

World Day of Consecrated Life
Cathedral of Saint Paul
February 14, 2009
The Most Reverend John C. Nienstedt

Isaiah 44:1-5
Philippians 3:8-14
John 15:9-17

Allow me to begin this homily by congratulating all our jubilarians present here this morning, who are celebrating a special anniversary this year. Thank you for the awesome gift you have given to the Church with the donation of your life. My heartfelt congratulations to you all. May God who has begun this good work in you, bring it to fulfillment.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, some may perceive the date of this Mass in celebration of religious, consecrated life as rather ironic. After all, February 14, Valentine's Day, is a day dedicated to romantic physical expressions of love, the kind of love that a consecrated religious surrenders by means of the vow of chastity. However, as you all know so well, chastity, along with the accompanying vows of poverty and obedience, are embraced precisely because that supreme love is worth every sacrifice. To surrender the good of family life and the joy of a spouse's embrace makes no sense unless it is seen in the light of a self-giving love. It is then, in the final analysis, quite appropriate to celebrate this Mass in honor of religious, consecrated life on Valentine's Day, because in honoring you, my dear religious, we honor your choice to live for Him who is love and for Him alone. How beautiful today's first reading speaks to your lives lived for love; lives which proclaim to the world "I am the Lord's!"

There can be no mistake on this point - the Church needs you. Some of you have been retired for years from the apostolate to which you dedicated your life with dedication, honor and silent fidelity. For many of you, this apostolate was teaching in the classroom or hospital work. Others of you have dedicated years to pastoral ministry in parishes or in the missions. For your years of faithful and zealous service, I offer you the gratitude of a Church who is deeply indebted for the ministry you have achieved and continue to accomplish.

However, as indispensable as your particular apostolates and works of mercy are, they do not comprise the most important reason that the Church needs you. One should not misunderstand me: the Church simply could not accomplish the many good works She does without the invaluable work of religious men and women around the world and here in our archdiocese. But the Church needs you, including those who have been retired for years, principally and most importantly, because She needs living, practical reminders of what holiness looks like.

As you all know, one of the great teachings of the Second Vatican Council was the “universal call to holiness.” Of course, the Church has always held this. From the very beginning of the Church’s life, Christians, no matter what one’s particular vocation happened to be, have been called to be “in the world but not of the world.” We are all called to walk in the light of Christ, and to be witnesses before a world immersed in darkness. But in a very particular way, the consecrated religious is called to embrace this vocation by means of a radical life-style, especially the commitment of love that comprises the faithful living out of the vows made on the day of one’s final profession. You have promised your life to Jesus, and we as members of the Church are counting on you to be faithful to this call. We watch with hopeful expectation as you “strain forward to what lies ahead,” that ultimate prize which is Christ Jesus.

While it is perhaps not fashionable to speak of a life of “perfection” in our modern era of egalitarianism, the Church has little such difficulty. There are in fact some who have been called to leave everything behind for the sake of the kingdom of God. True, all the members of the Church are called to keep their eyes fixed on heaven and on the life of perfection that is lived there. But you who have been consecrated by your religious vows have promised to strive to live this life here on earth. It is true that often we do fail to live those vows perfectly, and when we fail our lives are perhaps more like a spotted glass through which others see the life of God only dimly. But my brothers and sisters, how desperately the world needs your witness! How desperately the world needs you to live your vows with integrity and zeal. The church can train more teachers, it can find more administrators, it can educate and form staff for our pastoral offices. But without the example of the holiness of consecrated religious, the Church will be missing something of paramount importance, something indispensable for the life of the world.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, remain in the love of Jesus. He who is the Love of your life and who is the life of the world, has called you to be peculiarly His own and to abide in Him. No apostolate is worth more than union with Christ. I beg you with great urgency – be holy! Renew your commitment to running the race, to straining towards victory, to being the beloved of Jesus. Proclaim to the world by your chaste lives of noble simplicity and obedience lived for love, “I am the Lord’s!”