

to bring fuller life to others



*Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother
Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Assisi*

November
2015 #9



The fraternal dimension of the Church Communion

Dear Readers,

We are coming to the end of the year dedicated to Consecrated Life and we had the opportunity to reflect on the **Prophetic Testimony of Consecrated Life** through our Newsletter. In #7 we reflected on the *Identity of Christian life and consecrated life within the mystery of the Church*, and in #8 on the *Dimension of community life in Church communion*. In this issue we wish to offer some reflections and testimonies on the topic of **Apostolic dimension of Religious Life within the Mission of the Church**, emphasizing that we have been invited by Pope Francis to *live our future with hope*.

Religious life is especially related to the mystery of the Church and its mission; it pertains to its life and holiness. In fact, at the origin of religious consecration there is a call from God that can only be explained by an absolutely gratuitous love, capable of uniting to provide a testimony of this love. This year, stimulated by Pope Francis, there is a growing awareness that unless our religious life is prophetic for the world, it has no reason to exist. The apostolic dimension is not only based on a multiplicity of social and/or charitable actions; rather it is deeply related to the testimony of the experience of God in personal and community life. The spiritual renewal sessions offered to all sisters in the congregation revived in us the desire and commitment to develop deep relationships, in reconciliation with ourselves, with God, with others and with creation.

We have come to realize that if we want to revive the apostolic dimension of religious life and be credible instruments in today's world, we must commit to develop more evangelical communities that demonstrate a presence of the Lord: communities that nurture a simpler lifestyle, that are close to the people and comprehensible; communities that nurture authentic and deep relations among their members and among those they serve, work with and collaborate with.

Dear friends, as Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother we have committed ourselves to *participate in the mission of Jesus to bring fuller life to others revealing God's love for everyone, especially the poor*. We therefore ask you to help us be what we say we want to be. May the vows we profess be a prophetic proclamation to constantly search for God's will, to share assets, to work for justice, to be a place of encounter with God and with others.

*Sr. M. Teresina Marra, SSM
General Superior*

Prophetic Testimony of Consecrated Life

Publication by:
SSM Generalate
Via Paolo III, 7-9
00165 Rome, Italy
www.ssmgen.org

BE ON MISSION

Mercy is the background against which we want to give our lives. Mercy is the heart of the mission of the Church..

POVERTY

Poverty is connected with the joy in small things, with the ability to let go, with the journey to solidarity.

WITNESSES

Which challenges face religious life today? How can consecrated religious be signs of hope?



TO BE IN MISSION

The Gospel tells us that Jesus, after having received baptism and following his time of temptation and trial in the desert, was sent on a mission *“to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”* (Lk 4, 18-19)

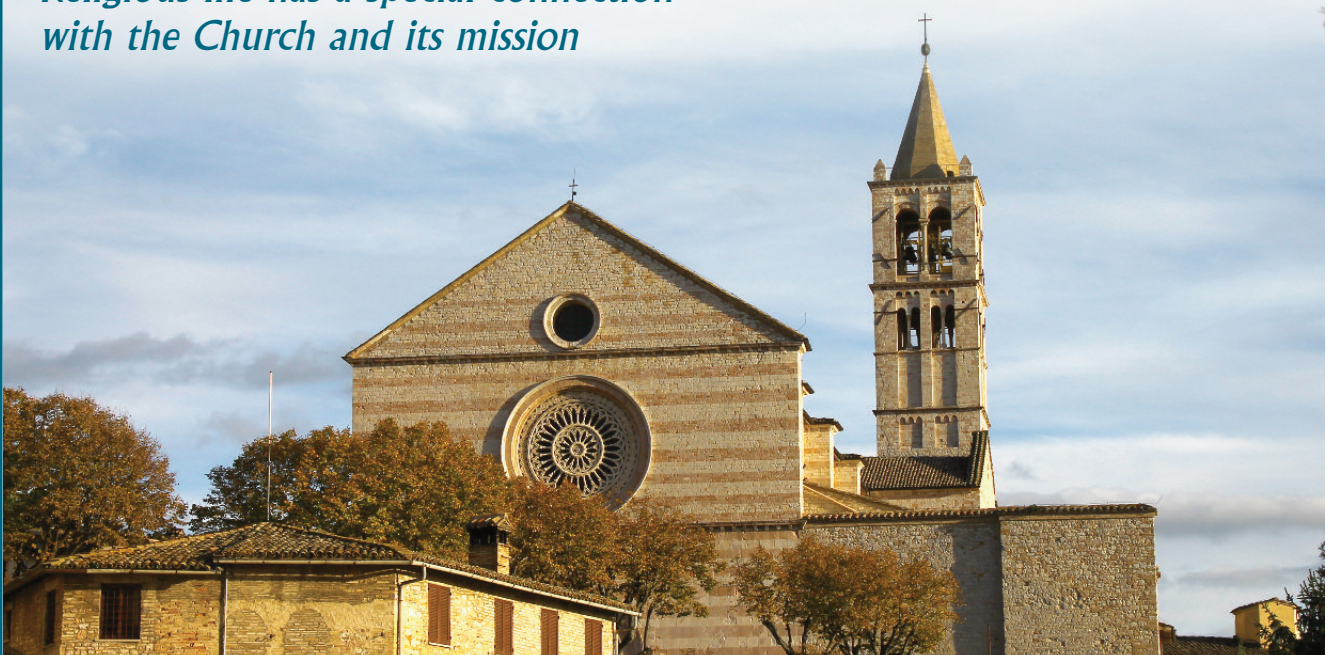
The good news, the liberation, the year of grace of the Lord tells us that as baptized individuals, we are all sent to follow in the company of Jesus, to bring God’s mercy everywhere and to everyone. This is the essence of evangelization; this is the mission of the Church, the very reason for the existence of the Church.



