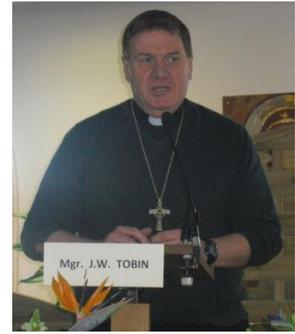


Life as a Vocation

**Mgr. Joseph William TOBIN cssr,
Secretary CICLSAL**



Introduction to the first conference

I am grateful to the leaders of the *Union of the European Conferences of Major Superiors*. At the beginning of this Assembly it is my happy duty to convey fraternal greetings from the prefect of our dicastery, Cardinal João Bráz de Aviz as well as from the other forty women and men who assist Pope Benedict XVI in his pastoral care for members of the consecrated life throughout the world. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has benefitted from a long and fruitful association with UCESM. I hope that my presence is a sign of our solidarity with you and the national conferences that you represent.

I have been asked to offer some input on the theme of this Assembly, *“Religious men and women in Europe: Life as a vocation”* and have been assigned two moments to accomplish this task. I hope to fulfil my responsibility by reflecting on different aspects of *vocation*, a reality which supposes a meeting of two freedoms: the absolute freedom of God, who calls, and the freedom of human beings, who respond to this call. In this first moment, we will consider the meeting of these two freedoms.

Tomorrow I will invite you to think about the notion of *mission*, which is inextricably linked to vocation. Although I do not have the privilege of being a European, I hope that I might be able to offer a few ideas concerning the mission of religious women and men in Europe today that may provoke further discussion among us.

Because of the bonds which unite us as religious, as well as your friendship with our dicastery, I hope you will have the kindness to overlook the poverty of these two conferences. I wish that I could offer you the scholarly breadth and depth that have characterized the speakers at past Assemblies of UCESM. Alas, I am ill-prepared to follow in the footsteps of such distinguished men and women who have spoken to you. However, like the apostle Peter, « I will offer you what I have » (cf. Acts 3.6), trusting that your own experience and the action of Holy Spirit will multiply these few loaves and fishes in order to provide nourishment for this important Assembly.

On Pilgrimage

What I am able to offer is the experience of a pilgrim, having left the country of my birth over twenty years ago, a departure which continues to give fresh meaning to a personal exodus that began in 1973, when I first professed vows as a Redemptorist missionary. Perhaps the experience of being pilgrims is a useful point of departure for our reflection, since we are gathered in one of the most famous sanctuaries in the world, the destination of so many wayfarers, especially the sick, the suffering and the anxious, who come here from every corner of the earth. If it is true that the Church understands herself to be a Pilgrim People¹, religious men and women are called to give particular witness to the truth that «here we have no lasting city» (Heb. 13.14), since our vocation should lead us «progressively into full configuration to Christ» during the course of an «earthly pilgrimage» in which we «press on towards the inexhaustible Source of light».²

¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 1, 48; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 45, 57, 58; John Paul II, encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (1980), 13.

² John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996; henceforth VC), 19.

Pilgrimage is a sacred experience that is found in most great religions and in many cultures. Interestingly, the notion of pilgrimage persists in some societies where the rest of traditional religious expressions have been swept away by secularizing influences. If it is true that the majority of countries represented in this Assembly are experiencing the ever-widening effects of secularization, it is also true that each of these countries can identify within its own boundaries one, even several centres of pilgrimage whose popularity continues even as other religious indicators diminish.

Perhaps this is so because the pilgrimage is a sort of paradigm for how human beings experience life itself. We sense or, at least, we hope that our lives are not to be understood simply as products of a random collision of atoms, blind destiny or biological urges. We know that our lives began in a place and we sense or, at least, we hope that our lives are going somewhere. Just as pilgrims keep moving in the direction of an unseen sanctuary, so we choose to find meaning in our life's journey by «walking» towards a place or a Person that we often glimpse only «as reflections in a mirror, mere riddles» (1 Cor 13.11).

The holiness of the pilgrimage is not experienced simply when one arrives at the desired goal. The vocation of a pilgrim is also lived each day, each hour and each minute of the journey: in every step taken in faith. As we walk the journey of life we are aware of a paradox: that we change radically along the journey while we remain the same. That is, we can trace important stages or identifiable segments through which we pass while the core of our identity mysteriously remains unaltered. A common metaphor for this paradox is that of a day, which has a morning, noon and an evening, all of which are perceived distinctly yet fused in a single unit. Although united, each phase of life has an autonomous value that should be appreciated as such and not simply as the preparation for the next stage.

The experience of a fundamental inclination or, if you will, the discovery of a «hidden treasure» or «priceless pearl» whose possession leads us to «sell all that we have» (Mt 13.45-46) is one way of describing a vocation. In this sense, our vocation also expresses the option that conditions the core of our being and remains unchanged, even as the morning of our life passes into the afternoon before arriving at the twilight of evening. Before entering into the notion of a *religious vocation*, we can ask: how may we say that the pilgrimage of *life* is *vocation*?

In preparation for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, the Holy Father recently reminded us that the profound truth of our existence is contained in a surprising mystery: every creature, and in particular, every human being, is «the fruit of God's thought and an act of his love, a love that is boundless, faithful and everlasting (cf. Jer 31.3). The discovery of this reality is what truly and profoundly changes our lives». ³ In the face of the mystery of human existence, Christian faith affirms that man exists because he is called into existence by his Creator. Seen this way, every human life is a «vocation», a call to be and to grow in communion and solidarity with others.

