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And so it begins ... an entire year (actually 14+ months!) dedicated to the Consecrated Life. It’s rather difficult to sustain interest in anything for an entire year! Yet we should try – for this life of ours is worth celebrating as a way for the Church to be who it is and be that well in today’s world.

The foundation for this lies in *The Joy of the Gospel*, which Pope Francis issued one year ago around this time. The opening lines say it all: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (no. 1).

As consecrated religious, we have had that encounter. We have been set free, as our Founders would say, to re-print that Gospel joy and give birth anew to the Savior walking in the midst of the world.

Having recently renewed our vows as O.S.F.S., we might consider our consecrated lives this year as the antidote to what Pope Francis calls “the great danger in today's world” (no. 2) in its three forms:

To a world that suffers from “the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart,” our vow of *Chastity*, joyfully lived, shows that we have already found Him whose love alone fulfills the yearning of our lives.

Amid this world’s “feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures,” our vow of *Poverty*, joyfully lived, says that materials goods pale in comparison to the wealth of God's kingdom, where alone we can know a happiness that lasts forever.

Contrary to the “blunted conscience” that guides our world, our vow of *Obedience*, joyfully lived, demonstrates 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.

Further reflections will consider our consecrated life in light of Pope Francis’ teaching, in the hope that this Year of Consecrated Life be a time of joyful blessings for us all.
January 5, 2015

The Heartfelt Desire of Consecrated Life

A new year begins – and with it our desire for newness of life, with a prayer for world peace and maybe a resolution or two for personal growth.

That desire for renewal lies at the heart of this Year for Consecrated Life. As Pope Francis explains in his apostolic letter on this occasion, the year aims to have us look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope.

For Pope Francis, desire is a central at the intersection of these times in our lives. Desire energizes our religious consecration because it “enlarges the heart” and enables us “to discern the voice of God.”

But our desires differ from those of others. The vows we profess intend to wake up the world to the truth that the desires for material possessions or marital intimacy or personal autonomy do not, in the end, fulfill our deepest human longings. Instead, we desire God – the very God who desires so obsessively to communicate Himself to us. In this regard, what Pope Francis says to his fellow Jesuits applies equally to us: “We need to seek God in order to find him, and find him in order to seek him again and always.”

As the new year begins, we might consider again our own vocation. Recalling the desire that led us to this Oblate life, “we may ask ourselves,” as the pope asks the Augustinians, “am I anxious for God, anxious to proclaim him, to make him known? Or do I allow that spiritual worldliness to attract me which impels people to do everything for love of themselves?”

“We consecrated people,” the pope continues, “think of our personal interests, of the functionality of our works, of our careers. Eh! We can think of so many things. ... Have I, so to speak, ‘made myself comfy’ in my Christian life, in my priestly life, in my religious life, and also in my community life? Or do I retain the force of restlessness for God, for his Word that makes me ‘step out’ of myself towards others?”

Getting in touch with the primordial desire of our souls, and responding to the God who speaks in our hearts – that’s the way to true peace, and it may be our most worthwhile resolution for this New Year.

* * * * *
February 2, 2015

Communicating the Consecrated Life

The message for World Communications Day is issued each year on the feast of St. Francis de Sales. This year’s message is particularly Salesian in adopting the biblical Visitation as an icon of “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love.”

In that message, Pope Francis speaks meditatively on how “The womb which hosts us is the first ‘school’ of communication” and how “Even after we have come into the world, in some sense we are still in a ‘womb’, which is the family.” For we who are religious, an additional womb gives birth to our communications – the womb of our founders, from whom we receive our way of life. On this day in particular, when Father Brisson was born into eternal life, we would do well to reflect upon communications in our Oblate way of life.

For Pope Francis, family relationships give form to the “bond which is at the root of language, which in turn strengthens the bond.” So, too, the bond of love received from Fr. Brisson gives us the language we use both to speak about and to live in our common life.

For Pope Francis, the family is “the setting in which the most basic form of communication, which is prayer, is handed down.” So, too, Fr. Brisson has impressed upon us the legacy of the Spiritual Directory as the indispensable way of making our whole lives a continuous prayer of union with God.