We are in the midst of two significant events: the Year of Consecrated Life and the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy that is about to begin. During this time we have attempted in our Congregation to focus our attention on evangelization through several programs and initiatives. We have just concluded the international experience, *“Evangelized to evangelize.”*

These are all important occasions that help us deepen our relationship with the Lord, to experience once again His merciful love, to renew our passion and commitment to convey the Lord’s mercy to others.

Religious life has a special connection with the Church and its mission



Everything in our life can become a sign of mercy. In fact, mercy is above all a lifestyle; it is a criterion that determines our choices and our priorities; it is a way of living our relations. It is the fundamental hue we want to give to our life. Then the gestures of our everyday actions, in our ministry and in extraordinary occasions will take on the same colour; they will thus be gestures capable of transmitting mercy, God's own mercy.

As a 14th-century prayer reads, *"Christ has no hands; he only has our hands to do his work today. Christ has no feet; he only has our feet to guide humanity along his paths. Christ has no lips; he only has our lips to speak of him to today's humankind."*

This is what it means to be in mission.

Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM



*Christ has no hands,
He only has our hands*



POVERTY

Lifestyle in the Light of Poverty

Lifestyle is always a determined answer to questions that confront our life. In relation to the evangelical counsel of poverty, they are questions like: How do I shape the relation to what I have (acquired for myself)? How does my striving for security find its fulfillment? How do I shape my relationships?

Basically, we have to differentiate between two ways of poverty. On the one hand, there is the poverty that is perceived as a deficiency that is a limiting life and hinders the person from becoming a whole human being, a poverty that nobody would freely choose, and which basically creates only victims. Then there is the freely chosen poverty. It brings the person to fullness through sacrifice. There is also a poverty in the things a person has to bear in the course of his/her life, such as sickness or calamities.

The experience of the “poor God” who became powerless for us, who gives himself and meets us at eye level can be reason enough to follow him on this way. God is found primarily among the poor. Mother Frances alerts her sisters never to forget poverty as the mother of all virtues. She feels a holy joy in herself as soon as the word poverty comes to her ear, and she defines her first accommodation as the house of holy poverty (ref. Letters of M. Frances to Father Jordan, 2). She is associated with St. Francis in her love for the manger that is the birthplace of holy poverty (ref. Letters of M. Frances to Father Jordan, 74). She knows the pearl of poverty has a rough surface, but it chooses her as spouse just as it chose St. Frances. Everything about poverty is attracting her. Through poverty a basic openness for God, the always giving one, is possible (ref. Letters of M. Frances to Father Jordan, 34).

Important is our inner awareness that we are all *receiving* and meeting others who are also receiving. This requires an “openness of empty hands.” The receiving comes before the achievement. The person is more than what she/he does or possesses. Contentment, thankfulness, and joy for the small and the inconspicuous belong to poverty. Letting go has to be learned and to be practiced, but not only in material things.



