

THE MISSION AND SERVICE OF CONSECRATED PERSONS

WITNESS OF DIVINE MERCY

S. Inmaculada Fukasawa aci

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Greeting

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for the invitation to this National Day of the Year of Consecrated Life. When I received this assignment, at first I thought that it was beyond me. Then the Lord worked on me, and my resistance was gradually transformed into a humble recognition of what I am and what I can do. Realizing that this came from God gave me peace. The Lord was inviting me to celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life with the consecrated men and women of Spain, to whom I owe a great deal, because through them I have received the two greatest graces in my life: baptism and my religious vocation.

Francis Xavier, the Jesuit from Navarra, was the one who brought the Catholic faith to my country. I was baptized when I was a student in a school that we Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus conduct in Japan. When I got to know them I wanted to be instructed, and at the same time I wanted to be, like them, a Handmaid of the Sacred Heart. As you know, our Institute is of Spanish origin. Therefore, I cannot speak of my life without relating it to Spain, in particular to its faith and its religious life. Because of this, it is especially significant that today and tomorrow I am celebrating the Year of the Consecrated Life with consecrated men and women of Spain.

I was asked to give this talk as a testimony of Consecrated Life. In this perspective, many other religious have responded to this invitation, and I in some way feel that I am speaking for the many consecrated women who could offer us their experience -- Sisters who every day live the service to the mission as the experience and witness of the Mercy of God in their lives, in the Church and in the world.

1.2 The Title

The title of my talk is "The mission and service of consecrated men and women, testimony of Divine Mercy." I received it gladly because Mercy has been and is the most profound experience of my life; moreover, it has many charismatic resonances. Our Constitutions begin: "In the Heart of 'Him whom they have pierced' we see God's mercy, which leads us to look upon the world with hope." Moreover, it was a great confirmation when Pope Francis convoked the Holy Year of Mercy, whose Bull of Indiction begins: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith."¹ The announcement of the Jubilee is consistent with the humble attitude that he has wanted to imprint upon his pontificate. He himself has expressed his need for Mercy and forgiveness from God and he continually directs us to Jesus, the face of the Mercy of God, to a Church which moves forward and makes its own the pain suffered by Humanity and the earth.

In this vein I share my experience, and I am grateful for the gift of our Consecrated Life in which we embrace the way of being of "Jesus of Nazareth who by His words, his actions, and his entire Person reveals the mercy of God."²

1.3 Presentation

In this talk I intend to present to you my vision of Consecrated Life, not something theoretical, but an experiential reflection. It is a look at my own experience that, illuminated by the Gospel, contemplates Jesus and the group of the Twelve as icons in order to understand our own life.

I begin by contextualizing the experience of the Consecrated Life in this ecclesial moment and the way in which it is called to allow itself to be evangelized and to second the current of transformation urged by Pope Francis. Within this framework we are celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life, and we will conclude it during the Jubilee year of *Mer*cy.

The Consecrated Life is for the Mission, and not only that, but in itself it is Mission. We are and we do Mission. The exposition is articulated in the three elements that I consider essential in the Consecrated Life: Consecration, Convocation and Sending:

- The first element, Consecration as the initiative of God who takes us for himself and transforms us into mission when we confess the Absoluteness of God with our lives.
- The second element that I consider essential in the Consecrated Life is the Convocation which expresses the experience of being called with others, thus the community is the space of brotherhood where we live the Kingdom that becomes mission as we are transformed into a prophecy of the humanity of Jesus.
- The third essential element is the Sending, sent by the Risen One with the power of the Spirit to continue his mission: to be the Mercy of the Father.

This narrative has as a central theme the Mercy of God experienced in personal and institutional fragility and received as mission.

1.4 Ecclesial context

We feel that the Church is experiencing a time of grace; some speak of an ecclesial spring.³ As a result of the renunciation of Benedict XVI and, more concretely, of the election of Pope Francis, a new era has begun in the history of the Church. The pontificate of Francis, with his direct communication and his simple gestures, is revealing a Church that is close to the people, that has a word that the world wants to listen to.

The language of the Pope is understood and his approachability touches the hearts of the people. His person calls us together because he brings us the words and the actions of Jesus. In this reality that is so beleaguered, words so worn out, sentiments so hardened, standards so fragile, he makes the word credible and hope possible.

We have perceived how many believers, disillusioned on the road to Emmaus, have felt “their hearts burn” (cf. Lk. 24:1) and return to the community. Furthermore, some of us who felt like the elder brother in the parable (cf. Lk. 15:11) have seen our own judgments toppled in the presence of Mercy. Many persons of other beliefs or of civil institutions regard Pope Francis as a benchmark of authority.

