



‘JESUS HAS BROUGHT US HERE’

BY
EMILY BYERS



When I told my *parrain* (French for “godfather”) over the Christmas holidays that Pope Francis had invited me to attend a meeting in Rome, he was speechless. He thought that I had received a letter or a phone call from the Holy Father, inviting me to a private audience at the Apostolic Palace (which, admittedly, would not be out of character for Pope Francis!). That was not exactly the case, but I really had received an invitation, sent on the pope’s behalf, inviting me to go to Rome.



In 2013, Pope Francis announced that the Church would celebrate a Year of Consecrated Life, beginning on the First Sunday of Advent in 2014 and ending on the feast of the Presentation, Feb. 2, 2016, the World Day of Consecrated Life. As a consecrated virgin, I was delighted to hear this news, but I never imagined that his declaration would impact me in a personal way. I certainly never dreamed that I would be present with thousands of people at the closing ceremonies of the Year of Consecrated Life in Rome—but, as usual, God's plans for me were more exciting than the plans I had for myself.

Last fall, I received a letter from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life inviting me to attend these closing ceremonies, which would include an international convocation of consecrated virgins, a papal audience and a special Mass on the feast of the Presentation. This sounded appealing, but I was hesitant to accept the invitation. Traveling to Rome would be expensive, and it would require taking a week off of work during a busy time at the school where I teach. I decided against it, but then I began experiencing a mysterious tug on my heart, urging

me to change my mind—so I did.

Thanks to the generosity and encouragement of my friends, I decided to attend this historic celebration. I was especially looking forward to the convocation of consecrated virgins. This meeting was only the third such gathering since the Second Vatican Council, and it was the largest one to date, with 500 women in attendance, representing dozens of countries on six continents. As a consecrated virgin living in the world (i.e., outside of a convent), I am not a member of a religious order in the usual sense; I am part of the ancient *Ordo Virginum*, or “Order of Virgins,” which consists of more than 4,000 women around the world who live a vocation of consecrated virginity under the authority of their diocesan bishop. There are currently 235 consecrated virgins living in the United States, but because we all serve the Church in the context of our local diocese, opportunities

for fellowship with one another are few and far between.

In this regard, the convocation in Rome was truly an answer to prayer. The greatest blessings of my trip were meeting other consecrated virgins and hearing their vocation stories, and I am overjoyed to now feel so “rooted” in friendship within the Order of Virgins. I also met many other consecrated persons in Rome—religious brothers and sisters, as well as members of secular institutes and ecclesial communities—all vibrant witnesses of the joy that comes from saying a wholehearted “yes” to God's call. My week in Rome was truly a time of *encounter*.

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Allow me to share with you a few encounters that stand out in my memory as moments of grace.

For several months before my trip, I had been in correspondence with a consecrated virgin from Lebanon. Providentially, she found me on my first day in Rome, right after I arrived at the conference center where the gathering of consecrated virgins would be held. There was a prayer service at St. Peter's Basilica that evening, and we decided to attend together. After we found our seats, my friend turned to say something to me, and I will never forget the expression of wonder and joy on her face. “Can you believe it?” she whispered, gazing up at the dome of the enormous basilica. “Jesus has brought us here to Rome! I never dreamed this would happen, and only a few months after my consecration!” Having visited Rome several times with friends and on school trips with my students, I had almost forgotten what it felt like to walk into St. Peter's for the first time, but she helped me to see it with fresh eyes. More importantly, she reminded me that our time in the Eternal City was a gift of grace, straight from the heart of Jesus.

On the first day of the convocation of consecrated virgins, we were greeted by the secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM. With great feeling, he pleaded with us to remain faithful to our vocation, through which God calls us to remain present to all the



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people in our lives—our families, friends, colleagues and the clergy and faithful of our diocese—and to be spiritual mothers in the Church, serving others with our gifts and praying for their needs. “You are important to the Church!” the archbishop emphasized. I was so moved by these words that, when his talk ended, I decided to express my gratitude. A friend and I found the archbishop in the café of the conference center, drinking an espresso. We had just introduced ourselves and begun to thank him when our conversation was interrupted, so I quickly said “Thank you for being here with us” and turned to leave. Much to my surprise, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned around to find the archbishop looking intently at me and my friend. “No!” he said. “Thank *you*—both of you—for living your vocation!” Needless to say, we never expected *him* to be the one thanking us!

Throughout the weekend, consecrated virgins from around the world shared their experiences of living their vocation in diverse cultural contexts. I was particularly struck by the testimony of a consecrated virgin from Iraq, who teaches English literature at a public university there. Since I am also a teacher by profession, I immediately felt a kinship with her. As she spoke about using the beauty of poetry to evangelize her students, I smiled, having thought the same thing myself on many occasions. She then went on to explain that she decided to remain in Iraq, even after her family fled the country due to the difficult political situation, after her bishop offered her a place to live. “We are playing hide-and-seek with death,” she said, “But if we only served God in times of peace, I think something would be wrong.” I was humbled by her words, and I

am reminded of her example of courageous perseverance when I walk into my classroom to teach each day.

On Feb. 1, the 5,000 consecrated persons present in Rome attended an audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican. Instead of delivering his prepared speech, the Holy Father gave an off-the-cuff address and spoke, as he put it, “from the heart.” This didn’t surprise me, but I was caught off-guard by his words about the future of consecrated life in the Church. The solution to the “vocations crisis,” he said, is hope-filled prayer:

I admit that it pains me a great deal when I see the drop in vocations ... In order to fight the temptation to lose hope, which gives us this barrenness, we have to pray more. And pray tirelessly. It does me a lot of good to read the passage of Scripture in which Hannah, Samuel’s mother, prayed and asked for a son ... [she said to God]: “I want a son!” I ask you: does your heart, facing this drop in vocations, pray with this intensity? “Our congregation needs sons, our congregation needs daughters ...” The Lord, who has been so generous, will not fail in his promise. But we have to ask him for it. We have to knock at the door of his heart.

This summer, I will celebrate the fourth anniversary of my consecration on the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and I am filled with gratitude that God has called me to live my vocation to prayer and service to his Church in the Diocese of Lafayette. Please pray for me, for an increase in vocations to consecrated life and for all consecrated persons, so that we might unite ourselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and trust him to make our prayer and work bear fruit for souls. †

