



## **Consecrated life at the very heart of the Church**

### **Statement from the Delegates of the International Vocation Conference**

**23-27 February, 2015, Rome**

**I**N CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) in the United States sponsored an international meeting of vocation ministers and religious leaders from across the Western world. The unprecedented meeting was generously underwritten by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and had a three-fold purpose:

1. To learn about the larger vocation picture beyond one's own country;
2. To identify common areas of convergence in needs for vocation promotion and awareness; and
3. To explore future areas for global collaboration in promoting new membership to religious life.

Eleven representatives of vocation centers and religious conferences from nine developed countries (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, United States, Canada, England/Wales, Ireland, France, and Germany) met at the Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina in Rome from February 23-27, 2015. Also attending was an official from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), the Secretaries General of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and the Union of Superiors General, and the Vice-President of the Union of the European Conferences of Major Superiors (UCESM).

In his Apostolic Letter "To All Consecrated People" on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, His Holiness, Pope Francis, outlined the "difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing ... particularly in the Western world." This conference, therefore, was focused on the vocation needs of the Western world—and not from other areas of the globe. The intention was not to be exclusive or elitist but rather simply honest in recognizing that issues the representative countries face are far different from other countries where both the Church and religious life are growing. In addition, given the consistent diminishment of religious in the developed Western world, there is a greater urgency to address those common issues that may either help or hinder vocations to the consecrated religious life.

### **Areas of Convergence**

Through a facilitated process of dialogue, input, prayer, and theological reflection, we identified the following areas of convergence in our common experience of vocation ministry:

#### **DISCERNERS AND NEWER MEMBERS**

Those who discern and enter religious life today come from a postmodern world where life and career choices are abundant. This is especially true for women where opportunities for advancement are no longer limited by custom and culture. Those who come to religious life today, therefore, intentionally choose to deepen their relationship with God through private and common prayer, to live the evangelical counsels, and to live in community.

Contemporary candidates are quite diverse in their age, culture and ethnic background, work and

ministerial experience, and knowledge of the Catholic faith. Labels such as traditional and liberal no longer seem to fit their profile. For instance, while they may have a strong devotion to Eucharistic Adoration or the rosary, they may be equally committed to feeding the homeless, sustaining the environment, or working for justice.

### RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

Some religious institutes receive several newer members, some receive members sporadically, and others receive none at all. There are some newly founded congregations that seem to be attracting multiple candidates as opposed to the more established orders.

A lack of newer entrants, the aging and diminishment of membership, and the strains of maintaining current ministerial commitments can limit a congregation's vitality, creativity, and ability to risk in beginning newer ministerial initiatives. This can contribute to an institute's malaise and questioning of the relevance of their life or mission in today's world.

### CHURCH

"The task of promoting vocations . . . calls for the active collaboration of pastors, religious, families, and teachers, as required in something which forms an integral part of the overall pastoral plan of every particular Church" (*Vita Consecrata*, 64). In some countries, on either a national or diocesan level, there is good collaboration and cooperation among religious, laity, clergy, and hierarchy in vocation ministry. Efforts are made to build a "culture of vocation" through a national framework or office, discernment groups and programs, and other evangelization efforts.

This, however, is not the experience of all countries where collaboration between diocesan structures and religious institutes is either strained or simply nonexistent because of an overriding focus on ensuring the promotion of priesthood and the ordained life. In addition, some bishops and clergy appear no longer to see a future for religious life and therefore do not encourage religious vocations. They seem to see a brighter future for the new ecclesial movements within the Church.

A common concern is that the promotion of vocations to the consecrated life has no clear focal point within the Holy See. The Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations was formerly within the Congregation for Catholic Education, and so it was part of a much broader work for vocations. Since the move of this office to the Congregation for the Clergy, religious vocations seem not to have a home in Rome.

## Signs of hope in religious life

Despite the multifaceted challenges facing many religious institutes, we are encouraged that people continue to inquire about religious life and that men and women continue to enter. Although their numbers are fewer, they are not daunted by an aging or diminishing population. They are zealous, committed, and hopeful about the future.

We agree that the Spirit is leading all religious to revitalize the charismatic gift and prophetic dimension of religious life. In order to do this, however, all in the Church must realize that much like our church and world, consecrated life is facing a new reality. While we can be nostalgic about the past, we cannot recapture it.

We recognize and are encouraged by the number of newer foundations of consecrated life founded in our countries, some of which are religious institutes, mixed gendered, or ecumenical communities. They are evidence that God continues to call and people continue to respond.

Although we come from various cultures and diverse religious charisms, our experience these days has been one of solidarity and unity centered on our shared passion of religious life. We were

reminded of the wisdom of St. Bernard of Clairvaux on religious orders: “We all need one another: the spiritual goods which I do not own and possess, I receive from others....All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God’s gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms...Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.” This has given us great encouragement for we have found that when we stand together, we are stronger.