He has set us in motion and has indicated a road for us: return to Jesus Christ, to his Gospel. He asks us to go out of our auto-referentiality, to break out of our fears, to let ourselves be led by the Risen One in order to enter into his wounds, to touch the marks of love and, like Thomas, to confess: “my Lord and my God.” From this encounter springs joy, the sign that accompanies those who have met Him and are sent to proclaim Him. The

Church is born from the experience of encounter and mission, and each one of us embraces with our life the arc which goes from the encounter to the mission and vice versa, from the mission to the encounter.

In this dynamic and hopeful current, the Pope, "as a brother who, like yourselves, is consecrated to God,"⁴ decided to convoke the Year of Consecrated Life. It is very meaningful to celebrate it in this current of transformation of the Church. He expects a great deal of us in order to set this renovation in motion.⁵ He is counting on consecrated persons. Our responsibility is great. First he wants us to renew ourselves, and from there, we will contribute to change in the Church.

In Japanese, conversion is "kaishin." Formerly we used to write it with two Chinese characters "改心" which mean to change or correct something in the heart. However, now we write "回心" This "kaishin" means to turn the heart around, to turn the heart toward another direction. The conversion which the Pope is inviting us is this "回心", that is to say, to turn the heart around, to make the heart do a 180 degree turn. This is something dynamic. It is not changing merely a part of our heart. We have the tendency to focus on ourselves; the direction of the heart is often inward. True conversion requires us to change this direction toward God, toward others.

The celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life has given us the opportunity to turn our gaze toward our history in order to thank God for so much good received, but above all, through the Magisterium of Pope Francis, we have felt called to look at our Consecrated Life in the light of the Gospel and allow ourselves to be evangelized. From here springs conversion "回心", and this leads us to live the present with passion and open ourselves to the future with hope.

2. CONSECRATED LIFE, CONFESSION OF GOD

2.1 We are won over by God

The common experience of our vocation is that of having been won over, encountered. The call is a gift, the initiative of God. Permit me to highlight what the gift of faith and of my vocation mean to me. From more than a hundred million Japanese, God called me to the Catholic Church. When I think that fewer than 1% of us are Catholic, I feel that it is a great grace to receive baptism in Japan. I can say the same of my vocation. When I was studying in our school, there were about 200 of us in the same grade. There were many good, capable and intelligent girls, but the Lord wanted me, not the others, to be a religious. A vocation is always a mystery, and without doubt I have not received this gift because of my own merits, it was a gratuitous gift.

In this space of the call is where we feel most radically the Absoluteness of God, who has the power to attract us totally to himself. St. Paul expresses it as an encounter that overturns all our values, the knowledge that puts all knowledge into perspective, the gain which makes all riches a loss. This is how he sums it up in his letter to the Philippians:

"But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him... It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I

continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus].” (Phil. 3: 7-9, 12)

This is what has happened to us. Each time that I make the Spiritual Exercises, this passage comes spontaneously to me, and I savor it with joy and emotion. It is the experience repeated through history, of men and women who have been transformed by the encounter with Christ Jesus and carry within the fire of his Spirit, men and women who become witnesses of what they have seen and touched:

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life” (1 Jn. 1:1).

2.2 We are intimately linked in the person of Jesus

In Jesus Christ we have met God, and He has seduced our heart. He has set himself up as the Absolute in our lives, putting all our family and social ties into perspective, he has freed us from the desire for power and possessions, and he has given us a new way of belonging.

Jesus calls us to “be with him and he sends us to preach” (cf. Mk. 3:14), incorporated into his life and mission, intimately linked to his person. We cannot separate his person from the mission. Moreover, the mission is to proclaim Him, and this is impossible without knowing him, without being with Him, without having shared his sentiments, without having made our own his preferences to the point of identifying with Him. “Now it is not I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20). The mission requires us to be in profound communion with Jesus, because “without me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).

From this special intimacy arises and is sustained the surrender which each one of us makes of himself at the profession of the three vows.⁶ In these important dimensions are concentrated the options of the earthly existence of Jesus, and they reveal at the same time the mystery of what he was and what he did.⁷ “In the vows we desire to live the existence of Jesus in his surrender to the Father and in his availability to all people.”⁸

Number 72 of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of John Paul II sums up very well the meaning of our consecration:

“...By the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life. ...Indeed, more than in external works, the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge, this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all.

...Thus it can be said that consecrated persons are "in mission" by virtue of their very consecration, to which they bear witness in accordance with the ideal of their Institute.”

2.3 Unveil the true face of God

From our perspective as consecrated persons, we ask ourselves: What is the service that consecrated men and women can do for humanity? What can our consecration say to this society?

