

18 COMMUNITY WORK

READING Mth. 5, 13-16

Salt of the Earth and Light of the World.[a]“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, what can be done to make it salty once again? It is no longer good for anything, and thus it is cast out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built upon a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor would someone light a lamp and then put it under a basket; rather, it is placed upon a lampstand so that it may afford light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine so that it can be seen by others; this will enable them to observe your good works and give praise to your Father in heaven.

CONSTITUTIONS 1867: 2

The purpose of this institute is to lead the congregated along the path of Christian perfection by encouraging in them the love of God in the contemplative life by the constant practice of prayer and charity towards others by habitual exercise in active life of the works of mercy, especially spiritual ones, for people of their own sex, in this way:

1st. Dispensing Christian and free education for poor girls

2nd. Dealing with ardent zeal and great prudence in completely instruct young repentant, that deviate from prostitution, and restored one day to society, regenerated and in state of being useful.

3rd. Serving with all humility and charity ladies who want to retire to spiritual exercises in the premises for the purpose, the care of the same congregation.

CONSTITUTIONS 102

We express our commitment to God through our Religious Profession in the following way:

« In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”

I, Sister N.N., moved by the Spirit, want to respond to God’s call following Christ more closely; and I express before you my commitment to living in the Philippian Community, to accepting the Sisters that God will give me, and to being a witness, before our destinaries, of Jesus’ preferential love for them.

Therefore:

Trusting in the love of Sorrowful Mary, and in the protection of Saint Philip Neri, before you, N.N., my General Superior (or the General Superior Delegate), I make the vows of

Chastity, Poverty and Obedience, (for a year or perpetually), according to our Constitutions”.

(To this the General Superior or Delegate will answer):

«And I, on behalf of our Institute, accept your Profession and I ask God that, just as He gave you the spirit to make it, gives you His grace to fulfil it with generosity. Amen.”

VITA CONSECRATA 18

The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6), calls all those whom the Father has given to him (cf. Jn 17:9) to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. But of some, those called to the consecrated life, he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. Mt 19:27) in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes (cf. Rev 14:4).

In the countenance of Jesus, the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) and the reflection of the Father's glory (cf. Heb 1:3), we glimpse the depths of an eternal and infinite love which is at the very root of our being.

Those who let themselves be seized by this love cannot help abandoning everything to follow him (cf. Mk 1:16-20; 2:14; 10:21, 28). Like Saint Paul, they consider all else as loss "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ", by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as "refuse", in order that they "may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life. This leaving of everything and following the Lord (cf. Lk 18:28) is a worthy programme of life for all whom he calls, in every age.

The evangelical counsels, by which Christ invites some people to share his experience as the chaste, poor and obedient One, call for and make manifest in those who accept them an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him.

Living "in obedience, with nothing of one's own and in chastity, "consecrated persons profess that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection. His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life.

Nor can it be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ's mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God's plan by the total gift of self. Every mission begins with the attitude expressed by Mary at the

Annunciation: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

POPE FRANCIS (2022/02/02)

Two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, await in the Temple the fulfilment of the promise that God made to his people: the coming of the Messiah. Yet theirs is no passive expectation, it is full of movement. Let us look at what Simeon does. First, he is moved by the Spirit; then he sees salvation in the Child Jesus and finally he takes him into his arms (cf. Lk 2:26-28). Let us simply consider these three actions and reflect on some important questions for us and in particular for the consecrated life.

First, what moves us? Simeon goes to the Temple, "moved by the spirit" (v. 27). The Holy Spirit is the protagonist in this scene. He makes Simeon's heart burn with desire for God. He keeps expectation alive in his heart: He impels him to go to the Temple and he enables his eyes to recognize the Messiah, even in the guise of a poor little baby. That is what the Holy Spirit does: he enables us to discern God's presence and activity not in great things, in outward appearances or shows of force, but in littleness and vulnerability. Think of the cross. There too we find littleness and vulnerability, but also something dramatic: the power of God. Those words "moved by the spirit" remind us of what ascetic theology calls "movements of the Spirit": those movements of the soul that we recognize within ourselves and are called to test, in order to discern whether they come from the Holy Spirit or not. Be attentive to the interior movements of the Spirit.

We can also ask, who mostly moves us? Is it the Holy Spirit, or the spirit of this world? This a question that everyone, consecrated persons in particular, needs to ask. The Spirit moves us to see God in the littleness and vulnerability of a baby, yet we at times risk seeing our consecration only in terms of results, goals and success: we look for influence, for visibility, for numbers. This is a temptation. The Spirit, on the other hand, asks for none of this. He wants us to cultivate daily fidelity and to be attentive to the little things entrusted to our care. How touching is the fidelity shown by Simeon and Anna! Each day they go to the Temple, each day they keep watch and pray, even though time passes and nothing seems to happen. They live their lives in expectation, without discouragement or complaint, persevering in fidelity and nourishing the flame of hope that the Spirit has kindled in their hearts.

Brothers and sisters, we can ask, what moves our days? What is the love that makes us keep going? Is it the Holy Spirit, or the passion of the moment, or something else? How do we "move" in the Church and in society? Sometimes, even behind the appearance of good works, the canker of narcissism, or the need to stand out, can be concealed. In other cases, even as we go about doing many things, our religious communities can appear moved more by mechanical repetition – acting out of habit, just to keep busy – than by enthusiastic openness to the Holy Spirit. All of us would do well today to examine our

interior motivations and discern our spiritual movements, so that the renewal of consecrated life may come about, first and foremost, from there.

