

Pope to religious: Even where weapons roar, you are witnesses to Jesus

“Through your commitment to follow Christ more closely — sharing in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit — you can show the world the way to overcome conflict, sowing fraternity through the freedom of those who love and forgive without measure”. Pope Leo gave this powerful reminder during the Mass he celebrated on Monday for the World Day for Consecrated Life, an annual observance that was instituted in 1997 by Pope Saint John Paul II which is celebrated on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 2 February.

Offering everything to God

Your founders and foundresses, docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, offer you wonderful models of how to fulfil this mandate faithfully and effectively.

Living in constant tension between earth and heaven, Pope Leo marveled how “they allowed themselves to be guided with faith and courage”. “Setting out from the Eucharistic table, some were led to the silence of the cloister, others to the demands of the apostolate; some to the classrooms of schools, others to the destitution of the streets or the toil of the missions”.

A prayerful presence in often hostile environments

This same faith, he said, moved them to return, “time and again, humbly and wisely”, to the foot of the Cross and to the Tabernacle, “where they offered everything and discovered in God both the source and the goal of all their actions”.

Through the power of grace, he said, they also embarked on perilous undertakings. “They became a prayerful presence in hostile or indifferent environments; a generous hand and a friendly shoulder amid degradation and abandonment; and witnesses of peace and reconciliation in situations marked by violence and hatred”.

Prepared to go against the current

“They were ready”, Pope Leo stressed, “to bear the consequences of going

against the current, becoming, in Christ, a ‘sign of contradiction,’ sometimes even to the point of martyrdom”. “Today, we honor our brothers and sisters who have gone before us as protagonists of this ‘prophetic tradition’, and do so above all by carrying forward their legacy”.

“You are called to testify that the young, the elderly, the poor, the sick and the imprisoned hold a sacred place above all else on God’s altar and in his heart”, the Pope said, while observing, “at the same time, each of them is an inviolable sanctuary of God’s presence, before whom we must bend our knee, in order to encounter him, adore him and give him glory”.

Religious communities do not abandon their people

He pointed out that evidence of this can be seen in the many “outposts of the Gospel” that their communities have established in a wide variety of challenging contexts, even in the midst of conflict.

“These communities”, he underscored, “do not abandon their people, nor do they flee; they remain, often stripped of all security, as a living reminder — more eloquent than words — of the inviolable sacredness of life in its most vulnerable conditions”.

“Even where weapons roar and arrogance, self-interest and violence seem to prevail”, Pope Leo observed, “their presence proclaims the words of Jesus: ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for... in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father’.

The Pope recalled that the Second Vatican Council reminds us that “the Church... will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven... At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself... will be perfectly established in Christ”.

He said that this prophetic vision concerns them as well, as “men and women firmly rooted in the realities of the present, yet ‘always attentive to the things that are above’ Christ died and rose in order to ‘free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’.

Pope Leo concluded by reiterating the Church’s gratitude to the Lord for the presence of consecrated men and women, saying, “She encourages you to be leaven of peace and signs of hope wherever Providence may lead you”.

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