Catholic Theological Union  
Installation of the President  
October 27, 2013  

Introduction

Twenty years ago I was privileged to pastor a parish on the north side of Chicago. I still stay in contact with some of those folks and, just after Easter, I received a humorous email from Tom, a young father, whose son, Sam, I had baptized eight years ago. Tom and Sam had been to Sunday mass, where the homily had seemed a bit mystifying. On their walk home, Tom turned to his son and asked, “Sam, to whom do you think Father was talking today: to the grown-ups or to the kids?”

Sam pondered this question for a moment or two; then answered brightly, “I think he was talking to himself!”

While talking to oneself is regrettably an occupational hazard of preachers, I trust I am able to speak for all of you – and for myself as well – as I congratulate Father Mark Francis on his selection as the seventh president of Catholic Theological Union. During the years we shared in Rome, I worked beside Father Francis in the governance of the Union of Superiors General and, in 2005, served with him as a member of the XI Ordinary Session of the Synod of Bishops,
which contemplated the great gift of the Eucharist. I am very grateful to call Father Francis my friend and I rejoice that his formidable gifts are now placed at the service of the Church through the mission of this great institution.

My own religious family, the Redemptorist missionaries, is one of the 24 sponsoring communities of this Union, and the experience of forty years as a vowed Redemptorist certainly colors these brief remarks; so do thirty-five years of priesthood and three years of episcopal ministry. In a special way, the gift of serving the Redemptorists and consecrated life at the international level leads me to describe what I believe to be the greatest challenge facing religious today, and then suggest the how the Catholic Theological Union can help us face that challenge.

**The Ecclesial Identity of Religious Life**

I believe that there is a broad anxiety among consecrated people concerning their identity. In an age that is characterized by rapid and fundamental changes in both the Church and society, consecrated persons ask **who are we? What really distinguishes our vocation? Where do we “fit in”?** For a number of reasons, I believe that the ecclesial sense of consecrated life is the biggest challenge faced by Sisters, Brothers and religious
priests. Let me use a couple of contrasting experiences to illustrate my point.

Part of my service as superior general of the Redemptorists was visiting my brothers in the seventy-eight countries where we minister. The visit to a local community often included a courtesy call on the local bishop. While there were some difficult conversations, most of those encounters actually were quite pleasant. I recall that a number of Ordinaries would want to assure me of their appreciation for the service of Redemptorists in the local Church by using words like these: “Father General, I am grateful for your confreres. They are very cooperative with the diocese. And, unless I think about it, I can't really distinguish them from the diocesan clergy.” What was good news for the local Ordinary did not have the same effect on me.

On the other hand, the years in our General Council as well as work in the Holy See gave me almost daily contact with men and women religious from across the world. This relationship provoked in me some anxiety regarding the enduring presence of what the Instruction Mutuae Relationes calls a “serious error”. I refer to an exaggerated juxtaposition between religious life and the structures of the Church, as if
they could subsist as two distant entities, one charismatic; the other, institutional. Rather, both elements, namely the spiritual gifts and the ecclesial structures form what Lumen Gentium calls “one, even though complex reality.”

There have been unfortunate declarations by those who identify themselves as spokespersons for a “prophetic Church”, which, by its very nature, must oppose the hierarchy. A deficient theological formation on the nature of the Church – a deficit, which, by all means, is not limited to religious – leads to a distorted ecclesiological vision. As a result, a false dichotomy replaces the “one, even though complex reality”. And, should recognize that this exaggerated juxtaposition flourishes in the absence of structures for mutual knowledge and respectful dialogue among bishops and consecrated women and men.

Beyond its rapport with the pastoral office of the Church, religious life today must rethink its identity in relationship to laity, who constitute the vast majority of the Church and whose baptismal vocation is both the source of their dignity as well as the motivation for their mission in this world. For many decades, we religious have asked ourselves how we might

1 MR, 34.
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empower the laity? The laity will not need our permission to minister and religious must ask ourselves what will be our witness in a massively lay Church?

The apostolic exhortation that followed the Special Synod on the Laity, affirms:

In Church-Communion, the states of life by being ordered one to the other are thus bound together among themselves. They all share in a deeply basic meaning: that of being the manner of living out the commonly shared Christian dignity and the universal call to holiness in the perfection of love. They are different yet complementary...

I believe that one of the gifts that the Catholic Theological Union is to help the Church develop a theology of religious life that better understands where religious “fit”. In the absence of such a resource, there is a tendency to reduce consecrated life, either to a base pragmatism that envisions religious simply as the providers of specific services in a local Church, or to a checklist of traditional mores that may or may not be adequately sustained by an authentic theology.

Beyond academic speculation, the particular composition of the faculty and student body of this institution can make it a

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3 John Paul II, apostolic exhortation Christifideles Laici, (30 December 1988), 55.
sort of “laboratory of communion”, which addresses the interests and gifts of religious, seminarians and lay students while underscoring the ways in which these particular vocations may complement one another.

An essential element for such a laboratory is a respectful, even reverential environment that supports and encourages all the different vocations that enrich this school.

**Conclusion**

Facing the *Basilica of St John Lateran* is a large statue of St Francis of Assisi with his arms outstretched. If you stand behind the statue at a certain distance it looks as if St Francis is holding up the church. This recalls the dream of Pope Innocent III in 1209 when he saw the church being upheld by St Francis.

The location of the statue also reminds us of the number of days that the Pope Innocent kept the friars waiting. He was unsure whether to meet these bedraggled visitors from Umbria or not. Finally, the dream, as well as the influence of his confessor, helped Innocent to overcome his scruples and meet the friars. Like the disciple John, who stood before the empty tomb, waiting for Peter, Francis and his companions hung in there, waiting before the facade of the Mother Church of
Christendom, waiting for its Pastor to meet them, so that they could enter together.

The work of Catholic Theological Union can help religious better understand that our way of life is “part of the organic communion of the whole Church, which is continuously enriched by the Spirit with a variety of ministries and charisms.”

Last spring, another Francis, who is both pastor and a consecrated person, met with the leaders of religious life from Latin America and the Caribbean. An unofficial transcript of remarks made by Pope Francis during his hour-long audience with the leadership of CLAR has been published and – perhaps, significantly – the Vatican has never denied the accuracy of the text.

According to the transcript, Pope Francis exhorted the religious:

*Say you err, [or] make a blunder – it happens! Maybe you'll receive a letter from the Congregation for Doctrine [sic], saying that they were told this or that thing.... But don't let it bother you. Explain what you have to explain, but*

4 VC, 1
keep going forward.... Open doors, do something where life is calling out [to you].

As I renew my congratulation to Father Mark Francis, the administration, faculty and study body of Catholic Theological Union, I pray that this great institution will enrich the Church by helping consecrated men and women to “do something” where Life is calling us and thereby live fully the grandeur of our vocation.

Thank you.

+ Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
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