A second question: What do our eyes see? Simeon, moved by the Spirit, sees and recognizes Christ. And he prays, saying: “My eyes have seen your salvation” (v. 30). This is the great miracle of faith: it opens eyes, transforms gazes, changes perspectives. As we know from Jesus’ many encounters in the Gospel, faith is born of the compassionate gaze with which God looks upon us, softening the hardness of our hearts, healing our wounds and giving us new eyes to look at ourselves and at our world. New ways to see ourselves, others and all the situations that we experience, even those that are most painful. This gaze is not naïve but sapiential. A naïve gaze flees reality and refuses to see problems. A sapiential gaze, however, can “look within” and “see beyond”. It is a gaze that does not stop at appearances, but can enter into the very cracks of our weaknesses and failures, in order to discern God’s presence even there.

The eyes of the elderly Simeon, albeit dimmed by the years, see the Lord. They see salvation. What about us? Each of us can ask: what do our eyes see? What is our vision of consecrated life? The world often sees it as “a waste”: “look at that fine young person becoming a friar or a nun, what a waste! If at least they were ugly... but what a waste”! That is how we think. The world perhaps sees this as a relic of the past, something useless. But we, the Christian community, men and women religious, what do we see? Are our eyes turned only inward, yearning for something that no longer exists, or are we capable of a farsighted gaze of faith, one that looks both within and beyond? To have the wisdom to look at things – this is a gift of the Spirit – to look at things well, to see them in perspective, to grasp reality. I am greatly edified when I see older consecrated men and women whose eyes are bright, who continue to smile and in this way to give hope to the young. Let us think of all those times when we encountered such persons, and bless God for this. For their eyes are full of hope and openness to the future. And perhaps we would do well, in these days, to go make a visit to our elderly religious brothers and sisters, to see them, to talk with them, to ask questions, to hear what they are thinking. I consider this a good medicine.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord never fails to give us signs that invite us to cultivate a renewed vision of consecrated life. We need to do this, but in the light of the Holy Spirit and docile to his movements. We cannot pretend not to see these signs and go on as usual, doing the same old things, drifting back through inertia to the forms of the past, paralyzed by fear of change. I have said this over and over again: nowadays the temptation to go back, for security, out of fear, in order to preserve the faith or the charism of the founder... is a temptation. The temptation to go back and preserve “traditions” with rigidity. Let’s get this into our head: rigidity is a perversion, and beneath every form of rigidity there are grave problems. Neither Simeon or Anna were

rigid; no, they were free and had the joy of celebrating: Simeon by praising the Lord and prophesying with courage to the child's mother. Anna, like a good old woman, kept saying: "Look at them!" "Look at this!" She spoke with joy, her eyes full of hope. None of the inertia of the past, no rigidity. Let us open our eyes: the Spirit is inviting us amid our crises – and crises there are –, our decreasing numbers – "Father, there are no vocations, now we will go to the ends of the earth to see if we can find one" – and our diminishing forces, to renew our lives and our communities. And how do we do this? He will show us the way. Let us open our hearts, with courage and without fear. Let us look at Simeon and Anna: although they were advanced in years, they did not spend their days mourning a past that never comes back, but instead embraced the future opening up before them. Brothers and sisters, let us not waste today by looking back at yesterday, or dreaming of a tomorrow that will never come; instead, let us place ourselves before the Lord in adoration and ask for eyes to see goodness and to discern the ways of God. The Lord will give them to us, if we ask him. With joy, with courage, without fear.

Finally, a third question: what do we take into our own arms? Simeon took Jesus into his arms (cf. v. 28). It is a touching scene, full of meaning and unique in the Gospels. God has placed his Son in our arms too, because embracing Jesus is the essential thing, the very heart of faith. Sometimes we risk losing our bearings, getting caught up in a thousand different things, obsessing about minor issues or plunging into new projects, yet the heart of everything is Christ, embracing him as the Lord of our lives.

When Simeon took Jesus into his arms, he spoke words of blessing, praise and wonder. And we, after so many years of consecrated life, have we lost the ability to be amazed? Do we still have this capacity? Let us examine ourselves on this, and if someone does not find it, let him or her ask the grace of amazement, amazement before the wonders that God is working in us, hidden, like those in the temple, when Simeon and Anna encountered Jesus. If consecrated men and women lack words that bless God and other people, if they lack joy, if their enthusiasm fails, if their fraternal life is only a chore, if amazement is lacking, that is not the fault of someone or something else. The real reason is that our arms no longer embrace Jesus. And when the arms of a consecrated man or woman do not embrace Jesus, they embrace a vacuum which they try to fill with other things, but it remains a vacuum. To take Jesus into our arms: this is the sign, the journey, the recipe for renewal. When we fail to take Jesus into our arms, our hearts fall prey to bitterness. It is sad to see religious who are bitter: closed up in complaining about things that never go right, in a rigidity that makes them inflexible, in attitudes of supposed superiority. They are always complaining about something: the superior, their brothers or sisters, the community, the food... They live for something to complain about. But we have to embrace Jesus in adoration and ask for eyes capable of seeing the goodness and discerning the ways of God. If we embrace Christ with open arms, we will also embrace others with trust and humility. Then conflicts will not escalate, disagreements will not

divide, and the temptation to domineer and to offend the dignity of others will be overcome. So let us open our arms to Christ and to all our brothers and sisters. For that is where Jesus is.

Dear friends, today let us joyfully renew our consecration! Let us ask ourselves what “moves” our hearts and actions, what renewed vision we are being called to cultivate, and above all else, let us take Jesus into our arms. Even if at times we experience fatigue and weariness –this too happens–, let us do as Simeon and Anna did. They awaited with patience the fidelity of the Lord and did not allow themselves to be robbed of the joy of the encounter with him. Let us advance to the joy of the encounter: this is beautiful! Let us put the Lord back in the centre and press forward with joy. Amen.