

YEAR FOR CONSECRATED LIFE

Consecrated Life and the New Evangelization

It is no mystery to me why Pope Francis has chosen to celebrate consecrated life in the upcoming year of 2015, given the recurring themes in his writings and homilies. In his first papal exhortation, *Joy of the Gospel*, he invites all the baptized to renew our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and urges us to welcome and share Christ's love to all with joy. Not coincidentally in another message he associates joy with consecrated life, "Wherever consecrated people are there is joy." It appears to me Pope Francis believes consecrated life is a model for the new evangelization because its orientation towards mission and commitment to poverty allow the gospel's joy to come alive in religious.

Pope Francis writes, "Missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity." He longs for this missionary spirit to be adopted by all believers and communities. The heart and source of this missionary spirit is God's mercy and love, evident in the great joy present in followers of Jesus. The Holy Father reminds us of the connection between joy and discipleship because "It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction," or the contagious nature of joy itself.

Throughout the Church's history followers of Jesus have been guided by the Holy Spirit to serve the Church in distinct ways. At times these Christians attracted others drawn to their way of life, forming communities of believers all leading a common lifestyle. The respective missions became the very heart of the identity and spirituality for these religious communities. Never were they self-serving, but always directed towards love of God and love of neighbor. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis understands the foundational importance of mission; a lesson for all the baptized, particular Christian communities, and the universal Church.

"God has a special place in his heart for the poor, so much so he became poor," reads *Joy of the Gospel*. Again and again Pope Francis urges us to go out to the marginalized, and to encounter Jesus in the poor and lowly. This is what leads us to personal and communal renewal, openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and to lift others up and out of their suffering.

Pope Francis' namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, was himself transformed by his encounter with the ostracized lepers living outside his hometown community. His heart was moved to leave everything and live a simple life focused on his relationship with Jesus. The consecrated religious vow of poverty requires them to live simply and in solidarity with the poor. This witness to poverty reminds the Church it must "be poor and for the poor," to imitate Jesus himself and sprout fruits of joy to all the world.

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