For Pope Francis, “The family, where we keep loving one another despite our limits and sins … becomes a school of forgiveness.” So, too, Oblate community life teaches us the importance of daily reconciliation among the confreres with whom we are to share one accord.

For Pope Francis, the family “is an environment in which we learn to communicate in an experience of closeness … a ‘communicating community’.” To this end, he adds that “The great challenge facing us today is to learn once again how to talk to one another, not simply how to generate and consume information.” So, too, our common meals, recreation, meetings and other interactions offer us multiple ways to create that “communicating community.” To do so, however, we may have to set aside the cell phones and tablets so as actually to converse with those in our midst.

This month, as we open our houses to let the world see who we are, may we also open our minds to connect with the vision of our blessed Founder and open our hearts to encounter the person of the confrere with whom we share this consecrated life.

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March 2, 2015

The “Difference” of Consecrated Life

In his Message for Lent this year, Pope Francis rails against a “selfish attitude of indifference (that) has taken on global proportions.” Reflecting on this message, Lent offers us an opportunity to consider again the difference that our Oblate consecrated life makes.

On the universal level, the Pope speaks of the Church as a communion of saints, “not only because of her saints, but also because she is a communion in holy things: the love of God revealed to us in Christ and all his gifts” – in particular, the gift of His Word and Eucharist. Our Oblate consecrated life makes a difference here, as we believe the sacred liturgy to be “the sun of all spiritual exercises.” Lent can be our opportunity to rededicate ourselves to celebrating the liturgy with fitting solemnity.

On the local level, the Pope speaks of the Christian community in two key ways: united with the Church in heaven and engaging in the life of society. Our Oblate consecrated life make a difference at this level whenever we share the gift of that saintly tradition of our patron Francis de Sales and our founder Louis Brisson, and of all the Salesian saints. Lent can be our opportunity to rededicate ourselves to learning more about Salesian spirituality and devising new and varied ways to bring this wise and holy tradition to our world.

Finally, on the personal level, the Pope speaks of the need for individuals to engaging in a “formation of the heart” that will make it steadfast, that will let itself be pierced, and that will give itself freely to others in need. Our Oblate consecrated life makes a difference in our hearts, as we seek to live and to grow into that “world of hearts” that so dominates the viewpoint of Salesian spirituality. Lent can be our opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the Sacred Heart, even more so than we do in our monthly consecration, so that we might open our hearts to others in love.

Pope Francis reminds us all that “Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience.” Our consecrated life is a response to that voice; by our lived example, we trouble the conscience of an indifferent world. In our Oblate life, in particular, we are called to live and share our distinct Salesian charism ... it’s our way, our only way, our cherished way, to make a difference.

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April 6, 2015

How Tiring Consecrated Life Can Be

In his homily for this year’s Chrism Mass, Pope Francis spoke about the tiredness of priests. Given the vagaries of this winter, the theme is especially appropriate! And even though his homily was directed to priests, it can easily be adapted to all in religious life.

The pope highlighted several forms of this phenomenon. The first he called “the weariness of people, the weariness of the crowd.” It’s the exhaustion we face from the ecclesial work we do, especially when we couple our apostolic efforts during the week with ministerial tasks on the weekend. But, says the pope, this kind is a “good and healthy” fatigue, “a fruitful and joyful exhaustion.” It’s taxing, to be sure, but it’s valuable because we share it with the Lord whose work we are doing. It’s the weariness of St. Francis de Sales, who found himself worn out from the multiple ways in which he ministered to a great variety of people.

The second form is “the weariness of enemies.” It’s the one we face by the very life we lead, where our profession of vows clashes with a culture and society that seems more and more antithetical to religious convictions. It’s the one our founder and first confreres faced and overcame. It’s the one that calls for us to hear for ourselves and to repeat often the exhortation of Fr. Brisson: “Bon courage!”

The third form Pope Francis calls a “weariness of ourselves,” a personal dissatisfaction that sets in as a “flirting with spiritual worldliness.” It’s the sometimes nagging desire to want something else, something different, something more … or anything but what we are mired in at the moment. Fortunately, we have St. Francis de Sales’ wisdom to recall, from his letter to Madame Brûlart: “Don’t long to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are. … What is the use of building castles in Spain when we have to live in France?”

