Columns
Religious Life



Members of the Holy Family Sisters of Goa renew their vows. (Courtesy of Molly Fernandes)



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March 9, 2023

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On the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, when my community members and I renewed our vows, I reflected on my own commitment. I found myself comparing it with the marriage commitment. The last few months have been big for the wedding industry, which has been "making up for lost time" with all the weddings delayed by the pandemic. From rich to poor, regardless of caste or creed, everyone loves to celebrate a wedding.

Certainly, in the springtime, when nature blooms and gives new birth, many promises are made and sealed. Many new families are formed and two become one. I, too, had a share in these events as I witnessed and participated in a wedding ceremony where vows were exchanged and promises sealed saying: *Set me as a seal upon your heart; till death do us part*. These promises inspired me to offer myself and renew my fidelity to the Lord and the church!

I was moved by the homily given at the wedding and liked the three short stories I heard there. One was:

> After a few years of married life, seated on the sofa, the husband was going through a document. His wife was surprised at his concentration, and asked him, "What's up?" He said it was nothing. His wife came closer and looked over his shoulder and whispered, "I know, it's our marriage certificate, and may I ask what you are looking for?" The husband, without a second thought, replied, "I am trying to locate the expiration date."

The second story:

> A few years after their marriage. The husband and wife are at the breakfast table. The wife is sipping her coffee thoughtfully, and the husband has his head buried in the morning's newspaper. The wife suddenly blurts out, "I am thinking of leaving you." The man drops his

> newspaper, sits bolt upright and in an annoyed voice asks, "Why, what's wrong?" This wife says in a somewhat irritated tone of voice, "You never say you love me, that you care for me, and you never utter a word of appreciation for all that I do for you." The man replies somewhat coolly, "Look here, five years ago, on our wedding day, I told you at the altar, 'I do,' " and then he added, "If I ever change my mind, I will let you know."

The third story was from the marriage of former President Ronald Reagan and former first lady Nancy Reagan:

> Nancy Reagan was once asked how she managed to stay in her marriage relationship with Ronald Reagan over so many years, when marriages around her and in their social circle were breaking down. Nancy said that she gave 60% and expected 40% from Ronald. When Ronald was asked the same questions, he said that he gave 60% and expected 40% from Nancy. Through their unity they could overcome all hurdles or struggles and problems. Because it was never "her" or "his" problem but "ours"!

These short stories speak of the ingredients of everlasting commitment — fidelity,

appreciation and attention. The fact is that there is no expiration date on the marriage

certificate, nor on the vows that we pronounce. The pronouncement of the vows is the

defining moment.

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The second story illustrated that appreciation, communication, encouragement, and the expression gratitude need to be done from time to time, not just through words but also deeds. It implies not taking each other for granted. You are not called to change each other, but to value each other; and to appreciate one needs to communicate. So, communication is important for relationships to grow. This applies not only to families or married couples — but definitely as well for religious who live in communities.

The third story illustrated the need of self-giving, which demands constant attention and giving more than taking, offering more than receiving. Of course self-giving is a challenge because we live in an age and time where self-fulfillment, self-sufficiency, self-absorption and self-gratification get priority. Self-giving implies that we are ready to sacrifice our time, our individual plans and ambitions for the good of each other, the good of the community and the church at large.

The celebration of the World Day of Consecrated Life on Feb. 2 — and in the U.S. Catholic Sisters Week from March 8-14 — reminded me of the eternal fidelity we promised to the Lord — of being faithful to the end. At a wedding, the couple promises: *I do … til death do us part*! Yes, the couple exchange vows and give themselves to each other, just as we religious pronounce our fidelity to the Lord through our sacred vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, offering all that we are for the Lord.

Thus, we do it for a mission and the couple do it for another great mission, because through them the Lord provides laborers to work for/in his kingdom, as "God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it." Genesis 1:28. And our families have generously offered us for the service of the people, to the church, to spread his kingdom. So we together join hands to establish God's kingdom.

Thus, indeed, "brothers and sisters for the mission” this year's theme for the 27th World Day of Consecrated Life is encircled with synodality. For, without communion and participation, mission is impossible. So it is inclusive: you and I, he and she, we and they, make brothers and sisters for the mission with our God-given talents, gifts and charisms. These God-given gifts and charisms through our calling entail witness, give value and make the mission fruitful.

Married couples fulfill the mandate given by God through their sacrament of matrimony, while we religious do it to fulfill what St Matthew states in his Gospel: "Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

Therefore, the key messages from the three little stories — acceptance, appreciation and attention — will help us commit ourselves constantly to the Lord in total fidelity for the sake of the kingdom, and offer ourselves for the mission entrusted to us through our charisms, with no expiration date!