

“Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.”

(Mk 1:35)

Brothers and sisters, what mental pictures do you have of monks and nuns in movies? How do the image industries depict those our Catholic tradition calls “religious men and women”? You may have seen the warm, caring nun as the school principal in the recent movie *Lady Bird*. Or you may remember the refugee German nuns building a convent in the desert with the help of Sydney Poitier in *Lilies of the Field*. You may have seen the Jesuit priests and brothers laying down their lives for the Guaraní tribes of Paraguay in the film *Mission*. I especially hope that in film or real life you have seen monks or nuns praying together, chanting the psalms gently in alternating choirs, right to left, left to right, in a monastery or convent hidden in “a deserted place”. Let’s keep this image in mind: religious chanting psalms together out in some quiet, peaceful place.

Now, if you look at your weekly Parish Bulletin, you will see an image on the cover with the title “World Day for Consecrated Life”. The painting represents Mary and Joseph who have come to the Temple in Jerusalem with the Baby Jesus to fulfil the Law of Moses, forty days after his birth. We actually celebrated that feast two days ago, on February 2, Candlemas. And whom do Mary and Joseph meet in God’s Temple? Old man Simeon and old woman Anna, who had been praying and serving God all their lives, waiting for the Lord to appear in the Temple. They, too, recited the Psalms night and day in this holy place in Jerusalem.

Let us turn to today’s Gospel. The first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark presents us with typical scenes from Jesus’ public ministry: preaching and teaching in synagogues, visiting and healing the sick, casting out demons, but also some “alone time” and prayer. “Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.” Praying and serving others: two most essential aspects of any Christian life. Whatever our state of life, marriage or celibacy, widowhood, the priesthood or the consecrated life, we are all called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and his disciples by prayer and service of others.

But in a more particular way, praying and serving are the calling of monks and nuns, of religious men and women, of the consecrated life. You know what? Almost every time I walk into Fr. Al’s room to ask him for something, I find him with a prayer book in hand. More often than not, he is praying the Divine Office, a set number of hymns and short Scripture readings, and many psalms. Do you know that every day, every religious man or woman sets some time apart to quietly pray at least 14 different psalms and some readings? Some do it together in monasteries; others, like us Jesuits, do so alone. All of us try to imitate Jesus who got up at the crack of dawn and went out alone to pray his Father in heaven. And what do

psalms teach us, essentially? To move from moaning to praising. It's normal to complain: that's what Job does in today's first reading. (If you were French, you'd take it up as a national sport!) But whining doesn't make us happy at the end of the day. If you look at the book of Psalms in the Bible, you will see that a lot of them start in grumpy mood, like Job, but end in joy, like the Psalm we sang: "Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted!" That is why we pray the psalms several times a day, to move from moaning to praising God, and to pray for others, that they might experience the same journey.

Similarly, like Jesus, all of us religious men and women are sent to serve others. Like Jesus who preached and taught, visited and healed the sick, we religious are missioned by our superiors to serve. Right now, I am working in a parish, but come September, I will be back in Rome, teaching theology at a university. Other Jesuits on the same formation program as myself this year will be school principals, or directors of refugee welcoming programs, or medical doctors, high school English teachers, journalists and bloggers, spiritual directors... And so many other men and women religious will have their own mission, out in the vineyard of the Lord.

Prayer and service! Once again, all of us baptized Christians are called to pray and serve. But through the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, we religious men and women have a little extra time to do so. Since we are not married, have almost no material possessions of our own, and take on the mission our superiors give us, we are supposed to have more time and energy to freely dedicate ourselves to praying and serving. We try to live what Paul tells the Corinthians: "Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible."

Brothers and sisters, as a conclusion, may I invite you to pray for us religious men and women in the Church? Pray together with us in joyful thanksgiving for our vocation! Pray for us when we are having a bad day and doubt our calling! Pray for us that we may have more vocations to the consecrated life in this country and the whole world! If you have children or grandchildren, please speak to them positively about the consecrated religious life. Just like the vocation to marriage, it is a joyful life. Like any life, it has its pains and trials, too. But it ultimately leads to the freedom of loving and being loved. That is what Jesus did and what he taught us to do. May all of us find our true vocation and may God's will be done!

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