From its first moments, then, this vocation is a free gift of God (a charism) as well as a task to be realized here and now (a commitment). Charism and commitment, vocation and mission are two aspects of the same theological reality: the truth is that we are not alone, lost in the midst of a cold, impersonal universe. Whatever the particular circumstances of our lives, we stand always in relation to the great Mystery, which lies at the origin of everything. It is a personal mystery, whom we call «God», who loves us and awaits a loving response from every man or woman. ⁴

In obedience to the Word

The pilgrimage of our lives has brought us to Lourdes, where our reflection cannot help but be conditioned by the presence of two women: the Virgin Mary and a young peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous. The story of Mary related in the Gospel of Luke, and the brief life of Bernadette, which has been captured in books and

³ Benedict XVI, *Message for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations (29 April 2012)*, (Vatican: 18 October 2011).

⁴ Luis González Quevedo, «Vocación: vocación en la biblia» en *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*, Ángel Aparicio y Juan Canals (eds.), (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas: 2009), 1864.

film, share some important points of convergence and may help us to understand the nature of life as vocation. The journey of Bernadette and that of the Mother of God recall lives that are responses to a word:

- a word that speaks to them in centre of their being: Mary gratefully recognizes the voice of One who «has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness» (Lk 1.48); Mary, in turn, visits Bernadette and speaks to her in her own dialect.
- a word that respects them and their dignity; Mary recalls that «he who is mighty has done great things for me»; Bernadette remembers that her beautiful visitor «looked at me as a person».
- a word that sends them in mission to others.

It is easy to recognize in the story of Mary and Bernadette, the principal characteristics of a vocation according to the Word of God:

- In every biblical vocation, *the initiative is always with God*. Yahweh chooses the people of Israel because he loves them (Dt 7.6-8). It is not the disciples who choose Jesus but rather he who elects them (Jn 15.16; Mk 3.12).
- A vocation is profoundly *personal*. God knows and calls men and women by name.
- The personal call from God demands a *response*.
- From the perspective of God, the vocation is always a *gracious gift*: God chooses whomever he wishes (cf. Mal 1.2); the recipient of a vocation remains free and is capable of refusing it (cf. Mt 19.21-22).
- God surprisingly does not choose the great and powerful of this world to carry out his plan of salvation. Rather, Scripture insists in showing *a clear preference of God for the little ones*, those easily despised. Israel is the least among the nations (Dt 7.7). *God has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness* (Lk 1, 48). God chooses «the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and... the weak of the world to shame the strong,... and the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something (1 Cor 1.27-28).⁵

As a pilgrim, whose particular journey has included nearly twenty-five years in the service of government in my own religious family, thinking about the nature of vocation while contemplating the icons of Mary and Bernadette, leads me to develop three considerations. First, I would like to invite you to think about which evangelical counsel might be the most important for religious in Europe today. Then we should recognize the difference between a vocation and a profession or career. Finally, we will think a moment about how we might make love stay.

The axial vow?

Can it be helpful to single out one vow as having a unique value for religious life in the second decade of the twenty-first century? If so, which one? When one considers the evangelical testimony of the vows against the background of current events, one could make a case that religious chastity offers a unique witness in the face of the public scandals caused by the sexual misconduct of clerics and religious as well as the reduction of sexual expression simply to a necessary biological urge. On the other hand, given a perennial preference of our way of life for the marginalized and the poor, religious men and women certainly want to understand better and live more coherently the evangelical counsel of poverty. However, I will argue that *obedience* plays a particularly decisive role in the apostolic life today.

It is practically a cliché to say that we live in midst of a rapidly changing world, Church and religious orders and congregations. Our age is called a transition time that is marked by «great advances in science and technology as well as powerful means of communication that sometimes colonize the spirit».⁶ There is the ambiguous experience of globalization that makes us interdependent at the same time as it undermines particular cultural identities. But our day also presents *kairos* moments in which we are surprised and realize

⁵ Ibid., 1826

⁶ International Congress on Consecrated Life, Final Document *What is the Spirit saying to the Consecrated Life?* (Roma, November, 2004), n. 2.

that the God who speaks is the Lord of history». We experience a thirst for and crisis of meaning that holds out to us a thousand proposals and promises».⁷

Even in the «in-between time» of the present moment, our Institutes must make choices. However, because it is a vocation, religious life is not free to be capricious nor can it determine the criteria for its options by its own lights alone. Amid a cacophony of voices that seek to «colonize» its spirit, our religious families need to distinguish the voice of Him who has called us to Himself and who sends us forth to preach and prepare the places he intends to visit. (Lk 10.1ss)

The tumultuous experience of change in our religious families over the last five decades as well as the flux of the world today demand that religious men and women have listening and discerning hearts that are free to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Can you see the need for religious to give particular attention to the vow of obedience, understood as a commitment to a co-responsible search for the will of God according to the charism of each religious family?

I like to think about our vow in the radical context described by Paul VI: «Even more than a purely formal and legalistic obedience to Church law or submission to ecclesiastical authority, [obedience] is a penetration and acceptance of the mystery of Christ, who, through obedience, saved us. It is a continuation of His fundamental gesture: saying Yes to the will of the Father».⁸ Obedience in this fundamental sense is consonant with the Word of God and the rich spiritual patrimony of our religious families, helping us to distinguish the voice of our Master and recognize the *kairos* within the chaos of our times.

A question and a response

The Gospels present a number of «vocation stories», accounts that recall Jesus extending an invitation that is accepted or rejected by the His listeners. My favourite «story» is the entire Gospel of John, which begins with a question and concludes with an invitation. The first words of Jesus are «What are you looking for?» (Jn 1.38); the Gospel closes with his words to Peter «You follow me» (Jn 21.22). Unlike the call of the apostles in the Synoptic Gospels, according to John the first words of Jesus to Andrew and the other disciple is an appeal to their desire, their dreams, and their ideals: «What are you looking for?». The Gospel is the story of the astounding encounter between the God, who «so loved the world», and the deepest hungers of the human heart. The call to follow comes after the revelation of the paschal mystery in which the saving plan of the Father is fully disclosed.

