

Sunday, February 5, 2012 - Day of Consecrated Life  
St. John Gualbert Cathedral, Johnstown  
Homily

It is a great pleasure to be here today to celebrate this liturgy. Today, throughout the Catholic Church in the United States, we observe a special day of joy and thanks for those men and women who have dedicated themselves to God in consecrated or religious life. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated this observance this past week on the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord.

In preparation for today's celebration, I started to think about the story of a young man who decided to join a monastery where the monks lived a very strict life without any of the comforts that most of us enjoy in our homes.

They observed silence most of the day and only once a year were they allowed to briefly share any difficulties or complaints with their superior. And during that conversation they could only say 2 words.

The first year the superior asked the young monk if he had any difficulties. The monk said, "Food cold." The second year the superior asked if there were any problems and the young monk said, "Bed hard." The third year the superior asked if there were any issues and the monk said, "I quit."

The superior responded, "I'm not surprised. All you've done since you got here is complain!"

I know that's a really bad joke, and that's why I thought about it when I began to reflect on the readings from Sacred Scripture for today's liturgy.

I began to wonder how am I going to deal with the rather despairing words of Job who describes his life

- As drudgery, like a slave who longs for shade
- As hired worker who waits for his wages
- As an endless time of unhappiness and restlessness
- As an existence that is without hope

We know that Job had lots of reasons for describing his life in those terms. However, in my experience of knowing and interacting women and men who have dedicated themselves to God through their religious vows, I have never heard anything that comes close to the lamentations of Job.

There is no vocation in the Church that is absolutely perfect, or that is without any challenges or difficulties.

However, the women and men in religious life I have known since the time I was a child are among the most courageous, dedicated, and joyful people I have ever known.

As far back as I can remember in my childhood there were always women and men religious being part of my life and they have had an incredibly positive impact on me.

My father's cousin was a Franciscan priest who spent almost 40 years as a missionary in Brazil. When I was in grade school it was a huge inspiration for me and my classmates because our teachers knew about Father Michael and the money collected by our class during Lent was always sent to him.

He would write to us and tell us about his pastoral activities in various villages in the jungle along the Amazon River. What an amazing experience it was to learn religion, geography, and social studies all in one lesson.

I couldn't wait until every 3<sup>rd</sup> year when Father Michael would come home for vacation when I would get to see him and he would bring some photographs or handmade objects from his parishioners that I could show to my classmates in school.

In every year of my education from grade school through seminary and graduate studies, I was taught by priests and sisters. None of them tried to recruit me to join a religious order, but they certainly did a lot to inspire me to learn the teachings of our Catholic faith.

More important, they inspired me and assisted me to know and cherish the Catholic faith on a much more personal level, by

- introducing me to the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
- introducing me to the saints as real role models of Christian living.

In every assignment I have had since my ordination as a priest more than 30 years ago, I have had the great blessing to work with many women in religious life.

On a daily basis I saw them put the virtues of faith, hope and charity into action. I saw them give so much of themselves to others and I saw them give so much of themselves to God.

Throughout my life I have always found it to be a great blessing to pray with men and women who are in religious life. It has been a real inspiration to watch them pray together.

It has been a huge honor for me to pray for them when they would ask me to be their confessor or spiritual director, or to direct a retreat for a group of them, or to pray for them in their time of need, even in celebrating their funeral.

That core value of centering their lives in and around the person of Jesus Christ the Lord in personal, communal and certainly Eucharistic prayer is their expression of following the example of Christ that we hear about in the Gospel today.

This short passage from the Gospel of Mark begins and ends with Jesus carrying out his public ministry

- leaving the synagogue where Jesus often went to preach
- going to Peter's house where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law
- curing many people outside of Peter's house who were brought there because the news was spreading that Jesus is the Son of God
- Jesus going on to other villages to preach the Gospel and to heal the sick

But in the center of the Gospel story is what we might be tempted to call an interruption of that busy schedule. It was much more than that. At the center of Jesus' life was his attention to his Father, our Father, with whom Jesus regularly spent time with in prayer.

