



BANQUET ADDRESS AT THE 2024 IRL NATIONAL MEETING

The Next Generation of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE



By Rev. Thomas Nelson, O.PRAEM.



To celebrate 50 years since the founding of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE, I would like to go over a brief history of the IRL and point us in a new direction as we approach the next 25 years. A generation extends around 25 years since most people don't marry until their mid-20s, so the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE, i.e., the IRL, has gone through two generations and is now approaching its third generation. What will that third generation look like? Well, we don't know, but let us look at the first two generations.

The First Generation of the IRL

First, you cannot understand the IRL unless you understand its origins. It was founded in 1974,

less than 10 years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. It is definitely an ecclesial organization founded on the teachings of Vatican II, in that its members and board of directors consist of bishops, priests, religious, and laity, united together in the sole purpose to promote the religious life.

But another key in understanding the mission of the IRL is what occasioned its founding. In 1974, religious life in this country and elsewhere was in crisis. All you need to do is to read the post conciliar document of Pope St. Paul VI on the Renewal of Religious Life (*Evangelica Testificatio*) published in 1971. That document was an answer providing some guidance for the crisis.

Certain Vatican officials asked the Servant of

God Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., to do something about what was happening to religious life in this country, so Father Hardon, along with several others, came together and established the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE with the mission to help bishops, priests, religious, and laity, to bring forth an authentic renewal of religious life, according to the teachings of Vatican II found in *Lumen Gentium* (chapter 6) and *Perfectae Caritatis*, as well as some post-conciliar documents.

Therefore, the IRL was thus on a rescue mission. We had lost our way after Vatican II, not only in the matter of liturgical renewal, which was felt in our parish churches, but also in the renewal of religious life, which was felt in our Catholic schools and universities, Catholic hospitals, and other apostolates. Vocations plummeted as the sisters were changing their religious habits, and by religious habits I mean much more than their religious garb. There was a loss of confidence in the traditional religious observances that mark religious life, such as a common *horarium* of prayer, silence in the cloister, a common table with religious reading, fasting, and even a corporate apostolate. And also the essential elements of religious life were morphing into unrecognizable practices.

For example, religious superiors were no longer called superiors, but community facilitators who build consensus, without any real authority to bind everyone on a common path. Religious poverty turned into good economics and not an ascetical practice which limits your use of goods. Common life, which had been centered on the conventional Mass and time for common prayer and gatherings, become mere camaraderie at best. Some even abandoned the common life altogether and started living in their own apartments. Moreover, the corporate apostolates of schools and hospitals dissolved into personal apostolates in which each chose his or her own ministry. Well, this was happening beginning in the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s, and into the 1980s. Traditional religious life was dissolving before our very eyes.

This was the situation of religious life when the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE was founded 50 years ago, to fight this false renewal and to help guide the authentic renewal of religious life. Thus, the IRL in its first generation became a rescue mission and took on a very apologetic approach, defending the Church and religious life from left-wing radicals who were more agents of the prevailing culture than of the Gospel truth.

Remember this was during the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s when traditional moral values were thrown aside in the so-called sexual revolution generating a culture of death, so not only was religious life threatened, but also marriage and family life. Fortunately, the IRL's founders were men and women of great faith, ready to serve the Church and religious life, such as the Servant of God Fr. John Hardon, the first National Director; Fr. Edmund McCaffrey, O.S.B.; Mother Mary Claudia Hornsberger, I.H.M.; Mother Angela Cettini, DSMP; and many others.

The IRL fulfilled its mission by various means, including through the IRL National Meeting. This gave a forum for great speakers on religious life who expounded on the authentic teaching of Vatican II, such as Archbishop Fulton Sheen, John Joseph Cardinal Carberry, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, M.C., Father McCaffrey, Father Hardon, Fr. Thomas Dubay, S.M., Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., Mother Assumpta Long, O.P., Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P., and many others. It was also a place where religious came to meet and strengthen one another in the midst of their spiritual battles, and where religious superiors could meet before the founding of the CMSWR, the Council for Major Superiors of Women Religious.

A lot happened in this first generation of the IRL, and the efforts of the IRL began to bear fruit. Things started changing for the better in religious life, especially during the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II, with the various synods he convoked, including the 1994 Ninth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the topic of conse-



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crated life, which brought forth the 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on “Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World” (*Vita Consecrata*). Additionally, the CMSWR was founded during this period, i.e., in 1992, so the major superiors of women religious, faithful to the authentic renewal of religious life, could now gather together without having to debate the essential elements of religious life.



