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**1. Introduction**

I wish to welcome you all to this liturgical celebration as we celebrate with all the Religious living and working among us who have come from the different parts of our Archdiocese. We thank the Lord for journey mercies granted to all us. A day like this affords us the opportunity to meet with all of you to share in your joys and pains and also to pray with you and for you. May the Lord for whom you sacrifice so much be gracious to you and reward you. May he renew in you the necessary graces to live and work peacefully with one another.

I wish to thank you for the peaceful way most of you have been exercising your charism in your apostolate so far in the Archdiocese. I am sure the Vicar for Religious and other elected officers in charge of your affairs are doing their best. This day is special to you, because it is a day set aside by the Universal Church as the World Day for Consecrated Life. It is a day you are called to reexamine the origins, history, mission and purpose of your congregations and how faithful you are to the charisms; asking for God's help and strength. It is my prayer that God may continually bless your various apostolates in our Archdiocese through Christ our Lord.

**2. On the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord**

Today, the Holy Mother Church celebrates the Feast of the Presentation of Lord. The Presentation is a liturgical feast, fixed since ancient times for the 40th day after Christmas, following what Jewish law had prescribed for the birth of all first-born males (cf. Ex 13: 2). Mary and Joseph faithfully fulfilled this as the Gospel account tells us. The Law of Moses prescribed not only the offering up of the first-born male, but also the purification of the mother. Mary's action in complying with law shows us that Mary and Joseph were obedient to Judaism. Mary and Joseph thus give us examples of obedient servants. In the same vein, Jesus, being God himself, had no

need for dedication, but since the law prescribed that every first-born male was to be redeemed, he was presented in the temple.

The feast of Presentation of the Lord in the Byzantine tradition is called the “Encounter.” This term might offer insight into today’s readings. Throughout Jesus’ earthly life, he had great respect for the Temple as a place of worship. Even in this early visit, let’s take a look at who Jesus encounters at the Temple.

First, Mary, his mother, is there. Throughout the Gospel stories, her faith in her Son and in God’s mission does not waver. (CCC 618) Joseph obediently brings his child and the requisite offerings to the Temple in order to fulfill the precepts of the Law. Even in this simple act by his parents, we see that Christ *had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God in order to expiate the sins of the people.*

Christ encounters Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was awaiting the consolation of Israel. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, who had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen Christ the Lord. It was that same Spirit who prompted him to come to the Temple that day. He took the child in his arms and proclaimed that the babe was indeed the promised Messiah - *a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.* He predicts Jesus’ future conflict with many in Israel, and the sorrow which Mary would bear.

Christ encounters Anna, the prophetess - an elderly woman who never left the temple, who worshipped night and day with fasting and prayer. She, too, gave thanks to God and announced Christ’s presence to *all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.* Through her words, Christ encounters these others - those gathered near the Temple.

What will you do when you encounter Christ? Perhaps you should look at how these individuals in the Gospel prepared to meet him. They were full of unwavering faith; they were obedient to the law; they were righteous and reverent, filled with the Holy Spirit and obedient to his promptings; they

worshipped God daily; they fasted and prayed; they humbly awaited redemption and trusted in the Lord's promises. And in the normalcy of their daily routine, they recognized in their midst and announced it to others. Are you living your lives with such preparation? We can only hope, pray and trust in the Lord to give us the grace at all times to be prepared and to live out our Christian calling to the full.

### **3. On World Day for Consecrated Life**

Today, the Catholic Church also celebrates the World day for Consecrated life. It is a day of prayer for women and men in Consecrated life. It was instituted in 1997 by Pope John Paul II. He set aside this day for consecrated men and women for three reasons: first, to praise the Lord and to thank him for the great gift of consecrated life. Secondly, this day is intended to promote knowledge of and esteem for the Consecrated Life by the entire people of God. Thirdly, to invite consecrated people to celebrate together solemnly the marvels, which the Lord has accomplished in them and to acquire a more vivid awareness of their irreplaceable mission in the Church and in the World.

I therefore call on all of you to use this day to reflect deeply on your calling as Religious. Use this day to re-examine your identity and Mission. The Vatican II Document *Perfectae Caritatis* mandated the Religious Congregations to “a constant return to the sources of their foundations and to adapt themselves to the changing signs of our times.” Pope Francis designated the “Year of Consecrated Life” from November 2014 to February 2016 for us to reflect once again, seriously, on the meaning and purpose of religious life and to change our old mindset, thought-pattern and ideology as they are old wine-skins which do not contain the solution for new challenges. We call on all religious working in our Archdiocese to use today's celebration to better prepare yourselves for the challenges ahead, taking into cognizance what Saint John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* no. 110 says “You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.”

