



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE
AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 28 January 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is for me a cause for joy to be able to receive you today, as you are gathered in the Plenary Session to reflect on the theme of faithfulness and abandonment. I greet the Cardinal Prefect and thank him for his words of introduction; and I greet you all, expressing my gratitude for your work in service to consecrated life in the Church.

The theme you have chosen is important. We may well say that at this moment faithfulness is being put to the test; the statistics you have examined show this. We are facing a 'haemorrhage' that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us. It is true that some leave as an act of coherence, because they recognize, after serious discernment, that they never had this vocation. However, others, with the passage of time, have less faithfulness, very often only a few years after professing their perpetual vows. What has happened?

As you have well noted, there are many factors that condition faithfulness in what is a *change of era* and not merely an *era of change*, in which it becomes difficult to take on serious and definitive commitments. A bishop told me, some time ago, that a fine young man with a university degree, who worked in the parish, came to him and said, "I want to become a priest, but for 10 years". The culture of the provisional.

The first factor that does not help maintain faithfulness is the social and cultural context in which we move. We live immersed in the so-called *culture of fragmentation*, of the *provisional*, which

leads us to live in an “à la carte” way, and to be slaves to what is fashionable. This culture fosters the need to always have “side doors” open to other possibilities; it feeds consumerism and forgets the beauty of the simple and austere life, very often causing a great existential emptiness. A strong practical relativism has also spread, according to which everything is judged in relation to a self-realization that is often extraneous to the values of the Gospel. We live in a society in which economic rules substitute moral ones, dictate the laws and impose their own systems of reference at the expense of the values of life; a society where the tyranny of money and profit promotes a vision of existence in which those who do not produce are discarded. In this situation, it is clear that one must first let him- or herself be evangelized in order to engage in evangelization.

To this factor of the socio-cultural context, we must add others. One of them is the *world of youth*, a complex world, at the same time rich and challenging. Not negative, but complex, yes, rich and challenging. There is no lack of young people who are very generous, supportive and committed at the religious and social level; young people who seek a true spiritual life; young people who hunger for something different from what the world has to offer. There are wonderful young people, and not just a few. But among young people there are also victims of the logic of *worldliness*, which can be summarized as follows: the search for success at any price, for easy money and easy pleasure. This logic also seduces many young people. Our task can be none other than that of standing beside them to infect them with the joy of the Gospel and of belonging to Christ. This culture must be evangelized if we want young people not to succumb.

A third conditioning factor comes from within consecrated life itself, where alongside much holiness — there is much holiness in consecrated life! — there is no lack of situations of *counter-witness* that render faithfulness difficult. Such situations, among others, are: *routine*, weariness, the burden of managing structures, internal divisions, the search for power — status seekers — a worldly way of governing institutes, a service of authority that at times becomes authoritarianism and sometimes ‘laissez-faire’. If consecrated life is to maintain its prophetic mission and its appeal, continuing to be a school of faithfulness for *those near and far* (cf. Eph 2:17), it must maintain its freshness and the novelty of Jesus’ centrality, the appeal of spirituality and the strength of mission, show the beauty of following Christ, and radiate hope and joy. Hope and joy. This shows us how a community is doing, what is inside. Is there hope, is there joy? It is going well. But when there is less hope and there is no joy, it is a bad thing.

One aspect that must be cared for in a particular way is *fraternal life in the community*. It must be nurtured through community prayer, the prayerful reading of the Word, active participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, fraternal dialogue and sincere communication among its members, fraternal correction, mercy toward a brother or sister who sins, and the sharing of responsibilities. All this must be accompanied by an eloquent and joyful witness of simple life alongside the poor and by a mission that favours the existential peripheries. The renewal of fraternal life determines the result of vocational ministry, the ability to say “Come and see” (cf. Jn 1:39), and the perseverance of brothers and sisters, both young and not-so-young.

Because when brothers or sisters do not find support for their consecrated life within the community they will seek it outside, with all that this entails (cf. *Fraternal Life in Community*, 2 February 1994, n. 32).

The vocation, like faith itself, is a treasure that we carry in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7); therefore, we must safeguard it, as we safeguard the most precious things, so that no one robs us of this treasure, and so it does not lose its beauty with the passage of time. This care is first and foremost a task for every one of us, as we are called to follow Christ more closely with faith, hope and charity, nurtured each day in prayer and strengthened by a good theological and spiritual formation, which defends against the fashions and culture of the ephemeral and enables us to walk steadfast in the faith. On this foundation it is possible to practice the evangelical counsels and to have the very sentiments as Christ (cf. Phil 2:5). The vocation is a gift that we have received from the Lord, who has looked upon us and loved us (cf. Mk 10:21), calling us to follow him in the consecrated life, and is at the same time the responsibility of those who have received this gift. With the Lord's grace, each one of us is called to take on responsibly, in the first person, the task of our own human, spiritual and intellectual growth and, at the same time, to keep the flame of the vocation alive. This means that we in turn must keep our gaze fixed on the Lord, being ever careful to walk according to the logic of the Gospel, and not to give in to the criteria of *worldliness*. Very often great infidelities begin with minor deviations and distractions. In this case too, it is important to make Saint Paul's exhortation our own: "it is full time now for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13:11).

In speaking of faithfulness and abandonment, we must accord great importance to *accompaniment*. I would like to emphasize this. It is essential that the consecrated life invest in preparing guides who are qualified for this ministry. I say consecrated life, because the charism of spiritual accompaniment, let us say spiritual direction, is a "lay" charism. Priests have it too, but it is a lay charism. How often have I found sisters who have said to me: "Father, don't you know a priest who can guide me?" — "But, tell me, in your community isn't there a wise sister, a woman of God?" — "Yes, there is that old woman who ... but ..." — "Go to her!". Take care of the members of your congregation. In the previous Plenary you already noted this need, as is also shown in your recent document, *New wine in new wineskins* (cf. nn. 14-16). We are never persistent enough on this need. It is difficult to remain faithful when walking alone, or walking with the guidance of brothers and sisters who are incapable of listening carefully and patiently, or who do not have adequate experience of consecrated life. We need brothers and sisters who are experts in the ways of God, so as to be able to do what Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus: to accompany them on the journey of life and at the moment of disorientation, and to rekindle faith and hope in them through the Word and the Eucharist (cf. Lk 24: 13-35). This is the delicate and demanding task of a guide. More than a few vocations are lost due to a lack of effective accompaniment. All of us consecrated people, young and not-so-young, are in need of adequate help for the human, spiritual and vocational moment we are experiencing. However, we must avoid any form of accompaniment that creates dependencies. This is important: spiritual

accompaniment must not create dependencies. Although we must avoid any form of accompaniment that creates dependencies, that protects, controls or infantilizes, we cannot resign ourselves to walk alone; there is need for close, frequent and fully adult accompaniment. All this will help ensure the continuous discernment that leads to discovering God's will, to finding in everything what most pleases the Lord, as Saint Ignatius would say, or — with the words of Saint Francis of Assisi — “to always want what pleases Him” (cf. FF, 233). Discernment requires, on the part of the guide or the person accompanied, a refined spiritual sensitivity, the ability to stand before oneself and the other *sine proprio*, with complete detachment from prejudices and personal or group interests. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that discernment is not only a question of choosing between good and bad, but between good and better, between that which is good and that which leads to identification with Christ. I would continue to speak, but let us finish here.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you again and I invoke upon you and upon your service as members and collaborators of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life the continual support of the Holy Spirit, and I bless you wholeheartedly. Thank you.