

1. The Good and Bad News about Religious Life

One of our Bishops was recently addressing a rather huge gathering of representatives from all over his diocese. This was how he began his talk: "My dear people, I have a good news and a bad news to share with you. The good news is that we are going to build a new Cathedral; the plan and budget for the Cathedral is already prepared. I can assure you that it is going to be, perhaps, one of the most beautiful Cathedrals, you have ever seen. Now the bad news is this: the budget we prepared is quite expensive; we need a lot of money and all the money needed for the construction of this Cathedral is now in your hands." This was the good and bad news he was sharing with his people.

Similarly, when I think of religious men and women I also have some good news and some bad news to share with you. Don't be afraid, I am not going to ask for any money. The good news about the religious is this: In India we have at present over one hundred thousand religious; to be precise they are, according to the latest statistics, 15086 men and 85344 women religious belonging to 307 congregations. It is really heartening that all these religious are actively engaged in various ministries, such as, proclamation, evangelization, family apostolate, education, health care, social service, freedom struggle and so on. Thank God, a good majority of these religious men and women i.e, almost 75 percent of them are contented, happy in their religious life and find satisfaction in their ministry.

Now the bad news, especially about religious women, is this: five percent of the nuns in India feel very strongly that they are not properly recognized, always rejected in their communities and completely unhappy in their religious life. Another twenty percent of the nuns in India feel that they are occasionally unaccepted and therefore often unhappy and frustrated. Fourteen of these unhappy sisters committed suicide inside their religious houses in the past nine years. Cases of eloping of the sisters are also on the rise. All these are not only bad news, but also very shocking. Due to these occasional scandals coming from religious houses, an anti-religious feeling is growing in the society. The media is very interested today in exaggerating these scandals and questions even the relevance of religious life today. The people blindly believe all that is told by the media and think that most of the religious are hypocrites. This is indeed a bad news and it calls for our serious attention and constant vigilance.

A good majority of the religious sisters are happy and as we have heard in today's Gospel, together with Jesus, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. At the same time a small percentage is unhappy and frustrated. Where do you belong? "We belong to the happy group of sisters". This is what you are declaring publicly by making this final profession. After due evaluation, your superiors are today confirming this declaration. We are all proud of you and we extend our sincere congratulations to you. We wish and pray that you be faithful to the vows you make today, and be always happy in your consecrated life.

Now does your final profession give you any guarantee that you will always belong to this happy group of sisters? Don't you have anything to do with the small percentage of unhappy sisters in your communities? In fact they are all pointing their accusing fingers at the majority of the happy sisters saying that these are the ones who don't give them due recognition and acceptance.

2. Importance of Community in Religious Life

Therefore it is not enough that you live a contented life and exercise your ministry to your full satisfaction. You are bound to create an impression in all other members of your religious community

that they are all accepted, recognized and loved. Nobody should feel rejected and unwanted because of your attitude and behaviour. In fact, you cannot be happy unless you try your best to make all others happy. You should remember that the religious community is not a mere organization i.e, a casual coming together of different persons, but it is an organism. St. Paul teaches us very clearly what this organism is: "for just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body..." (1. Cor. 12, 12). This is what we mean when we say that the religious community is an organism. And therefore as St. Paul instructs us, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'. On the contrary the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honourable we invest with greater honour. If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (1Cor. 12, 21-26). Only those who consciously try to cultivate this organic unity in religious communities can be happy in their religious life.

Integration of every members into the body of the community is the essence of religious life. Without this integration there is no religious life. At the same time this integration is not an easy task. There are no two persons hundred percent identical in everything. Each person is unique. The character, personality and talents of one person is different from other. Hence conflicts and incompatibility are inevitable in religious houses. It happens in every community life including families. There must be some internal mechanism by which conflicts are resolved and community life is made pleasant. What is this mechanism?

Very often religious superiors resolve problems of their communities by resorting to transfers. Among the members also there is a tendency to ask for transfers when confronted with difficulties. Now we are realizing more and more that transfers are easy and momentary solutions and often they are dangerous both to the persons, who are transferred and to the community to which they are transferred.

For example, take the case of Cardinal Law, former Archbishop of Boston. He was a holy man and was widely known as a very good administrator. Certain priests in his Archdiocese who were having tendencies of pedophilia were giving him constant headache. The Cardinal thought of solving the problem by transferring these priests from one parish to another. What actually happened was that together with these priests their problems were also transferred. Thus one priest alone spoiled 130 children in different parishes. People began to accuse the Cardinal and he was forced to resign. To settle the various court cases the Archdiocese had to pay 85 million dollars i.e., more that 425 crores of rupees to the victims and the Archdiocese thereby became bankrupt.

