



Easter MESSAGE

Easter 2021

Dear Sisters,

Easter is the story of God's fidelity. The whole history of salvation which reached its fulfilment in Christ is a manifestation of God's fidelity. God has not ceased to demonstrate his fidelity, despite the repeated infidelity of His people throughout all generations. Jesus is the "faithful witness" (Rev 1:5), a manifestation of God's fidelity. In Him all God's promises are fulfilled (*cf* 2 Cor 1:20).

Fidelity is also the gift of Easter to us "who have been baptized into Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:3). We are invited to respond with fidelity to the Father through the Son who "loved us to the end" (Jn 13:1). But, fidelity cannot be achieved through our own efforts alone. It is foremost, an undeserved grace, a free gift that comes from God and is founded on the "yes" of Christ.

Our fidelity to God, as Pope Francis said, "is nothing more than a response to God's fidelity."¹ It was God's faithfulness that sought Peter out after his denial, that changed the life of Mary Magdalen, and that emboldened the Apostles to overcome their fear and go out to proclaim the Risen One! It is also God's fidelity that sustained our Congregation for 325 years and that inspired countless courageous Sisters to offer their whole lives unselfishly in His service. God's faithfulness always precedes our own, "and our faithfulness is always a response to that faithfulness that precedes us."²

We are aware how the present "culture of the provisional and fragmentation"³ has influenced a precarious fidelity among consecrated persons and the clerics. However, the phenomenon of abandonment and decrease in vocation are areas of concern that cannot be justified by socio-cultural reasons alone. This reality is a symptom of a broader crisis that we cannot ignore or consider as "normal." **It is not normal for a religious to decide to leave the Congregation after a long period of initial formation or after many years of living the life.**⁴

¹ Pope Francis, Homily Santa Martha Mass, April 15, 2020.

² *Ibid.*

³ CICLSAL, *The Gift of Fidelity The Joy of Perseverance* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

In an online conference held here in Rome, Archbishop Jose Rodriguez Carballo, OFM, Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), presented the disturbing statistics of those who left religious life from 2016-2020. In 2020 alone, almost 2,000 religious from all over the world abandoned their vocation. Archbishop Carballo further noted that based on the reports submitted to the Dicastery, the three major reasons for abandonment are: 1) Weakened spiritual life due to lack of personal prayer, absence from community prayer, superficiality in sacramental life, and greater focus on activities; 2) Loss of sense of belonging, manifested in dissatisfaction in community life, the institution, and the Church, and lack of balance between community and personal needs, where the community is seen only as a means to satisfy one's needs; 3) Affective issues which lead to the violation of the vow of chastity, marriage, heterosexual/homosexual acts, affective problems that have repercussions in community life.⁵

Our Congregation is not immune to this present crisis. Even if our dropouts constitute .01% of the worldwide total, we cannot remain indifferent to the situation that concerns consecrated life and the Church as a whole. Let us, therefore, take advantage of the celebration of our 325 years of foundation as a graced opportunity to confront ourselves constructively and calmly, in order to identify any institutional or communal failures that may have contributed to the situation. It is only by honestly confronting ourselves first that we can begin to take the path of renewal in our consecrated life.

Let me recall to mind the three R's that I previously mentioned to celebrate meaningfully our 325 years of foundation: **remembering, renewing, and responding**. In the same light, I wish to deepen our reflection using these three words to propose ways to sustain our fidelity and persevere in the path that the Lord marked out for us.

“The faithful one is the one who holds together the memory and the present: this enables her to persevere.”⁶ **Remembering** the Lord's action in our life, our significant encounters with Him when our “hearts burned with love within us,” is what generates and sustains our own fidelity. Pope Francis, has continually invited us to witness the “JOY of our encounter with the Lord...This joy, is contagious, it impels one forward, to bear witness to the Gospel in the service of the Church.”⁷ Remembering engraves our God experiences in our hearts, where we can draw strength in moments of doubt or difficulties. Therefore, the greatest and indispensable tool in our journey towards perseverance is **unceasing prayer for the gift of fidelity**. The Lord promised that if we “seek Him, we will find Him, if we search after Him with all our heart and soul.” (cf. Deut 4:9)

⁵ Archbishop Jose Rodriguez Carballo, OFM, Online Conference on “The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance,” December 20, 2020.

⁶ CICLSAL, *The Gift of Fidelity The Joy of Perseverance*, 43.

⁷ Pope Francis, Meeting with Seminarians and Novices, Vatican City, (6 July 2013).

Another way of intensifying our fidelity is through the renewal of the important aspects of our life. **Renewing** our consecrated life implies that we take the arduous but liberating path to conversion, both on the personal and communal levels. I wish to point out the adverse effects of irresponsible use of the internet and social networks in our consecrated life. While we acknowledge that the new technologies have provided “extraordinary opportunity for dialogue, encounter, and exchange, as well as access to information and knowledge,”⁸ especially during the pandemic, yet, at the same time, we are concerned about how digital media has exposed the religious to addiction, isolation, loss of authentic interpersonal relationships, and weakened commitment. Unfortunately, a number of our young professed Sisters have fallen into the trap of inappropriate relationships developed through the use of social media, which eventually led to their departure from the community. Hence, the **gift of discernment** is an urgent need today, since our contemporary world offers us countless possibilities, all of them are seemingly “good” and “valid.” Let us seek to develop this gift through prayer, reflection, spiritual reading, and accompaniment. I wish to emphasize here the crucial role of the Formators and the local communities, especially in the moral and spiritual formation of the young Sisters.

Another area that needs renewal is our community relationships, since fraternity has often been mentioned as one of the reasons for leaving religious life. Each of us has a **sense of co-responsibility** for the faithfulness of our Sisters; each one contributes to a serene climate of understanding, mutual help, support, and attentive listening. The “witness of joy” of the whole fraternity constitutes a further encouragement to the perseverance of consecrated persons.⁹

We are likewise called to renew our **fidelity to the Church**, our mother in faith. This fidelity calls for obedience to the Church authorities and our lawful Superiors, and faithful adherence to the teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church. As members of one body, the Church, any false testimony or witness contrary to the Catholic beliefs that we profess affects the whole Church. Hence, we need to exercise prudence, discretion, and discernment in our actions and words. The Superior must be informed of any activity undertaken by the Sisters, like interview or personal testimonies requested through the social media or any means of publicity.

Finally, in **responding** to the gift of fidelity we need to develop another spiritual attitude which is **perseverance**. Perseverance is an essential attribute of fidelity. It is following Jesus, the Faithful One, who was “obedient unto death...even death on the cross” (Phil 2:8). Our perseverance in prayer, even in the midst of dryness; our willingness to persevere to love and serve others, even if it entails a lot of sacrifice and self-denial; the persevering gift of oneself in total consecration, even in the face of difficulties, sickness or challenges, are but some of the ways in which we can nurture the “gift of fidelity and the joy of perseverance” in our life.

⁸ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 88.

⁹ CICALSAL, *The Gift of Fidelity The Joy of Perseverance*, 70.

“Remain in my love” (Jn15:9) is the request of Jesus, both yesterday and today. We all need perseverance, which is to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, and at the same time to act with sincerity and creativity in going through moments of darkness and in supporting one another.¹⁰

Let us then celebrate the season of Easter, the season of God’s fidelity, invigorated and with renewed commitment to live our consecrated life in fidelity and persevering joy! May the blessing of the risen Lord accompany us on our journey towards fullness of life!

I wish you all a joyful and faith-filled Easter!

*Affectionately in the Risen Christ,
Sr Maria Gertrude Lee*



¹⁰ Ibid.,174.