The search for God has always been the quest of every being thirsting for the Absolute and the Eternal.⁹ The great religious traditions mirror this search, as do secularized societies, where men and women seek some kind of meaning in life, death, love and suffering without reference to a revealed faith. Like Paul in the Areopagus, if we are attentive to the «shrines» that these societies construct, we can discern many altars to the *Agnostos Theos* (cf. Acts 17.23).

For religious, the quest for ultimate meaning finds the definitive answer in Jesus Christ. We confess «Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God» (Jn. 6.68-69). Yet, even when we come to the joyful recognition that «we have found what we were looking for», as the disciples enthusiastically burble to Nathaniel at the onset of the Gospel narrative (cf. Jn 1.41), the search continues.

Our religious profession is *a special and fruitful deepening of the consecration received in Baptism*, yet it is also the continuation of the quest for God. For eighteen years, I meditated on an image of Jesus in the chapel of General Curia of the Redemptorists, which presents him in three-quarters profile. There remains always the hidden side of the Master, so our prayer continues to be “Your face, o Lord, I seek” (Ps 27.8).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Paul VI, *Discorsi al Popolo di Dio 1966-1967* (Roma: Studium, 1968) 119.

⁹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience: Faciem tuam, Domine, Requiram*, (Vatican City 2008), n. 3.

Pilgrims or Professionals?

There are ways of living our religious profession that actually reduce it to something else. For example, there is the risk of identifying *vocation* with a *profession*. This seems to be true especially among the so-called «active» or «apostolic» religious in Western societies. Strictly speaking, a profession refers to a task or specialized service, while a vocation is a call that resonates in the depths of one's being, «place» where God's voice can be heard. Let me try to illustrate what I mean.

Several years ago I was speaking with a close friend and fellow member of the Union of Superiors General. He had just concluded the visitation of his brothers in the United States and, since our general council was about to begin a visitation of the American provinces, I was interested in his experience. He looked a little puzzled and sad, saying that it seemed easier to talk about spirituality with lay associates than with his brothers. Having already had the same experience in some Redemptorist communities, I lifted him up and pinned him against the wall, asking politely that he explain further his intuition. He said that he wasn't sure, but he had the impression that in the United States, it was very important for religious also to be professionals. He wondered, however, whether that sort of professionalism left any room for the mystical.

In Western nations, the term “professional” commonly describes highly educated, mostly salaried workers, who enjoy considerable work autonomy, a comfortable salary, and are commonly engaged in creative and intellectually challenging work. Less technically, it may also refer to a person having impressive competence in a particular activity.¹⁰

There is an undeniable and, in my opinion, entirely appropriate value attached to some values of professionalism in consecrated life, such as a priority for the intellectual formation of our members as well as the use of management and organizational strategies in planning and evaluation. Even Jesus recommends that we count bricks and soldiers before making final decisions about towers and battles (Lk 14.28-33). We have all benefitted from educational opportunities in first and continuing formation. Father Gerald Arbuckle SM has pointed out the valuable lessons that religious can learn from the corporate world and many of us have consulted thinkers like Peter Drucker in our efforts to chart a course for our communities.

An appreciation for professionalism in the consecrated life can be useful, insofar as it is coherent with the essential values connected with our way of discipleship. As I see it, a problem comes about when consecrated life is reduced to professionalism, no longer witnessing clearly to «the one thing necessary» (Lk 10.42) or the «folly of the Cross» (1 Cor 1.23). There are a number of circumstances that conspire to promote such a reductive understanding of our life.

Beyond the value that Western society assigns to education, personal autonomy and financial independence, there is also an undeniable bureaucratization of consecrated life, which affects especially members in leadership. Michael Holman SJ, until 2011 the provincial superior of the Jesuits in the United Kingdom, observes that, during the communist domination of Czechoslovakia, authorities found the best way to undermine the faith of Christians was to give them endless forms to fill in.¹¹ Perhaps you are wondering whether your respective general administration or local diocese might not ascribe to a similar strategy! Father Holman notes that a sound formation these days needs to train future priests and religious to prepare risk assessments, and health-and-safety reports, to participate well in committee meetings and line-manage employees so that these tasks become instruments of mission and not a cause for disillusionment.¹²

Yet, isn't it easy to lose sight of mission amid administrative demands on superiors today? In addition to their administrative demands, superiors are pressed by the individual needs of the members. George Wilson, SJ has described a particular temptation that seduces servant-leaders in religious life: to be so captivated by attention to these needs of individuals that the group as a whole loses direction. He describes the possibility

¹⁰ cf. citations at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professional#cite_note-Gilbert-0.

¹¹ Michael Holman, “Vocations in an ever-changing world” in *The Tablet*, 19 June 2010, p. 15.

¹² *Ibid.*

of a province resembling a 100-person collective that is travelling down the river on a large raft. Each «passenger» is reasonably content as a result of care on the part of superiors. However, no one notices that the enterprise as a whole is treading water as it is about to go over Victoria Falls!¹³

There are some tensions essential to a truly human life. Without tension, one cannot stand, walk or sing. I wonder whether a vital tension in consecrated life is being reconciled in a manner that is slowly neutering the energy of our respective charisms. I describe this tension as the dynamic relationship between what we can do and what we ought to do. Management strategies, together with an increasing fragmentation among our members, can lead us to consider solely our limits rather than imagine new possibilities.

A realistic pragmatism is certainly a useful skill but, if we are to be true to our call, such pragmatism must be challenged by the demands of the Word of God as well as the exigencies of the particular charismatic project of our religious family. The use of strategies and instruments for planning, management and evaluation can bring about a well-ordered sterilization of mission, if these tools are not used in tension with an ideal that is risky, apparently unproductive and, in a word, unprofessional. Jesus not only advises us to count bricks and soldiers but also sheep; however, the last item is to be numbered by use of an irrational calculus that has the shepherd leaving ninety-nine to go in search of one (Mt 18.12). What would the provincial economy say? The little ships of our provinces and monasteries do not belong on the beach, with all of us mending the nets. We belong on deep and dangerous waters in search of a catch (Lk 5.4).