We are encouraged by the growing lay support for religious vocation ministry. We have found that there is an increased number of lay women and men, who not only serve as vocation ministers, but who also support religious life with their prayers, money, and encouragement. We were especially privileged by the “participation of the laity” at this meeting, who often brought “unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism” and who reminded us of the significance of religious life in their own lives as well as in the life of the Church (*Vita Consecrata*, 65). The future of religious life cannot be dependent upon the religious alone. If religious life is a gift to the Church, everyone in the Church must support and encourage it. We welcome our lay sisters and brothers as partners in this ministry.

## Opportunities for the future

As a result of our deliberations, we identified the following opportunities for the future:

1. While this was a first attempt at an intercontinental vocation gathering, we affirm its value and desire to meet on a regular basis. We also recognize the importance of expanding the conference to include other countries in the future. We desire to maintain our communication with one another for mutual support and resource sharing for the benefit of our vocation ministries.
2. Active involvement and support of religious leadership in vocation ministry is essential for an effective vocation program. We desire to collaborate and to serve as a resource to the UISG, USG, and UCESM in their work with superiors general and religious leadership conferences in prioritizing vocation ministry. We also humbly request that CICLSAL look to ways to collaborate with the Congregation for Clergy in their common interest of religious vocations.
3. A large percentage of recently professed religious and recently ordained priests have participated in World Youth Days and other similar, large youth festivals. Such events are significant for vocation awareness and discernment. We desire to partner together on a consistent and ongoing basis at World Youth Days to witness to the solidarity of religious and the rich diversity and global dimension of religious life.
4. The 50th anniversary of the promulgation of *Perfectae Caritatis* presents the Church with a unique opportunity to develop a comprehensive theology of religious life. This theology would be helpful for the ongoing renewal of religious life and for vocation promotion. We encourage CICLSAL to consider this possibility. It is our hope that this theology be studied in both religious and diocesan seminaries. As parish priests are often the first point of contact for those discerning a vocation, we emphasize the need for their education about religious life.
5. Global communication has changed the way we think and perceive the world. “Communication is a means of expressing the missionary vocation of the entire Church; today the social networks are one way to experience this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ (“Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day,” 2014). We commit to exploring ways in which global communication can change the world of vocation ministry by strengthening our bonds, learning from one another’s programs and resources, and providing and sharing vocation information so discerners may “further encounter Christ.”
6. We believe that religious vocations will flourish in an ecclesial culture where all baptized Christians claim their own vocation, whether it be to marriage, priesthood, single life, or religious life. We

desire to work with our bishops, vocation centers, and religious leadership conferences in creating this vocation culture.

7. We recognize that religious life is a big tent of many charisms with differing ways of living out that charism with each contributing to the building and strengthening of the Mystical Body of Christ. “The gifts are varied, but the Spirit is the same” (1 Cor. 12:4). We embrace this reality as a value and not as threat or as an indictment of one particular style of religious life. We celebrate with those institutes that do receive newer members.

8. We recognize that some religious institutes, like many of their ancestors in the past, are approaching the sunset of their mission and are no longer able to accept nor form newer entrants. This transition is painful to members of these institutes and for the Church at large. We offer our prayerful support and profound gratitude to these religious institutes for their dedicated lives and years—sometimes centuries—of faithful service. We encourage other Church leaders to do the same. We hope, however, that within the final fulfilment of their mission, these religious institutes find opportunities to promote the joy and vitality of religious life for the sake of all religious institutes and the future of consecrated life.

9. We recognize that religious charisms are not private possessions of a given religious institute, but rather they are dynamic gifts of the Holy Spirit intended to be freely shared with the People of God. This often is affirmed by the testimony and witness of those connected with our institutes and ministries who have been enriched by our heritage and traditions. Charisms can and will continue, although in possibly different forms, beyond the vowed membership within a religious institute. We believe this truth needs to inform all decisions made by our institutes regarding their future, especially when they pertain to accepting or not accepting newer members.

10. While we recognize the need for religious institutes to educate their members about contemporary vocation ministry and the culture from which today’s candidates come, at the same time, we also recognize the need for ongoing conversion of our congregations regarding our own vocations, the essentials of the religious life, and the need to follow Jesus Christ by living our vowed lives of faith to the fullest. “It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 3).

## In Conclusion

We prayerfully and joyfully join Pope Francis in his exhortation to all consecrated people to “embrace the future with hope” and “to practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: ‘Be not afraid . . . for I am with you’ (Jer. 1:8).” Confident in the Lord of the Harvest, who continually calls women and men to follow him, we entrust our efforts in vocation ministry to the Holy Spirit who inspires the multitude of religious charisms in consecrated life “which is at the very heart of the Church” (*Vita Consecrata*, 3). Come Holy Spirit!

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