

Catholic Review Column: Celebrating the Gifts of Consecrated Life

Last week, in honor of Catholic Schools Week, I had the pleasure of visiting several of our Catholic schools. Three of the schools I visited happened to be sponsored by women religious. The schools – Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson, and The Catholic High School of Baltimore in East Baltimore – were diverse, not only geographically, but also in the ways in which they reflect the charisms of their sponsoring orders, respectively, the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia, the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia.

In the case of all three schools, my visit reminded me not only of the excellence of our schools and their students, but also the valuable contributions of consecrated religious here in our archdiocese.

Perhaps it was fortuitous that my school visits last week were to schools operated by religious institutes, for the weekend that followed culminated with my celebrating Mass Feb. 1 in observance of the World Day of Consecrated Life. On the first Sunday of each February, our archdiocese observes this important day in the life of our church, a day established in 1997 by St. John Paul II as a day of prayer for women and men in consecrated life and to highlight the gift of consecrated persons for the whole Catholic Church. Our celebration takes on special meaning this year, which Pope Francis has dedicated the “Year of Consecrated Life.”

When the church refers to “consecrated life,” she is describing the vocation of women and men in the church who have heard and answered the call to follow Christ more closely by professing the evangelical counsels or vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and living a form of life that is recognized by the church. This includes, among others, religious sisters, religious brothers and religious priests.

Some are engaged in ministries of direct service such as those who teach in our schools and universities, as well as those who work in health care, parishes and social services. Others lead contemplative lives of prayer, praying constantly for the church. The phrase “consecrated life” also includes individuals who are called to live as hermits and consecrated virgins, as well as lay women and men who bear special witness to Christ by lives vowed to consecrated celibacy, poverty and obedience.

More generally speaking, “consecrated life” includes the many ways in which persons in the church can be called to lead a more intense life of discipleship, not only for their own sake, but, more importantly, to inspire and encourage all of us to follow Christ more fully in the vocations of marriage, priesthood or as a single person.

Throughout the history of our archdiocese, women and men in consecrated life have served the people of God of this local church in concert with the diocesan clergy and lay faithful. Consider that our first bishop, John Carroll, was himself a consecrated religious as a member of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Soon after his appointment as Archbishop of Baltimore, he immediately sought the aid of the Society of St. Sulpice (the Sulpicians) to help in the formation of priests here, leading to the founding of St. Mary’s Seminary, which continues in operation today. He also brought to our archdiocese St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who established the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, modeled after the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Her order united with the Daughters of Charity in 1850. They remain present in our archdiocese today in so many valuable ways, including at St. Agnes Hospital and Mount St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, to name just a few.

The number and contributions of the religious communities of women and men serving in our archdiocese are far too numerous to properly recognize in this short column. Suffice it to say, our church is blessed to have such dedicated partners who so generously have made what Pope Francis calls “an exodus from self” by adopting Christ’s own self-giving love, shaped by chastity, poverty and obedience.

Let us give thanks to God for their vocations and for the work that they do for all of us each and every day. Let us pray with them and for them and ask the Lord to send to their communities many new vocations, so that we may never be without their

irreplaceable witness to Jesus, the authority of a life consecrated totally to his love.