I am very much aware that as Religious you all have your various apostolates. However, I wish to challenge you this year to take the education and formation of our youths very seriously. I have just returned from Panama, where we had a wonderful time with the youths from all over the world. I have been reflecting deeply since I came back and I strongly believe that a lot of our young people want to know and love God more than they presently do. What is your Congregation planning for the young people of our time who are caught at a crossroad as to how to serve God in this age and time? What is your congregation doing to help our youths who are tempted by the new trend that success and happiness can easily be attained at any price, through easy money and pleasure; through power or material prosperity? As religious you have a special and irreplaceable role to play in inspiring and accompanying young people in the faith. Our youths are in dire need of mentorship. They need to see in you, a Religious, who by detachment from seeking power, wealth and pleasure can attract them to the unique joy and fulfillment which comes from knowing Christ and thus allow God to help them come out of self-centeredness, conformism and worldliness.

Our youths are in need of models of holiness. They need teachers of prayer; they need teachers of generosity; they need teachers of faith, hope and love and above all they need teachers of faithfulness. Your total commitment to the evangelical counsels will prove to be vital in the formation of our young people. Many young people live in loneliness and isolation. They need the witness of what communal living is all about. They need models of community life which show the different forms of how people can relate in a mature way. From your examples, they should be able to draw inspiration on working together, helping and supporting each other. When I look at some parishes in our Archdiocese which we have assigned to Religious communities to administer on behalf of us, what impresses me is the fact that there is a real sense of community among the priests and others who work in the parish and this is something which then becomes infectious within the wider structures of the parish. So, I encourage you today to find new ways of accompanying our youths on their path of life and on the path of faith.

#### **4. The First Reading (Malachi 3:1-4)**

In today's First Reading from the prophet Malachi God says he is sending his messenger to prepare the way before the Lord comes. Preparing the way for the Lord is what John the Baptist did. He called the people to repentance and total conversion. This is exactly what we do when we preach and teach others. Consecrated men and women in the past used to be known for being itinerant preachers and teachers. They moved from place to place fearlessly carrying the word of God and establishing small Christian communities in territories where the Good News have not been heard. In the process some even died. What has happened to this zeal for mission? Why do we complain when we are sent on mission? We hear some religious say "this is a difficult mission, I cannot go. I don't want to suffer and die before my time". Many of our elders today can still recall the men and women in their different habits who brought the message of Christ to them, taught them Catechism, how to say the Rosary, taught them how to participate at Mass, how to go to Confession, how to be dedicated to the work of God and even baptized them. They had nothing but the word of the Lord. Through this ministry, you teach possible future Popes, Bishops, Priests, Religious Superiors, Political Leaders, Community Leaders etc. It is a wonderful opportunity to impact knowledge to people.

In the process of preparing the way for the Lord, the Religious is also refined and purified as the prophet says today. This is because the Lord whom you prepare the way for is the refiner's fire that can totally obliterate all your sins. When you teach you also learn. When you teach purity, you learn to be pure, when you teach respect for constituted authority you learn to be obedient, when you teach honesty you learn to be sincere with keeping your religious vows. Indeed, the act of preparing the way for the Lord is also the best way to always renew the grace of your Baptismal and religious commitment.

#### **5. The Second Reading (Hebrews 2:14-18)**

The author of the second reading of today tells us that God is concerned about us. He has in the person of Christ delivered us from the power of the

devil and death. Christ through his suffering and death has made expiation for the sins of the world. As a result, he had to be made like his brethren in every aspect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. Jesus is described as merciful and faithful. In other words, he is a compassionate and trustworthy high priest. As a result of these qualities, people from all walks of life became better for meeting him. The presence of these qualities in our own lives as Religious will make us become sources of blessings for others. A compassionate person is someone, who in some way can enter into or tries to enter into, our experience of life, someone who can feel with us and for us. A trustworthy person is someone who honors and respects whatever we might entrust to him or her. They can be relied upon to hold whatever we give them of ourselves. These are qualities that are fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are found in those who are open to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is compassionate towards us because he has shared the same flesh and blood, we all share. He has become completely like us, having been tempted in every way that we are. He is trustworthy. Having given his life for us on the cross, he has shown that he is worthy of our trust. This trustworthy and compassionate high priest enters our lives every day. He enters in a special way through the Eucharist which we are now celebrating. Open your hearts to receive him and let him transform you into his very self and make you truly compassionate and trustworthy in the discharge of your duties so that you can become a source of blessing to others.