Although the pope didn’t mention this one, we might add being afflicted by a “weariness of each other.” It happens due to the variety of personalities among us, as well as the diversity of personalities, proclivities, and penchants each of us has for doing as we do. It can be exacerbated by the close proximity of the common life. Yet it is also our gift and our opportunity to fulfill the divine call to love one another, even, or especially, those in our daily midst.

Whatever the form, our weariness provides a way by which we can draw closer to the Lord in this Year of Consecrated Life. As Oblates, we do so in response to that favorite Scripture passage of our patron: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:28-29).
May 4, 2015

Challenges of the Consecrated Life

In the most recent edition of Civiltà Cattolica (4/18/15), Fr. Antonio Spadaro published an article on “Seven Challenges of the Consecrated Life According to Pope Francis” based on the Holy Father’s presentations and writings. In summary form, and a rough translation, they are listed below ... to invite further reflection!

#1. Recognize yourselves as sinners ... “confess with humility, and at the same time with great confidence in God (who is) Love, your own fragility and ... live it as the experience of the merciful love of the Lord.”

#2. Seek and find God in all things ... “Here comes into play the ability of the soul to recognize God not where our senses are in the habit of finding Him, but wherever He decides to be and to work.”

#3. Have an open thought ... “the plan of God is always greater than personal projects. The process must therefore be open; only God knows the end and the result.”

#4. Be prophets ... “Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord.”

#5. Be generative ... “(The Institute’s) spiritual doctrine is not an abstract system of ideas, an ideological scaffolding, or a ‘sack’ of truth carried on one’s shoulders; it is an ensemble of truth first experienced and then understood that gives form to a life.”

#6. Be brothers ... “community conflicts are inevitable; in a certain sense they need to happen if the community is truly living sincere and honest relationships. That’s life. ... (R)eligious fraternity, with all the possible differences, is an experience of love that goes beyond conflict.”

#7. Go on mission ... “Mission is not a successive phase with respect to the spiritual charism, nor is it a secondary expression of it. As the Church understands herself in her history and in her mission, so the charisms of Institutes of religious life are understood in their historical expression in service of the people of God on the journey. In this mission, the properly prophetic and eschatological nature of the vocation to consecrated life pushes toward the boundaries.”

And to offer a concluding image ... In religious life, “we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”
In the Salesian tradition, Trinity Sunday marks a special commemoration – symbolically and historically. The eternal relationality of Father, Son, and Spirit symbolizes the interconnection of hearts that forms St. Francis de Sales’ vision of human life and fulfillment. And on Trinity Sunday in 1610, the saint put this vision into effect through the founding of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

In his [Angelus talk on Trinity Sunday in 2014], Pope Francis pointed to the connection between the cause and the effect of Trinitarian love in the world of human hearts.

The Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen Jesus, conveys divine life to us and thus lets us enter into the dynamism of the Trinity, which is a dynamism of love, of communion, of mutual service, of sharing. A person who loves for the very joy of love is a reflection of the Trinity. A family in which each person loves and helps one another is a reflection of the Trinity. A parish in which each person loves and shares spiritual and material effects is a reflection of the Trinity.

And, we might add, a religious community in which each confrere loves and sacrifices himself and shares all things in common is a reflection of the Trinity.

As the foundation of our communitarian life, the dynamism of love that is the Holy Trinity also undergirds our apostolic activity. As Pope Francis noted in his [Angelus talk on Trinity Sunday in 2013],

The Most Holy Trinity is not the product of human reasoning but the face with which God actually revealed himself, not from the heights of a throne, but walking with humanity. It is Jesus himself who revealed the Father to us and who promised us the Holy Spirit.

Walking with one another humbly, gently, and in a hidden way that sought always and everywhere to love God is what St. Francis de Sales intended for the consecrated religious of the Visitation Order. We, Oblates, were founded, in that same Salesian vision, for the apostolic ministry of making God to be seen walking again with the humanity of our times and places.

