

Gospels give framework for vocation ministry, says conference speaker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - The Gospels provide a framework for Christian life and vocation ministry, said a speaker at the National Religious Vocation Conference's biennial convocation Oct. 9-13 in Louisville.

"What happened to Jesus and his disciples in a strange way happens to us. Birth, baptism, ministry, death - it is the life cycle of the Gospels and it is the life cycle of a Christian life," said Passionist Father Donald Senior, a professor of New Testament studies at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Father Senior, who gave the keynote address Oct. 10, was one of several speakers to address the 500 men and women religious, priests and lay participants at the convocation. He said the Gospel call of Christ's first followers was not unlike God's call to Catholics today.

"We know in the Gospels, the beginning of Christ's life is a call, not a choice," he said. "'Follow me' is Christ's unadorned command" to his disciples.

He also said the Gospel stories "make it abundantly clear that the life of discipleship is not in our hands; it is a call. It comes unexpectedly."

The Gospels also make it clear, he said, that disciples are asked to follow after Jesus: They are not his "buddies."

"Jesus is out in front of his community; the disciples follow behind in confusion and fear," he said, noting that the first disciples were called to leave their families and change their lives forever. "The call of God is often disruptive for these folks."

They are also "unlikely vessels" of God's work, he said. None of them are "ideal types."

“They prove to be awkward, slow to learn, confused, ornery,” he said. In the Gospels, there is a “disinclination to idealize the early Christians. They even betray him.”

In these stories, Father Senior said, readers of the New Testament can find tools to help them in their discernment or recruitment efforts particularly because they show discipleship as having a “mentoring quality.”

“People who seek God’s call in their lives need someone they can confide in,” he said.

He also said the Gospel image of a journey describes the life of faith.

“The life and mission of Jesus is cast as a long journey. It’s a lifelong journey with many twists and turns on the road to God and eternal life,” he said.

Father Senior also told convocation participants that the Gospel stories of men and women being called to follow Christ “remind us that responding to God’s call requires conversion, change.”

He said the “notion of call is not peripheral to the Scriptures” but is integral to the Gospel understanding of Christ’s life and is also at the heart of what those in vocation ministry are doing.

In closing, Father Senior, who also spoke about St. Paul’s conversion during his five-hour session, noted that the saint doesn’t “argue his moral discourse.”

“He doesn’t say, ‘Act this way and you will be holy,’” said Father Senior. “You are the body of Christ; you are a temple of the Holy Spirit; you are a holy people. Therefore, comes the imperative: Be true to yourself. Act as you are as a holy people. Strive to be true to what you are.”