Do you know what you were doing one year ago today? What happened then may not be as memorable as other days, like when President Kennedy was assassinated or when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon or when the Berlin Wall came crashing down – all things that probably sound like ancient history to you who are undergraduates! But last year something fundamental took place, especially to people of faith.

One year ago today Pope Francis issued his apostolic exhortation Evangeli gaudium, on “The Joy of the Gospel.” No, it’s not a document with high magisterial authority, but to-date it is the only one he has published on his own! Yes, it’s a teaching that fits nicely with the cover-image pope who continues to ride a wave of positive sentiment and worldwide popularity. But the real significance of The Joy of the Gospel is this: it’s the reason why we’re here, it’s the foundation of what we do, and it’s the message we have to give.

The Joy of the Gospel is the reason why we’re here in this place today. In some way, each and every one of us has encountered the love of God: perhaps through an encouraging word from a parent or teacher, perhaps by a visit to this lovely Valley, perhaps in that still small voice that speaks to our souls. Whatever the moment or the means, God has indeed come to us. And “Thanks solely to this encounter,” as Pope Francis tells us, “we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption” (no. 8). In other words, we are freed from seeing this life only through that the lens that is me. We have been set free to be more, to become who we are and to be that well. (And that’s not just a DSU thing! The invitation to encounter Jesus is for all.)

As Christians that joyful encounter is the foundation of all that we do. It’s the bedrock on which is built and supported every moment of our lives, from the song-singing happy holidays to the trying times of sadness, and every day in-between. The Joy of the Gospel, says Pope Francis, “adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved” (no. 6).

That is the message we have to give others. By the joy of our own lives we act as disciples; without it we cannot. “Here,” says the pope, “we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (no. 8). Our Christian mission in the world is to live this Gospel love, to make alive in our time and place a saving encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. When we do, as the pope claims, we “are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness” (no. 1). Or, in simpler words, we find joy.
The Joy of the Gospel - with its transcendent focus, its life-long certitude, and its existential freedom - that’s the joy we hear about in today’s Scripture readings. It’s the joy of the 144,000 “who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Rev.) It’s the joy that can inspire a poor widow to “offer her whole livelihood” (Luke). It’s the joy that is embodied, or should be, in what you are about to hear us do this evening, as we renew our vows as Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.

Some of those sitting here first made that profession of vows more than six decades ago; others only as recently as five years ago. One is celebrating the 40th anniversary of his profession; two others, their 50th. Whatever the time frame in which they were said, these words are ones that I invite you to listen to closely. With these words, every one of us comes before you to renew our response to an encounter with the love of God that we have experienced. And we wish to reaffirm that this encounter is to embrace ever more closely our whole heart and our whole life, and that it is to be expressed ever more fully in the totality of our existence.

This is our response to the dangers that Pope Francis identifies at the outset of his exhortation (no. 2):

- If “The great danger in today’s world ... is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart,” then let our vow of Chastity, joyfully lived, show to the world that we have already found Him whose love alone fulfills the yearning of our lives.

- If that great danger is seen in “the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures,” then let our vow of Poverty, joyfully lived, say to the world that materials goods pale in comparison to the wealth of God’s kingdom, where alone we can know a happiness that lasts forever.

- And if the worldwide danger is connected to “a blunted conscience,” then let our vow of Obedience, joyfully lived, demonstrate that the lone criterion of a meaningful life is to live it in complete accord with the divine will as that is made known to us.

Religious profession - vowing a life to God through the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience - is one way of living out the Joy of the Gospel. It’s a distinct vocation, to be sure, and one that may not be as popular as it was in past years. But it’s a marvelous way for the Church to be who it is and be that well even in today’s world. This is why, beginning next Sunday, we shall kick off the celebration of an entire Year of Consecrated Life.

For now, though, we will stand before you to say that, no matter how extreme it may seem, the consecrated life is a joyful one when it is lived in response to a call, an invitation to encounter eternal love in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and that’s an invitation God may well be extending to some of you here. If so, you will know what joy is when you answer. For, as Pope Francis says, “The Lord does not disappoint those who take the risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms” (no. 3).

The Lord is also here in this chapel, waiting to give himself to us in this most blessed sacrament. As we gather around the Lord’s Table, pray for us, as we do for you, that all of us might experience, again and always, the real Joy of the Gospel.

+ May God Be Blessed +