

Homily delivered by Father Oliver CSSR at the Mass for Religious of Hexham and Newcastle

This Homily was given in St Mary's Cathedral on the Feast of the Presentation 2nd February 2008 and is reproduced here with Fr Oliver's kind permission.

Over twenty years ago we had a General Visitation from Rome to our Province from our Father General. There was a great deal of interest from my colleagues as to what he might say to us. But I don't think anyone expected him to say what he did say. He said "My dear colleagues, you have two choices: Renew or die!"

Fortunately, we renewed and lived another day.

But twenty years on, it seems the message to Consecrated Life is almost similar if not the same. Many people ask "Is there any fire in these ashes?" And we must believe there is.

The recent death of John O'Donohue¹ has sparked renewed interest in what he wrote and said. In 2004 he was interviewed on BBC Radio3 by Joan Bakewell. He spoke of the experience of "Nothing there". When he got up in the morning he sometimes felt there was nothing there for the future of his ministry . . . nothing there for the future of the ministry of the Church; there was nothing there for the future of his own life. But he said "I don't look upon this absence as an invitation to close my account with God. I see it as a challenge."

And the greatest resource or challenge Consecrated Life has is the "community of charisms". The different approaches, the different perspectives, the different emphasis. Someone once described a charism as a "fire in the eye of God which has focused ours".

It is often said that "the prophetic element" of Consecrated Life is its salvation. That ability in a secular age to raise questions in people's lives: why do people live like this? What are they committing themselves to? Is this what living is about?

¹ John O'Donohue died on January 3rd, 2008 peacefully in his sleep. He was 53. His book "Anam Cara" was a first introduction to Celtic Spirituality for many people.

Consecrated Life has so many incentives to keep this prophetic element alive:

- being a community of prayer
- being a community of persons
- being a community of apostolate
- being a community of conversion
- being an open community

When the Christian Brothers were leaving Sunderland two years ago, they were speaking about their future – a future without their apostolate, Education. They spoke of accompanying so many people in the search, or the journey that so many people are on today, the search for meaning, the search for Truth, the search for belonging.

Many people in Consecrated Life are used to not just evangelising but being evangelised by the very people we seek to evangelise. One of my colleagues illustrated this when he said that, on a Parish Mission, someone came to him to ask his advice. And he said the gentleman spoke for 20 minutes without interruption. My colleague was forming in his mind some advice to offer the gentleman when and if he got the chance. But at the end of the 20 minutes the gentleman said; "Now, that's my story; that's my situation and I can tell you that you have been most helpful". And he got up and left. My colleague commented afterwards: "I never said a word". The listening was what that gentleman needed at that time.

Consecrated Life has so many other incentives to keep alive the prophetic element: for years Religious have tried to help people reconnect with their faith; and what has happened in the meantime is happening on the other side of things; the number of people joining the Church! That is where the action is! That is where it is happening.

We have so many incentives but we have also got this feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Simeon has the face of Christ revealed to him . . . the Light of the World.

If in anything we do, if in everything we do, we attempt to show the face of Christ to each other and to whoever crosses our path . . . then there is certainly fire in these ashes.