Lastly, it was also a time of new institutes coming to birth, including the School Sisters of Christ the King, founded by Bishop Glennon P. Flavin, the third president of the IRL; the Sisters of Life, founded by John Cardinal O’Connor of New York; and the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal and Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal, founded by Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C.F.R., and Most Rev. Bob Lombardo, C.F.R. (IRL Vice President), and others; the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word, founded by Mother Mary Gabriel Long, SsEW, with the help of Mother Angelica (around this time, Mother Angelica with her community founded EWTN); the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother the Eucharist, founded by Mother M. Assumpta Long, O.P., and others; and last but not least, the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius, founded by Fr. Frank Phillips, C.R. Thus, at the close of the first generation of the IRL, as we were celebrating the Jubilee Year, new hope was breathed into religious life, and things were much more stable and healthy.

The Second Generation of the IRL

It was also at this time that Michael Wick and I took over the reins of leadership of the IRL, which was now entering into its second generation. The leadership was restructured to allow the National Director, who must be a priest, to reside with his own community instead of relocating to Chicago where the national office is located. Thus, the Executive Director, who could be a layperson, managed the national office, and together with a staff, was the main driving force behind the IRL’s operations; now, of course, Jeff Karls serves as the Executive

Director. Mike became the first Director of Operations, and then eventually the Executive Director in the year 2000, and I became the National Director in January 2001.

We began to reflect with the IRL Board of Directors on how we could best serve the mystery of consecrated life in this country. This resulted in a slight paradigm shift from the rescue

mission, which characterized the first generation, to the new evangelization, which was very much part of the pontificates of Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. This paradigm shift is reflected in the IRL’s magazine *Religious Life*. It presents a very positive presentation of religious life, reporting on the good things that are happening in religious life today. Articles are written by priests, religious, and laity on various aspects of religious life. The magazine includes vocation stories, stories about the lives of the saints and other notable religious, and addresses of the Holy Father on religious life. It became a really great tool for the new evangelization of religious life, and so we must thank Michael Wick, Anne Tschanz, and others who get that magazine out every other month.

We also founded the *Vita Consecrata* Institute (VCI), a summer school for religious with a twofold purpose. First, ongoing formation and renewal of religious and their vocation as religious. The majority of our participants come with this purpose in mind. Second, to obtain a Master’s degree for those who choose to, in the theology of the consecrated life. It is the only program in this country that I know of that offers a Master’s degree in the theology of consecrated life. The program is accredited by the Notre Dame Graduate School of Theology at Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia. It is a beautiful campus with a beautiful church where we celebrate Mass, and also pray the Liturgy of the Hours and a common Holy Hour. We try to integrate our studies with prayer and the traditional observances of religious life.

It is a real opportunity for renewal as those who have been there can testify. I encourage you, who are religious, to take advantage of the VCI for your-

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Next Generation of the IRL (*cont. from pg. 5*)
selves and your communities.

So this is where we are at the end of the second generation in the life of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE. We began as a rescue mission to help the Church save and preserve the mystery of the consecrated life. Then, as things were coming together and new hope was breathed into the Church with the new evangelization, we shifted our focus and entered more fully into the new evangelization, with religious life at its heart.

The Third Generation of the IRL

Now, what is the program for the third generation of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE? Do we need to refocus ourselves and take in new considerations? I think we do. And let me begin by bringing to your attention some very sobering facts. I am reluctant to do so, but I think it is important to see the crisis that we are in. When you think of the new evangelization, the renewal of religious life, and the big players in that, you cannot ignore certain religious institutes and their founders. They founded extraordinary religious institutes with *many* vocations, and they were leaders in the movement to restore consecrated life. But how the high and the mighty have fallen! I am speaking about those who have been guilty of abuse—spiritual abuse, abuse of authority, abuse of the conscious, and even sexual abuse. You can read about these phenomena, which has attacked religious life and rocked the Church, in the recent book by Dom Dysmas de Lassus, the Prior of the Grande Chartreuse and thus the superior general of the Carthusian Order, called *Abuses in Religious Life and the Path to Healing*.

Now, what is God teaching us? I have thought very much about these religious founders and about the abuses in some of their religious institutes. I think it tells us how wounded we are and that our consecration as priests and religious doesn't cover

up our wounds. So the mystery of consecrated life must be safeguarded. The ecclesial life of the Church has been renewed—the priesthood, seminaries, religious life, and novitiates have been renewed—but the culture at large has not been renewed. The family, the very foundation of society, the seedbed of religious vocations, has been under attack since the 1960s with diabolical force, and I mean that literally.

Same-sex marriages have been not only legalized, but there is now gender confusion among our youth. Schools meant to educate our youth in truth and virtue are now propagating diabolical lies and vices. So many of our young people are trapped in addictions and are getting involved in the occult, and this rise in occult activity is a new phenomenon. When I was first ordained in 1981, I was not trained to deal with demonic possession and obsession. I did not need that training, at least then, because I never came across it in my ministry. The culture was still healthy enough. Christian values were still prevalent, though society was fast declining.

