In his address to the religious of North-East India at the Conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life (Diphu, January 23, 2016), Fr Joseph Mathias SJ, Rector, St. Peter’s Seminary, Bangalore, spoke about the challenges religious in India are facing today. About 240 religious from the various states of North India took part in the celebration. Here is a short summary of the eighteen challenges Fr Joseph Mathias identified.

Consecrate life started as a protest movement in the church, and lost much of it vitality after it became institutionalized. But God sends new prophets in every age to renew its vitality.

Prophets:

Religious, to be relevant, need to be prophets. As Pope Francis states, Religious men and women are prophets. They are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father, poverty, community life and chastity. In this sense, the vows cannot end up being caricatures; otherwise, for example, community life becomes hell, and chastity becomes a way of life for unfruitful bachelors. The vow of chastity must be a vow of fruitfulness. In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophecy.
Looking at the crisis in religious life, “The Consecrated Life loses its relevance when it loses its specific identity and can no longer play its specific role in the Church and the world. The crisis of relevance of Consecrated Life is simply an aspect of the more fundamental crisis of relevance of religions as such. Religion in its present socio-cultural forms in many waysseems to be more suited to an agrarian society and not to today’s post-industrial and post modern society. It somehow or other fails to respond to humanity’s religiosity in a cyber-age. So what are some of the Challenges confronting the Consecrated Life today?”

A danger today: Recruiting for careers, as a labour force, rather than as a vocation.

Another danger: Sticking to our comfort zones rather identity with the hardships people face today

What is our basic identity? Does it from our jobs or from our call?

“There is a strong temptation to relate one’s identity to one’s functions: educator, social worker, professor of philosophy, theology, scripture, counselor, doctor,etc. These functions require of course specialized training, skills, etc., based on human sciences or even ecclesiastical studies. One can be qualified in all these areas without being a man of moral and spiritual integrity. For example one can be a professor of Moral theology while wanting in transparency, honesty in matters of money, unhealthy relationships, etc. Hence it is the need of the hour that we as priests and religious are clear of our identity: Disciples of Christ. That is the only identity, rest are all functions.”

A move we need to make is from mono-culturality to multi-cultural membership.

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6. Paradigm shift from mono-culturality to multi-cultural membership
“...sad to say even the priests and consecrated persons are not free from such parochial and divisive tendencies. For the sake of power and status often priests and consecrated persons aggressively campaign for leadership posts as bishops, major superiors, principals, directors of big Institutes, etc.”

A genuine intercultural community is characterized by:

1. The recognition of other cultures (e.g. allowing minority culture to be visible in the community).

2. Respect for cultural diversity, differences.

3. The promotion of a healthy interaction between cultures.

Another challenge and need today is inter-congregational collaboration. “The mission of God is larger than what each individual or each congregation can do. Given the complexity of our mission in India and the minority character as Christians, we can save a lot of money, personnel and harness our both material and human resources if only we can move towards inter-congregational collaboration both in formation and in many of our ministries.”

A delicate area that needs attention is Collaboration between clergy/consecrated men and consecrated women: “There is an appreciable improvement with regard to the spirit of collaboration among clergy/consecrated men and women in diverse ministries of the Church: pastoral, educational, social, medical, formation, etc. However, one must admit in all honesty that there is increasing number of situations where the clergy/consecrated men and women face at times very painful conflicts that adversely affect both interpersonal relationships and also the effectiveness of their ministries.”

Pope Francis calls all of us, to “move to the peripheries.” As he says in EvangeliGaudium, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather
than a Church which is unhealthy from being confirmed and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the Centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’. (no. 49).

Another challenge: The Gospel Style of leadership:

“The Gospel style of leadership is defined in terms being shepherd, servant and steward. The leadership is for mission not just for order, discipline, to maintain structures. In practice the leadership as exercised in the Church is often geared to maintaining status quo, with emphasis on results, efficiency; smooth functioning of communities or institutions. Many a times we come across to people as smart, able, efficient administrators and functionaries and not with attitudes and behaviour that reflect the leader who is a shepherd, servant and steward. It is this manner of exercising leadership that makes Pope Francis a leader with credibility and universal mass people. It is precisely this type of leadership that earned great admiration of Indians by the much esteemed former President of India, Dr Abdul Kalam.”

Further, the Pope reminds us of our responsibilities towards the earth, our common home: See his encyclical, Laudato Si’.

To be the type of religious needed today, we need a relevant formation. Just academic training is not enough.

Conclusion

“Are we an attractive brands or icons to the modern world? “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows but by attraction” (EvangeliiGaudium, No. 14) The consecrated life will not flourish as a result of brilliant vocation programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us men and women who are happy. Similarly, the apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life does not depend on the efficiency of its methods. It depends
on the eloquence of our lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and following Christ to the full."

Fr Joseph Benedict Mathias SJ