In our time we are witnessing a profound crisis of values, there are profound transformations happening on a worldwide scale. As it has been said for some time, “we are not only in an era of change but rather in a change of era.”⁹ We find ourselves facing the emergence of a new paradigm, of a new cultural model, of a new society. This crisis affects all dimensions of human life, but I am going to limit myself to the religious aspect.

In our society, at least in the West, the unifying cultural fabric inspired by Christian faith has been broken. We perceive some signs of contradiction; in the last decades there has been a rupture in the transmission of the Christian faith from generation to generation. Man seems to have left God outside the horizon of his daily life. We are amid a practical atheism, and at the same time there is a new awakening of religious sentiment. One can notice the search for transcendence, although some authors distrust this sentiment and describe it as “religion yes, God no”. There is a new religious sensibility, a turning towards God. From the extensive bibliography about this theme, it seems that the question of God has never been so alive, -- but, what god?¹⁰

Benedict XVI, very conscious of this reality, said in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*: “There is no greater priority than this: to enable the people of our time once more to encounter God, the God who speaks to us and shares his love so that we might have life in abundance” (cf. Jn. 10:10).

Really, this is the most urgent task of the Church and it is one of the greatest services which the Consecrated Life can offer in our time: to open the horizon of human life to the reality of God and to unveil his true face.

2.4 Called to be the mediation of the encounter with God

The Consecrated Life confesses the one, personal God, who dialogues with man, who loves each person, whom we cannot manipulate. He who takes the initiative in love and “comes to us so that we can go to him.”¹¹ He who was incarnated in Jesus. He has revealed to us the true face of God. “No one has ever seen God. The only Son of God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him” (Jn. 1:18).

In our Congregations there is an enormous wealth of human and spiritual wisdom. We have the capacity of accompanying others in that journey to interiority, to help them to enter within themselves, and to listen to the essential questions of their existence, those that give meaning to their lives.

We feel the indifference and the negation of God as one of the existential peripheries to which we are called in order to say to the men and women of our time: “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, rise and walk” (Acts 3: 4-8).

The Consecrated Life confesses the God of Jesus, a God who is Father, who loves with a merciful heart, with a faithful love that has within it the mysterious power of maternity.¹² Jesus incarnates this Mercy in his words and actions, with his life and his death!

In our Congregations we have made a long journey in learning about ourselves, of entering to the depths of what we are, and in accepting the truth of our humanity. In our fragility we have found Jesus, the fountain of life and compassion; therefore we can, from him and with him, help others to enter into this journey of liberation.

We have touched the intimacy of God who is Mercy, which has made us capable of listening to and accepting our wounds. We feel that our mission is to make possible experiences where the person may encounter this God, because only by touching his mercy can one reach the truth that saves.

The Consecrated Life confesses the relevance of God for human life, a God capable of satisfying the thirst of the heart, who can fill life with meaning, in whom we place our trust even to the point of putting ourselves into his hands.

Among us there are Brothers and Sisters who live the joy of the Gospel, in their lives it is evident that they have found the precious pearl, and the person of Jesus and his Gospel occupy their hearts. They are estimable human witnesses, simple and approachable; they do not stand out because of their titles or their power. We can find them teaching in a school or in a university, accompanying the elderly, healing the sick, they are persons whom we encounter on a daily basis, but in their words and in their gaze we recognize the Lord.

I have here the testimony of a Sister who wrote to me upon finishing her service as Superior of an infirmary community. In her letter she says:

“I don’t know what plan God will have for me, manifested through my provincial, but I have always wanted to be available, I want to be that way until the end of my life. These years lived in this community have been a true school of learning for the future of my life. My birthday is coming in a few days. The years take their toll – and I observe that they are taking a toll on me – although thank God I do not have any illness. I have hopes of filling life with little things that go unperceived but that create a lot of well being, of praying with peace, reading, being available and approachable, of fostering joy. I plan to be happy, because I am completely convinced that happiness is something that one decides with anticipation. And I, with the grace of God, have decided this. Only this way will I make the Sisters that I live with happy.... I am going to free my mind of preoccupations, live humbly, give more and demand less.

My community with its multiple limitations, because of age, is a community that knows very well, and I believe also lives, the value of continuing to work for the Mission through their prayer and self-giving.”

I want to recognize the apostolic value of these communities, numerous in Consecrated Life in Spain, in which the mission is lived as a mutual exercise of mercy in the acceptance of our poverties, limits and weakness.