Another essential aspect of poverty is being without security. That is where the responsibility for the marginalized emerges since they cannot show concrete achievements. It also involves becoming one of them at the deepest level. Solidarity cannot be separated from the prophetic power of confronting and reproaching, pointing



out the causes and the destructive, inhumane interrelations that push people into poverty. It is not about sharing of the *superfluous*. The hoarding of goods separates the possessing from the non-possessing.

To live poverty means freeing oneself from every “clinging” to money and possessions, ideas, standardizations and plans. A basic requirement of such an attitude is to consider oneself always as a beneficiary now and into the future. Only on this basis can we give of ourselves lavishly and without fear. This trust, well exemplified by Mother Frances and our first sisters, is also in our experience as sisters in our community.

The hope for this perfection through God gives us the courage to accept our own brokenness. Someone that is already “saturated” and doesn’t lack anything or doesn’t know poverty, doesn’t expect anything further, and settles for what he/she has achieved – be it material, psychological, mental or spiritual. The first responsibility of poverty is not to give everything away, but to receive everything gratefully as gift without claiming the rights of possessions.

Sr. Gudrun Maria Schellner, SSM



If we are what we should be, then we will set the world on fire





WITNESSES

To live the future with hope

Hope is a great strength for our life. Living without hope is a great suffering because the person doesn't see a future ahead, doesn't have strong motivation for a commitment, doesn't appreciate the small joys of life. A hopeless person often feels uncomfortable with him/herself and others. In the book of Proverbs we read: *"For lack of guidance a people falls."* (Prv 11:14) As human beings we need a future ahead of us—we need hope.



Pope Francis urged young people with these words: *"do not let hope be stolen"*. What do we proclaim when we say that Christ is our hope? Christian hope is a gift of God; through Baptism, we have already received this gift as a virtue. It develops to the extent we live and practice it. Christian hope is not illusion, is not naivety, it is not a lack of realism; indeed, it begins with the identification and responsible denunciation of injustices and evil in our lives and reality.



Christian hope is not illusion because it is based on our certainty of God's love, on our belief that God in Jesus Christ has already saved us in history and that it is worth striving every day in order to build a more just world, even and especially when we don't seem to see any result. Christian hope is believing that it is worth dealing with obstacles, seeking the common good, developing relationships based on the respect and communion with others and with creation.

These are the challenges that all Christians are called to face. As consecrated persons, in which specific ways are we called today to witness hope?

The following reflections were offered by two SSM lay employees and two young SSMs.

Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, SSM

What in your opinion are the major challenges that Consecrated Life needs to face today?

From Oshkosh – Wisconsin

I believe there are many challenges facing those in the Consecrated Life. A lack of vocations is definitely a major one. When I was growing up we saw the Sisters involved in school life, church life and healthcare. They were always visible and an inspiration to all; and inspired many to become priests, brothers and sisters. There was a point in time when we desperately needed schools and hospitals in the United States. Religious communities provided them, and they also helped parishes grow. We are in a different moment now. There's both dying and new life happening. It needs to be approached with the sense that God is inviting us to something.



Women today face unique circumstances that challenge their discernment. Discernment is not a snap decision to begin with, even with the best guidance. For women, the process is complicated from the outset by a lack of role models and support because of the disappearance of Sisters from most of the Catholic schools and hospitals. Unlike priests who have at least a weekly presence in a young person's life - potentially more through Catholic youth activities and parochial school settings - a female could conceivably go through her entire elementary, middle school and high school years without encountering a nun on a regular basis.



The modern world is a challenging place. Those of us in the lay sector rely on the support of our faith and our family to get us through the good times as well as the tough times. I believe that communal life whether it be in a convent, monastery or in a faith-based local community is vitally important to those women and/or men that are married to God and Mother Church. The reaffirmation of their faith, ministry and vocation can be sustained with the help of their religious family. And by doing this with others, there will be a companion on the way when life gets challenging, when one needs to laugh, and when one needs others to engage with.

The Sisters have been movers and shakers in the history of our country and also within the Church. They need to be listened to and help formulate the future of the Consecrated Life of women. Many Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops are far removed from reality and also removed from what is really happening in the world as well as the Catholic Church today. They should not be dictating the future of religious orders, but rather it is time for religious brothers and sisters to rediscover the spirit of their founding charism. It is time for them to use their foundation for the rebuilding of community life. Congregations may need to prioritize through spiritual contemplation and discernment what the focus of their ministry and mission may be in the modern world of today.



