

## **Address to the General Assembly of the CRC** **Sunday, May 27, 2018**

With great interest and participation, I lived with you yesterday's proceedings. I thank all those who spoke and who enriched and challenged me. I wish I could share some of these interpellations, but there is no time ... Thank you, however, for giving me the opportunity to speak to you now.

This will not be a speech. As the Pope's representative in Canada - I would like Pope Francis himself to speak to you through me, so that you can hear, through the Bishop of Rome, what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today.

Truly, in front of the multiplicity of your charisms, of your personal stories, of the different and specific situations of your congregations, it is not easy for me to answer the question which I asked myself: "What to say to you?" Or better, "What to give to you?" Because I would not want it to be mere words, but a gift, a gesture of love to the CRC, to each and every one of you who form the CRC and through you, to the members of your communities.

This past week I was in Vancouver where I preached the retreat for the priests. It came to me spontaneously to propose to them as a theme: "*The joy (the challenge) of being priests*". With deep conviction I would like to say, to proclaim with you also, the joy of being a religious, echoing St. Teresa of Avila who said, also with deep conviction, "What would the world be like without men and women religious?"

But am I being a sentimentalist by saying that? Religious in Canada are decreasing by many hundreds yearly and - throughout the Catholic Church - communities that die are about one hundred every year!

About these things, about dying, I would just like to share a thought that is mine: dying is not a sin. On the contrary, it is a grace! It is the sign that I have accomplished my mission. However, it is important to die well, to be attentive to giving up oneself to the very last breath of one's life, freely, without thinking about the return. So the joy of being a religious (*confessio trinitatis, signum fraternitatis, servitium caritatis*), until the very end!

Until the very end of course but even more especially, the joy of being a religious at the beginning, in the freshness of religious life. People need to rejoice seeing young men and women religious. This experience is hampered by the shortage of vocations which worries us, and which also worries Pope Francis who, in this connection, speaks of a haemorrhage of vocations. This shortage of vocations and therefore the need to "take care of vocations" must be a priority for each of you and for your congregations... in fact it is a pre-condition to be able to attend to and accomplish other priorities.

How do we look at this problem which, on the one hand, makes us suffer and on the other, puts before us a salutary challenge? We must stir ourselves with this conviction: if it is the best gift that we have received, we must proclaim it, announce it, with the certainty that God is not "stingy" - but continues to offer this gift and therefore, continues to call.

I think that the strength of our vocational fruitfulness and of our drive can and must be supported by three actions: 1. the quality of our life; 2. our prophetic announcement; 3. our prayer.

1. The quality of our life: We must be aware that others may feel drawn to respond to this call to religious life, seeing the joy and generosity of our lives. Joy and generosity. Joy speaks of the quality of our relationship with God, with Christ as the center of religious life, and the quality of our fraternal life; generosity - manifests the quality of our mission, of our apostolic commitment. Joy and generosity: that's what others should see in us. People who know *for whom* they live for and *the reason why* they live for; happy people, who devote themselves to their ideal (their charism) with conviction, without calculation. I am convinced that what attracts today as always, is a beautiful life, true, full of meaning, completely given, in the face of which we can say "it's worth living that way." What attracts is a community where we breathe the air of family, a household in which we really love each other and where we are truly brothers and sisters; and it is also a mission that genuinely places itself at the service of the Gospel for the building up of a new humanity. If there are few who share our lives and our mission, we may have to ask ourselves if our lives are fully lived, coherent and therefore credible.

2. Prophetic announcement: The coherence and the testimony of life are not enough. They must be accompanied by the word. By living your charisms, your mission in the Church, you are called to involve those you meet on your journey, to involve them in sharing your story, the history of your congregation, to help young people discover that which God expects from them. Sometimes we are too fearful, we are afraid of being disrespectful, of being intrusive. And yet we forget the violence that is every day diffused by the media. Perhaps our word, our proposal, more than limiting the liberty of the other, can be a true liberation. Or maybe we are ashamed to propose our life? Or maybe we do not believe in it anymore? So then: to speak openly and courageously about the religious vocation; lend your voice to the One who today is calling many to follow him!

3. Finally prayer: pray and invite to pray the Master to send workers for the harvest. Before asking others to pray, we will pray! Just as one cannot delegate the testimony of life and the commitment to explicitly propose the religious vocation, nor can one delegate prayer. So: pray for vocations, explicitly, pray for the needs of the church and humanity, in order to become co-responsible with the Father of the harvest. Then invite others to pray with you - but who? Our associates, surely, the cloistered communities, certainly. But also our families, the staff of our houses and especially the young. We must involve young people: only if they ask the Master to send workers, will they come to understand the importance of the harvest and the great need to

have people who can dedicate their entire lives to it. Only if they would pray to the Master, will they be able to discover Who he is in truth, and be able to respond to his call to follow him.

In order to answer the shortage of vocations and to actively interpret the concern for vocations, allow me to make a suggestion: that each congregation question itself as to the opportuneness of promoting, of launching “*a year of the vocation*”, a year in which the congregation commits itself to promoting vocations to the religious life, and in particular to the life (charism) proper to itself, involving all the people around, the young people in particular.

But how to make religious life attractive and relevant? As we know, what makes the Christian life and the Church attractive and relevant is Jesus and his Gospel, source of joy. We must return to the Gospel, to the simplicity and radicality of the Gospel. This is a call that concerns you directly, considering the evangelical nature of the religious life.

In this respect, allow me to propose (as did Sister Giselle Turcot yesterday) the example of Pope Francis. Pope Francis has several times explained the reason that motivated him to choose as a new name that of “il Poverello” of Assisi: St. Francis would have always reminded him of the poor. And the poor, during these five years already of his pontificate, have always been present on his journey.

Now, the charism of Francis of Assisi is above all to have lived and re-proposed to the entire Church the literal Gospel with its radical demands, *sine glossa*, without compromise or sugar coating. Poverty and the poor came as a consequence.

It seems to me that it is this same charism that animates the life and teaching of Pope Francis. This is what, as for Jesus, leads him to favor the poor and makes him so loved and close to people. And it is again the proclamation of the Gospel *sine glossa* which brings others, those who feel threatened in their privileges, their prestige, their power ... to react negatively to him. The Jesus of the Gospel continues to be a sign of contradiction...

In conclusion: a year of the vocation in each Congregation, supported by exemplarity of life, by a courageous and explicit call, and the prayer of all, especially the young; and a return to the letter of the Gospel, *sine glossa*, as the supreme rule of the religious life.

THANK YOU.