The Consecrated Life proclaims the absolute value of God, which we are all called to live, that God may have dominion over our lives in such a way that the human realities come in next to last. The consecration is a confession of the Absoluteness of God and of the urgency of his Kingdom.¹³

Thus our Congregations, moved by the proclamation of Jesus and his Kingdom, have broken through the barriers. In our ranks there are men and women who leave their country and their culture, who pitch their tent among another people, who become one with their people, learn their language and wear their clothing. For many of them it may be at the cost of their health, and for some their life. Consecrated Life has a universal heart.

In March I sent a letter to the Sisters with the desire of responding to the call of Pope Francis to “a new missionary going forth”. I asked them to offer themselves to be sent “wherever there is the greatest need”. I proposed some distant places where the religious

presence is most fragile and needs reinforcement. This letter moved the institute very much, and the response was beautiful, as much on the part of some elderly sisters who united their hearts to this call but whose health and age did not permit them to go, as on the part of the young who showed themselves completely available. The desire to go beyond the borders is alive in the Sisters, and not only in the young. Before making the perpetual profession they offer themselves with generosity and enthusiasm to evangelize outside their country. Many of them remind me of this after a few years.

Our consecration is mediation for others, and our prayer, which is the space of encounter with God, can be an invitation and a call. To open this encounter with Him, in his word, makes it possible for other persons to experience that “Only He has the words of Eternal Life” (cf. Jn. 7:68).

In the liturgy we are invited to enter into the Mystery through the beauty of song and word. The songs express our deepest desires. They are not just lovely words; but they are also true. The weakness of our daily limitations does not obscure the authenticity of what we feel. In the liturgy there are no discourses, but only experience. It is the expression of those that “for love of the divine beauty”¹⁴ have followed Jesus. Between July and August we held in Rome a month-long course of ongoing formation. Participating were 29 Sisters who had lived 17, 18 or 19 years of perpetual profession. When they sang, “The love of God is never finished, his Mercy is never exhausted...” or “The goodness and the love of the Lord endure forever,” I saw them tremble with emotion. It is true; songs help us to confirm our experience of the Mercy of God.

Moreover, in a privileged way the primacy of God is expressed in the Eucharistic adoration, in the humble and believing recognition of our nature as creatures in the presence of the Transcendence of God, from which arises our grateful response that becomes service. I find very enlightening the words of Fr. Benjamín González Buelta SJ: “When we adore the Lord, we seek a favorable space, and we dedicate to him a time in which our entire person is focused on accepting the infinite love of God from which we emerge, in which we exist and toward which we journey... the first fruit of this prayer is personal integration, for our entire person is unified. The body, the thoughts and the affectivity unite in the decision to live entirely in gratitude. In that contemplative silence all words fit; in that presence are contained all encounters, and in this inquietude are nourished all activities.”¹⁵

CONSECRATED LIFE, PROPHECY OF HUMANITY

3.1 The disciples learned humanity in their contact with Jesus

I invite you to turn your gaze toward the Gospel, toward Jesus. Many people follow him, but we see him always surrounded by a small group. Jesus is not a solitary man; his love generates around him a brotherhood and community of disciples, whom he dares to call simply friends. With them he shares the most personal things: his relationship with the Father and his passion for the Kingdom. Father Ricardo Volo, a Claretian, writes: “The group of disciples closest to Jesus was called together by him in order to form a very unique community around the figure of the Master, and in order to be entrusted with his own mission. These specific dimensions of his discipleship represent, historically, a paradigmatic element which is very important in the charism of the consecrated life.”¹⁶

Those who have been called are called together with others. To be a disciple is to be at the same time a co-disciple with others. The community is the extension of his message and mission. The disciples show that the Kingdom is possible. Jesus desires to transmit his

message incarnated in a human group. The community is the reflection of the very figure of the Lord. It is the sign and witness of the truth of the message of Jesus.

Let us contemplate the beginnings of this group in the Gospel of John. We see two of them who follow Jesus anonymously until He turns around and asks them: "What do you seek?" The response: "Master, where do you live?" and he invites them: "Come and see" (cf. Jn. 1: 38 – 39). It is the invitation to have the experience; only he who lives with Him and like Him can know Jesus.

Those disciples who followed Jesus knew him in daily life; they saw him moved by the sight of the crowd that "were like sheep without a shepherd." (Mk. 6:34). They felt the compassion of God in the gesture of acceptance and tenderness toward that woman, a public sinner, that scandalized Simon the Pharisee (cf. Lk. 7: 36 - 8:3). They listened to the moving words of Jesus to the poor widow who had lost her only son: "do not weep" (Lk. 7: 11-17).

