

Do all to show that you ‘belong to Christ’

On Saturday morning, 10 December the Holy Father spoke to men and women religious in the Paul Audience Hall at the Vatican; approximately 23,000 women religious, 4,500 men religious and numerous members of Secular Institutes and of Societies of Apostolic Life live and within the Diocese of Rome. The Religious who attended the Pope's Meeting were accompanied by Cardinal Camillo Ruini, Vicar of Rome, who opened the Audience with a greeting to the Pope. The following is a translation of the Holy Father's Address, which was given in Italian.

Your Eminence, venerable brothers in the episcopate and in the priesthood, dear brothers and dear sisters,

It gives me great joy to meet you today in the spiritual atmosphere of Advent, while we are preparing for Holy Christmas. I greet each one of you with affection, men and women religious, members of secular Institutes and of the new forms of consecrated life present in the Diocese of Rome, where you carry out an especially appreciated service, well integrated into the various social and pastoral realities. And I thank you warmly for your service.

I address a special thought to those who live in the monasteries of contemplative life and who are united to us in spirit, as well as to the consecrated persons who have come from Africa, Latin America and Asia to study in Rome or to spend part of their lives here, also taking an active part in the mission of the Church in the City.

I offer a fraternal greeting to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, whom I thank for his words on behalf of you all.

Consecrated men and women have always been a precious presence in the Church of Rome, partly because they bear special witness to the unity and universality of the People of God. I thank you for the work you do in the Lord's vineyard and for your commitment in facing the challenges to evangelization posed by today's culture in such a cosmopolitan metropolis like our own.

Brave fidelity to the charism

The complex social and cultural context of our City in which you work demands of you courageous fidelity to the charism that distinguishes you as well as constant attention to the local problems.

Since its origins, in fact, consecrated life has been marked by its thirst for God: *quærere Deum*. May your first and supreme desire therefore be to witness to the fact that God should be listened to and loved with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your might, before any other person or thing.

This primacy of God, precisely in our time where there is a great absence of God, is immensely important. Do not be afraid to present yourselves as consecrated persons, also visibly, and do your utmost to show that you belong to Christ, the hidden treasure for which you have left everything.

Make your own the well-known programmatic motto of St Benedict: "Prefer nothing to the love of Christ".

Of course, the challenges and difficulties that you encounter today are numerous, committed as you are on various fronts. In your residences and apostolic works you are well integrated in the diocesan programs, collaborating – as Cardinal Ruini said – in the various branches of pastoral action, also thanks to the network set up by the bodies that represent the consecrated life, such as the Italian Conference of Major Superiors and the Union of Major Superiors of Italy, the Group of Secular Institutes and the *Ordo Virginum*.

Persevere on this path, strengthening your fidelity to the commitments made, to the charism of each one of your Institutes and to the guidelines of the local Church.

Such fidelity, as you know, is possible when one sticks firmly to the small but irreplaceable daily fidelities: first of all, fidelity to prayer and to listening to the Word of God; fidelity to the service of the men and women of our time, in accordance with one's own charism; fidelity to the teaching of the Church, starting with that on the consecrated life; fidelity to the Sacraments of Reconciliation and of the Eucharist, which support us day after day in life's difficult situations.

Next, a constitutive part of your mission is community life. Strive to create fraternal communities; show that through the Gospel human relationships can also change, that love is not a utopia but indeed the secret for building a more fraternal world.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, after the description of brotherhood achieved in the Christian community, points out, almost as a logical consequence, that "the Word of God continued to spread, while at the same time the number of the disciples in Jerusalem enormously increased" (Acts 6:7). The spreading of the Word is the Blessing the Lord of the harvest gives to the community that takes seriously its commitment to increase love in brotherhood.

Courageous witness to the virtue of chastity

Dear brothers and sisters, the Church needs your witness, she needs a consecrated life that confronts the challenges of our time courageously and creatively. In the face of the advance of hedonism, the courageous witness of chastity is asked of you as the expression of a heart that knows the beauty and price of God's love.

In the face of the thirst for money that widely prevails today, your sober life, ready to serve the neediest, is a reminder that God is the true treasure that does not perish. Before the individualism and relativism that induce people to be a rule unto themselves, your fraternal life, which can be coordinated and is thus capable of obedience, confirms that you place your fulfillment in God.

How is it possible not to hope that the culture of the evangelical counsels, which is the culture of the Beatitudes, may grow in the Church to sustain the life and witness of the Christian people?

The conciliar Decree *Perfectæ Caritatis*, whose 40th anniversary of promulgation we are commemorating this year, says that consecrated persons recall for all Christ's faithful "that wonderful marriage made by God, which will be fully manifested in the future age, and in which

the church has Christ for her only spouse” (n. 12). Consecrated persons live in their own time, but their hearts reach out beyond time and they witness to their contemporaries, often absorbed in the things of the world, that their true destiny is God himself.

Thank you, dear brothers and sisters, for your service to the Gospel, for your efforts in the area of education and culture, for the ceaseless prayer that rises from your monasteries, for the many activities that you carry out.

May the Blessed Virgin, a model of consecrated life, guide and sustain you, so that you may be for all a “prophetic sign” of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I assure you of my remembrance in prayer and I cordially bless you all.

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