Voices of Sisters
Spirituality
Religious Life



(Unsplash/Sixteen Miles Out)



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Editor's Note: *Feb. 2 was designated by St. Pope John Paul II in 1997 as the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life. It coincides with the feast of the Presentation of the Lord (Candlemas) since women and men in consecrated life are called to bring the light of Jesus Christ to all people. Our columns yesterday and today, and our feature on "The Life" for this month reflect that theme.*

During one of the feast day Masses last month I had a strange experience. The eucharistic celebration had started, and when the readings started, everybody sat down. I was sitting behind the choir along with two parishioners and one of my community members.

In a split second the young priest who was leading the choir came towards us, made my sister-companion get up, took her chair and told her to get another one from a heap of chairs which were about 20 yards from the stage. I told my sister not to go.

He looked at me, gave back the chair, and asked, "Do you want me to go and get the chair?" I didn't respond. A young man sitting with the choir offered to go, but the priest said "no" and went for the chair. There were many options open to him, yet he chose the religious to vacate the chair! Sad to say, he was a very young and energetic priest, but what does this indicate about his attitude towards women religious?

I had this reproach for the church: the church celebrates Vianney Day in honor of the patron of priests, but the religious working in the parishes seem to be of little importance or are taken for granted.

I heaved a sigh of relief and felt overwhelmed by a deep inner joy when in 1997 Pope John Paul II declared Feb. 2 as a day of prayer for the consecrated life. I was in high spirits and felt that justice had prevailed — because it is the consecrated women and men who choose to get their hands dirty in the life we have chosen to serve! But it is actually the Lord who chose us: "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you" (John 15:16).

It was and is the consecrated women who did and do most of the works related to the church — be it sacristy, catechesis, distribution of Communion, and visiting the sick. Yet in some parishes, even today the priests fail to pray for the religious on this

day.

It is so appropriate that the pope designated this celebration for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord (Candlemas) — a boon and reminder to support consecrated life. I remember how in my childhood the priest blessed the candles at the main door and came in procession along with the people, keeping the tradition that signified that Christ is the *light of the world*. Wherever the procession went, we would light all the other candles with the blessed one.

On this day we are reminded — especially consecrated people — to spread the light, joy, love and peace of Jesus Christ through selfless service, by word and example, by being his witnesses in the course of our different apostolates to families, youth, education, care of the sick and aged, the poor and other unseen works.



Members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Holy Family of Nazareth, Sancoale-Goa, India, hold candles as they celebrate the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life. (Molly Fernandes)

As in the message on the first celebration of the consecrated life day Pope John Paul II said, quoting *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

> "Truly there is great urgency that the consecrated life show itself ever more 'full of joy and of the Holy Spirit,' that it forge ahead dynamically in the paths of mission, that it be backed up by the strength of lived witness, because 'modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.' "

According to the law of Moses, 40 days after his birth Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple to present him to the Lord, offering a sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24). Obedience to the law by Mary and Joseph, taking the responsibility to fulfill their duty towards their child, sets an example for consecrated ones to obey lawful authority, remain faithful to our vows and live by our congregation's constitutions and directives.

I am also moved by the seer-prophet Simeon who waited for the coming of the Lord to the Temple. Led by the Spirit, Simeon came into the Temple and met the Lord, taking the child in his arms and proclaiming the words — *the Canticle of Simeon* — that we pray for night prayer: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace ..." (Luke 2:29-32). He not only comes to the Temple and meets the child; he also prophesizes, telling Mary "a sword shall pierce your heart" (Luke 2:35).

The prophetic reading in today's liturgy of the Presentation of the Lord keeps before us three unpredicted things. *The coming* of Simeon and Anna to the Temple, *their meeting* with the Holy Family and third *the prophecy* of Simeon.

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Deeper reflection on this reminded me that these unpredicted things do take place every time when I go to pray: *I come* into the holy presence of Jesus and he makes himself present to my presence. Second, *I meet him;* and third, *he whispers* deep within about the cross I need to carry today — which often comes as a *sword that pierces the heart* — sometimes even from those whom we least expect.

Thus, the challenge: to spread the light of Christ amid turmoil, pain, suffering and surrounding darkness. To burn like the candle which sometimes burns gently, or at

times burns forcefully — losing its form and shape due to winds or breezes.

One evening during adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, I noticed two candles burning gently and observed that all fans were off; however, I had a flashback to another day when the flames were spreading violently, burning the candles into a shapeless mass.

This is a good illustration of our life, living and working at different places, in different fields: working gracefully at our own pace, sometimes exhausted due to external forces or pressure, the strain of additional demands, or while working under others. Even then, let us passionately *burn with joy* till we are burnt out, without consideration of our shape or form — being his witnesses by deeds of love for the sake of Christ, and spreading his light to the world.