

DIOCESAN GATHERING OF RELIGIOUS PRIESTS, SISTERS AND BROTHERS

On a bright spring morning earlier this month, the religious of the Diocese gathered at Nazareth House in Ballarat for our annual Mass and luncheon. Mass was held in the newly opened downstairs chapel and we were able to appreciate the special features it offered. Bishop Paul Bird, assisted by his Redemptorist brothers Frs Frank Smith and Peter Danh and by Nazareth House Chaplain Fr Kevin Condon OP, presided over a congregation assembled from all corners of our Diocese. It was good too that Margaret Claver, a Faithful Companion of Jesus sister from Melbourne, could join us as she was passing through Ballarat.

The day was organised by the Council of Religious for the Diocese. We were warmly welcomed by the Chairperson, Margaret Sculley IBVM, who made reference to the significance of this gathering in the Year of the Consecrated Life. Not only is our bishop a religious, but our pope is as well.

A delicious lunch was served, significant milestones in peoples' lives were celebrated, there were prizes for lucky spots and there was much joy in the room. Marg thanked Sr Clare and the Nazareth Sisters for their unfailing generosity and support of the gathering, and Bishop Paul Bird for his presence, his helpful words at Mass and his continued support of the religious of our diocese.

There were poignant moments - the realisation of the ageing of the group, the effort made by some to come a great distance to be present and the immense contribution this group has made to our diocese over the years. Candles were lit during Mass to remember those of our congregations who had died since our last gathering. We lingered over coffee, enjoying the bond of our shared calling and the friendships which develop over the years.



Homily from the Mass with Religious celebrated at Nazareth House Ballarat on November 7, 2015

As you would recall, Pope Francis nominated this year as the Year of Consecrated Life. He announced the special year in a letter to religious around the world. He did so as Pope but also as a religious himself. He mentioned this at the very start of his letter. He wrote: Dear Brothers and Sisters in Consecrated Life, I am writing to you as the Successor of Peter, to whom the Lord entrusted the task of confirming his brothers and sisters in faith. But I am also writing to you as a brother who, like yourselves, is consecrated to God.

As Successor of Peter, Pope Francis shares Peter's task of confirming, encouraging us in our faith. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis shares with us the call to religious life. So his words of encouragement are the words of someone who is close to us in our vocation as religious. This may help us appreciate Pope Francis' message as a message of someone who feels with us in the ups and downs of our religious life, someone who has shared the joys and struggles of serving God and serving people as a member of a religious community. In Pope Francis, we may sense someone who feels with us in our lives as persons consecrated to God and to God's people. Someone who feels with us. Someone who has compassion.

A sense of compassion, a sense of feeling with those who are struggling. This is a key element in the makeup of Pope Francis. He wishes to show compassion to those in need and he wishes to foster compassion in us all.

This relates readily to the other year we are noting today – the Jubilee Year of Mercy. This will start on December 8 when Pope Francis opens the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica in Rome. There will be celebrations throughout 2016 in Rome and throughout the world – celebrations of the mercy of God.

These two special years go very well together – the Year of Consecrated Life and the Jubilee Year of Mercy. The first highlights our consecration to God as members of religious communities. The second reminds us that the God we are consecrated to is a God of mercy and the religious communities we belong to are meant to be communities of mercy, communities where we show compassion to one another and communities that reach out in compassion to all those we serve.

As we heard in the reading from the prophet Joel, our God is a God of tenderness and compassion. We are called to follow God's lead in this. In the parable from the gospel of Luke, the father was moved with pity and ran to his wayward son, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. We are called to be merciful like that loving father.

There is a beautiful expression in the document Pope Francis wrote announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy. He spoke of the Church and each community in the Church being "an oasis of mercy". "Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy." May these words be fulfilled in our lives as religious. Wherever we are, may we help to create an oasis of tenderness, an oasis of compassion, an oasis of mercy.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR