willingly took on. The world was much larger then; there was not even a transcontinental railway. You can imagine how grueling the journey was: by ship, by stagecoach, even walking. Some of them did not even survive the trip, and for all of those early ones it was taken for granted that they would never see their families again. In imitation of Christ, the Good Shepherd, these heroic women and men laid down their lives for others. And they continue to do so in our own time, even if the physical circumstances are not as harsh. What is it, though, that can move one to such great sacrifice?

There can be only one answer: love. Love in the true and deepest sense: love of God and of neighbor, taking the two great commandments with the utmost seriousness. Love follows its own logic; it pays no heed to what is practical, easy, or conducive to one’s own comfort and convenience. In a reading from the great theologian St. Peter Chrysologous, we hear him describe this alternative logic of love in the following way:

... how could our narrow human vision apprehend God, whom the whole world cannot contain? But the law of love is not concerned with what will be, what ought to be, what can be. Love does not reflect; it is unreasonable

and knows no moderation. Love refuses to be consoled when its goal proves impossible, despises all hindrances to the attainment of its object. Love destroys the lover if he cannot obtain what he loves; love follows its own promptings, it goes where it is led, not where it ought to go. Love inflames desire which impels it toward things beyond its reach.

We can see something of this kind of love in those who represent the deepest longing of ancient Israel for the coming of the Messiah: the elderly Simeon and Anna the prophetess. St. Luke tells us that Simeon was a man “of the Spirit”: it was “in the Spirit” that he came to the Temple, for “the Holy Spirit was upon him”, and “[i]t had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord.” The same can be said for Anna, who “never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.” She, too, “[came] forward at that very time.”

These holy elders embody the hopes and aspirations of Israel; their love and devotion filled them with the Spirit, giving them a spiritual sensitivity to see beyond appearances to apprehend the saving mysteries God was working out before them. It was St. John Paul II who instituted this World Day of Consecrated Life on the Feast of the Presentation, and in his homily on this occasion, back in 1991, he spoke about this spiritual vision of these elders. He said:

Simeon begins to see. This *recognition* of the Baby Jesus could not have happened but ‘in the Holy Spirit’. From the human standpoint he certainly could not have distinguished him in the midst of so many parents who were bringing their babies to be presented in the Temple.... It is the Spirit who makes it possible for Simeon to see all this with his own eyes.... *He sees clearly with the certainty of the truth.*

This reveals to us something of the mystery of God’s own love. God’s love is likewise marked by this unrestrained extravagance.

We began Mass today with the rite of blessing and lighting of candles, as is indicated for this Feast Day of the Presentation, thus giving it its old English name, “Candlemas.” Being devout Jews, Jesus’ parents followed the prescripts of the Mosaic Law, and so this feast day occurs forty days after Christmas. We thus began Mass by entering church with lighted candles, for with this Mass the liturgical cycle commemorating the Christmas mysteries comes to an end, the mysteries which celebrate Christ the light coming into the world.

But this ritual of blessing and lighting candles at the entrance of the church and processing in with them is reminiscent of another important liturgical feast: we will do this again at the great Easter Vigil. This feast, then, marks a significant transition in the Church’s liturgical cycle commemorating the mysteries of our salvation, for after today the Church will begin to focus our attention more on the upcoming season of Lent, and

the whole liturgical cycle of Lord's Passion, death and glorious Resurrection. This, after all, was the very point of the mystery of the Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas: the Son of God took on human flesh, a human body, precisely so that in that body he could offer his life on the Cross to forgive us our sins and win for us eternal salvation.

This is the extravagance of God's love: He created us, and when we rejected Him, He redeemed us, all the way to offering His Son in sacrifice on the Cross. As the Exultet that is sung at the Easter Vigil puts it: "to ransom a slave, You gave away Your Son."

This is the extravagant love of those who embrace the consecrated life: by their profession of the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons incarnate the poor, chaste and obedient Christ. Their act of self-oblation of their whole life bears the fruit of eternal salvation for their brothers and sisters for whom, moved by the Spirit, they lay down their lives in union with Christ.

In that homily almost thirty years ago, when he began this World Day of Consecrated Life, John Paul addressed those gathered before him with these words:

... dear brothers and sisters of the [Religious] Orders, of the Congregations and of the Institutes of Consecrated Life ...[:] you have come here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as Simeon and Anna in Jerusalem. And not only in this moment, because *your whole life and your vocation are the fruit of the Spirit at work in you.*

This has certainly been true here in our Archdiocese. And so I say to you, dear brothers and sisters of the Religious Orders, of the Congregations, of the Institutes, and of all forms of consecrated life: thank you! Thank you for all you do and are for us. What a completely different, and much sadder, place would our Archdiocese be without you! And a special thank you and congratulations to our jubilarians today, who are celebrating milestone anniversaries of 25, 40, 50, 60, 70 ... and even 80 years of religious profession! May God keep you strong, and may many young people respond to His call by following your Spirit-filled example in giving their lives completely over to Christ and the service of his people.