How do you make love stay?

Years ago I read an otherwise forgettable novel, whose most interesting point was a boast made by the author in the Foreword to the book. The writer informed his audience that the novel would teach how one could make love stay. I read the novel but, arriving at the conclusion, felt like the promised lesson had eluded me. However, turning the last page, the reader discovers a final word from the author, printed on the back cover of the book. The message read something like this:

Dear Reader, you probably missed my point. If you want to make love stay, you must remember two principles, and the second of the two is more important. First, it is never too late to have a happy childhood. Secondly, the secret is the mystery. Once you can take love for granted, once you believe that it is what is owed to you in life, once the beloved becomes like the furniture in your house – except he or she moves around a bit – then your love will begin to die because the mystery is gone.

A vocation cannot be reduced to the initial call of God and, even less, to the simple response of a human being. A vocation is an ongoing dialogue between God and man or woman. Just as a marriage cannot be reduced to the first declaration of love, the courtship or even, the exchange of vows, a religious vocation is really a story of love that should last for a lifetime.

The grace of perseverance in one's vocation is the willingness to continue a dialogue of love in which the invitation of Jesus to follow Him remains as the polar star which directs the course of one's lives. Hence, the insistence of the Church that religious life, which is born from hearing the Word of God, must embrace the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels as its supreme rule¹⁴. At the latest World Youth Day, celebrated in Madrid last summer, Benedict XVI reminded an audience of young women religious that «a life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience becomes a living 'exegesis' of God's word. ... Every charism and every rule springs from it and seeks to be an expression of it, thus opening up new pathways of Christian living marked by the radicalism of the Gospel».¹⁵

The nature of vocation as an enduring dialogue and the constitutive force of the Gospel for religious life demand that religious remain in a permanent relationship with the Word of God. This is a *sine qua non* for maintaining the dialogue of love that is a vocation. It is also a requirement for the participation of religious in

¹³ George Wilson, SJ, "Leadership or Incumbency", http://gbwilson.homestead.com/Leadership_or_incumbency.htm

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis* (October 25, 1965), 2.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, address given at the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, August 19, 2011.

the much-desired «new evangelization». The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* explains: «If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to challenge by the revealed word and the signs of the times».¹⁶

I am happy to report the impression of our dicastery that the life of religious institutes gives an increasing priority to the Word of God. The new undersecretary of our Congregation, Sister Nicoletta Spezzati ASC, recently declared that her analysis of the reports that religious institutes are required to submit periodically to the Holy See (cf. canon 592, §1) reveals that religious today give a central place to the Word of God in their personal and communal lives. For religious today, dialogue with the Word is

constituent of the spiritual life, illumines [their] discernment, critiques their style of life, calls them to conversion, reinforces communion, informs fraternal decisions regarding community life and mission and sustains the service of authority».¹⁷

Religious are making a concerted effort to ensure that the ongoing dialogue of love with the Mystery continues, trusting that this is the secret for making love stay.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini famously observed:

This world needs persons who are contemplative, critical, attentive and courageous. This will require, from time to time, new and uncommon choices. It demands a sort of attention and emphasis that comes, not from sheer habit or public opinion, but from listening to the word of the Lord and perceiving the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit in human hearts.¹⁸

In other words, the world needs women and men who perceive the gracious gift of God, who calls them to himself and sends them forth. Women and men, who are «doers of the Word and not hearers only» (Jas 1.22). Women and men who, like Mary, our Mother and model of faith, «treasure» the signs of times and places «in their hearts», that is, in the centre of their beings, the place where the voice of God is heard. Women and men who know how to make love stay.

¹⁶ VC, 81.

¹⁷ Nicoletta Spezzati, ASC, interview in *L'Osservatore Romano*, (February 2, 2012); my translation.

¹⁸ C. M. Martini, "L'uso pastorale della 'lectio divina'", in *Comunione nella Chiesa e nella società* (Bologna, Dehoniane, 1991), 635-647; my translation.

Introduction to the second conference

Yesterday I invited you to think about vocation as a meeting of two freedoms: the absolute freedom of God who calls, and the freedom of a human being who responds to this invitation. We can speak of life as vocation because of

a surprising mystery: every creature, and in particular, every human person, is the fruit of God's thought and an act of his love, a love that is boundless, faithful and everlasting (cf. Jer. 31,3). The discovery of this reality is what truly and profoundly changes our lives.¹⁹

This reality cannot be reduced to a profession or a career, or to the initial call of God and, even less, to the simple response of a human being. For religious, our vow of obedience commits us to a life of listening and an untiring search for God and God's plan. Attention to the mysterious dialogue between God, who freely calls, and human beings, who respond in freedom, is the secret of perseverance, how we can "make love stay".

In Scripture, the notion of vocation is closely related to election and mission. While the concept of election seems to be broader and more generic, permitting the inspired authors to speak, for example, of a *chosen people*, the notion of vocation is concerned more concretely with individuals (particular vocations). However, in the Bible both election and particular vocations are always in view of a service or *mission* as part of God's saving plan for the world.²⁰

The theme of the 15th General Assembly of UCESM suggests a concrete mission, since it speaks of *Religious men and women in Europe*... This precision provokes a bit of anxiety. I am thinking of the experience of Father James Barrett, who was an American Redemptorist for sixty-five years and a dear friend of mine. During the period of my initial formation and first years of ministry, Father Barrett was a sort of mentor, who had spent his whole adult life accompanying communities of Hispanic immigrants in the United States.

