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The Gift of Consecrated Life

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Religious life has been in the news during the past few weeks. Even reality TV is getting into the act and has broadcast a series on young women who are exploring religious life. In addition to presenting a final report on religious sisters in the United States, Pope Francis has also called the universal Church to celebrate a Year of Consecrated Life from November 2014 to Feb. 2, 2016. In fact, the Holy Father called for this special observance very soon after we had announced our own Year of Marriage and the Family in the Diocese of Fargo, which began on the Feast of the Holy Family, Dec. 28. One might ask if these two special years will somehow be in conflict, but that notion hardly seems possible. All Christian vocations are part of the one universal call to holiness, and I doubt that we'll have any trouble at all celebrating both here in the Diocese of Fargo.

I have a very personal reverence for consecrated life. I had two aunts who were Franciscan Sisters, and I was taught by Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of St. Francis in grade school and high school. I was fortunate to study with the Dominican friars at the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, and I served as Vicar for Religious in the Diocese of Lincoln. I was also very blessed to have the assistance of Franciscan Apostolic Sisters from the Philippines during my service as rector of St. Gregory the Great Seminary. So, like many of you, I have been extraordinarily blessed by the presence and influence of consecrated religious throughout my life.

And now, as Bishop of Fargo, I am fortunate to have the assistance and witness of religious priests and sisters in various apostolates of the diocese. In fact, the Diocese of Fargo has been served by religious from the earliest days of our history. Religious priests served as missionaries before there even was a Diocese of Fargo, and religious sisters weren't far behind. Among other works, the priests served as missionaries, pastors, chaplains and teachers. And, the sisters staffed schools and hospitals all over North Dakota. The available space doesn't allow me to catalog all the religious communities and apostolates that have graced our diocese, but I can say that our diocese would not have taken root and flourished as it did without their presence.

Consecrated life has an even longer history in the universal Church, going back to the early days of persecution when men and women adopted a hidden life of prayer and penance in the desert. Many of these individuals banded together in communities and adopted a common way of prayer and daily life that sustained them in faith and charity. Some of those earliest communities, like the Benedictines, continue to serve the Church after many centuries, demonstrating the enduring fruitfulness of their call.

Consecrated religious typically take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, although some communities have variations on these vows. By their poverty and simplicity of life, they conform themselves to the poor Christ, and they demonstrate to the world that life is more than the possessions we amass for ourselves. Living lives of celibate chastity, the consecrated religious give their hearts entirely to God and manifest a single-minded love for Christ and his Church. And, by their vow of obedience, they imitate Jesus, who came to do the will of his Father in all things. Through obedience, they make themselves completely available to their communities and to the Church, serving wherever there is a need.

Some commentators interpret the way of life of the consecrated religious as a loss of freedom, but in my experience, their vows give them more freedom rather than less. The consecrated life allows a religious sister, brother, or priest to live selflessly for Christ and for others, unencumbered by the weight of worldly affairs. To use the words of St. Hildegard, herself a Benedictine nun, the religious can be “like a feather on the breath of God.” The consecrated religious can also be a prophetic presence in the Church and in the world, calling all of us, by the witness of their lives, to live more fully our own vocations to holiness.

Those who choose to live the consecrated life obviously make sacrifices to do so. They do indeed forsake personal possessions, families of their own, and some measure of personal autonomy. It would be naive to think that the consecrated life is always easy. Any religious sister, brother, or priest will tell you that the life they have chosen has its own challenges and trials. By their consecration, the religious does not give up his or her humanity, and must strive for virtue just as we all must. But, with the challenges comes great joy, the joy of total commitment to God and freedom from obstacles to a deeper relationship with Christ. In a very real way, the consecrated religious anticipates here on earth the kind of intimate relationship with God that we all aspire to in heaven.

It is no secret that the number of religious in the United States has declined in recent decades, including here in the Diocese of Fargo. We are all made poorer by the reduced number of religious in our diocese, so this year should be an occasion for fervent prayer and active promotion of religious vocations for both men and women. In our parishes, in our schools, and in our family homes, prayer for religious and priestly vocations should be a regular intention placed before the Lord. And, we all should make a point to encourage young people to consider the religious life. Many young religious and seminarians have told me that they first began to consider this vocation at the suggestion or encouragement of others. I have no doubt that God is still calling young people to this beautiful way of love, but we must do what we can to make sure his call is heard. Families, too, should make an effort to present the option of consecrated life to their children. Pope Francis reminds us that the family is where every vocation is formed, and if our children are indeed called by God to the consecrated life, we can be certain that he will give them the joy and happiness that we desire for them.

Finally, this Year of Consecrated Life should be an occasion to give thanks. We must definitely give thanks to God for the consecrated religious who have contributed so profoundly to the life of the Church in our diocese. And, we should also be sure to thank the religious sisters, brothers, and priests who have touched our lives in a very personal way. Consecrated life is a beautiful gift of God to the Church and should be cherished. In the coming year, let us pray for our religious sisters, brothers, and priests, and ask our Lord to renew the grace of their calling with joy and every grace.