They saw him touch the leper, eat with publicans and prostitutes, welcome sinners, all those despised by the society and those most in need of esteem and dignity. In Jesus they discovered the merciful God, the God who never forgets the suffering of his children. In his actions they experienced the goodness of God the Father. Truly, how lucky the Apostles were!

In their daily dealings with the Master they did not learn a doctrine, but they took on a life -- that of Jesus. They touched his humanity, they felt his tenderness, they entered his "meek and humble" heart (cf. Mt. 11:29), and they knew his passion for the Father and for the least.

They learned another way to relate. Where they put power, Jesus puts service: "... If I who am your master and lord, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13: 13 – 14). Where they tried to put triumph and vainglory, Jesus put surrender even to the point of giving up one's life: "Whoever wishes to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. He who is determined to save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for me will find it (Mt. 16: 24-25). Where they put privileges and security, Jesus puts identification with him, taking up his destiny: "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Mk. 10: 39-40).

Jesus lives giving of himself, and his death is the expression of one who "loves to the end" (Jn. 13:1). The Eucharist perpetuates his self-surrender in the gift of his Body and his Blood. On that night in which he was to be handed over, in the midst of the hostility, betrayal and abandonment, Jesus in the Eucharist anticipates his surrender as a free and universal gesture of love. In that moment are condensed all the words and actions of his life, and he wants them not to forget: "This is my body which is given for you; do this in memory of Me: (1 Cor. 11:24), that is, do what I have lived and for the reason that I have lived.

3.2 We, consecrated men and women, prolong the humanity of Jesus

Today, we are called to be the "living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting" (VC 22). The Consecrated Life is born from the memory of Jesus and exists in his name. It carries within it the experience of the encounter with Him, and it is the witness of "He who lives" (Lk. 24:23). The Spirit has engraved in its heart the words and the actions of Jesus. Therefore, in it one can recognize the Master.

The Consecrated Life is the living memorial of those first disciples who followed the Master through the roads of Galilee. They experienced the poverty and availability of “he who has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk. 9:58); they were not bound by any social ties, and their family was those who “listened to the word of God” (Lk. 11:28). They were moved by the same passion that burned in Jesus; the will of the Father and the lot of the least.

The Consecrated Life is the memorial of that first Eucharist which is repeated not only in each celebration but also in daily self-giving. The Eucharist inserts us into communion of life with Him in such a way that we live in his dynamic of self-giving, and not only that, but in communion with Him we receive the gift of communion with all those to whom He gives himself.¹⁷ The gift of communion becomes mission.

This is what we are called to be, but it is not always what we live. Pope Francis denounces our community life-styles in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“Those wounded by historical divisions find it difficult to accept our invitation to forgiveness and reconciliation, since they think that we are ignoring their pain or are asking them to give up their memory and ideals. But if they see the witness of authentically fraternal and reconciled communities, they will find that witness luminous and attractive. It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?” (EG 100)

The Pope’s words are strong; they express his pain because of this lack of communion. Faced with his denunciation we recognize our weaknesses and limitations, and at the same time we feel the call and the commitment to humanize our relationships.

Our communities are a memorial of Jesus if they are spaces of true humanity where we feel that we are brothers and sisters and not rivals, friends in the Lord and not only workmates, where there is a place for trust and laughter, where together we can dream of the Kingdom and grow old joyfully. Where the primary value is the person and not the law, the spirit before the letter. Where we feel mutually accompanied on the road of faith, and we help one another to grow in our vocation.

For me, to live the faith together with those who have given themselves to the Lord is an inestimable gift. Thanks to this experience we have grown in our faith and our vocation. When I entered the congregation I considered myself good. However, soon I could see that there are Sisters who were much better, kinder, and more apostolic. In daily life with my Sisters, and above all in the deeper personal contact I have with them as Superior General, I have discovered the beauty of the person, the image of God, in the concrete, of their goodness and their self-giving in spite of the difficulties that living together entails. The limitations, far from diminishing this gift, reinforce it even more. My belonging to the Institute is strengthened in the grateful recognition of all that I have received.

Our communities are the memorial of Jesus if they are a place of encounter from the aspect of cultural and generational diversity and the appreciation of mutual richness. Where it is possible to have a dialogue that permits us to speak our own minds and to receive this as light and not as a threat, where silence also is communication and a hug conveys a message, if our communities are open to the world, and our houses and structures allow us to be approachable to those to whom we have been sent.

Our communities are a memorial of Jesus, if we recognize Him in the smallest, and this presupposes the welcome to and understanding of the weakest members of the community, weakness that comes because of age, illness, character or limitations. If forgiveness overcomes any offense and authority is synonymous with service. If mercy is our mode of being. If our actions express the same love with which Jesus loves us.