John Fuller

From Rome – Italy

In order to answer this question, I tried to reflect on the difficult situation that today's world is addressing.

How is today's world? What does today's society look like? The world in which we live today seems to be more and more barren, and the people seem to believe in what they see, they touch, but little in what they live. This is, in my opinion, the first major challenge that Consecrated Life should address to break into the hearts and lives of the people in a time

that wants us to be without identity. The continuous call of Consecrated Life is to keep our identity alive. There is also a strong, transcendent and prophetic dimension. Consecrated life is itself a proclamation of God's faithfulness and mercy. We expect therefore that consecrated men and women, through the daily listening to God's word, their life example and a new language, will be ready to pass on the message of salvation to the new generations thirsting for truth and authenticity.

A characteristic of the consecrated life is the dynamism; the persons are always challenged to adapt, to communicate and interact in the various cultural contexts where they are present and operate. The challenge is to avoid staticity, in order to enhance the communication among individuals and among the peoples, beyond all ideology or thought.



In other words, we expect consecrated women and men to be models of spirituality and fidelity in their daily lives. In my opinion, a religious community's living processes are the same as a family's in the strict sense of the word. When today's sense of family is compromised by new social needs, a relationship of communion among the members of a religious family is something capable of warming people's heart.

As a Christian lay woman, recently married, I would like to see consecrated women and men living their charism with happiness; then they can say they are tools for bringing fuller life to others in a world where people believe they are already full of happiness. For me, the vocation of a consecrated woman or man is being the heart of the Church, the heart of the People of God on the way.

Jessica Rocchi

What do you as a newer member hope for in religious life and what do you think this time of vulnerability and uncertainty might be calling us to?

From Grenada – West Indies



If we are what we should be, then we will set the world on fire. (Paraphrasing St. Catherine of Siena) This is my hope for religious life that we continue to live a vibrant prayer and community life and be active in ministries so that our lives and actions can illumine and transform the world.

As I travel around and encounter people and also as I reflect on what is happening in the world today, I see some despair, hopelessness, hatred, anger and lack of for-

giveness. Suicide is at an all-time high now, why? People have lost hope. We have to be the light and the yeast in the world. We religious know and have experienced Christ's love and mercy and so we must transmit that to the world.



People need to know that God desires to be in relationship with us and that we are worthy of his love and mercy as his children. People must have hope in knowing that there is absolutely nothing that we have done or can do to stop God from loving us. People need to hear this message and live it as though they believe it. I am convinced that this is one way that transformation can take place in the world today. Someone once said, to make a difference in someone's life you don't have to be brilliant, rich, beautiful or perfect. You just have to care.



In these times of vulnerability and uncertainty, we are called to stay connected to Jesus Christ so that we are transformed into fruits of compassion, love, courage, forgiveness, and people of faith. Jesus Christ is our only hope! Let us continue to deepen our relationship with him through the Eucharist, by praying and meditating on his words, and allowing the words to penetrate our hearts and be a light for others.

Jesus asked us to be a mustard seed, yeast, salt and light. So let's continue to grow, rise, shake and shine, all for the glory of God!

Sr. Yvette Marie Fernander, SSM

From Rome – Italy

In a time when we talk about relationship crises, countries that build walls in order to stop people from crossing the line and broken families, I think that it is important for religious life to rediscover one of the fundamental characteristics of our identity: to be instruments of communion. The document *Vita Consecrata* invites us to be “*signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony.*” Often, however, human weakness seems to contradict this great calling. How can we be in communion with someone who hurt us? Is it possible for people very different from each other to collaborate? Is it really worth working for communion after so many resistances?

My hope is that religious life gives a *Christian response* to these demands, both individually and as a community, that it looks into how Christ has experienced diversity, conflict and injustice in order to live the fragility and diversity that are inside us and among us in a new way. My vulnerability is valuable because it helps me to accept other people’s vulnerability without judgement. I hope that with Jesus we will be the writers of a story different from the crime news or romantic novels that we read in the newspapers, a story in which there is space for hospitality, diversity, unity. It is not by denying or eliminating our weaknesses that we will be in communion; but by trying to accept and integrate them we will be men and women of Christ. Only a *fuller religious life* will be able to attract the new generations and to talk about God as the One Who starts from our being human, the One Who loves all of us with our potential and vulnerability. If we are able to be a reflection of this love, our life will be a call for many young people.

Sr. Gisella Maria Lo Conte, SSM

Do not let hope be stolen