Back in the 1960's, like many young religious in that country, our seminarians lived rather sheltered lives. The young men studied in closed seminaries and, during the summer holidays, were sent to a nearby camp where, I presume, they were expected to strengthen the bonds of community life, while protecting their vocation from dangerous temptations. At that time, Father Barrett was working alone in enormous encampments of migrant labourers: attending to their religious needs, advocating for their rights and dignity, and otherwise caring for these abandoned people.

One year it occurred to him to suggest to his superiors that some seminarians might join him for a portion of the summer. His young confreres would be able to learn something about another culture and better appreciate what would be required of them as missionaries. Because the encampments were more than 1,000 kilometres from the seminary community, the provincial government felt that permission should be asked from the general government in Roma. After reading the petition, the members of the General Council responded with an enthusiastic yes! It would be wonderful for the students to have some missionary experience during the summer months. A group could go *ad experimentum*; the only requirement was that they return to the seminary community each evening for meditation!

Knowing that the General Council was made up almost exclusively of Europeans, the provincial government did not think of asking that the superiors reconsider. Past experiences had shown the Americans that their brothers on the other side of the ocean had a difficult time understanding how large their country was.

Of course, Americans make similar mistakes when speaking about Europe, even as we display a well-known and frightening ignorance of this continent – or any other, for that matter! Ambrose Bierse, an American satirist of the late nineteenth century and famous for his cynicism, once observed that "war is God's way of teaching Americans geography." Though I have had a European address for the last twenty years, I cannot pretend to be able to offer a profound analysis of the Church and religious life across this continent. How

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Message for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations (29 April 2012)*, (Vatican: 18 October 2011).

²⁰ Luis González Quevedo, "Vocación: vocación en la biblia" en *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*, Ángel Aparicio y Juan Canals (eds.), (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas: 2009), 1826.

can I speak credibly to “religious men and women in Europe”, conscious that the real experts are sitting in front of me?

What I propose to do must necessarily be quite modest. I have selected a biblical icon to guide our reflection this morning. The icon is taken from the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the account of Paul and his companions at the city of Philippi, the first Christian community in Europe (Acts 16.6-40). Perhaps the circumstances around the arrival of the Gospel in Europe may shed some light on what confronts the Church, whose leaders speak of the need for a “new evangelization”. To this end, reference will be made to the *Lineamenta*²¹ for coming Synod of Bishops that will study the theme “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”.

Philippi is interesting also because its community received a lovely letter from Paul, an epistle that may speak eloquently to religious men and women in Europe today. I intend to close this conference with a reference to that Letter, underscoring an element that should be part of the mission of religious men and women in Europe today

Guided by the Holy Spirit and the writer of *Acts*, let us recall the first Christian community of Europe. We read in the sixteenth chapter of *Acts*:

⁶They travelled through the Phrygian and Galatian territory because they had been prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to Mysia, they tried to go on into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them, ⁸so they crossed through Mysia and came down to Troas. ⁹During [the] night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas, making a straight run for Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city.

What do we know about Philippi in apostolic times? Located in north-eastern Greece, it was a city of some importance in the Roman province of Macedonia. Lying on the great road from the Adriatic coast to Byzantium, the Via Egnatia²², and in the midst of rich agricultural plains near the gold deposits of Mt. Pangaeus, it was in Paul’s day a Roman town (Acts 16.21), with a Greek-Macedonian population and a small group of Jews (see Acts 16.13).

Originally founded in the sixth century B.C. as Krenides by the Thracians, the town was taken over after 360 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, and was renamed for himself, “Philip’s City.” The area became Roman in the second century B.C. On the plains near Philippi in October 42 B.C., Antony and Octavian decisively defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius, the slayers of Julius Caesar. Octavian (Augustus) later made Philippi a Roman colony and settled many veterans of the Roman armies there.

Paul, according to Acts (Acts 16.9–40), established at Philippi the first Christian community in Europe. He came to Philippi, via its harbor town of Neapolis (the modern Kavalla), on his second missionary journey, probably in A.D. 49 or 50, accompanied by Silas and Timothy (Acts 15.40; 16.3; cf. Phil 1.1) and, perhaps, Luke.²³ The *Acts* account tells of the conversion of a business woman, Lydia; the exorcism of a slave girl; and, after an earthquake, while Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, the faith and baptism of a jailer and his family.²⁴ [Acts 16](#) concludes its account by describing how Paul (and Silas), asked by the magistrates to leave Philippi, went on to Thessalonica (Acts 17.1–10), where several times his loyal Philippians continued to

²¹ Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, *Lineamenta* (Roma: February 2, 2011); henceforward, *L*.

²² The **Via Egnatia** (Greek: Ἐγνατία Ὁδός) was a road constructed by the Romans in the 2nd century BC. It crossed the Roman provinces of Illyricum, Macedonia, and Thrace, running through territory that is now part of modern Albania, the Republic of Macedonia, Greece, and European Turkey.

²³ If Luke is to be included in the “we” references of Acts 16.10–17.

²⁴ None of these persons, however, is directly mentioned in the Letter to the Philippians.

support him with financial aid (Phil 4.16). Later, Paul may have passed through Philippi on his way from Ephesus to Greece (Acts 20.1–2), and he definitely stopped there on his fateful trip to Jerusalem (Acts 20.6).

Let us return to the details regarding Paul's decision to enter Europe. Can you see a puzzling feature in the account just read from *Acts*? The writer reports that "Holy Spirit" and "the spirit of Jesus" prevented Paul and his companions from going where they originally had intended to preach. Frustrated twice, Paul then has a dream of someone in Macedonian dress, who begs him to come and help his people.

