

Pope Francis Opens Year for Consecrated Life

Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, World Day for Consecrated Life

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

February 2, 2015

Before our eyes we can picture Mother Mary as she walks, carrying the Baby Jesus in her arms. She brings him to the Temple; she presents him to the people; she brings him to meet his people.

The arms of Mother Mary are like the “ladder” on which the Son of God comes down to us, the *ladder of God’s condescension*. This is what we heard in the first reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews: Christ became “like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb 2:17). This is the twofold path taken by Jesus: he *descended*, he became like us, in order then to *ascend* with us to the Father, making us like himself.

In our heart we can contemplate this double movement by imagining the Gospel scene of Mary who enters the Temple holding the Child in her arms. The Mother walks, yet it is the Child who *goes before her*. She carries him, yet *he is leading her* along the path of the God who comes to us so that we might go to him.

Jesus walked the same path as we do, and showed us a new way, the “new and living way” (cf. Heb 10:20) which is himself. *For us too, as consecrated men and women, he opened a path.*

Fully five times the Gospel speaks to us of *Mary and Joseph’s obedience to the “law of the Lord”* (cf. Lk 2:22-24,27,39). Jesus came not to do his own will, but the will of the Father. This way, he tells us, was his “food” (cf. Jn 4:34). In the same way, all those who follow Jesus must set out on the path of obedience, imitating as it were the Lord’s “condescension” by humbling themselves and making their own the will of the Father, even to self-emptying and abasement (cf. Phil 2:7-8). For a religious person, to progress is to lower oneself in service.

A path like that of Jesus, who “did not count equality with God something to be grasped”: to lower oneself, making oneself a servant, in order to serve. This path, then, takes the *form of the rule*, marked by the *charism of the founder*. For all of us, the essential rule remains the Gospel, this abasement of Christ, yet the Holy Spirit, in his infinite creativity, also gives it expression in the various rules of the consecrated life, though all of these are born of that *sequela Christi*, from this path of self-abasement in service.

Through this “law” consecrated persons are able to attain wisdom, which is not an abstract attitude, but a work and a gift of the Holy Spirit, the sign and proof of which is joy. Yes, the mirth of the religious is a consequence of this journey of abasement with Jesus: and when we are sad, it would do us well to ask how we are living this kenotic dimension.

In the account of Jesus’ Presentation, wisdom is represented by two elderly persons, Simeon and Anna: persons docile to the Holy Spirit (He is named 4 times), led by him, inspired by him. The Lord granted them wisdom as the fruit of a long journey along the path of obedience to his law, an obedience which likewise humbles and abases—even as it also guards and guarantees hope—and now they are creative, for they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They even enact a kind of liturgy around the Child as he comes to the Temple. Simeon praises the Lord and Anna “proclaims” salvation (cf. Lk 2:28-32,38). As with Mary, the elderly man holds the Child, but in fact it is the Child who guides the elderly man. The liturgy of First Vespers of today’s feast puts this clearly and concisely: “*senex puerum portabat, puer autem senem regebat.*” Mary, the young mother, and Simeon, the kindly old man, hold the Child in their arms, yet it is the Child himself who guides both of them. It is curious: here it is not young people who are creative: the young, like Mary and Joseph, follow the law of the Lord, the path of obedience. And the Lord turns obedience into wisdom by the working of his Holy Spirit. At times God can grant the gift of wisdom to a young person, but always as the fruit of obedience and docility to the Spirit. This obedience and docility is not something theoretical; it too is subject to the economy of the incarnation of the

Word: docility and obedience to a founder, docility and obedience to a specific rule, docility and obedience to one's superior, docility and obedience to the Church. It is always docility and obedience in the concrete.

In persevering along along the path of obedience, personal and communal wisdom matures, and thus it also becomes possible to adapt rules to the times. For true "aggiornamento" is the fruit of wisdom forged in docility and obedience.

The strengthening and renewal of consecrated life are the result of great love for the rule, and also the ability to look to and heed the elders of one's congregation. In this way, the "deposit," the charism of each religious family, is preserved by obedience and by wisdom, working together. And, along this journey, we are preserved from living our consecration lightly and in a disincarnate manner, as though it were a Gnosis, which would reduce itself to a "caricature" of the religious life, in which is realized a *sequela*—a following—that is without sacrifice, a prayer that is without encounter, a fraternal life that is without communion, an obedience without trust, a charity without transcendence.

Today we too, like Mary and Simeon, want to take Jesus into our arms, to bring him to his people. Surely we will be able to do so if we enter into the mystery in which Jesus himself is our guide. Let us bring others to Jesus, but let us also allow ourselves to be led by him. This is what we should be: guides who themselves are guided.

May the Lord, through the intercession of Mary our Mother, Saint Joseph and Saints Simeon and Anna, grant to all of us what we sought in today's opening prayer: to "be presented [to him] fully renewed in spirit." Amen.