

Maastricht, November 2014

Dear Sisters in Belgium, Brazil, East Indonesia, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Tanzania, Timor Leste, the USA and Vietnam,

A very warm greeting from your General Board!

Celebrating special feast days helps bring the liturgical life of the church into our life and helps us to build and strengthen our lives as a community of faith. It is a way to make the celebrations of the Church and the communion of saints a vibrant living thing for us all.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, the Church gives special honour to Saint Charles Borromeo who is known as the loving reformer of the Church and the patron of learning and the arts. He achieved a position of great power when still very young and used it with humility, personal sanctity and unselfishness to reform the Church of the evils and abuses that were rampant among the clergy and the nobles of his times. He cared about people and wanted them to know that the Church of God cared about them, too. His changes and reforms in the way the Church was organized, changed the way the Church listened to the people – to all of them, not just the rich and powerful.

In one of his homilies he said:

*“Would you like me to teach you how to grow from virtue to virtue and how, if you are already recollected at prayer, you can be even more attentive next time, and so give God more pleasing worship? Listen, and I will tell you. If a tiny spark of God’s love already burns within you, do not expose it to the wind, for it may get blown out. Keep the stove tightly shut so that it will not lose its heat and grow cold. In other words, avoid distractions as well as you can. Stay quiet with God. Do not spend your time in useless chatter.”* (Saint Charles Borromeo, Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis, Mediolani 1599, 1177-1178).

St Charles Borromeo accepted that all human beings have shortcomings, but if we want help, God has given us the means to find it easily. According to him these means are penance, prayer, the avoidance of evil discussions and harmful and dangerous friendships. He also emphasized the importance of meditation before, during and after everything we do. St Paul said, *“I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand.”* 1 Corinthians 14: 15). St Charles Borromeo advised us to meditate on what we are doing. In other words, to be attentive to the presence of God and to truly observe how we do, think, feel, and behave.

In relation to this, we could reflect on three reasons why we need to do so. *Firstly*, we will be able to change ourselves, to adapt and grow in maturity. Therefore, self-awareness and humility are very

essential. It seems easy. But, how often do we wake up and say, “How I reacted yesterday was ridiculous, I need to change that”?

*Secondly*, we will be able to recognize the value of other people. We will give them a listening ear, respect, courtesy, and total concentration. This means paying attention to others, not just listening to our own needs and desires. We become more empathic and compassionate to others. *Thirdly*, we will be able to give genuine contemplation to God's Word and His call to respond to others. In the Scripture the word for ‘contemplate’ is ‘behold’, which means to gaze upon. King David wrote that the one thing He wanted more than anything else was to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord (cf. Psalm 27: 4). This is one of the more difficult spiritual disciplines because it requires that we stop trying to perform, trying to learn, trying to do, and simply ‘be’ in God’s presence instead, loving Him and allowing Him to love us back. We deeply need this, for, through it, we experience God’s love or, as St Paul wrote in Romans 1: 5, “*God has poured out His love into our hearts.*”

The quotation above is similar to an illustration that compares Religious community with a bright fire coming from a tiny spark of love of God in each of us. Perhaps the fire that each of us has, is not big enough to drive out the darkness. Therefore, we need each other. Just like if there are several coals together then a fire grows in warmth and brightness. But if those coals separate, they more quickly lose their warmth and brightness and the fire can go

out. The same goes for a religious who prays. Living a life of faith is more difficult when one is alone. But together, our faith is strengthened as we encourage and support each other. We can learn from each other, pray together and share our joys and difficulties.

How true this is when we look at our life as religious in this era of globalization and secularization. Compared to some years ago, our numbers are not plenty. The number of candidates who want to learn about religious life, has also been decreased. Vowed life has become less attractive when compared to the various ways of life that our modern society offers people. One can passionately be involved in different kinds of works of mission without being a member of a religious congregation. Religious life has been set to the margin. Sometimes we feel alienated from society e.g. when we go to public places such as a supermarket, government offices or when we travel by public transportation. But how often do we not experience God's love through others, especially through strangers willing to communicate with us and, all the more, as they share their personal stories with us, notwithstanding the fact that we have only met them for the first time? We often hear people say: *"There is something interesting in you, I do not know what, but I believe you are a person who is close to God"*. Isn't this a tiny spark of God's love burning in our hearts?

St Charles Borromeo was not saying we should isolate ourselves from everyone when he said: "*Keep the stove tightly shut so it will not lose its heat.*" He was saying that coming together protects the precious gift of faith, the gift of prayer and the gift of vocation which the world – full of discouragement, infatuated with violence, and lacking in light and love - is so eager to extinguish. He said: "Avoid '*useless chatter*'." When we do that, we will have time for meaningful conversations. When love grows in our hearts and overcomes our self-centeredness, we can really communicate with people. We experience this in community life, during gatherings, shared meals, when we get together to have fun and surely also on different occasions when we meet different kinds of people: our parents, relatives, co-workers, mission partners, students, patients, parishioners, etc.

Dear Sisters, most of us probably will say that we have been practising all that I mentioned above. But, St Charles Borromeo reminded us to "*be even more attentive next time*". Thus, why don't we do so? Let us radiate the gift of prayer and vocation to all people. Let us share the great love of God in our daily life with joy, freely, faithfully and fruitfully. Therefore, in line with Pope Francis, the Congregation invites each of you to participate in welcoming and celebrating the YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE all over the world.

*“I want to say one word to you and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always joy!”* says Pope Francis in his circular letter, *Rejoice!* It is a letter addressed to consecrated men and women published by the Holy See in preparation for the Year of Consecrated life. This year will begin on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, which is a special day of prayer dedicated to those living the religious life. The events will conclude on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council decree “*Perfectae Caritatis*” on the renewal of religious life which takes place on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. With the theme **“Wake up the world!”** – inspired by Pope Francis’ call to action to men and women religious—the logo celebrates and promotes consecrated life.

The objectives are derived from *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, the Apostolic Letter of John Paul II in 2001, article #1 where all of us are invited to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever”* (*Heb. 13: 8*).

The Year of Consecrated Life will focus on:

- 1) Renewal for men and women in consecrated life,
- 2) Thanksgiving among the faithful for the service of sisters, brothers, priests, and nuns,
- 3) Invitation to young Catholics to consider a religious vocation

Dear Sisters, this Year of Consecrated life given to us by Pope Francis is an opportunity to rediscover the importance of religious life. How do we take part in this movement? Principally, let us resolve to offer extra prayers for consecrated persons in our country and dioceses. We will no doubt pray more effectively if we know them. There are several programmes/activities to be undertaken, during this fifteen-months period wherein we are invited to celebrate this year. Among the possibilities are:

- a. We could use Pope Francis' circular letter "Rejoice" as a reference for personal, communal and institutional spiritual reading and reflection as we journey towards 2015.
- b. We could organize special programmes for the launch (November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014) and the conclusion (February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016) of this year.
- c. Every Area could organize one Seminar and at least one day of recollection on the theme: "Wake up the world".
- d. Every Area could organize at least two special programmes during this year to highlight the need and importance of consecrated life in the Church.
- e. Every Area should take upon themselves the task to organize retreats/recollections/seminars /workshops and other programmes related to the theme, particularly for youth.

- f. Every Area could encourage the sisters to reflect and write down her reflection highlighting the charism of the Congregation and/or articles on Consecrated Life and circulate these with as many people as possible.
- g. In cooperation with other religious congregations to organize renewal programs for the younger members of the Congregation.

*May the Name of the Lord be blessed forever and ever. Amen.*

**Happy Easter Day to you all!**