

Circular Letter #1, 2014

Dear Sisters,

First I invite you to take some minutes of silence, and recall your experiences in the past year 2013. As you think back, what comes quickly to your mind a; good or bad experiences? Whatever the experience, it is a starting point or a leap into the New Year 2014. The fact that we are able to reach the New Year is in itself a blessing. A lot of people passed on to new life either unexpectedly or after a short or long illness, including members of our own families and friends. As people of faith we believe that their passing is because “God had tried them and found them worth of himself” (wisdom 3:5). The fact that we are able to enter this New Year, means that God is giving us another chance to reform our lives and to be ready to experience everlasting happiness at the end of our earthly life.

As I listened and re-read the personal evaluation from each group during our just ended workshop and a day on our own, I realize that each of us had a good number of points to improve upon and a few to still hold on to. This is beautiful, for it confirms the fact that we are sinners, in need of God’s grace and mercy. St. Paul urges us “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive all our sins, if we say, we have no sins we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us”. My dear Sisters, may each of us strive at our own pace to face challenges with faith and courage. Let us continue to reflect on the materials we received from the Curia or workshops, annual retreat, communal reflection and sharing, so as to enhance our fraternal life. Pope Francis is calling us to be Religious women in action both at personal and communal levels and consequently to go to the peripheral to embrace the marginalized.

I invite you to reflect on the excerpt from Pope Francis’ insight to Male Superiors held last year on November 29, 2013. It was published in La Civiltà Cattolica on January 3, 2014. Some of the points like on formation may not seem applicable to us, but if you recall the explanation about Ratio Formationis (ref. Chapter feedback), it is imperative that the professed Sisters are the first Formators of new candidates, because girls are attracted to our religious life and learn more from what they observe than from theory. And what the Pope referred to is sometimes evident even among professed Sisters. I found the text to be very inspiring and challenging.

I wish you God’s grace, peace, and a faith-filled New Year.

Faternally,

Sr. Theresa Mwelwa fmsa

Vice Provincial Superior

Pope: Religious Must Wake Up the World

Father Antonio Spadaro, editor-in-chief of the Society of Jesus-owned periodical, was with the 120 superiors general attending the meeting. His 15 page article recounts the free and spontaneous conversation that covered a wide range of issues. The superiors only requested a brief meeting but the Holy Father wanted to spend whole morning with them, Fr. Spadaro wrote.

Asked by one of those present what are the priorities for religious, Pope Francis answered by making an explicit reference to Benedict XVI who stressed that the Church grows through witness, not by proselytism. “The witness that can really attract is that associated with attitudes which are uncommon: generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness in order to care for others,” the Pope said. “This is the witness, the martyrdom of religious life.”

He went on to say that religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. “The Church must be attractive,” he said. “Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!” He stressed the Church is speaking of “an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth.”

But the Holy Father said evangelical radicalism is not only for religious: it is demanded of all, and it is necessary to follow the Lord in a prophetic way. Not only should religious live lives that wake up the world, he said, but they should also recognize their sinfulness and weakness, which “doesn’t negate” their witness but “reinforces it.”

“What I expect of you therefore is to give witness,” he said.

The Periphery:

Moving on to another question, the Holy Father said that reality is understood “only if looked at from the periphery” as it helps one to analyze it “more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches.”

“It is not a good strategy to be at the center of a sphere,” the Pope said. “To understand, we ought to move around, to see reality from various viewpoints.”

He went on to speak about how important it is to him to be in “real contact” with the poor. “If this does not happen, we then run the risk of being abstract ideologists or fundamentalists, which is not healthy,” he said. “Jesus went to all, really all.”

He stressed that “prophecy of the Kingdom is a non-negotiable” and that it is not enough just to appear as prophets but to really be them. “Religious are men and women who light the way to the future,” he said.

Turning to charisms, he said they need to be lived “energetically as well as reinterpreted culturally”. This is risky, he said, “but this should not stop us, because there is the chance of making worse mistakes.” He said inculturating a particular charism is “fundamental, and this never means relativizing it.”

On the subject of religious brothers who are not priests, he said the area needed to be looked at again and asked the prefect and secretary of the Congregation for Religious and of Institutes of Apostolic Life – both of whom were present – to facilitate “a more satisfactory reflection.” But he stressed that he didn’t think that lack of such vocations at the current time was a sign that this vocation had ended. “We should rather understand what God is asking us,” he said.

Formation:

On the subject of formation, the Pope said the “ghost to fight against” is when religious life is seen as an escape from a difficult and complex world. He noted that to avoid problems, in some houses of formation “young people grit their teeth, try not to make mistakes, follow the rules smiling a lot, just waiting for the day when they are told Good, you have finished formation.” But he said this is “hypocrisy that is the result of clericalism which is one of the worst evils.”

“We need to conquer this propensity toward clericalism in houses of formation and seminaries too,” the Pope stressed.

He went on to say it is important to recall that the language of young people in formation today is different from that in the past. “We are living through an epochal change,” he said. “Formation is a work of art, not a police action. We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And then these little monsters mould the People of God. This really gives me goose bumps.”

The Pope was especially keen to stress that formation be directed not only at personal growth but also its final goal: the People of God. “It is important to think about the people to whom these persons will be sent while forming them,” he said. “Just think of religious who have hearts that are as sour as vinegar: they are not made for the people.”

He also said seminaries should welcome sinners, “but not the corrupt.”

Fraternity:

Asked how to combat a tendency towards individualism in community life, he cited the example of Taizé, where many confessions live together. Fraternity is what keeps communities together, he said, noting that it is sometimes difficult, and that even apostolic work can become an escape from it. “If a person cannot live brotherhood, he cannot live religious life,” the Pope said.

He added there is a need to go “beyond conflicts.” Although conflicts are necessary if the community is living sincere and honest relationships, they must be faced “head on” and “should not be ignored,” he said. “A life without conflicts is not life.” He also said tenderness helps to overcome conflicts. “We have to recapture that tenderness, including maternal tenderness. Think of the tenderness that Saint Francis lived, for example.” But if this is insufficient, he said, “It might be necessary to change communities.” He also talked of “Eucharistic tenderness” and the need to “caress conflicts.”

Sometimes he noted that problems of brotherhood are due to “fragile personalities” in which case professional help should be sought. “There is no need to be afraid of this,” he said, “one need not fear necessarily succumbing to psychologism. But never, never should we act like managers when dealing with conflicts in the brotherhood. We should involve the heart.”

On the subject of relations between religious and the episcopacy, he said bishops need to see the consecrated not as functionaries but “gifts that enrich dioceses.” He stressed the involvement of religious communities in dioceses is important, and advised the Congregation for Religious and of Institutes of Apostolic Life to resume reflection on the document *Mutuae relationes* and work on a revision.

Finally, the Pope returned to the importance of going to the periphery and frontiers. He stressed the importance of adequate discernment and support before sending religious to the margins. “They may have good will but might not be prepared for situations,” he said. And he argued that education “is a key, key, key mission!” of religious. “How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing? We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them,” he said.

Before his departure, ***he announced that 2015 would be dedicated to consecrated life.*** Looking at the prefect and secretary of the Congregation for Religious and of Institutes of Apostolic Life, he joked: “It’s their fault, it’s one of their ideas: it’s dangerous when these two get together.”

He left the hall thanking the religious superiors for their work, spirit of faith and pursuit of service. “Thank you for your witness, for the martyrs that you continue to give the Church, as well as for the humiliations to which you must submit: this is the way of the Cross,” he said. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”