

Pope encourages religious to be witnesses

Dear brothers and sisters,

With pleasure, I greet you at the end of the International Congress for formators of religious life, entitled “Living in Christ according to the way of life of the Gospel” And I thank Cardinal Braz de Aviz for his words to me in the name of all here present. I thank also the Secretary and the other collaborators who have prepared the congress, the first of its kind celebrated at this level in the church, with formators, male and female, belonging to many institutes and from many parts of the world held during the year dedicated to the Consecrated life.

I wanted to have this conference with you, because of that what you are and represent in virtue of being educators and formators, and because in each of you I see our young people, protagonists of the present living with passion, and promoters of a future animated by hope. Young people who, moved by the love of God, search for the path they are to take in their own lives in the church. I feel them here present and think of them affectionately.

Seeing you in such great numbers, one would not say that there is a vocations crisis! But in reality, there is an undoubtable decrease in numbers, and this makes all the more urgent the work of formation, a formation that might truly form the heart of Jesus in the heart of our young people, to the point that they might have the same attitude (Phil 2:5; Vita Consecrata 65). I am also convinced that there is not a vocations crisis where there are consecrated people able to transmit the beauty of consecration with their own witness. You are called to this, dear formators. This is your ministry, your mission. You are not only “masters;” you are above all witnesses to following Christ in your particular charism. And this is done if you rediscover every day the joy of being disciples of Jesus. From this joy comes the requirement to care always for your own personal formation, a formation that begins with a strong friendship with the only master.

It is truly this: Consecrated life is beautiful. It is one of the most precious treasures of the Church, rooted in the vocation of baptism. And therefore it is beautiful to be formators, because it is a privilege to participate in the work of the Father who forms the heart of the Son in those whom the Spirit has called. At times this service can be felt as a burden, as if it takes us away from something more important. But this is a lie, a temptation. The mission is important, but it is also important to form those for the mission, form the passion of proclamation, the passion for going wherever, in every periphery, to tell everyone about the love of Jesus Christ, especially to those far from the Church, to the little ones, and to the poor, and let ourselves be evangelized by them. All this requires a solid base, a Christian structure of one’s personality that today families rarely know how to give. And this increases your responsibility.

One of the qualities of the formator is the possession of a great heart for the young, to form in them great hearts, able to receive everyone, hearts rich in mercy, full of tenderness. You are not only friends and companions of the consecrated life for those who are entrusted to you. But you are true fathers, true mothers, able to ask and to give them the most. This is possible only through love, the love of fathers and of mothers. And it is not true that today’s youth are mediocre and not generous. But they need to experience that “it is blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), that there is great liberty in an obedient life, great fruitfulness in a virginal heart, great richness in possessing nothing. Here it is necessary to be lovingly attentive to the path of each and to be evangelically demanding in every phase of the path of formation, beginning with vocational discernment, so that the eventual crisis of “quantity” might not determine the much graver crisis of “quality.”

For this reason, initial formation is only the first step of a process destined to last for the rest of one's life. The young must be formed in humble and intelligent freedom to let himself be educated by God the Father every day of their life, at every age, both in the mission and in fraternity, both in action and in contemplation.

Thank you dear formators, for your humble and discreet service, your time dedicated to listening, to accompaniment and to the care of each of your young. In this mission neither time nor energy is spared. And do not become discouraged when the results do not correspond to your aspirations. Even failures can favor the path of continuing formation for the formators. And though sometimes you may have the feeling that your work is not appreciated enough, know that Jesus follows you with love and the entire Church is grateful.

I encourage you to live this ministry in joy and gratitude, with the certainty that there is nothing more beautiful in life than to belong to God with one's whole heart and to give one's life in service to your brothers and sisters. I ask you to pray for me and I offer you my heartfelt blessings.