Our communities are the memorial of Jesus if we live from the reality of feeling ourselves called together and are the expression of total belonging to the Lord, belonging that is not individual but as a body.¹⁸ We are depositories of the mission of Jesus, and this makes us community for the mission, if what we are and live we experience as mission, and we offer as proclamation.

Then yes, the Consecrated Life is the Memorial of Jesus. Although numerically small, without power and social relevance, conscious of its weakness, it rises up like a humble sign of the Kingdom, as prophecy of humanity, that of Jesus, a generator of authentic human relationships, crafter of communion, in mutual belonging: we are with others and for others, and capable of fostering a culture of encounter.

4. THE CONSECRATED LIFE, SENT TO BE MERCY

4.1 Transformed by the Risen One

I invite you again to turn your gaze upon the first disciples. Those who followed the Master hit bottom with his death. They scattered and days later they met together, but in hiding for fear of the Jews (cf. Jn. 20:19 ff).

This narrative, in common with the other Easter texts, speaks of an Encounter that would transform the lives of that group. In different forms the evangelists narrate this experience: those men and woman are reached there where they are existentially -- closed in by fear, sad because of the loss of the Master, disillusioned in their expectations, skeptical about whether the Kingdom of God is even possible. They have come up against the power of evil, and death, as its ally, put an end to their dreams and their hopes. There, in the most radical human experience of total despair, the Risen One goes out to meet them., His presence in their midst transforms them, and His Spirit leads them in the interior pilgrimage of faith. Those men are capable of recognizing the Lord in the Crucified One. Now they know the Master internally and understand his words. Faith opens them to a new reality which does not deny what they are, but gives them an insight capable of reading their history in a different light, one that transcends these limits, that makes them experience "He who lives" (cf. Lk. 24:23).

The reality does not change, but the Spirit realizes in them the promises of Jesus, and they experience a joy which no one can take from them, unconditional peace and life in abundance. The gift of the Spirit makes them witnesses of the Risen One, in such a way that they proclaim it with the surrender of their lives.¹⁹

In this narration we can find many elements that can illuminate this moment of the Consecrated Life. Furthermore, today, we need to recognize the presence of the Risen Jesus that takes us out of ourselves, that leads us to open the doors, to stop face the future without fear, and to believe that in Him it is always possible a new beginning.

4.2 Sent to humanize

Jesus sends us, in the name of the merciful God, with the same mission that he has received, and for this purpose he sends us his Spirit. We are sent as a word that encourages, a hand that lifts us, a compassionate embrace for all those who suffer, a defense of all those whose lives are threatened. With his heart we are sent to humanize, to proclaim the worth and the dignity of each person because God himself has handed over his life for all. We know that the mission is not ours, nor is it sustained by our strengths or abilities, and it bears the seal of the cross.

Pope Francis expresses very profoundly the sense of the mission:

“Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people. We realize once more that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.” (EG 268)

I want to share with you how I have grown to understand the mission. I come from a non-Christian culture. I do not have knowledge of many religions, but only some in Japan, for example, Buddhism, although like many Japanese, I have never lived it as a faith. Shintoism, which explains the origin of Japan, for me is more a tradition. Buddhism speaks of the mercy of Buddha, of its gods. It insists on our vertical relationship with transcendence. Prayer and contemplation, sacrifice and abnegation, harmony and balance are important in Buddhism. However, it seems to be not very involved in improving society. At least, that is not what I perceive in it.

What attracted me to Christianity and constitutes its difference is the incarnation of God, the humanity of God, the man who becomes a way to arrive at God. This gives meaning to the entire ethical dimension of faith and the commitment of the believer to its reality, and above all to the most vulnerable. God is not only the compassionate and merciful God, but the Mercy that has made himself history, face, word, and flesh in Christ. His way of speaking and acting is mercy, and we are the prolongation of his speech and action. We are the mission of Mercy.

The Consecrated Life carries in its heart this passion for Jesus and for his people, and like Him, knows that it is sent to be mercy, to go out to meet the men and women of our time, those who are distant and those who are near. It wants, in its fragility, to stop looking for guarantees in order to embrace the suffering of the people. It wants the poor to be at its table and at its altar, and it will not rest until it attracts all to Him. It knows that its place is to be at the feet of others, serving. Everything human is its concern; therefore it accompanies the lengthy human processes, remaining even at the cost of life.²⁰

I am going to share with you the testimony of a layperson who shared with us in Cameroon the medical mission that we do as a team with the Dominican Sisters. It shows how we are perceived. He writes thus:

