

At the School of Mary, Consecrated in Virginity: With Free, Total, Faithful and Fruitful Love

On May 8, 2013, in his talk to the International Union of Superiors General, Pope Francis spoke about the unique gift that religious women bring to the Church by saying: *“What would the Church be without you? She would lack maternity, affection, tenderness! A Mother’s intuition.”* Also on February 2, 2014, the World Day for Consecrated Life, the Pope said, *“Nuns are a gift, the leaven that carries the message of Christ.”*

Pope Francis’ words of affirmation to religious women echo what Blessed John Paul II wrote in his letter to women in 1995: *“From the heart of the Church there have emerged women of the highest calibre who have left an impressive and beneficial mark in history. I think of the great line of woman martyrs, Saints and famous mystics... And how can we overlook the many women, inspired by faith, who were responsible for initiatives of extraordinary social importance, especially in serving the poorest of the poor?”* In the same letter Blessed John Paul II also thanked consecrated women for following the greatest of women, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who opened herself with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God’s love.

In a few weeks we are going to celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation, the feast of the wedding of the Holy Spirit with our humanity through Mary. As Caryll Houselander wrote in *The Reed of God*, *“It is in Our Lady that God fell in love with humanity.”* In the story of the Annunciation, Mary gives us a living example of the four qualities of the true spousal love that Blessed John Paul II introduced in his teaching on the Theology of the Body. From Blessed John Paul II’s perspective, the real love is not complete if it is not **Free, Total, Faithful, and Fruitful**.

Here I would like to mention more explicitly how these four elements of real love are present in our vocation as women consecrated in virginity for the sake of the Kingdom.

1) The love of our consecration in virginity is Free. Our vocation as consecrated women is a response to the One who not only freely chose to be one with us in the Incarnation, but also by offering His life for us on the Cross. We see this element of Jesus choosing to love us and to lay down His life for us freely emphasized in the Gospel of John 10:17-18: *“This is why the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down on My own [...].”* Similarly, at the Annunciation, the angel departed only after Mary offered her Fiat freely to what was presented to her by God through the angel Gabriel.

2) Total love: from the story of the Annunciation, we learn from the Blessed Virgin Mary that true love has to be total. Her yes was without condition or reservation because her love was total. As Blessed Mother Teresa said, *“Intense love does not measure; it just gives.”* It was this love that led the Blessed Virgin Mary to surrender with complete and absolute trust to the will of the Father. Mary was to give God her body and soul totally. Through her Fiat, Mary teaches us to surrender all that we are to the invitation of God’s love to all of humanity. Just as His love was incarnated through her, as religious women we are called to love totally like His Holy Mother in order that our lives may bear and bring His love into the world as she did. Blessed John Paul II emphasized the depth of such a total love in his apostolic letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women by saying: *“This [yes] cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because virginity is not restricted to a mere ‘no’, but contains a profound ‘yes’ in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner.”*

3) Faithful love: fidelity to our vocation means to embrace Jesus' life from the Annunciation to His Ascension. It is a journey of living the experience of dying and rising to new life, the paschal mystery in daily living. It is a daily invitation to surrender to the will of God in our life and to live the paschal mystery of Christ with faithful love just like Mary did. She offered her Fiat at the foot of the Cross just as she did at the moment of the Annunciation. She continues to do so today by embracing her motherhood for the Church and all humanity through her presence and unceasing intercession. It is the same for us religious women to live out our vocation with the same fidelity from the first moment of our consecration until the end of our lives. As Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta expressed this fidelity in her words to the newly ordained priests: *"Celebrate each Mass as if it is your first Mass, your last Mass and your only Mass."*

4) Fruitfulness: Blessed John Paul II in his writing on the vocation of women wrote, *"For virginity does not deprive a woman of her prerogatives. Spiritual motherhood takes on many different forms. In the life of consecrated women, for example, who live according to the charism and the rules of the various apostolic Institutes, it can express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the edges of society. In this way a consecrated woman finds her Spouse, different and the same in each and every person, according to His very words: 'As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me' (Mt 25:40)."* It is the same in the Blessed Mother's life and example, who through her yes became a Mother of all humanity. In the Middle East, I witnessed how Christians and Muslims alike trust in her motherly heart and invoke her intercession, especially in times of need. The fruitfulness of her vocation didn't end with Jesus' Ascension to Heaven. She continues to mother Jesus' Mystical Body here on earth by being the Mother of the universal Church.

The Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us religious women, that the number of spiritual children that we serve throughout our vocational path doesn't define the fruitfulness of our vocation and spiritual motherhood. Mary's pierced heart, at the moment of Jesus' Presentation in the temple, losing Him at the temple, feeling Him abandoned in the Garden of Gethsemane and then watching His pierced Heart, wounded body, suffering on the Cross, teaches us that so too we, as spiritual mothers, consecrated in virginity, are called to embrace the wounds of Jesus' Mystical Body, His Church here on earth.

By reflecting on the teaching of Blessed John Paul II on the real love being Free, Total, Faithful, and Fruitful through the life of the Blessed Mother from the first moment of Annunciation, we see the deep and profound connection between receptivity and fruitfulness. Mary's Free, Total, and Faithful receptivity to the will of God the Father made her life be Fruitful now and for all eternity.

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