May the Holy Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be the source and sustenance of our consecrated life and our apostolic work.

* * * * *
July 6, 2015

The Substance of the Consecrated Life

During his recent pastoral visit to Turin (on June 21-22), Pope Francis spoke to the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In that discourse he highlighted three characteristics of their Founder, whom we know to have been profoundly influenced by St. Francis de Sales. About the first of these he said:

“Don Bosco carried out his priestly mission up to his last breath, sustained by an unwavering trust in God and in His love, by which he did great things. This relationship of trust with the Lord is also the substance of consecrated life, so that service to the Gospel and to the brothers may not be a remaining prisoners of our (own) viewpoints, of the passing realities of this world, but (rather) a continual surpassing of ourselves, anchoring ourselves in external realities and immersing ourselves in the Lord, our strength and our hope.”

We, Oblates, know that such “unwavering trust” in Divine Providence is a hallmark of Salesian spirituality (“tenui nec dimittam”) as well as a characteristic virtue in the life of our blessed founder, Fr. Brisson. In this special year, it is now ours to renew in our individual and community lives.

As Oblates we remain anchored in the realities of this world, which we engage daily in the variety of our apostolic works. There we find a diversity of personal perspectives among us in terms of theological thought, political polity, social teaching, and every other subject that we hold dear precisely because it is of concern to each one of us. There, too, we see a bleak picture when we look at actuarial tables about the reality of the future.

But all these matters are transient. Whether projected or present, whether numerical or notional, they pertain to the “passing realities of this world.” The challenge we face, as much today as in the days of Don Bosco and Fr. Brisson, is to “surpass ourselves” by recognizing that this world is not all there is, that our work is not ultimately our own, that even our very lives are secondary to the life of the Lord in us.

In our Salesian tradition, what we “have taken hold of” is not our works, not our places, not our way of life. We have taken hold of Him, and are called to do so once again, “immersing ourselves” in the lone source of strength and hope that will endure when all else changes and passes away.

That relationship is the “uni-” in our “uni-diversity.” That relationship is what our consecrated life is built upon and what we share in our apostolates. That relationship is what will sustain us wherever the future takes us, just as it did for our saintly patrons and protectors.
August 3, 2015

The Time of Consecrated Life

During his recent pastoral visit to South America (on July 5-13), Pope Francis spent much of his time – four speeches, in all – speaking to clergy, religious, and seminarians. In that time, he spoke about time and its connection to what we do as ministers of the Gospel.

Taken in isolation, he said two rather curious things. In Ecuador he told his listeners that “No moment belongs to us.” It was an indictment against losing patience and succumbing to the tiredness that serving others brings to us. But service is our happy lot in the consecrated life; and, as the pope added, when we remain convinced that everything in life is a gift – even the tasks we are given – then we can soldier on “to serve when we are tired, and to serve when people tire us.”

In Bolivia he spoke about “the spirituality of zapping” – an odd turn of phrase which he likened to the response of those disciples who “passed by” Bartimeaus, indifferent to him and deaf to his shouts. The pope explained it as an approach to the spiritual life that “is always on the move, but it has nothing to show for it.” It’s the response of one who has no time to be touched by those in need. It comes from a “heart used to passing by without letting itself be touched: a life which passes from one thing to the next, without ever sinking roots in the lives of the people around us …”

Considering the sheer number of items we have on our to-do lists, the appointments we must keep, the deadlines we must meet, and the never-ending interruptions that turn into yet more tasks to be completed, “zapping” may sometimes appear to be our only viable option for getting things done!

Another Francis has also noted that the apostolic life is not a matter of speed nor of the quantity of good works. Our patron saint reminds us, as he did St. Jane de Chantal, that over-eager haste can cause us to get all knotted up. For this reason, he counsels her (and us) to that simplicity that seeks only to live each day well: “Let us keep going all the time; however slowly we get on, we shall still make plenty of way” (Selected Letters, p. 120).

The speakers are worlds apart and the contexts quite different. But the message to us who are consecrated to service in the Church remains the same. As we reflect upon all that we have to do, and the little time that we have to do it, humility challenges us to remember that even time does not belong to us; gentleness beckons us to see even what is bothersome as a gratuitous gift from God; and charity calls us to “keep to the road and finish the journey” (Treatise I:7) … no matter how long it takes to get there!

