

**Homily at the Annual Mass for Religious
6 February 2020**

Dear Sisters and dear Brothers,

This annual Diocesan Mass for Religious is a precious moment to thank God and to salute you who are religious for the grace of the consecrated life in the life and mission of the family of our Diocese.

This year the World Day for Consecrated Life, the 24th, celebrated on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, fell on Sunday. So, I thought that we should celebrate a Votive Mass of the Feast today. In the background, of course, is today's Memorial of the Japanese Jesuit martyrs, St. Paul Miki and his companions.

Luke's Gospel takes us back to Christmas and the mystery of the Incarnation. Every moment of every day we are invited to enter that mystery and to make Christ present in our words and in our actions, in our relationships and in our service of one another.

In the Gospel we see examples of resilience in Mary and Joseph as they bring their first-born to the Temple and in Simeon and Anna, such faithful members of God's holy people. It is the same resilience you display in fidelity to the Consecrated Life. Recently, at a conference on formation for the priesthood, there was a focus on the challenge of resilience for young people, not just in terms of the priesthood and the religious life, but also in many professions. What I found fascinating and helpful was the conclusion that, even in the secular world, the themes of thanksgiving and wonder and awe need to be

woven into our daily lives to feed and sustain our resilience. For me, that is the grace of God.

Grace was very much at the heart of what Pope Francis said at the Mass for Consecrated Life last weekend. And I make no apology for quoting from his homily especially as the Holy Father is himself a religious. He takes the words of Simeon from the *Nunc dimittis*, "My eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon alone saw Jesus as the Saviour, Jesus, a child, vulnerable and simple, new born. Taking Jesus in his arms, Simeon sees the grace that is worth more than life – "Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace." Yes, he sees the grace that is worth more than life, and that there is nothing further to wait for.

Pope Francis suggests that that is the vision for the consecrated life, that you, as religious, catch sight of the vision of Jesus as grace, and leave everything behind. Like Simeon, you are invited to welcome the Lord with open arms and to see everything as gift, all as grace, and that your religious life is a gift of love. I am sure that, like me in my vocation, you wonder whether you are making any progress in your journey of faith and whether you can cope with the next step. Yet it was a religious who asked me to look back and to see whether God had been at work in my life as I wondered about my next step into retirement. Of course, I saw God's hand at work. And so, it was gently pointed out to me that God's hand would continue to be there for the next chapter of my life, however long or short that might be. Pope Francis speaks of our poverty before God and our need to keep our gaze on the Lord and not on ourselves.

Continuing the theme of the vision of grace, Pope Francis warns us against the temptation to see things in a worldly way but to remain steadfast in love for

the Lord, to see poverty as a higher freedom and chastity as the way of love without possessing, and obedience not as a discipline, but as a victory over our own chaos, in the way of Jesus.

For you who are religious that is lived out first and foremost in community in being loving and compassionate towards one another as we recognise our own poverty, and to infuse all that we are and do with hope like Simeon and Anna in the Gospel.

I began by saying that this Mass was a precious moment to salute you, dear religious sisters and fathers, and to acknowledge the gift of your consecrated life in the Diocese. It is also an opportunity for me to thank you for your prayer and support during almost fifteen years as Bishop of the Diocese of Northampton. During that time, one or two congregations have had to leave the Diocese as they regrouped, and the hole they have left brings home the inestimable value of your presence here. So, I give thanks to God for you and I give thanks to God for the graces I have experienced, and I pray that in your religious life and in the new chapter of my life we may hold onto the vision of God's loving grace for each one of us and for our world. Amen.

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