

... It is Your Face, O Lord, that I seek!

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's paschal passing has affected us profoundly. It constitutes an important moment in the life of the Church: one that has left us feeling sincerely moved and deeply grateful. We have honoured our Pope Emeritus and marvelled at both his moral stature and the gratitude that has spontaneously arisen in those who found spiritual nourishment in his words. A choral 'Thank you' has burst forth from the heart of the Church.

In various circumstances, the Holy Father stated that life is not something that comes full circle but is, rather, a journey that leads to an encounter, a fullness of being. We thank the Lord for the clarity of his faith, for the gift of his thinking and for the simplicity in which he always lived and with which he communicated the depths of God's mystery.

As consecrated women, we loved and supported the *humble labourer in the Lord's vineyard*, welcoming his magisterium's prophetic intuitions and allowing his teachings to challenge us. We will remember him for the humility and wisdom with which he accompanied the Church and those in religious life.

Retracing the years of his pontificate, it is clear that Pope Benedict sought to bring consecrated life back to its original core: the form of life that Christ chose. "*Belonging to the Lord*," he said to the Superiors General gathered together at the audience held on 22 May 2006, "*means to be on fire with his incandescent love, to be transformed by the splendour of his beauty: our littleness is offered to him as a sacrifice of sweet fragrance so that it becomes a witness of the greatness of his presence for our epoch, which has great need to be inebriated by the richness of his grace*".

His magisterium was not lacking in clear, incisive words about the consecrated life as a "powerful" testimony to and expression of the reciprocal seeking of God and man, attracted to each other in Love. "*The very fact of being consecrated*," Benedict XVI states, "*makes the consecrated person, as it were, a 'bridge' to God for all who encounter him or her, a reminder, a reference point. And this is all by virtue of the mediation of Jesus Christ, the Consecrated One of the Father. He is the foundation! He who shared our weaknesses so that we might participate in his divine nature*" (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 2 February 2010). Powerful words, these! Ones that we have taken to heart, recognizing that building one's house on rock, on Christ and with Christ, means building on a foundation called crucified Love.

We remember him for his steadfast, vigorous request to put the Word of God at the centre of our spiritual lives in order to rediscover the gift of light that Sacred Scripture (especially the Gospels) offers to our lives, our hearts and the renewal of consecrated life. "*The Word of God is Christ Himself, Who is and must be at the heart/centre* of the Church and its religious life.*" (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 2 February 2006). Particularly striking is his Christocentric testimony which found expression in his simple, direct proclamation and his clear, consistent way of working. For Benedict XVI, discipleship is to respond in love to Jesus Christ by living a personal friendship with Him and inwardly renewing one's decision to turn to Him by constantly immersing one's heart in Easter, through which life acquires its fullness.

Listening to Benedict XVI, one naturally rediscovers a passion for listening prayerfully to the Word, who speaks to us in our present situation and shapes our hearts, making our daily lives a sacred space in which the Mystery becomes incarnate. Only an unconditional welcoming of the Word can generate novelty and bring about transformations. The path outlined by Benedict XVI consists in listening assiduously to the Word - because every kind of wisdom is born of the Word of the Lord - and being able to scrutinize it with sapiential love. This fruitful

dynamism of the Spirit then leads us to an authentic encounter with humankind because *"seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave"* (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18).

Consecrated life is a plant with many branches: one that is rooted in a daily experience of the Gospel as the element that provides beauty and presents every person to the world as a reliable alternative. This is what today's society needs. This is what the Church expects: to be a living Gospel.

Benedict's spiritual legacy is his call to belong to Christ and to keep the flame of love always burning in one's heart, continually fed by the richness of faith, not only when this brings with it interior joy but also when it is joined to difficulty, aridity and suffering.

As a theologian and truth-lover, Benedict opened a most profound reflection on two very important themes: truth and love. These are not terms that contradict one another. Rather, they demand and fuel each other, since *"without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way"* (Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*).

Aware that Church doctrine only reaches the heart of every person if it leads to love, he conceived of and lived his pontificate as a service of love or a 'presidency of love'. This humble, simple model of governance has encouraged us, too, to conceive of authority as a generative form of service by seeking to *"let unifying love be [our] measure; abiding love [our] challenge; self-giving love [our] mission!"* (c.f. Vigil with the Young People, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, 19 July 2008).