It was not until the new millennium that I came across my first diabolic encounter, namely of a young religious who was severely under oppression, and I did not know what to do. The diocese she lived in did not help because they had no exorcist. I knew I had to get training for myself, so I enrolled in the Pope Leo XIII Institute, a school for exorcists located here in Mundelein. I learned that the devil is a coward, and he usually attacks the weak, namely those who are already psychologically wounded or caught in some form of addiction. I learned that it is not enough simply to say prayers of deliverance, but that one must attend to the wounds.

I bring this up to illustrate to you the culture we are living in and the place from where our vocations are coming. We are living in a wounded culture that is to some degree diabolically infested. Pope Fran-



cis sees this. He says that the Church has become a hospital; so many of her children are wounded, and we must apply to them the medicine of mercy. So the healing ministry is growing in the life of the Church, and rightly so; and it is not by accident that God has lifted up in our times two religious sisters as spiritual mothers for us, namely St.

Thérèse of the Child Jesus, with her oblation to Merciful Love, and St. Mary Faustina, the Secretary of Divine Mercy.

So this is a new aspect we have to consider as we move into the third generation of the IRL. It must be built upon the past, both the defense of the essential elements of religious life and the new evangelization in promoting the religious life. But now, we must do that with an awareness of the need for healing first in our own communities. Original Sin and the awareness of our own frailty and the need for healing has always been part of our Christian consciousness, but now our brokenness is more pronounced because we are coming from a secular society, and at times even a diabolically infested society.

So we all need healing—spiritual and at times psychological healing—and we should not be afraid to seek it. Also, our new candidates coming into our communities need healing. Much of it should take place before they enter the novitiate, but they should be accompanied throughout their formation and religious life.

And lastly, even if we are healthy and whole, we must remember that many of the people we serve are often broken, wounded, and in need of healing.

Now, we should not be afraid to admit this because it does not make us any less human or unfit for consecrated life. It merely points us to the path of mercy. When mercy touches a wounded soul that humbly acknowledges its poverty, it heals and elevates that soul. The doorway into Our Savior's pres-




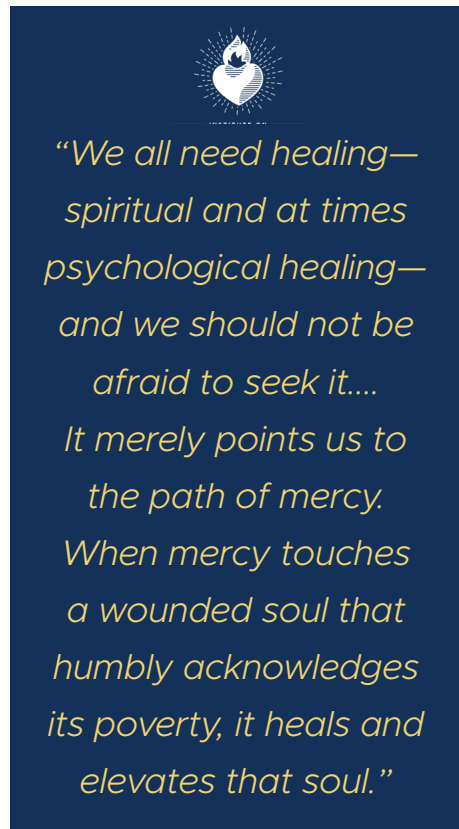
ence is a wound. Humility lays bare this wound before Him, and He enters into the wound to heal and to transform it into a sacred scar like His own in His glorified body. God can be glorified in our woundedness if we humbly acknowledge our poverty and littleness, and place absolute confidence in God's mercy and love for us. This is why for Christians, the joyful faith in

the Risen One never loses sight of the Crucified One. So what I am saying is that we should boldly move forward in living out the mystery of our consecrated life and not be afraid to admit our brokenness, but be confident in the healing power of Christ to heal what is wounded and to transform what is broken.

In my opinion, the Little Way of St. Thérèse opened up the path to the universal call to holiness because her Little Way presupposes our brokenness, our poverty, and our littleness. We merely need to acknowledge it with humility and to embrace it with bold confidence in the mercy and the love of God to heal us. We do not need to be giants in the spiritual life, all put together with stellar virtues, to become saints. We can be little and broken and wounded as long as our hearts are humble with absolute confidence that God can lead us to holiness if we are faithful to Him in the daily duties of our life.

So, I propose that this is the way to live the religious life in these troubled times we are living in with perhaps even greater challenges as we

move into the future. God is with us. "Be not afraid," Jesus said, "I have conquered the world." So as we celebrate our 50 years of service to the Church and religious life, let us move forward, ready to defend the essential elements of religious life, proclaiming the new evangelization and the full truth of the consecrated life, but in all humility, aware of our brokenness and need of healing, confident in God's mercy and love for us. 



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