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Today in the USA we celebrate Labor Day. As consecrated religious, our labor is not primarily economic but spiritual. As Oblates, our work is the spread of our distinctly Salesian charism in the apostolic endeavors in which we are engaged.

Last week, Pope Francis spoke about the importance of charism to members of the apostolic movement known as the Schoenstatt Fathers. To participants in their general chapter, he said:

“You know that a charism is not a museum piece, which remains intact in a showcase, to be contemplated and nothing more. Fidelity, to keep the charism pure, in no way means to close it up in a sealed bottle, as if it were distilled water, so that it would not be contaminated by the outside. No, the charism is not preserved by holding it apart. It needs to be opened and allowed to go out, so that it enters into contact with reality, with persons, with their anxieties and problems. And thus, in this fecund encounter with reality, the charism grows, is renewed and the reality is also transformed; it is transfigured by the spiritual force that such a charism bears in itself.”

In what remains of this Year of Consecrated Life, we might consider what we “do” with our charism. Do we leave it locked away in dusty books that sit on a library shelf? Do we seek to learn more about our patrons and founders, what they meant by our charism, and how they lived it out? Do we adapt and apply that charism in our personal and apostolic situations? Do we share that charism, directly, with those with whom we labor?

We know, from our own experience and from what others tells us, that the Salesian charism has much to offer to the contemporary world. Its “everyday” approach to spiritual growth responds well to both the mundane realities and the personal challenges that we and others face. And the sanctity of our patrons shows clearly that it works!

The Salesian charism proposes a distinctive way to encounter God. This celebratory year offers us an opportunity to guide others along that same way. As persons consecrated to this encounter and commissioned to disseminate this charism, may we labor, once again, to wake up the world to the spiritual treasure that is our heritage!
During his apostolic journey to the USA, Pope Francis spoke of many things. One of the more delightful, and repeated, references was to dreaming.

His invocation of Martin Luther King received a welcome ovation in the Congress: “I am happy that America continues to be, for many, a land of ‘dreams’. Dreams which lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people.” He also referred to King’s famous dream at the school in Harlem, where he reminded the children: “It is beautiful to have dreams and to be able to fight for our dreams. Don’t ever forget this.”

He reminded the bishops in Philadelphia that a good pastor “watches over the dreams” of his flock. And he told the prisoners in Philadelphia that even God dreams, that Jesus came to give all human beings “the life which the Father always dreamed of” for them.

At the Festival of Families he recalled Joseph’s dream in the Gospel to build a home for his family, which was interrupted by the divine plan of the Incarnation. Here we see the pope’s reason for referencing the dream world, a sacred realm where the divine can be revealed: “God always knocks on the doors of our hearts. He likes to do that. He goes out from within.”

Fr. Brisson, whose feast we celebrate this month, also had dream. He foresaw for himself a solitary life directing sisterly souls and working on his inventive projects. The Good Mother interrupted that vision with her own dream of what became our religious congregation. From within her dream came a persistent knocking on the door of Fr. Brisson’s will. Fortunately for us, he answered!

Each of us also dreams. Our vocation to the consecrated life entails a vision: of our relationships to Jesus, of our common life with one another, of our apostolic work in the Church. Realizing that dream is our lifelong project. Recalling that first dream, of seeing and hearing the Lord call us to this life, is the constant memory that inspires our future. As Pope Francis said at the International Congress for Consecrated Young People, “In dark moments, in moments of temptation, in difficult moments of our consecrated life, return to the sources, remember and recall the astonishment we felt when the Lord looked at us. The Lord looked at me … Memory.”

So in this Year of Consecrated Life … dream on!

* * * * *
In his 2014 “meditation’ for the Memorial of the Presentation of Mary, Pope Francis pondered how much the Temple scene had changed between the time of the twelve year-old Jesus who conversed with the elders and the later-in-life Jesus who lashes out against the desecration of his Father’s house.

A similar reflection might do us well as we prepare to celebrate the annual custom of renewing our vows this November.