“Personally, it has been very gratifying to discover the many works that the religious with whom I lived, the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as well as the Dominican Community, are carrying out in Africa. ... These religious women are doctors who gaze upon the world, on their fellow man, at their mission with the most neglected... contemplating life, with humility, taking care of the sick with tenderness

and practicing justice. They are continually helping to bring out all their interior richness, pulling at this golden thread that is hidden in the heart of each person which, if we follow it, will lead us to the best in each one."²¹

It is a beautiful account of how the Consecrated Life is humanizing medicine with holistic care,

4.3 Let us embrace the Paschal Mystery

I cannot finish without speaking of the pain that there is within the Consecrated Life. It is that of the missionary on contemplating the need and the suffering of the people. It is the compassion that moved Jesus: "At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd"(Mt 9: 36). The world makes us suffer!

The Consecrated Life, like the Good Samaritan, goes out to the highways and byways and takes upon itself the sufferings of his brothers and sisters. It makes itself present to immigrants and refugees, in marginal barrios and in abandoned places, curing and teaching, accompanying processes of reconciliation and defending rights and dignity. Our hearts are moved in the presence of these faces, but today I want to focus on the suffering of so many persons who are treated like merchandise. It is one of the worst slaveries of the twenty first century, and it affects the entire world. Pope Francis recognizes the role presence of Consecrated Life especially of women religious in regard to the issue of human trafficking and says:

"I would like to mention the enormous and often silent efforts which have been made for many years by *religious congregations*, especially women's congregations, to provide support to victims. These institutes work in very difficult situations, dominated at times by violence, as they work to break the invisible chains binding victims to traffickers and exploiters. Those chains are made up of a series of links, each composed of clever psychological ploys which make the victims dependent on their exploiters. This is accomplished by blackmail and threats made against them and their loved ones, but also by concrete acts such as the confiscation of their identity documents and physical violence. The activity of religious congregations is carried out in three main areas: in offering assistance to victims, in working for their psychological and educational rehabilitation, and in efforts to reintegrate them into the society where they live or from which they have come."²²

Consecrated Life has a universal face and is incarnated as a service to its brothers and sisters, demonstrating that the Lord approaches them with compassion, walks at their side and remains although this may involve the loss of life.

The Consecrated Life is present in the existential peripheries of hunger, of poverty, of uprooting, of loneliness, of the lack of meaning, of the absence of God... and the hurts of Humanity, and with Jesus embraces its pain.

There is another suffering that goes together with this one, a suffering that Jesus also expresses: "Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." (Mt 9: 37-38). It is suffering due to the lack of persons, because of diminishment, because of not having strength, because of not being able to respond to the Mission.

In these moments of our history, in the precariousness of our strength, we feel the temptation to cling onto what we have, to feel helpless when faced with the task, and to

recite a plaintive litany of the difficulties in which Consecrated Life finds itself. This is the temptation of self-referencing that we continually have to overcome.

There is another way of taking a stance, if we trust in the word of Jesus: stop looking at ourselves in order to look at him and to pray. It involves going out of ourselves and searching for God and in God, that is to say, discerning, knowing that the mission is from Him, that the pain of God is the pain of his sons and daughters, and to situate ourselves humbly in this search, whose light comes only from God. On our part it requires us not to take our eyes off Jesus and his people, because he is our criterion for discernment.

Then we want what God wants, and fearlessly we let go of works and presences in order to be simply available. Last March, in the monthly meetings of formation of the International Union of Superiors General in Rome, we had a day for General Teams, in which we shared about the restructuring of works and communities that we are carrying out in our congregations. I could confirm that the majority of us are carrying out this planning with creativity, with the sincere desire of continuing to evangelize, according to the way of proceeding of each Institute and involving the entire Apostolic Body. This situation is putting into play our faith and spiritual wisdom, the capacity to generate life in our institutes. Above all, these processes make evident the love for the Church and for humanity; therefore we know that ways will open to us, because it is the Spirit who leads us with his light and his grace.

We feel and we are poor and small, and mysteriously this brings us closer to the One for whom we live, and this reality is being transformed into evangelical opportunity. Never have we felt such solidarity working beside others, sharing with the laity not only work, but charism and mission. I believe that more than ever we experience this charismatic diversity of the Consecrated Life as a richness. We are more aware of the one mission of the Church, the *Missio Dei*. The mission is from God, we are not the protagonists. We feel that our mission is something we receive. It is not ours; we accept it and humbly put ourselves at its service, shoulder to shoulder with others. We are sent from the context of our identity, with the characteristics of our charism, to work with all those who have a universal and available heart for the Mission of God.²³

4.4 Consecrated Life on the move

The Consecrated Life is Mission and is for the Mission. Living this condition of being sent puts us in a permanent state of going forth in order to respond to the pain of God, and requires the Apostolic Body of the Congregation to be open to a continual discernment; no one can be exempt from this responsibility. Responding compassionately demands precision and realism in regard to what we are and what we can do. This realism leads us to prioritize places and modes of our presence, and also to accept the loss of the presences that we leave. We put this pain into perspective if we find the meaning of losing in order to gain, of dying in order to give more life.

