

REFLECTION BY HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It is very good to be with all of you today. As the Psalm says, “How good it is when brothers (and sisters) live in unity!”¹ Look around. As you notice one another – women, men, people of different expressions of consecration; some religious, some in secular institutes; others who are living a personal form of consecration – what I hope you can see is a synodal Church. In the final document of the recently concluded General Assembly of the Synod, this is what it says about consecrated people in the Church:

“In their experience of living in the world, the various forms of consecrated life matured into what we now recognize as practices of synodal living. These include how to practice discernment in common and to harmonize together individual gifts as well as pursue mission in common. Orders and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes, as well as associations, movements and new communities, all have a special contribution to make to the growth of synodality in the Church. Today, many communities of consecrated life are like laboratories for inter-cultural living in a way that is prophetic for both the Church and the world. At the same time, synodality invites – and sometimes challenges – pastors of local Churches, as well as those responsible for leadership in consecrated life and in the movements, to strengthen relationships in order to bring to life an exchange of gifts at the service of the common mission.”²

Allow me to make a couple of points about this quotation from the Synod document, as it pertains to your gathering here as consecrated people.

First, the consecrated life which you live is synodal by its very nature. Walking together with each other and with the Lord, listening to the Spirit: these habits are

¹ *Psalm* 133:1.

² XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Second Session (2-27 October 2024), Final Document, 65.

embedded into your rules and constitutions. And so, for consecrated people like yourselves, so much of being a synodal Church is about continually renewing your fidelity to the foundational charisms and authentic expression of your particular form of consecration. Not in a “static” or completely unchanging way, but by remaining “rooted”. Having good, healthy roots allows you to grow and adapt to changing times and circumstances. Synodality, in other words, is not foreign to you at all. By living your consecrated life, you can be models of the synodal path within the heart of the Church.

Secondly, today’s gathering is already an answer to that invitation and challenge that the Synod final document offers to bishops and leaders in consecrated life: “to strengthen relationships in order to bring to life an exchange of gifts at the service of the common mission.” This is what we allow to happen on a day like this, when people from different forms of consecrated life and religious communities come together. It is already a blessing for Catholics when they meet each of you as individuals and communities. But that blessing is multiplied when we see your communities acting in concert with one another, working together joyfully and with mutual respect and admiration. This is, for the rest of the members of the Church, a strong witness both to consecrated discipleship and to a unity that harmonizes. So, thank you for being here! And please know that the Holy Father – a fellow consecrated person! – is spiritually close to you today.

One thing I would like to note before addressing the specific theme of my talk. You will hear me speak repeatedly about “community” and “communion” as it relates to the consecrated life. I am aware that among the many expressions of consecrated life in this Archdiocese, not only are there groups of religious sisters, brothers, and priests who live together, but there are also consecrated virgins, hermits, and anchoresses; as well as members of secular institutes and societies of apostolic life. But even for those consecrated people whose form of life is less visibly “communal”, I consider every consecrated person to belong to a “communion” in virtue of your special dedication to the evangelical counsels, which you share with all other consecrated people. All of you are a spiritual community of close collaborators with the Lord. As a matter of fact, your very presence at this day of recollection gives witness to the communion that you have with all other consecrated persons.

PRAYER, COMMUNION, AND MISSION: ROOTED IN THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

At the close of this Year of Prayer in preparation for the Jubilee Year, and building on the momentum of the Synod on Synodality, our theme today is “Prayer, Communion, and Mission”. In this reflection I will touch on each of those three elements, drawing from the Pope’s recent encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. **Prayer** is essentially a renewal of the encounter between our own personal heart and the heart of Christ. **Communion** happens when we allow our own heart-to-heart relationship with Christ to be open to relationship with the hearts of others. And finally, **mission** is when we – whose hearts are united with one another through the heart of Christ – allow that union of love to become a force for evangelizing the world. Considered together, this dynamic is what we could call a “synodality of the heart”.

I. Prayer as a “Return to the Heart”

You are all consecrated people, so you know that everything begins with **prayer!**

In his encyclical *Dilexit nos*, on the human and divine love of the heart of Christ, Pope Francis begins with a discussion of our own hearts. First of all, he acknowledges the challenge of the contemporary environment. He says: “[W]e find ourselves immersed in societies of serial consumers who live from day to day, dominated by the hectic pace and bombarded by technology, lacking the patience needed to engage in the processes that an interior life by its very nature requires.”³ He says that, because of this, it requires a special effort to “return to the heart”. Even as consecrated people, you are not immune to the pressures of a culture that tends to pull you away from your true center. The Pope reminds us that the Bible “speaks to us of the heart as a core that lies hidden beneath all outward appearances, even beneath the superficial thoughts that can lead us astray.”⁴ He calls the heart “the locus of sincerity, where deceit and disguise have no place.” He says that the heart “usually indicates our true intentions, what we really think, believe and desire, the ‘secrets’ that we tell no one: in a word, the naked truth about ourselves. It is the part of us that is neither appearance or illusion, but is instead authentic, real, entirely ‘who we are’.”⁵

Of course, this is why prayer must begin in the heart. For prayer to be authentic, there can be no pretense before God. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux said: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 9.