One of the great details of the story is that the disciples went to look for Jesus and told him that everyone was looking for him.

Jesus might have complained about his prayer being interrupted. But with his spirit renewed and refocused as a result of his time spent in prayer, Jesus immediately got up and moved ahead with his mission.

This is not a story about an interruption, distraction, or inconvenience. It is a story about what is central to the life of a person who has totally committed his or her life to God, as do the men and women religious that we pray with and pray for today.

We are so blessed in the Catholic Church to have this special form of Christian living; this way of living the Gospel as a person who is consecrated to God and who has professed vows through which that consecration and commitment is strengthened.

When Pope John Paul II instituted this Day for Consecrated Life in 1997, he wanted it to be a time for us

- to show our thanks to the men and women who live the various forms of religious life
- to show our thanks for them by asking God to bless them and strengthen them
- to be reminded of the rich treasure that they are for us in the Church; one that it is worth thinking about and recommending to others who are searching for a special way to experience God's love in their lives

And when Pope John Paul II instituted this day for Consecrated Life in 1997, he wanted it to be a time for those women and men in religious life

- to celebrate together solemnly the marvels which the Lord has accomplished in them,

- to discover by a more illumined faith the rays of divine beauty spread by the Spirit in their way of life, and
- to acquire a more vivid consciousness of their irreplaceable mission in the Church and in the world.

We are blessed to have men and women belonging to almost 30 different religious orders or communities serving in our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

I have been meeting with them and getting to know them and I can only tell you that in spite of the challenges and sacrifices that they make on a daily basis, they are awesome.

I have heard from countless parishioners; people all over the diocese who have such great affection and esteem for these religious women and men who do so much for us in so many ways, including

- care for the sick and the dying
- care for the elderly
- teaching in Catholic schools and colleges
- preparing young people and adults to receive the sacraments
- religious education and youth ministry in parishes
- help for the poor, the hungry, the homeless
- missionary activities in places like Haiti and Jamaica
- retreats and spiritual direction for people whose lives are troubled as Job in the first reading, but are able to look for hope in the person of a dedicated religious sister, brother or priest
- guiding others who are trying to discern their vocation
- last but not least, is their constant praying for all of us and our special intentions.

When was the last time you had something important to pray for and you called upon the powerhouses of prayer in our diocese where these women and men in consecrated and religious life are ready to assist us with their prayers? I know I do, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to anyone!

Many of you know that in my first year as Bishop, there has been an increase of interest and response to vocations to the priesthood for our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

You may not know that there is also an increase of interest and response to vocations to consecrated and religious life. I have met and spoken with a number of young men and women who have shared their interest with me. Some have already acted on it and even begun their formation in a religious order.

Many young people, both young women and men, tell me that among the reasons why they are attracted to the religious life is that

- they long to have the kind of relationship with Jesus Christ that is part of religious life
- they long for the support in their discipleship that is found in the common life of women and men who are in consecrated or religious life
- they have met, they know, and they have seen many examples of authentic religious life in the sisters, brothers and priests in the religious orders and communities in our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown and these authentic examples have inspired them.

If poor Job were around today, he might complain that his life is miserable in part because there are not enough vocations to religious life. Well, Job is not around today, and even if he were, I would tell him as I tell others not to be so pessimistic about the prospects for religious or consecrated life in our time and in our place.

Today, is a special day to lift up this unique form of Christian life in thanks to God and in thanks to those women and men who make us, our Church, and our communities so much better because of their faith, their hope, and their love.

As we hear in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, we know that like St. Paul, you men and women in religious or consecrated life

Have made yourselves slaves to all

so as to win over as many as possible.

To the weak you became weak, to win over the weak.

You have become all things to all, to save at least some.

All this you do for the sake of the gospel,  
so that you too may have a share in it.

The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the most important way for us to offer praise and thanks to God. To all of our sisters and brothers in religious and consecrated life, I say thank you, thank you, thanks be to God for you! Keep doing what you do so well. We love you and we pray for you!