In an address to a mission agency of the Church of England, Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, referred to this passage from *Acts* and spoke about the need for the Church to discern well where it is called to announce the Gospel today:

I have a sense that the Holy Spirit is saying to Paul and his companions, don't waste your energy where God at this moment is not opening a door. Keep your eyes and ears open for the door God *is* opening; the place where God has already in some way turned over the soil. Where do we start? Where God has started. How do we start? By listening, looking, discerning for the way in which God has turned over the soil for us.²⁵

The *Lineamenta* for the coming Synod of Bishops on new evangelization refers twenty-four different times to the need for discernment. Recalling the experience of the primitive Church, the *Lineamenta* observes

the process of evangelization became a process of discernment. Proclamation first requires moments of listening, understanding and interpretation.²⁶

The Church is aware that the world has changed and continues to present new socio-cultural forms. The *Lineamenta* draw a clear comparison between the situation that confronted Paul and the present challenges. Tired, prefabricated solutions for the problem of evangelization no longer are acceptable. Instead, the Church must "listen, understand and interpret" before it speaks.

There is another conclusion that might be drawn from the circumstances that led Paul to Europe. In the long run, not every failed project is necessarily a defeat. What we initially judge in negative terms, could actually be the work of the Holy Spirit, who impedes human projects in order to further the proclamation of the Gospel. This possibility invites us to look again at the present crisis and discern whether God may not be opening a door for the Church.

We can also believe that personal success of the disciple is not the most important indicator of the progress of the Gospel. The church at Philippi will eventually become a sufficiently flourishing community for Paul to honour it with one of his letters. Judging from this chapter in *Acts*, however, Paul's personal success was minimal. Evidently the community grew considerably after his departure and, as is clear from Paul's letter to them, he reserved his greatest affection for the Christians of Philippi.

We continue reading from the sixteenth chapter of *Acts*:

¹³On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. ¹⁵After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home," and she prevailed on us.

¹⁶As we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl with an oracular spirit, who used to bring a large profit to her owners through her fortune-telling. ¹⁷She began to follow Paul and us, shouting, "These people are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." ¹⁸She did this for many

²⁵ Rowan Williams, "God's Mission and Ours in the 21st century" (June 9, 2009), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/779/gods-mission-and-ours-in-the-21st-century> .

²⁶ L 3.

days. Paul became annoyed, turned, and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Then it came out at that moment.

¹⁹When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the public square before the local authorities. ²⁰They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These people are Jews and are disturbing our city ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or practice.” ²²The crowd joined in the attack on them, and the magistrates had them stripped and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

During his brief stay in Philippi, Paul meets and evangelizes several different groups of people. On a Sabbath he goes to the outskirts of the city, where a small group of Jewish women and proselytes (i.e. “God-fearers”) were meeting. They gather near the river, since the water could be used for ritual purification. Perhaps the Jewish community in Philippi was so small that it did not have the requisite ten men to form a synagogue.²⁷ Paul and his companions use the occasion to speak about Jesus as the fulfilment of the divine promises of messianic salvation.

His words touch the heart of Lydia, a successful business woman and the head of a household. When she and her household are baptized, the first domestic church of Europe is born. The conversion of this female head of a household, who was either single or a widow, has necessarily religious and spiritual implications for the other members. Today the Church needs to be ever mindful of the strategic importance of social networks for the rapid spread of the Gospel.

This conversion of Lydia also leads us to wonder how the Church should speak to women in the countries represented at this Assembly. Is it helpful to propose an evangelization that is intentionally sensitive to gender? What are the special considerations to keep in mind when the Church speaks to the “Lydia’s” of today: educated, successful women who play a prominent role in their “households” and who are searching for God?

The meeting by the river also introduces the question of the evangelization of young people. A slave girl appears on the scene. The Book of Acts portrays her as possessing an “oracular spirit”.²⁸ In fact, the young woman is enslaved in two different ways. First, she is in thrall to the vagaries of the alien spirit which possesses her. Secondly, as the reading makes clear, she is a source of significant profit to her masters.

Paul challenges the double slavery of the girl, expelling the spirit and incurring the wrath of the girl’s owners, who seize him and Silas and drag them before the city magistrates. Whenever the Gospel threatens vested interests, especially economic interests, it is bound to meet opposition (cf. Acts 19.25-27). So the slave girl’s handlers, far from being pleased with her liberation, can think only of their loss of revenue. Although their accusations against the foreign preachers are presented as their concern for public order and revered cultural traditions, it is clear that real reason for the rage of the owners of the girl is their greed.

The Church acknowledges the increasing difficulty of transmitting the content of faith to new generations. Both the Holy Father and the *Lineamenta* for the coming Synod refer to an “educational emergency”.²⁹ As the *Lineamenta* explain, the use of the term by the Pope intends to refer to

the increasing difficulty which is encountered today by not only Christian educational activity but also educational activity in general. Transmitting to new generations the basic values for living and right conduct is becoming more arduous.³⁰

²⁷ Ten men were required by the *Mishah* in order to form a *minyán* or quorum necessary for certain prayers and rituals; cf. *m. Sanhedrin* 1:6; *Pirqe Abot* 3:8.

²⁸ literally, « a Python spirit » (ἔχουσαν πνεῦμα πύθωνα); the Python was the serpent or dragon that guarded the Delphic oracle. It later came to designate a “spirit that pronounced oracles” and also a ventriloquist who, it was thought, had such a spirit in the belly.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, [Discourse at the Opening of the Convention of the Diocese of Rome](#) (11 June 2007); *L’Osservatore Romano: Weekly edition in English*, 20 June 2007, p. 3. *Lineamenta*, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The “educational emergency” means that the Church is no longer able to transmit to young people all that she owes them.

This failure, even impotency, is more tormenting, if one believes that an essential element of the mission of Jesus and, as a necessary consequence, the mission of the Church is to “proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind ... to let the oppressed go free” (cf. Lk 4.18). Is it possible that the true freedom of young people is actually distorted because of the inability of the Church to transmit to them what they need to live? Are the youth in Europe in fact enslaved by a narrow horizon of possibilities, since the truth of revelation is denied to them, as well as thralls to an economic system that strives to multiply their needs by means of unbridled consumerism, while increasing their anxiety, since they have little hope of obtaining just and stable working conditions?

