

Leading the Church's Chosen

Interview With Secretary of Congregation for Consecrated Life

By Carmen Elena Villa

ROME, NOV. 16, 2010 (Zenit.org).- After three months as secretary of the Vatican's congregation for consecrated life, Archbishop Joseph William Tobin admits that he has a certain longing to be in the missions, though he says his new post is a type of missionary work too.

"It's not simply paper work or documents," he said. "It is about trying to see that congregations of consecrated men and women of the world respond increasingly with fidelity to their vocation."

The Redemptorist went from being superior-general of his congregation (a post he received in 1997) to being named in August the secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

A Detroit-native, Joseph William Tobin was ordained a priest in 1978 and a bishop last month. "I thank God for my vocation," he told ZENIT's Spanish edition. "I consider it a great unmerited gift."

ZENIT: What was your response to this appointment?

Archbishop Tobin: It is a vote of confidence on the part of the Holy Father, which makes me feel unworthy but at the same time impels me to carry out this task because I know that the Pope loves the Church and he also has a particular love for consecrated life. In giving me this [office], he shares with me a pastoral responsibility that is very close to his heart. Above all, I respect and thank the Lord and accept with much humility this gesture of confidence.

I confess that it also represents a sacrifice because I am a missionary and I thought that after serving 18 years in government, first as consultor and then as superior-general of my congregation, the Lord would grant me another form of mission, but I think that what we do here is not bureaucratic work. I think that to serve the religious congregations of the world is in itself a mission work.

ZENIT: Added to your new mission is the experience of your recent episcopal ordination and living in fullness the priestly order.

Archbishop Tobin: There was a very intense moment in the liturgy of my episcopal ordination during the Litany of the Saints. I very much like this part of the rite, especially when they evoke two great saints: my baptismal patron who is St. Joseph and also St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori, founder of my community. When I was lying on the floor, I was conscious that the whole Church was praying, asking the Heavenly Father for the gift of the Spirit and with much confidence I thought that God could not deny this prayer.

Also very beautiful for me was the imposition of hands, which is the nucleus, along with the consecrating prayer.

ZENIT: You have just been superior of the Redemptorists. What lessons did this give you for your new post?

Archbishop Tobin: I had the good fortune of accompanying an international community. In our congregation, there are some 5,000 consecrated worldwide who work in 78 countries. This offered me a sort of daily school to learn the multi-cultural nature of consecrated life, always seeking the pivot and strength that unites us, which is the religious spirit. I believe that to serve a multi-cultural community with its lights and shadows has served my preparation for this new mission -- also working in a team that is international. In the curia we were 11 brothers from 10 countries. This enables one to adjust to other ways of thinking and not to run the risk of idealizing one's own culture.

ZENIT: What are the challenges you must address as secretary of this congregation?

Archbishop Tobin: There are some that are very urgent. For example, the very difficult state of many religious congregations in Africa, which were founded and sometimes abandoned at the diocesan and local level. We must ask ourselves how we can help them and keep the necessary elements, at times as basic as food and lodging, also resources for initial and continual formation.

ZENIT: And what do you think the universal Church can do for these congregations?

Archbishop Tobin: I believe that solidarity is a very important value. We are a family. There are consecrated men and women in local Churches that have many resources and we must see if they can live in a simpler way. The result would be greater support to brothers and sisters facing very difficult conditions. The most important thing is that they not feel isolated or abandoned. No matter how small the congregations are, they belong to the universal Church, especially when they enjoy approval at the diocesan or pontifical level, they must feel part of the Church, supported and strengthened.

ZENIT: Another challenge is the subject of the apostolic visit to religious congregation in the United States.

Archbishop Tobin: A key for us -- and this was noted in the document of this dicastery on fraternal life in community -- is that we, religious, must be men and women teachers of dialogue because we are teachers of fraternal life. I believe dialogue is a very important point and that both brothers and sisters must approach the mutual search for truth. When I visited my brothers during my years as superior-general I said to them: "I don't come as a policeman, nor do I come as a tourist. I come as someone committed to the most precious thing he has: my life in a project which is the congregation's mission." When we speak as consecrated men and women we must realize that we are speaking about our life's wager, which must have meaning and if we must correct something, we must ask for the grace of conversion, which is always a challenge of consecrated life. In my way of seeing this it is a dialogue, a wager, which at the same time is an answer.

ZENIT: How can one work so that the old communities will remain faithful to their original charism?

Archbishop Tobin: I always invite Redemptorists to reflect on the inspiration of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori. It's true that secularization is a challenge but there are others. I remember that once, visiting a

province that lived under a military dictatorship, at one point the brothers said to me, "Although we have denounced the regime and some of us went to prison, the military's way of thinking has penetrated us and sometimes we treat one another as the military." As Paul VI said in his apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi": The Church "has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel." For us it is a question of going to the interior of a culture without losing our soul. This is the challenge and I think that many congregations of the Church will reveal themselves on these questions.

ZENIT: Many other new congregations are also being born.

Archbishop Tobin: The image I have of consecrated life is like a flowering eco-system in which new forms must appear; this is a sign of the health of the eco-system. We must make an effort to preserve the good of the past and accept the new that the Spirit inspires.

ZENIT: But on the other hand, there is a crisis of response to the call to the vocation of consecrated life.

Archbishop Tobin: Especially in the West. In Nigeria, for example, there is no crisis of response to the call. Every year, from that country, the Redemptorists receive 500 requests to enter and we choose 14. In other countries of Africa the situation is more or less the same. It's true that in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia there are many vocations. It's true that in some countries, especially in Western Europe, Canada and the United States, there is a crisis but in other parts of the world the crisis consists in a good number of formators with meager resources. The crisis is not always numerical.

ZENIT: What do religious congregations contribute to the Church as Mystical Body of Christ?

Archbishop Tobin: We, consecrated, must show and evidence in our life a certain liberty, which is different from the layman's liberty. It's true that laymen are free to go where we, religious, cannot go, but we are even more free to live a missionary life by not having so many family responsibilities. If we don't use this liberty well we must question ourselves because consecrated life is not about irresponsibility but about radical liberty.

I believe it's very good that the Church stresses the vocation of baptism. But we must remember that both the Second Vatican Council, and later John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation "Vita Consecrata" said to us that consecrated life is essential within the life of the Church. "By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus -- the chaste, poor and obedient one -- are made constantly 'visible' in the midst of the world," said the Pope.

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