Columns
Religious Life



Religious communities gather for Mass on the Day of Consecrated Life at Our Lady the Healer Church in Karumandapam, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, south India. The words written on the wall above the crucifix translate to "I am for you." (Courtesy of Robancy Helen)



by Robancy A. Helen

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

August 21, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As I celebrated Holy Week and the Easter season, I reflected back on another celebration this year in my home parish (Our Lady the Healer Church in Karumandapam, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, south India).

We were celebrating the Day of Consecrated Life on Feb. 6. All the women and men religious were welcomed with roses and sandalwood paste on our foreheads, as is the custom here. The Daughters of St. Paul (the Pauline Sisters), the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph, the Montfort Brothers, the Capuchins and the Rosarians are the congregations that serve our parish community.

It was joyful and heartwarming, with all of us renewing our commitment to God to sacrifice our lives to serve humanity with compassion, competence and commitment. Religious life is full of sacrifices: We give up our desires, dreams and reputation, lose our identity. There are misunderstandings, loneliness, transfers and all the other life challenges along the way.

While at the Mass, I saw the words written on the wall above the crucifix: "I am for you." What does that mean to me today?

We all have complaints that our lives are not what we expect. Sometimes we feel tired, worn out and ready to give up. People misunderstand us, and sometimes we have doubts about who we are and what we are doing here for God and people.

Advertisement

For all these doubts and tribulations, Jesus is the answer. He moved from place to place to preach the good news. All his friends and followers deserted him, and he was all alone in Gethsemane. He was crucified, losing his identity. There was no place to bury his body, and he was blamed for doing good. So he is our model and our solution.

It is not easy to live totally to fulfill the will of God. At the same time, it is not difficult to glorify him, sacrificing again and again in order to be holy and committed to Jesus and his mission.

When we choose to dedicate our lives to Christ, we first give up our home, family and friends. We are asked to change our habits and characters for the good of all. For example, I do not like to eat bitter gourd and eggplant, but I have learned to eat them!

With great difficulty, we learn other languages for the good of the mission to which we are assigned. For some, it is a pain, but for others, it is a pleasure. At many of our homes, we never did any household work, but in the convent, you are supposed to cook, clean and take care of others, besides performing multiple missionary tasks.

It might have been easy for us to live with our own family and tolerate their character, but in community life, everyone will have a set of habits, likes and dislikes, and we are asked to adjust to everyone and tolerate each other for the sake of community life and the common good, in the spirit of evangelical vows and Gospel precepts.

> For those who feel religious life is a burden, recollect the moments when you experienced love and happiness from God. Think of people as our co-pilgrims in mission.
>
> Tweet this

In our homes, greeting each other with a good morning or good night was not a custom, but in formation houses, we are taught these good habits, and sometimes adopting them is hard at first.

Coming from a small village to live with foreigners or strangers — with whom we did not have much in common — was not at all easy. Yet we learned to accommodate, to be open to other cultures and appreciate them, and learn to live with diversity.

Sometimes we wonder if it is worth living religious life, and we are tempted to abandon our vocation. It is a cross, yet with a devoted heart many have accepted it and sacrificed their desires for the sake of Jesus and his mission.

So, it is not a bed of roses, but a consecrated life is a life of fulfillment and satisfaction. For those who feel religious life is a burden, recollect the moments when you experienced love and happiness from God. Think of people as our co-pilgrims in mission; we are responsible for their moral and spiritual lives, and we are called to work and live with them, sharing their struggles and joys.



Members of religious communities are seen at Our Lady the Healer Church in Karumandapam, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India. (Courtesy of Robancy Helen)

Our religious identity is not in the dress we wear; it is in our faces and actions that reflect the face of Christ shining through us as the "light of the world" and "salt of the earth."

Some of my friends at the university have asked me if I have ever felt that I missed the opportunity of giving birth to children and having a family.

For the world, we religious are the people who have sacrificed the happiness of having a family — and I think for women religious, it is harder. Sacrificing the gift of motherhood is hard, but in religious life, we share in the motherhood of Mother Mary for the sake of God's mission.

As religious women and men, we share some characteristics of God and Mother Mary.

When I was 20 years old, my superior asked me to give counseling to a 45-year-old man. I asked, "How can I? He is older than me and has more experience in life."

She just said, "You can do it," and I had to do it out of obedience, not because I thought I was capable of it.

We all share the motherhood of Mary. We do not know the spiritual needs and thirsts of people, but when we love and take care of them, it is a real offering of ourself.

> There are people out there who are poor, orphaned, widowed, abandoned or differently abled. They need spiritual fathers and mothers who can show them the love of God.
>
> Tweet this

Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are diminishing everywhere, for various reasons amid our changing times. Young girls and boys are afraid of losing their freedom, and parents find it difficult to send their children to seminaries and convents.

What is our responsibility? Many religious found our vocations because of religious women and men who were an example, an inspiration, a role model and a road map to choosing this life.

The church needs people to work for God's kingdom. We need people who can offer their time, energy and talents for the good of humanity.

A life lived for uplifting others is holy and a life of fulfillment. Leaving aside jealousy, revenge, enmity and hatred, let us become the messengers of Mary who bore witness to love, care and commitment. Let us reach out to the unreached and needy; all people deserve to be treated and loved equally.

There are people out there who are poor, orphaned, widowed, abandoned or differently abled. They need spiritual fathers and mothers who can show them the love of God.

Some people are oppressed in the name of caste, class, gender, race, religion or other differences. It is time for us to kindle our consciousness and work for God's kingdom with dedication.

Our lives are safe in God's hands. Let our commitment be constant, regardless of the trials and tribulations we face in our day-to-day lives.