²³After inflicting many blows on them, they threw them into prison and instructed the jailer to guard them securely. ²⁴When he received these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and secured their feet to a stake. ²⁵About midnight, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God as the prisoners listened, ²⁶there was suddenly such a severe earthquake that the foundations of the jail shook; all the doors flew open, and the chains of all were pulled loose. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew [his] sword and was about to kill himself, thinking that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted out in a loud voice, “Do no harm to yourself; we are all here.” ²⁹He asked for a light and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved.” ³²So they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. ³³He took them in at that hour of the night and bathed their wounds; then he and all his family were baptized at once. ³⁴He brought them up into his house and provided a meal and with his household rejoiced at having come to faith in God.

There are many details of the account of the miraculous liberation of Paul and Silas that are worthy of comment. Given the restraints of this reflection – and the limits of your patience! – I will select only two.

The two missionaries appear to be in a hopeless situation: locked in the bowels of a foreign prison with their feet bound to a stake. What do they do? Though badly beaten and bound by chains Paul and Silas were “praying and singing hymns to God”, that is, the apostles were singing grateful songs of praise, not pleading with God for their release. The account adds another important detail: *the prisoners listened* (16.25).

The scene hearkens back to an earlier incident in Acts. The fifth chapter recalls how the apostles, after being whipped and ordered never to speak again about the name of Jesus, “left the Sanhedrin full of joy that they had been judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Name” (5.40-41). One can easily conclude that the same reason leads Paul and Silas to sing in the dark night of a European jail.

The scene also looks to the future, reminding me of a modern European martyr, Blessed Methodius Dominick Trčka, a Redemptorist missionary of Moravian origin, who worked zealously for the good of the Greek-Catholic Church in eastern Czechoslovakia. During the night of the April 13, 1950, the government suppressed all the religious communities. After a summary trial, Fr. Trčka was sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment, during which he was subjected to lengthy interrogations and torture. In 1958 he was transferred to the prison of Leopoldov, in what is now the Slovak Republic. He was suffering from pneumonia contracted during solitary confinement, which was imposed on him for singing a Christmas hymn. He died March 23, 1959 and was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 4 November 2012.

Many images of Blessed Methodius Dominick depict him holding a small scroll on which are written the words of a traditional Slovak Christmas hymn. It is a reminder of an apostle whose chains could not dampen his spirit, who was led to encourage his fellow prisoners by singing a song that might lift their spirits beyond the bars that enclosed them. Paul, Silas and, I daresay, Blessed Methodius Dominick represent the biblical portrait of the just who suffer (cf. Dn 3.24), whose prayer becomes prophetic testimony as well.

After the sudden earthquake and the possibility of the prisoners' escape, the attention of Acts turns to the jailer and his conversion. Once again Paul assumes the initiative and becomes an instrument of salvation. The earthquake and the other prisoners are forgotten and the jailer asks "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" (16.30). The formulation of the question is catechetical and the answer responds to Luke's favourite creedal statement: salvation is linked to faith in Jesus Christ.³¹

I suspect that, for a large part of Europe, redemption is a meaningless category. Indeed, the many-faceted crisis of Christianity can – and probably should – be reduced to a common denominator of a soteriological nature, the loss of its salvific relevance. Christianity has weakened its potential to signify salvation. And the Church is no longer the Church, if it cannot communicate salvation. One could turn on its head the famous axiom of St. Cyprian and affirm that *extra salutem nullus christianismus*.³²

The *Lineamenta* recalls that the revelation of Jesus "made us not only recipients of the gift of salvation but also its proclaimers and witnesses".³³ What should be proclaimed in Europe today? The question is absolutely crucial and its adequate treatment demands more time and space than is possible during this conference. However, if a reflection on redemption is not to finish as merely a theoretical exercise, it is essential to look at the world in which we live and work. Only if we are willing to maintain this attentive – may I say, *obedient* stance towards reality will we be able to discern people's anxious questionings and discover in these how God is truly revealing himself and making his plan known. The audacious doctrine of the Second Vatican Council invites the Church today to reveal the "all embracing nature of redemption",³⁴ a proclamation that in a credible way addresses the anxious questions of Europeans today.

³⁵But when it was day, the magistrates sent the lictors with the order, "Release those men." ³⁶The jailer reported the[se] words to Paul, "The magistrates have sent orders that you be released. Now, then, come out and go in peace." ³⁷But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, even though we are Roman citizens and have not been tried, and have thrown us into prison. And now, are they going to release us secretly? By no means. Let them come themselves and lead us out." ³⁸The lictors reported these words to the magistrates, and they became alarmed when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹So they came and placated them, and led them out and asked that they leave the city. ⁴⁰When they had come out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house where they saw and encouraged the brothers, and then they left.

The city magistrates give the order for Paul and Silas to be released. Paul's reaction is surprising. First, instead of vanishing quietly from the scene, Paul makes protests, declaring that he is not satisfied with a simple release in the face of what has been done to him and Silas. For the author of Acts, the protest of Paul re-establishes both the apostle and the Christian mission in all its rights. But then Paul makes a surprising announcement: that he and Silas are Roman citizens! The magistrates react with understandable fear, since it was illegal to treat citizens in the manner they had dealt with the two apostles. So Paul and Silas walk out of prison with their heads high.

We might wonder: why had not Paul announced his citizenship earlier in the account? Perhaps he wanted to avoid a judicial process that might have dragged on for a long time, causing him to lose valuable time for his missionary activity.³⁵ In fact, after a final encounter with Lydia and the other new Christians, he sets off for Thessalonica (Acts 16.40-17.1).

A postcard to the friends at Philippi

Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. (Phil 4.4-5)

³¹ Gérard Rossé, *Atti degli Apostoli: introduzione, traduzione e commento*, (Milano: San Paolo, 2010), 197.