⁴ *Dilexit Nos*, 4.

⁵ *Dilexit Nos*, 5.

and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”⁶ Or, as the peasant of Ars said when asked what he does while sitting before the tabernacle: “I look at him and he looks at me.”⁷ This is true prayer, in which a connection is found between our own human heart, and the human and divine heart of the Lord. As Solomon prayed before the altar of the Lord: “Render to each and all according to their ways, you who know every heart; for it is you alone who know the heart of every human being.”⁸

Each of you was called by God – and each of you said “yes” – to a vocation of special consecration to Christ. And for each of you, your heart is the place where God’s desire for you and your desire for him met. Your heart is the deepest locus of the call to consecrated life. To the degree that you want your consecrated vocation to remain alive and continue to grow, you are called to continue to return to your heart, and to be sure that your heart continues to be a guest house for the Lord.

When we do return to our own heart in prayer, we discover that there is another heart longing for relationship with ours. Jesus has a heart that thirsts for our friendship and love. As the Lord said to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque: “I thirst, but with a thirst so ardent to be loved by men in the Most Blessed Sacrament, that this thirst consumes me.”⁹ It is in the union of those two hearts – yours and his – that the energy for your life of consecration originates.

And when Christ looks at you, when he “turns his gaze” upon you, he is not just thirsting for any human love. He is thirsting for the particular love that only you, with your individual uniqueness, can provide to him. Each one of us has a totally unique gift for loving God, and that is what the Lord seeks from you: your own unique “self”.

Having looked at prayer as a returning to our own heart, and a joining of our heart with the heart of the Lord, let us now turn to the second element: **communion**.

II. Communion as the Joining of Hearts in the Lord

While the unique personal relationship that each of us has with the Lord is fundamental, our life in Christ is also meant to be joined to a communion of hearts who

⁶ *Manuscripts autobiographiques*, C 25r; cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2558.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2715.

⁸ *1 Kings* 8:39.

⁹ St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, Letter 133 to Father Croiset; cited in *Dilexit Nos*, 166.

are connected with each other. From prayer, which involves a return to that “one-on-one”, “heart-to-heart” encounter with the Lord, arises a further call to communion.

Every one of us first experienced communion in the family. For those of us who grew up in Christian families, that communion was a union in and with the Lord, thanks to God. To the degree that our parents, or other adults in our life, were connected to the Church, we also experienced, from our early years, that communion which Christ created by establishing the Church to be his Body and his family living in the world. For me, growing up in my family, this was always made very clear. My mother, in particular, was a very devout person. But her devotion always oriented her to communion: to concrete service, and to seeing Christ in the other person. This is what she taught us.

No matter what your own experience of communion was like within your family – or perhaps you experienced Christian communion in some other setting outside your family – each of you, at a certain point, perceived a call to the consecrated life. This means that God called you to enter into a further communion yet: one marked by a shared dedication to the evangelical counsels. For many of you, this communion is experienced quite explicitly each day as you live within a local religious family that is part of your congregation or institute. But as I mentioned earlier, even those of you who do not live your consecrated life in physical communion with others, you are spiritually united with your consecrated brothers and sisters wherever they may be.

To be a fruitful part of a human community – whether one we are born into, or one we choose according to a call – is a challenge. But to be in communion with others who themselves are in communion with the Lord is part of the synodal journey which constitutes our life of discipleship. In order for this communion with others to be authentically Christian, and fruitful, we must enter it as one who already has a living connection with the human and divine heart of the Lord. The whole idea of Christian communion is that we are several hearts, each united to the heart of the Lord, and united with one another *with* the Lord and *in* the Lord.

One of the greatest challenges of this call to communion is the vulnerability required for a person to “expose”, in a real sense, one’s own personal relationship with Christ to the view of others. This can be a fearful prospect, because we open ourselves to the judgment of others. We might have questions such as: *What if my way of loving Christ is misunderstood by the other person? ... What if the other person has a love for*

Christ that seems “better” than mine, or makes my relationship with Lord seem weak or defective?

Such fears are real. A person can only take the risk of letting his or her own relationship with Christ be shared with others, if they are given a sense that they will be received well by the others in the community. This is where the grace of a particular community’s charism helps, because a person feels a certain “resonance” with that community, and is therefore willing to share his or her own heart’s experience of the Lord with other members of the community. What a consoling joy it is when the others in the community not only accept the new individual’s experience of relationship with the Lord, but rejoice at that person’s experience, because they see in it something that affirms their own relationship with Christ and is there to enrich the community! So often this is the spiritual “birth” of a person’s call to a particular consecrated community. These early graces can help fortify a person later in life when they are confronting the sufferings and challenges of continuing to love, and to be loved, in community. They are reminded of the assurance and confirmation that they were given in the beginning, that they “belong” here.

