

The Conference on Consecrated Life 2014



The Immaculate Heart of Mary Church at Botwell in Hayes, once again hosted a wonderful Conference. This is the third brain child of Fr Angel Ochagavia, CMF. This year the title and theme of the Conference was “Church and Consecrated Life as envisioned by Pope Francis”.

Once the introductions and opening words by the Superior of the Claretians, Fr Chris Newman was given, Archbishop Jose Rodriguez Carballo OFM began the talks. His theme – “Signs of Hope. What the Church expects from the consecrated life” was a theme that was to resonate throughout the Conference. Placing the Gospel at the centre of our lives with simplicity, dialogue and listening.

“What is the purpose of consecrated life”? he asks, and he answers it by saying that it is a search for God – a life long journey and this theme runs through the Conference, as it is pivotal to the writing *The Archbishop invites us to say who we are with teeth, not mediocrity or diplomacy, being authentic, and transparent rather than focusing on trying to be perfect. Putting Christ at the centre of our lives he stresses, rather than being pre-occupied with our own survival. We need to offer a radical conversion to the Gospel, joyfully and fruitfully, with fidelity.*

If we do not go out to the poorest and be poor but stay closed in – we will become fossilised and fearful. We need to rid ourselves of the security we have built up in structures, those we have should be grounded in a vision beyond the familiar. The Pope urges us to “fly the nest” and tell the Good News to the world. He invites us to make a noise and be less afraid of making mistakes, surprise the world as God constantly surprises us. He adds that this is relevant for all of us, not just the young. We are all are able to hold this passion for God’s life.

Brother James Boner then spoke on “Our Weakness is our Strength” – and noted that though our numbers were reduced and we have a tendency to focus on structure changes rather than people, because they are easier to work with and that we have a tendency to try and find simple solutions to complex problems. He invites us to look at this anew with eyes of faith. He reminds us of our deep relationship with God and that our response is itself a gift from God. If we spend time worrying about how we can plug a hole or fill a gap we are losing sight of why we were called in the first place.

Brother James wonders if the challenge now is to surrender to a reliance on God's greater plan and trust in him in faith, even when sometimes we feel this struggle, it is all part of our journey.



This theme of “journey” as depicted by Pope Francis, is later highlighted in a very memorable way by Fr Sr Kate Stogden’s talk on “Surrender to joy in service of the Gospel – testifying to fruitfulness” explores what the Pope is telling us about renewal, and our personal relationship with Jesus. Sr Stogden continues this theme of being fearless and open to the Holy Spirit and conversion and our need to “wake up” to the world and live. She spoke of what surrendering to God means, that we allow ourselves to be taken to the unexpected places, the deeper yeses with our God of Surprises.

She notes that we never get what we expect with God, citing the example of The women at the Tomb, who didn’t expect to find the tomb empty, yet they did. Sister Stogden asks us if we are standing at the empty tomb or are we ready to take a radical choice and go with uncertainty with Jesus. Our challenge is can we face our fears. Prayerfully she compels us to share the good news through mission – and that our surrender to God is itself a gift from God – picking up the theme Brother James highlighted earlier.



On the second day of the Conference Fr Jose Cristo Rey Garcia continued the theme of the Pastoral Conversion in the Consecrated Life from Evalgeliu Gaudium and highlighted that originally in 2012 some of the Bishops had been negative and

doubtful of the ability of a new evangelization in our world today but Pope Benedict XIV reminded them that the Holy Spirit is there to guide us and that we have a role as God's accomplices. To create a "New Formation" for each of us to be out there Fr Cristo Rey uses a wonderful analogy, that of a flight that depicts our life's journey. We Prepare for our Departure he tells us, getting rid of the negatives, not judging but with love. We prepare for take-off next and during this time we feel the tension he suggests between a mission that sends us out and our own fear that holds us back, as highlighted by our other speakers. He suggests Jesus is our Pilot, we the co-pilots. A call in our closeness to God to risk our security, to not being like a plane stuck in a hanger, going nowhere allowing this to block our onward journey.

We need to take away the brakes to fly – he suggests next- stop letting this fear go. A need to stop being absorbed by the world but get out in to it. We then set our destination, and here he tells us we need to get out there with the poor and become poor with them – out on the edges of society where some such as women and children are marginalised – these are the places we need to go to.

Go out and live and yet also the Pope invites us to find time to be still, listening, waiting, slowing down, and being able to be with people.

We might hit turbulence in the shape of fear of lack of eg money, but we are reminded that we made a vow of poverty – also a vow of anti-idolatry and he reminds us that our work is to make the success of our mission our priority. We need to develop a discerning heart, and not be held back.

Finally he tells us we arrive – and at our arrival he asks us to think about the question – how can we share the good news of God's love in the person of Jesus? The Holy Spirit will guide us and we need to pray for renewal, being prepared to be open to where the spirit propels us to travel.

The Pope's themes of outdated structures, fear, and then of faith, hope, evangelisation, mission and daring to go where we have never gone before, were explored fully.

The final speakers were no less invigorating: Sr Barbara Claire and Miss Mary Leavy.

All of the speakers inspired the listener not to stay fixed and rigid but dare to think the unthinkable – not even to be frightened of reduced religious numbers, but to see this all as part of God's elaborate plan for us. Listening and engaging with people with missionary zeal, being guided by the Holy Spirit.

The musical group "Ooberfuse" led a prayerful reflection during the Conference and our Masses each day helped us all celebrate together. It was a wonderful 2 day Conference and all 130 attendees left with a renewed vigour and mission to take out into the world.

Jo Farrell - Godgossip Reporter