

April 18, 2010

On Tuesday afternoon, I will celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving and host a dinner honoring the consecrated religious women in our diocese. At Mass, I will thank God for the gift that consecrated religious women are to our diocese. I will also thank the consecrated religious women for responding to God's vocation and for helping build the Body of Christ through their witness, prayer, and diverse ministries.

During our Mass, we will offer praise to God especially for the jubilarians. This year, Sister Nikodema Bober, CSAPU, and Sister M. Rose Hasser, OSF, celebrate 25 years; Sister Joanne Marie Schutz, SSCM, celebrates 40 years; Sister M. Dianne Zimmer, OSF, celebrates 50 years, and Sister Eileen Wemhoff, OSF, celebrates 60 years. If you were so fortunate as to have had sisters teaching you in school, you readily appreciate the profound effect that religious have had on yourself and on the life of the Church. I continue to remember with much gratitude the sisters who taught me in seventh and eighth grade. They certainly helped me be open to the Lord calling me to the priesthood.

Today there are very few sisters in our Catholic schools because many have retired and a good number of women religious are engaged in a variety of other ministries. Whether teachers, pastoral workers, social workers, or dedicated to the aged, orphans, or the poorest of the poor, religious continue to touch the hearts of people very significantly.

Who consecrated religious women are is even more important than what they do. Their living witness arises from their complete dedication to God and to

the values of the Gospel. Their lives are rooted in the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Many people in our society are preoccupied with material possessions. Closets are not adequate for the numbers of shoes and clothes that individuals possess. Yet, the next trip to the mall does not come soon enough for many. Religious live lives poor in fact and in spirit, lives of labor lived in moderation and foreign to earthly riches, lives with a particular sensitivity for the poor in this world. Their poverty frees them to love God with their whole heart.

The vow of chastity goes hand in hand with poverty and enables religious to love God totally and completely. This vow represents their deliberate choice to live in the midst of this passing world, witnessing to our future resurrection and eternal life.

Many in our society equate freedom with license. Through the vow of obedience, religious witness to a life lived in harmony with God's will as expressed through their legitimate superiors. As Pope Paul VI so beautifully expressed it, consecrated obedience represents total availability to the Holy Spirit.

Religious serve as a sign of contradiction in our society which promotes self-gratification, shallow fulfillment, and often alienates the poor and the powerless. Religious hold Jesus and His Gospel values at the very center of their lives. They remind us of our call to holiness through Baptism. They remind us that we find our peace and happiness by holding Jesus at the center of our lives and by pursuing the Father's will as He taught us. They give credence to the words of St. Augustine: "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you." Religious keep before us the source of our true joy, namely, our relationship with the Lord Jesus and our sharing His love in service with others.

On Tuesday, I will express gratitude to God for the prayers, sacrifices, and ministry of the religious in our diocese, but most especially for their inspiration which keeps us focused on Jesus who is our source of deep peace and joy. I invite you to pray for our religious and for an increase of vocations to religious life.