In our families too we have problems. But we don't think of transfers. Everyone knows that there is an organic unity in the families. The relationship that exists among the members of a family is intimate and permanent. Therefore even when there are differences we don't try to break up relationship and get away from other members of the family, but we try our level best to sort out these differences and bring about a radical cure.

There was a time when similar intimacy and permanence were existing in the religious communities. People were entering the convent with the knowledge that they have to be there for life. Initial conflicts and clashing of personalities were there in every community. As it happens in our families, all these conflicts were gradually resolved by being together for a long time, by proper understanding and necessary adjustments.

Now somehow, the situation and mentality have changed. Everyone who enters a convent knows that she is there for some functional purpose and for a limited period. The moment she is fed up with other members of the community, she has the possibility of asking for a transfer or the superiors themselves will see to that. The criteria generally followed today for transfers are efficiency or trouble shooting. Transfers are done to place people in suitable jobs and for getting rid of troubles. But instead of solving problems such transfers only serve to aggravate problems, pushing the problem under the

carpet for a while and transferring the problem from one place to another. In this process very often the importance of community life, the building up of relations and growing in perfection, which are the essence of religious life are forgotten.

According to a famous psychologist (Elizabeth Herlock) three things are needed to make a good community; they are acceptance, affection and achievement. These three words can easily be misunderstood. Acceptance doesn't mean acceptance of ourselves by others, but it means our own acceptance of the present situation, the present community we are in, the present circumstances, however hard it may be. Similarly affection doesn't mean the love we get from others, but the pain we take and the sacrifice we offer to express our love for Jesus and for our companions. Now if there is such an acceptance and affection, there will automatically be achievement. More than all the wonderful things we accomplish, what we mean by this achievement is the happiness we derive from our religious life. So to belong to the group of happy religious above all what is needed is a correct understanding of community life and a steady growth in it.

3. Need of Accepting Corrections in Religious Life

Secondly to be a happy religious what I would like to advise you is that you should be always open for corrections. In the Gospels we see Jesus meeting a rich young man. This rich young man was full of himself and not open for correction and therefore he lost a great opportunity. He came to Jesus in search of the Kingdom of God, that is, in search of happiness. Jesus first instructed him to obey the commandments. Now from his childhood onwards he was very faithful to all the prescriptions of the law. He was literally obeying all commandments. He thought that Jesus would praise him and set him as a model to every body. But Jesus looked into his eyes and said: "You have still one defect; one thing you still lack" (Luk 18,22).

What would be your spontaneous reaction if someone tells you, "you have one defect; there is something lacking in you". We generally don't like such observations. We would challenge them and justify ourselves dismissing their observation as mere imaginations. The reason is that we don't like corrections and we are not open to it. This is what the rich young man did and he lost thereby a great opportunity of becoming an apostle of Jesus. Jesus said to him: "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me. But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich" (Lk. 18, 22-23). In the Gospel we read that he became sad. His reluctance to accept corrections takes away even the little happiness he had. He thought the hoarding of riches and the magical observance of all the stipulations of the law were his merits and plus points. Now the very merits in his own eyes become his defects in the eyes of Jesus; what he thought his plus points were nothing but his minus points in the eyes of Jesus.

Unlike this rich young man today by means of the three vows you are publicly expressing your readiness to sell all that you have for the treasurer of God's Kingdom and for possessing Jesus. In the words of St. Paul today you solemnly declare: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3, 7-8).

It is easy to make such beautiful statements, profess your vows here in the church on this day of your final profession. But when you try to put them into practice in your daily life it is going to be difficult. Everything is not over with the final profession; you are only starting your religious life. You are not made perfect by this final profession; you are only entering the path to perfection. Till the end of your life you will be facing continuous resistance from your self, from the world you are living in, tempting you to go astray from the vows you are pronouncing here today. You have to live your vows everyday. At every moment of your life you will be listening to the voice of Jesus inviting you to be open to correction; "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have". You will be going on hearing

this voice, this invitation through your conscience, through your superiors and through the members of your community. You should not be full of yourselves like the rich young man. You should be humble enough to accept this invitation, examine yourselves and open to correction. Be always humble as St. Paul exhorts us and you should not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think (cf. Rom. 12, 3). "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2, 3-4).

My dear Sisters, the religious life today is indeed going through a crisis. Let us not be discouraged and disappointed. Our message to the world, as Mahatma Gandhi said, is our own life. A happy religious life is an inspiring witness and a fitting answer to the false propaganda that is going on around us. I was trying to tell you that due importance given to community and openness to correction makes your life happy. The happiness you radiate everywhere is the light that shines in you. In today's Gospel Jesus is calling you the light of the world. Let us try our best to live up to this vocation. As Jesus himself expects from each and everyone of you, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father, who is in Heaven" (Mt. 5, 16). God bless you.