## **7. The Gospel Reading**

The Evangelist Luke in today's Gospel reading recounts the rite of purification that Mary and Joseph performed in the temple. It was a special moment in the life of the Holy Family. The Gospel says the parents brought in the child Jesus and Simeon took him in his arm and blessed God. We are told too that Anna the prophetess also came and spoke well of the Child. It was indeed an encounter of the young and the old. There is something deep happening here. The encounter became a source of blessing for both

generations. Simeon and Anna were graced and blessed by the coming of this young couple and their child into the Temple. The young couple were themselves blessed and graced by the aged Simeon and Anna. This can be true of our own experience as well. The younger generation can be a source of blessing to the older generation and vice versa. They each have something to give the other.

As Religious, you must realize that you need each other – young and old – to renew and strengthen your knowledge of God. You must never push aside the elderly members of your congregations or consider them as “old school”. Pope Francis in his address to the Religious in Rome last year said “If the young are called to open new doors, the elderly have the keys”. Your brothers and sisters in the community are a gift to be cherished. I enjoin you today to strengthen the intergenerational bond in your religious communities. No matter what generation you belong to, your calling as followers of the Lord is to bless others by your presence. Ask yourself: are others the better for having met me? Do I have a relationship with the Holy Spirit? Let it not be said that we are impoverished in the midst of plenty. We have all the means to receive graces and blessings from God. How well do we use them? Our lives have become mechanical. We pray only to fulfill all righteousness. We celebrate mass because we have to. We dispense the sacraments just so that we are not seen as not performing our duties. When they tell us to fast, we are quick to say ‘my life as a religious is fasting itself’.

My dear religious, let us not end up acting as sign posts for others to heaven and then miss heaven ourselves. We are told that the prophetess Anna fasted and prayed night and day despite being elderly. She did not give herself to the flesh as she grew old: overeating, oversleeping, immoral gratification, or meaningless activities that waste time. She devoted herself to serving and hoping in God, praying and bearing witness as His servant. We are called to be more serious with our spirituality and our commitment to our apostolate. Let us take our daily prayers seriously. Let us make it a point of duty to spend at least an hour with the Lord daily before the Blessed Sacrament and ask him to help us keep our vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. I enjoin us too to be mindful of what we discuss with others and send over social media. Let us ask our Mother Mary and St.

Joseph to present us to their Son Jesus just like they presented him in the temple so that we can truly be a blessing to our generation.

### **8. 2019 General Elections**

Before I conclude this homily, I will like to say a few words on the forthcoming general elections. We have barely 14 days to the presidential elections. I urge all of you to encourage your parishioners and those who work with you to vote wisely and to shun violence of any kind during the elections. May I remind you that you are not to be seen or thought to be campaigning directly or indirectly for any political party. Instead admonish all politicians to shun violence. Elections should not be a do or die affair. Let the people vote according to their conscience for candidates whom they know will deliver on their electioneering promises. It is also an appropriate time to pray fervently for the success of the elections. Many have expressed fears about the forthcoming polls. Many believe that it may lead to the disintegration of Nigeria and another civil war. God is not asleep. God is always with us and will hear our prayers for a successful poll. Remind the people that Nigeria has been consecrated to our Blessed Mother Mary and she will not abandon us.

**And so, for the success of our General elections, I call on all consecrated men and women in our Archdiocese to say the rosary for nine consecutive days, alongside the prayer for Nigeria in distress, asking for our Lady's intercession. This rosary Novena should begin on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February and should end on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February. May our Lady intercede for Nigeria and for all of us through Christ our Lord.**

### **9. Conclusion**

My dear Religious, the Feast of Presentation and day of Consecrated life is an appropriate occasion to praise the Lord and thank him for the precious gift represented by the consecrated life in its different forms. It is also an appropriate time to encourage in all people of God the knowledge and esteem for those who are totally consecrated to God. Your way of living and



working can vividly express full belonging to the Lord. Place yourselves without reserve in the hands of Christ and of the Church. You are like watchmen among the people of God who perceive and proclaim the new life already present in our history.

I join my voice with that of the Holy Father, Pope Francis to invite you to make your whole “life a pilgrimage of loving transformation. To constantly achieve this, you must look into the depths of your heart, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do I have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has my heart maintained a restless searching or have I let it be suffocated by things that will finally harden it?

You are to be a light on a hilltop, living an authentic Christian life of prayer and action that witnesses in a luminous way to the power of the Gospel through closeness and encounter. May this day be for all of us an occasion for rededicating ourselves to God, asking for grace and strength to carry out the mission entrusted to us all.

May the Lord renew in you each day the joyful response to his freely given and faithful love. May Mary most holy, the consecrated woman, help you to live to the full your special vocation and mission in the church for the salvation of the world. May the grace of God the Father, the love of God the Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**Happy Celebration and May God bless you all.**