The impetuous child seated before the religious authorities of his day has grown in wisdom and grace to become a learned, indeed revolutionary, teacher. Through continuing education as we age, are we growing in understanding the ways of the Lord and in zeal for our apostolic life in the Church?

The young man who ventured out from the Temple precincts encountered many along His way; some he helped and healed, while many others remained indifferent to him or even hostile to his ministry. We have certainly interacted with scores of people in our various apostolates, and continue to encounter new faces along the way. Do we seek, still, not our own benefit or comfort, but to help and to heal those in need by our words and our deeds? Do we remain humble and gentle in the face of opposition to our works?

Returning to the Temple as His life draws to its close, Jesus seeks again to be in the presence of His Father and to commune with Him in the Spirit of prayer, there in what is to be a sacred space. At whatever stage we find ourselves on the spectrum of this life, do we now yearn more passionately for our own union with God? Do we come to our Temples – our sacred times and spaces – with greater fervor for the spiritual life to which we have been called by our Father?

Things certainly changed for Jesus since His first visit to the Temple. While we’ve renewed our vows any number of times, things have changed for us, too, in the years since our first professions. In this Year of Consecrated Life we are invited to an even deeper renewal of our religious commitment and of our zeal for the Lord. Recalling the simplicity and devotion of May, and coming again into our Father’s house, let us seek the grace to purify our own lives, so that we might draw nearer to the One to whom we have given our lives as Oblates.

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With the beginning of Advent this year comes a special time – the Jubilee of Mercy. Overlapping the Year of Consecrated Life (which does not officially close until February 2, 2016), the Jubilee Year invites us who are religious to ponder the place that mercy has in the consecrated life. Clearly, mercy is a divine gift for all, something everyone needs and seeks and can benefit from. But for us, there’s more. Consecrated to the Lord of Mercy, our life and our work aim to share that mercy with the world.

But before we can be models of mercy, before we become dispensers of that divine disposition, we must first be on the receiving end. Our patron emphasizes this with his insistence on humility as a signature virtue in the Salesian tradition. As he writes in the Introduction to the Devout Life, “a lively consideration of graces received makes us humble because knowledge of them begets gratitude for them” (III:5).

Advent provides the liturgical time to position ourselves in gratitude for God’s gift of Himself to the world and to receive that merciful grace anew as we prepare for the coming of Christ again. The exercise of examining our conscience offers us the means to do this well.

In a recent address to participants in a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the decrees from the Second Vatican Council concerning the life of clergy, Pope Francis asks a revealing question suitable also for our Advent examination as religious:

if the Lord were to return today, where would he find me? “Where your treasure is, there will your heart also be” (Matt 6:21). And where is my heart? In the midst of people, praying with and for people, co-involved with their joys and sufferings, or more so in the midst of the things of this world, in earthly affairs, in my private “spaces”? A priest cannot have a private space, because he is always either with the Lord or with people. I think of those priests I knew in my city, when there was no answering machine, but they slept with the phone at their bedside, and at whatever hour people would call, they got up to give an anointing: no one died without the sacraments! Not even in rest did they have a private space. This is apostolic zeal. The answer to the question – where is my heart? – can help any priest orient his live and his ministry toward the Lord.

This Advent, as we reflect upon that coming of the Messiah into our hearts (what Fr. Brisson referred to as His second coming), the pope’s question can open that personal door to the place where we stand most in need of divine mercy. Grateful for this divine gift, which is incarnated for the whole world at Christmas, we can then zealously share that mercy with all those to whom we minister.
A Resolution for the Consecrated Life

Once again Pope Francis has made headlines for an unscripted question-and-answer session he held with young people on the last day of 2015. In this case, when he spoke with an association of choir singers, he freely admitted that he can’t hold a tune. “If I were to sing,” he told them, “it would seem like a donkey!”

The pope’s spontaneity, and humility, render his conversations quite endearing. His grandfatherly approach comes across as always charming. But for all that, it’s still the Holy Father who speaks. Realizing this, we might consider how three things he said to those youngsters apply also to us, and serve as an inspiring way to draw the Year of Consecrated Life nearer to its close.

