



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

JOHN PAUL II

FOR THE I WORLD DAY FOR CONSECRATED LIFE

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear consecrated persons!*

1. The celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life, which will be observed for the first time on 2 February, is intended to help the entire Church to esteem ever more greatly the witness of those persons who have chosen to follow Christ by means of the practice of the evangelical counsels and, at the same time, is intended to be a suitable occasion for consecrated persons to renew their commitment and rekindle the fervor which should inspire their offering of themselves to the Lord.

The mission of the consecrated life in the present and in the future of the Church, now at the threshold of the third millenium, concerns not merely those who have received this special charism, but the entire Christian community. In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* issued last year, I wrote: "In effect, *the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church* as a decisive element for her mission, since it 'manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling' and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse" (VC 3). Thus, I would like to renew the invitation to consecrated persons to look to the future with confidence, relying on the fidelity of God and the power of his grace, who is always able to accomplish new wonders: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!* Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things" (VC 110).

The reasons for the World Day for Consecrated Life

2. The purpose of such a day is threefold: **in the first place**, it answers the intimate need to praise the Lord more solemnly and to thank him for the great gift of consecrated life, which enriches and

gladdens the Christian community by the multiplicity of its charisms and by the edifying fruits of so many lives totally given to the cause of the Kingdom. We should never forget that consecrated life, before being a commitment of men and women, is a gift which comes from on high, an initiative of the Father "who draws his creatures to himself with a special love and for a special mission" (VC 17). This look of special love profoundly touches the heart of the one called, who is urged by the Holy Spirit to place himself or herself in the footsteps of Christ, in a particular way of following him, by means of assuming the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience. A stupendous gift!

"What would become of the world if there were no religious?" St. Teresa rightly asked herself (*Autobiography*, ch. 32, n. 11). This is a question which brings us to give unceasing thanks to the Lord, who by this singular gift of the Spirit continues to enliven and sustain the Church in its demanding journey through this world.

3. In the second place, this day is intended to promote a knowledge of and esteem for the consecrated life by the entire People of God.

As the Council underlined (LG 44) and as I have had occasion to emphasize in the above-mentioned Apostolic Exhortation, consecrated life "constitutes a closer imitation and an abiding re-enactment in the Church' of the way of life which Jesus, the supreme Consecrated One and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples" (VC 22). It is thus a special and living memory of his being Son, who makes of his Father his only love -- his virginity; who finds in him his exclusive richness -- his poverty; and who has, in the will of his Father, the "food" by which he is nourished (cf. *Jn* 4:34) -- his obedience.

This form of life, embraced by Christ and made present particularly by consecrated persons, is of great importance for the Church, called in every member to live the same upward striving toward God who is All, following Christ in the light and power of the Holy Spirit.

The life of special consecration, in its many forms, is thus at the service of the baptismal consecration of all the faithful. In contemplating the gift of consecrated life, the Church contemplates her own intimate vocation of belonging only to her Lord, desirous of being in his eyes "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish" (*Eph* 5:27).

The fittingness of dedicating a special World Day is evident, then, for it assures that the doctrine about consecrated life will be more widely and deeply meditated and assimilated by all members of the People of God.

4. The third reason regards consecrated persons directly. They are invited to celebrate together solemnly the marvels which the Lord has accomplished in them, to discover by a more illumined faith the rays of divine beauty spread by the Spirit in their way of life, and to acquire a more vivid

consciousness of their irreplaceable mission in the Church and in the world.

Immersed in a world which is often agitated and distracted, taken up sometimes by the press of responsibilities, consecrated persons also will be helped by the celebration of this annual World Day to return to the sources of their vocation, to take stock of their own lives, to confirm the commitment of their own consecration. In this way, they will be able to give witness with joy to the men and women of our time, in diverse situations, that the Lord is the Love who is able to fill the heart of the human person.

Truly there is great urgency that the consecrated life show itself ever more "full of joy and of the Holy Spirit," that it forge ahead dynamically in the paths of mission, that it be backed up by the strength of lived witness, because "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41).

On the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple

5. The World Day for Consecrated Life will be celebrated on the feast which commemorates the presentation which Mary and Joseph made of Jesus in the temple "to present him to the Lord" (*Lk* 2:22).

This Gospel scene reveals the mystery of Jesus, the One consecrated by the Father, come into the world to carry out his will faithfully (cf. *Heb* 10:5-7). Simeon points to Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (*Lk* 2:32) and by a prophetic word foretells the supreme offering of Jesus to the Father and his final victory (*Lk* 2:32-35).

In this way the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is an eloquent icon of the total offering of one's life for all those who are called to show forth in the Church and in the world, by means of the evangelical counsels "the characteristic features of Jesus -- the chaste, poor and obedient one" (VC 1).

Mary is associated with the presentation of Christ.

The Virgin Mother who carries Jesus to the temple so that he can be offered to the Father expresses very well the figure of the Church who continues to offer her sons and daughters to the heavenly Father, associating them with the one oblation of Christ, cause and model of all consecration in the Church.

For some years now, in the Church of Rome and in other dioceses, the feast of 2 February has almost spontaneously brought numerous members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life around the Pope and diocesan pastors in order to demonstrate together, in

communion with the entire People of God, the gift and commitment of their call, the variety of charisms of consecrated life, and their special place within the community of believers.

It is my wish that this experience be extended to the whole Church, so that the celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life may gather consecrated persons together with other faithful in order to sing with the Virgin Mary the marvels which the Lord accomplishes in so many of his sons and daughters, and to manifest to all that being a "people consecrated to himself" (cf. *Deut 28:9*) is the condition of all those who are redeemed by Christ.

Fruits hoped for the mission of the whole Church

6. Dear brothers and sisters, as I entrust to the maternal protection of Mary the institution of this World Day, I deeply hope that it bear abundant fruits for the holiness and the mission of the Church. May it help, in a special way, to heighten in the Christian community an esteem for vocations of special consecration, to stimulate ever more intense prayer for obtaining them from the Lord, in this way helping to mature in young people and families a generous willingness to receive them as gift. The life of the Church as a whole will draw benefit from this and so will the new evangelization.

I trust that this World Day of prayer and reflection will help the *particular Churches* to treasure ever more the gift of consecrated life and to be measured by its message, to find the proper and fruitful balance between action and contemplation, between prayer and charity, and between commitment in the present time and eschatological hope.

May the Virgin Mary, who had the sublime privilege of presenting to the Father his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, as a pure and holy oblation, obtain for us that we may constantly be open and welcoming in face of the great works which He does not cease to accomplish for the good of the Church and of all of humanity.

With these sentiments, and with the prayer that consecrated persons may persevere with joy in their vocation, I impart to all the Apostolic Blessing.

Vatican City, 6 January 1997.