We are aware of the appreciation that Benedict XVI showed for consecrated men and women and his encouragement *"to be witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God in a world that is evermore disoriented and confused"* still reaches us today as a prophetic call. He has invited us *"to look at our time with the gaze of faith so as to be able to look at men and women, the world and history in the light of the Crucified and Risen Christ, the only One able to direct men and women [...]"* (Address to Superiors General of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 22 May 2006).

Again, he states, *"[...] the consecrated life is important precisely because it is a sign of unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world that risks being suffocated in the vortex of the ephemeral and the useful (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata, n. 105). Instead, the consecrated life witnesses to the superabundance of love that is an incentive to "lose" one's life in response to the superabundance of the love of the Lord who first "lost" his life for us."*

Caring and attentive, he had words of hope and profound respect for consecrated people, particularly those who were living in situations of greater fragility, reminding them that *"[Not one] is useless, for the Lord associates [each one] with his "throne of grace". On the contrary, they are a precious gift for the Church and the world that is thirsting for God and for his word"* (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 2 February 2010).

With great clarity, he has challenged us to fight against the secularized culture that has penetrated the mind and heart of not a few consecrated persons, inviting us to overcome the relativism that impoverishes faith and the quest for God by pushing us to live lives of mediocrity.

"The Lord wants men and women who are free, not bound, able to give up everything to follow him and to find in him alone their very all. Courageous choices must be made, both at the personal and communal levels, which give a new discipline to the life of consecrated persons and bring them to rediscover the all-encompassing dimension of the sequela Christi." (Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 22 May 2006).

He has encouraged us to be credible and luminous signs in the world: to be the fire of the Gospel and its paradoxes, without conforming to the mentality of this world but, rather, continually transforming and renewing our commitment, so as to be able to discern God's will, what is good, acceptable and perfect to him (c.f. Rm 12: 2).

Pope Benedict XVI always recognized the special role of women in the life of the Church and gave them a crucial part to play: "[...] *given the distinctive influence of women in society, they must be encouraged to embrace the opportunity to uphold the dignity of life through their involvement in education and their participation in political and civic life. [...] The genius of women to mobilize and organize endows them with the skills and motivation to develop ever-expanding networks for sharing experiences and generating new ideas.*" (Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the International Conference on the theme: "Life, Family and Development: The Role of Women in the Promotion of Human Rights", 20 March 2009)

"[...] the women had had an experience of a special bond with the Lord, which was fundamental for the practical life of the Christian community, and this is always the case in every epoch and not only when the Church was taking her first steps" (Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus, 9 April 2012).

Benedict XVI had a truly heartfelt need to cultivate the Church's dialogue with art, insofar as art is a world of beauty. Above all, he spared no effort to bring the beauty of the faith itself to light so as to ensure that the faith was not simply talked about but actually celebrated. He devoted himself to seeing that the liturgy was harmonious, since it is the celebration of the presence and work of the living God and because it is intended to lead us to and into the divine mystery.

Full of profound reflections that constitute a vast legacy of wisdom and faith, Benedict XVI's journey will remain in the heart and history of the Church. His thinking will continue to illumine the path of all those who found in him a light that brightens the world's darkness. His magisterium will, of course, remain: his three encyclicals (*Deus Caritas Est*, *Spe Salvi* and *Caritas in veritate*), the beauty and depth of his reflections and his catechesis during the general audiences. He leaves us a marvellous spiritual and ecclesial fatherhood, a heritage that marked the twentieth century and the first steps taken in the new Millennium.

The Holy Father leaves in our hearts a deep desire for prayer as the soul's breath and nourishment and an oasis of peace from which we can draw the water that sustains the spiritual life and transforms existence. He triggers nostalgia for God in us, the longing to seek Him and meet Him as He communicates Himself, makes Himself known and inflames us with His Spirit, making us jump for joy.

His witness as a man in love with God who sought his Lord is an invitation to cultivate the desire to constantly seek a Face: "*Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*" (Ps. 27: 8). And to direct one's own journeying – both in the small, everyday steps as well as in the more important decisions – towards completing this pilgrimage of the heart.

Dear Pope Emeritus, to you we express our profound and eternal gratitude.

Sr. Nadia Coppa, A.S.C.

U.I.S.G. President