To accept this dynamic of moving on involves activating our faith and our hope, which is not born in a vacuum but is founded on our history that speaks to us of an absolute trust in the God who walks with us. An itinerancy that presupposes divesting ourselves of our securities in order to go to the "other shore," journeying together with the small and the least. "We will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love."²⁴

The Consecrated Life, faithful to its prophetic and mystical identity, from that intimacy with God is sent to acknowledge him and make him present in history, going out to the ends

of the world, announcing and living the values of the Kingdom, being Gospel for the poor and the small.

4.5 Passing through the Door of Mercy

I want to situate my final remarks within the framework of the Teresian Jubilee Year and with you to give thanks for the universal gift of Saint Teresa of Jesus. Her person and her work are “the heritage of humanity,”²⁵ according to the theme of the World Teresian Congress held in Ávila a few days ago.

We see Teresa as an icon of the Consecrated Life. In this free and humble woman -- because that is how she really was -- we recognize the desire and the search for God which always sets us in motion.

The testimony of her spiritual itinerary brings us close to the “God of Mercies.” When Teresa writes, she invites us to have an experience of God. Of a God who continually fills her to overflowing with his mercy, “he who waited so long for her.”²⁶ No one has been able to put heart and words to this experience of Grace in the truth of her humanity as well as Teresa has. She helps us to enter without fear into the most sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ and to treat him as “true friend.”²⁷

Without doubt the celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life has been enriched with this event, and it is equally significant that it concludes within the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which will begin on December 1, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. That day, united to Mary, we will pass through the Holy Door, which this year is in a special way the Door of Mercy, allowing ourselves to be embraced by the Mercy of God and receiving the mission of being Mercy.

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* n. 1, April 2015.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Cristianismo y Justicia*. “No podrán detener la primavera. Suplemento del Cuaderno n. 192.” December 2014.

⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*. November 21, 2014.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ JOHN PAUL II Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* n. 16, 1996.

⁷ RICARDO VOLO CMF, *Una vida inspirada por el evangelio*, Ed. Claretianas, Madrid, 2014, p. 114.

⁸ PASCUAL CEBOLLADA SJ: “Los votos en el centro de la Vida Religiosa”: *Sal Terrae* 103/7, (2015) pp. 351-362.

⁹ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo* Aparecida 2007, n. 44.

¹⁰ A. CORDOVILLA, *Crisis de Dios y crisis de fe*, ed. Sal Terrae, Santander 2012. The vision that it offers is very interesting.

¹¹ POPE FRANCIS, Homily on February 2, 2014.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia*, 1980 note 52.

¹³ JUAN MARÍA URIARTE, *El celibato*, Ed. Sal Terrae, Santander 2015, p. 96.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II *Vita Consecrata* n. 16.

¹⁵ BENJAMÍN GONZÁLEZ BUELTA, “Adoración y servicio: dos alas de un mismo viaje” *Boletín de la UISG* 155, 2014.

¹⁶ RICARDO VOLO CMF, *Ibid.* p. 58.

¹⁷ BENEDICT XVI Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas est*, n. 13. 2005.

¹⁸ PASCUAL CEBOLLADA SJ, *Ibid.*

¹⁹ JOSÉ ANTONIO PAGOLA, *El camino abierto por Jesús: Mateo, Lucas, Juan y Marcos*. Ed. PPCX: Madrid 2012. I want to express my gratitude for his commentaries on the Gospels, which have helped my faith so much, as well as his commitment to evangelization.

²⁰ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 24, 2013. This very thought-provoking passage, which speaks about the evangelizing community, has been an inspiration for me.

²¹ S. ASENSIO MARTÍNEZ DE SAN VICENTE "Experiencia de un psicólogo voluntario en Camerún" in *Medicina paliativa en niños y adolescentes*, Ed. Paliativos sin fronteras, San Sebastián 2015.

²² POPE FRANCIS, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2015.

²³ Cf. HANDMAIDS OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS General Congregation XIX, Rome, 2012.

²⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to Consecrated Persons on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, II, 4.

²⁵ Theme of the World Teresian Congress, held in Avila from the 21st to the 29th of September, 2015.

²⁶ SAINT TERESA OF JESUS, "The Book of her Life," Prologue.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter XXII.