Year of Consecrated Life

Presented by
The Missionary Childhood Association
Introduction:
The Year for consecrated life concerns not only consecrated persons, but the entire Church. Consequently, I ask the whole Christian people to be increasingly aware of the gift which is the presence of our many consecrated men and women, heirs of the great saints who have written the history of Christianity.

~ Pope Francis, November 21, 2014

Teachers, Catechists and Youth Ministers:

Pope Francis proclaimed 2015 a Year of Consecrated Life, starting on the First Sunday of Advent, the weekend of November 29, 2014, and ending on February 2, 2016, the World Day of Consecrated Life. During this special celebration, Pope Francis, a religious himself, invites the Church to recollect the glorious history of consecrated life, reflect on its present variety and participate in its future. The Holy Father’s proclamation speaks not only to consecrated men and women but also to all men and women, young and old, who share in the same spirit and mission. He asks in this Year of Consecrated Life that all Christian people become increasingly aware of the gift that is the rich charism of consecrated men and women. To celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life in the United States and respond to the Holy Father’s wishes, the USCCB’s Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations encourages pastors, catechists and religious educators to create opportunities for dioceses, parishes and schools to explore this vocation in the Church.

This Missionary Childhood Association resource offers activities and a session plan featuring the history of consecrated life and particular examples of religious men and women contributing to the mission of the Church. The materials and session culminate by offering opportunities to support and participate in the Church’s mission in cooperation with religious men and women.

Yours in Christ,

The Missionary Childhood Association
Session Overview:

I ask you, Pastors [and Catechists] of the particular Churches, to show special concern for promoting within your communities the different charisms, whether long-standing or recent. I ask you to do this by your support and encouragement, your assistance in discernment, and your tender closeness to those situations of suffering and weakness in which some consecrated men and women may find themselves. Above all, do this by instructing the People of God in the value of consecrated life, so that its beauty and holiness may shine forth in the Church.

~ Pope Francis, November 21st 2014

This Missionary Childhood Association (MCA) Resource provides an introduction and deeper understanding of the vocation to the religious life by exploring its history and present forms in relation to the mission of the Church. The session begins with recollection activities to bring to the surface student experiences and pre-knowledge of religious life and transitions to a presentation of its role and relationship to the Church. Through a series of reflection activities, readings and discussion young people will encounter who religious are, how one enters a religious order or congregation, and what their lives are like day-to-day. The session focuses on the common charism of prophecy and mission for consecrated life and missionary congregations in particular. The materials and activities conclude by developing an action to support this work.

This resource can be used in a classroom environment or adapted for more informal ministry settings. The materials are designed to be used as a single unit of study or adapted as modules into existing curriculum. Sectional materials are labeled and separated.
**MCA Year Of Consecrated Life Materials and Activities invite youth to:**

- Explore a general history of consecrated life and more — specifically the contributions of religious men and women to the mission of the church
- Explore the variety of charisms in religious life today and their many ministries
- Reflect on the theme of religious vocation in their own lives
- Connect with the vocation and ministry stories of consecrated men and women serving as missionaries
- Identify and develop opportunities for action and support of consecrated men and women on mission

**Materials and Activities At-a-Glance:**

- Opening Prayer
- Part I: Introduction and History
  - Reflection Activity 1.1
  - What Is Consecrated Life? Teacher Directed Learning 1.2
  - Founder(s) Small Group Activity 1.3
- Part II: Present Forms and Concluding Event
  - Guiding Reflection Questions 2.1
  - Consecrated Life Fact Sheet Exploration Activity 2.2
  - Share What You Have Learned: Invitation for Action 2.3
- Part III: Supporting the Charism of Consecrated Life
  - Guiding Reflection Questions 3.1
  - Culminating Action or Event to Celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life 3.2

**Preparation:**

Read through the materials and discern how you will adapt them to your catechetical setting. We recommend you choose some supplemental materials to research in order to deepen your own understanding of the mission and vocation of consecrated life. As you prepare, determine how you might use the materials to meet the needs of your students and animate your own teaching style. You may choose to use the materials in one session or break the unit into two or three sessions. This resource is designed to be used in its entirety as a session or adapted as modules into existing curriculum. Sectional materials are labeled and separated. In addition to your own teaching, we suggest reaching out to local communities of consecrated men and women to join you as guests or co-teachers to give a living and breathing example of the charism and mission of this way of life active in the Church.