Pope Francis reminded the group that singing is the method by which mothers lull children to sleep, that simple tunes engender in all of us a sense of tranquility and joy. Leading them in an Augustinian chant, he implored them to remember always to “sing and walk.” In our consecrated life, sacred song is all around us: in the seasons of the year, in the Psalms of the Office, in the celebration of Mass. As we continue to walk on our way as religious, the songs we carry within offers us a profound source of spiritual accompaniment.

Following upon this idea, Pope Francis admitted to having made just one New Year’s resolution: to pray more. This, he said, is the first duty of a bishop. Then he invited them – and by extension, us – to do the same. From the joy of soulful song, it follows that seeking deeper communion with Him who is the source of that joy would be a beneficial beginning to the new year.

Strengthened by this resolve, he concluded with encouraging words to those young people who may be in fear of their future. He made it clear to them that the troubles of the world, the wars that are being fought everywhere, reflect a perennial battlefield, where good and evil, the devil and God, wage war within every one of us. While it is commonplace to see all that is bad, the Holy Father encouraged them with the reminder that what is holy may be hidden but goodness is certainly there all around us. They (and we) need only look for it.

The inner tranquility of song, the supernatural desire of prayer, the enduring power of the good – three spontaneous thoughts for the young that may well inspire us who are not so young! These certainly inspired the “wise” ones whose visit we remember at this time of year. The Magi traveled at great effort in order to pay homage to the newborn king. Following their celebrated encounter, they then went quietly home. Perhaps they sung to themselves along the long route back. Presumably they were touched by their prayerful encounter with the divine. Hopefully it affected them for good throughout the rest of their lives.

May the same be true for us in 2016 and beyond.
And now it ends. The fourteen-month Year of Consecrated Life closes tomorrow (Feb 2), on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. This day will be celebrated as the 20th World Day of Consecrated Life. On it, we Oblates also remember the anniversary of the death of our founder, Fr. Brisson.

What message Pope Francis will speak tomorrow remains to be seen. What effect this Year as had, on us and on the Church, likewise awaits. But if we continue to base our reflections on the pope’s words, his recent discourse to a seminary community offers an observation at once simple and profound. One thought there may serve well as a summation of our mission as consecrated religious in the Salesian tradition.

Pope Francis exhorted the group to reject the “temptation” to “normality” or the worldview that a “normal” life suffices. “Instead,” he said, “for us ‘normality’ is pastoral holiness, the gift of life.” And he warned that if one chooses simply to be a normal person, he will be only “mediocre … or worse.”

This call to holiness, what lies at the root of any consecrated life, is especially pertinent for us and the charism that shapes our life and work. A defining feature of our Salesian spirituality is its “everyday-ness.” Our patron saint extolled the ordinary tasks and routines of life as providing the opportunities to be virtuous. Our founder bore witness to the sanctification of labor in service of the basic needs of others. And how often do we hear from people, positively, that the Oblates are “real” and “down-to-earth” and even “blue collar” in their approach to the spiritual life.

Yet this is not the same as being normal. While we may, indeed, be called to do ordinary things, we are likewise challenged to do them extraordinarily well … not as a matter of quality, or a degree of aptitude, but in the extraordinariness that pertains to the realm of the sacred. What our Salesian consecration demands of us is a way of living that transforms the ways of the world into the ways of holiness.

We seek to live humbly, “normal” in our shared human fallibility. We seek to live gently, “normal” in our common human relations with others. We seek to live simply, “normal” in our bearing and our words and our lifestyles.

Yet we can never be normal! Not so long as we aim to live a Devout Life by doing good carefully and frequently and promptly. Not so long as we give our lives entirely to this religious congregation and to our particular spiritual charism. Called to transform the “normal” into what is super-natural, in every aspect of our life and our work, we will best be who we are when we are extraordinary … when we consecrate, or make holy, all that we think and say and do.

That transformation is what attracted us (and will attract others) to this way of life. That conversion is what the Lord asks of us continually. That devotion is the “eminent charity” lived by Salesian saints. Now, as the Year of Consecrated Life ends, it is our turn to live extraordinary lives!