³² Javier Vitoria Cormenzana, "Heartened by the Sounds of a Delicate Silence", in *Concilium* (2005/3), p. 125.

³³ L 23.

³⁴ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, (December 7, 1965), nn. 11, 22, 41.

³⁵ Rossé, *op. cit.*, 198.

Paul and his European friends did not forget each other after his initial visit. The Philippians continued to offer financial support to the Apostle, who returned at least once (Acts 20.6) before his death.³⁶ He also wrote to them. Among the letters of the Apostle, the one sent to the Christians of Philippi is numbers among the so-called “letters from prison. Even though, if judged by its modest length³⁷ the letter should be counted among the minor epistles of Paul, over the course of history it has represented and continues to represent an important point of reference, not only for theology but also for liturgy and spirituality.³⁸

What is more, this letter demonstrates a very personal and relational character. In that particular character Paul develops his two classical concerns: his relationship with Christ as well as that with the Christians of “his” communities – the places he had evangelized and now accompanies spiritually and morally from his prison cell. In particular, the dialogue between the “I” of the Apostle and the “you” of his correspondents constitutes a unifying theme that runs throughout the text.

To my mind, the Letter to the Philippians is the most cordial in tone of any of the letters of the Apostle. Paul cannot help expressing his sincere affection for his audience. The whole letter breathes a credible joy that animates the triangular relationship between Paul, Christ and his beloved Philippians. As we will see, this is not a superficial elation but rather a deep-seated relationship that is shared between a prisoner in chains and a community that is constantly threatened by the possibility of rupture. The truth is that both Paul and the Philippians are able to live joyfully only because they live “in the Lord”, that is, deeply rooted in their bond with Christ.³⁹

How can this Letter, originally sent to the first community of Christians in Europe, speak to the vocation/mission of religious men and women in Europe today? While there are many themes that could interest us, I would like to close this conference with a brief reflection on the singular importance of joy.

I believe that Nietzsche foresaw that the consequence of the “death of God” in a particular culture would be the loss of *cordiality* (a word whose original sense conveys the transcendence and gratitude that erupts in the monotony of life and leads us to exclaim “It’s good to be alive, in spite of everything!”). The *Lineamenta* for the coming Synod detect in the world a strong penchant to see

the speaking of truth as too onerous and too ‘authoritarian’. Such thinking leads to doubting the goodness of life – “Is it good to be a human being?” “Is it good to be alive?” – and the validity of relationships and commitments which make up life.⁴⁰

The Letter to the Philippians invites Christians to live in a way that proclaims that, indeed, it is good to be alive, despite everything. Even a rapid reading of the Letter reveals its insistence on joy as a characteristic of the disciple. More than a superficial or transitory feeling, this joy is an eschatological dimension of life “in Christ”. Paul’s deepest desire is to meet Jesus following his death, the same Christ whom the Apostle has tried to glorify with his whole existence (1.19-21) in the hope of arriving at the final resurrection (3.11-14).

Paul includes the Christians of Philippi in this horizon of hope and these are called to be vigilant over themselves in view of the “day of Christ Jesus” (1.6-10;2.16). On that “day” the Lord Jesus, with the fullness of his power, will transform those who have awaited with faith to share in his glory (3.20-21).

Hence the Philippians already can experience the closeness of the Lord (4.5) and savour, even in the midst of suffering, his joy in anticipation of their salvation and definitive communion with him. Therefore, in the context of the Letter, this joy is not so much a passing sentiment as a stable condition, independent of the external circumstance. It is the bond of the disciple with Christ that determines joy.⁴¹ For Paul, joy signifies

³⁶ Paul may have passed through Philippi on his way from Ephesus to Greece (Acts 20.1–2).

³⁷ The letter counts only 1.629 words which are printed in 104 verses, subdivided in four chapters.

³⁸ Francesco Bianchini, *Lettera ai filippesi: introduzione, traduzione e commento en Nuova Versione della Bibbia dai Testi Antichi* n. 47 (Milano: Edizioni San Paolo, 2010), 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁰ *L* 20

⁴¹ Bianchini, *op. cit.*, 17.

the deep relationship between him and his friends in Philippi (1.4;2.2-28;4.1), as well as his recognition of the progress and diffusion of the Gospel (1.18-25).

Today the key question for the mission of religious life is not the content of its message but rather the credibility of our witness, in our capacity for mutual relations and to welcome respectfully those who are different because this is what the Spirit brings about in the context of a life in dialogue. The mission of religious life in Europe is to live with eschatological hope in anticipation of the victory of the Lord in history. It is to live with profound joy.

Joy is absolutely necessary, if we want to promote our way of life as an authentic possibility for following Christ today and in the future. Permit me to conclude this reflection with an illustration from my family. I am the eldest of thirteen children: we are eight girls and five boys. None of my sisters entered religious life, even though our mother had three aunts and five cousins in the same congregation.

This is not to say that one or the other of my sisters did not feel called. I remember one summer when I was home from the seminary. I was pretending to read the newspaper but actually was eavesdropping on several of my sisters, who were chatting in the same room. One sister, Ann, who at that time was 16-17 years old, told the others that she was thinking of going to the convent. Once the others realized that Ann was serious her proposal, one of her older sisters asked with some concern, "Do you want to be unhappy all your life?" The truth was that in North America during the confusion of the 1960's and 70's, many religious gave a message of being deeply discontented.

The vocational culture of our communities must be built on joy, which is an essential characteristic of religious life. We invite young people to come to us with their questions and their restlessness. We welcome them respectfully and joyfully, allowing the Lord to speak to them in their hearts and ask "*What are you looking for?*" It is possible that young still people desire to "*stay with him*" and will find such a dwelling place with us. It is still possible that they will hear his invitation "*Follow me!*"