In a healthy community – a community of consecrated people, but any healthy Christian community – the individual is free to continue to “return to their heart” and grow daily in their personal relationship with the heart of Christ. Far from isolating the individual, this personal growth continues to enrich the communion of all the members. A strong, living, and “organic” community life, anchored in the heart of Christ, is then able to embark on the third aspect of this “synodality of the heart” – and that is **mission**.

III. Mission: A Communion of Hearts Evangelizing Others

As the Holy Father has reminded us, the Church is missionary by her very nature. In today’s world especially, when we cannot depend on the old societal structures to transmit the Gospel from one generation to the next, we must embrace this truth of our ecclesial identity. We are *essentially* missionaries. Being on mission is not merely something we “do”, it is *who we are*. This identity does not make prayer, our heart-to-heart relationship with Christ, *less* important. On the contrary, it makes that relationship even *more* important. We recall how St. Teresa of Calcutta observed that adoring Jesus in the Eucharist helped her and her sisters to love the poor with greater and deeper faith and love. Likewise, the strength and authenticity of our communion with fellow Christians, and fellow consecrated persons, is even *more* vital if we are to be fruitful

missionaries. In fact, to be on mission is to be a communion of hearts joined in loving openness toward others.

Just as the experience of “heart-to-heart” encounter between the individual and Christ is necessary to make the individual person a fruitful member of a larger “communion-of-hearts-in-Christ”, so, in turn, a living community of persons, whose hearts are beating together with the heart of Christ, is necessary to produce fruitful evangelism to those outside the community. For a community of consecrated people to fulfill their charismatic evangelical mission in the world, they must be alive as a “synod of hearts” centered in the human and divine heart of Christ. This means that they, as a community, are united by a recognizable charism, but at the same time they are expressing that charism according to the diversity of their individual personalities and personal qualities. As a community on mission, therefore, it is a “harmony of persons” united in the love of Christ. We know this when we see it. As opposed to a community in which there is a rigid uniformity of behavior, practically “cancelling out” the uniqueness of each person, what we see in a “harmonious” community is all the richness and variety of the persons expressing themselves “in concert” with one another. Like a good orchestra, it is not 20 members playing the same note on the same instrument, but rather, different notes being played, but in such a way that there is a kind of “vibration” that gives the feeling of life, and even of excitement.

In a community that has attained that balance of unity and diversity, an extrovert can act in peace alongside an introvert; someone more jovial and expressive can be in the same community as a person of greater seriousness and reserve; and by the grace of the charism that unites them in the same consecrated community, they are both contributing to the same mission.

The reason for this is that each person’s personal encounter with the heart of Christ is welcomed into the “community of encounters”, each enriching the other, and all together experiencing the delight of Christ’s own heart in the diversity of his members. The Spirit of God in such a communion of hearts is alive and free to move among them. The Spirit is free also to flow forth from a community like this, producing much fruit.

When it comes to mission, courage is required: courage to innovate, to change, to experiment with new methods of apostolic work. Leaders of consecrated people today, as much as bishops and other leaders in the Church, need to be creative, and not

held back by habit or fear. But, my dear consecrated sisters and brothers, sometimes we bishops have the most difficult time adapting! But as consecrated people, there are still ways in which you can go ahead in faith. And I encourage you to do this, always listening to the Spirit.

In the Church's history, is it often the consecrated people who give the rest of the Church a "spark" of new life and new initiative. They discover ways of connecting with the people of the day – of giving to the people of their day a better way of recognizing the meaning of the Gospel, and how it responds to the desires of their hearts. Siant Margaret Mary Alacoque and others did this when they revealed to their contemporaries a tenderness in the heart of Christ that helped overcome Jansenism. Saint Thérèse did this when she distilled the more imposing formulations for holiness into a simple and profound "little way" that perfectly accorded with the Gospel. And, so that I'm not accused of paying attention only to French saints – although they're the best ones! – we can also think of people such as Saints John Neumann and Elizabeth Ann Seton, pioneers of Catholic schools in the United States, and St. Katherine Drexel, who did so much for the African American and Native American people. They were all "spiritual innovators"; and you can be too!

Conclusion

Be God's innovators. In other words, let the call of the heart of Christ continue to lead you. Let your own relationship with Christ contribute to the communion you are a part of, and to the mission that you serve. In this way, the Church's message will remain alive and dynamic in this age.

I pray that today is a day of grace for you, and that this Advent will be a season of renewal. I pray also that this coming Jubilee Year will be a very powerful experience for each of you, and for all consecrated people in the Church. May you experience unity with one another, and a deepening and strengthening of the hope that does not disappoint.