**Important:** Before you begin, develop an idea of what type of service action or event you would like to help your students plan as the culminating learning action. To ensure a successful conclusion, think about how you want to invite young people into action after the content of the session. Conclude strong. Don’t fizzle.
Supplemental Materials:
Listed below are possible supplemental sources educators may use to develop longer and more in-depth learning units for their classroom or youth group:

Resources and Information on the Year of Consecrated Life
- Year of Consecrated Life Website created by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men — www.yearforconsecratedlife.com/

Theological Resources
- The short book by Johann Baptist Metz, The Followers of Christ: Religious Life and the Church

Historical Resources
- Consecrated Life Timeline and Videos from the Vocations Network. Available at http://www.vocationnetwork.org/articles/show?id=461

Vocation Resources
- National Religious Vocation Conference videos, online surveys and texts. Available at www.vocationnetwork.org
- Religious Ministries’ Catholic directory. See directory and search tools available at www.religiousministries.com

Mission Resources
- The Pontifical Mission Societies in the U.S. www.onefamilyinmission.org

Local Resources
- Local communities of consecrated men and women. We suggest reaching out to your local communities to collaborate for Year of Consecrated Life events. Possibilities include guest speakers, ministry visits and retreat opportunities.
How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit the many different forms of consecrated life which has raised up throughout history and which still exists in the Church today? They can be compared to a plant with many branches which sinks its roots into the Gospel and brings forth abundant fruit in every season of the Church’s life.

—Vita Consecrata (No. 5)
Opening Prayer


O, God we adore you and thank you for all that you are. We gasp with awe at Creation you have set before us and tremble, at times, at the work we must do to sustain it. The work is indeed plentiful. But so are the many gifts you have provided each of us. We humbly ask again and again for your ongoing guidance as we seek to understand your will, know the purpose of our gifts and respond to your call with our lives to serve the Church and entire human family.

We thank you, O God, and we are listening...

1.1 Reflection Activity (5-7 minutes)

- Project Reflection Images (see corresponding slide presentation)
- For each image ask young people:
  - What do you see?
  - What do they know about these people in the image?
  - What do you think is happening?
- Facilitate discussion highlighting preconceived notions, surprises and unknowns about Sisters, Brothers, monks and nuns
  - Image 1 – Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Assisi in Lusaka, Zambia serving in Cheshire Home, a care center for the orphaned, and disabled
  - Image 2 – Salesian Sister coaching Softball in New Jersey
  - Image 3 – Franciscan Friar being arrested for civil disobedience with other religious leaders outside the White House raising awareness of environmental issues
  - Image 4 – “unknown” Jesuit Archbishop in Buenos Aires riding the bus among the people
1.2 What is Consecrated Life? (10-15 minutes)

Teacher notes: See corresponding slide presentation

SLIDE 1 – Title Page: What is Consecrated Life?

We have all heard of monks and nuns. Maybe we have met some, been taught by some or maybe all we
know about these men and women comes from movies, stories and rumors. This is a special year to take
a closer and more detailed look in order to find out what consecrated life really is, and what it means for
all of us in the Church.

SLIDE 2 – A Jesuit Named Francis

Pope Francis has proclaimed a Year of Consecrated Life to raise awareness of the contributions of those in
consecrated or religious life to the identity and mission of the Church.

In light of the Pope’s invitation, what do you know of the Jesuits or the Franciscans? What have you
heard?

Jorge Mario Bergoglio entered the Jesuit order in 1958. We know him now as Pope Francis. When he
chose the name Francis, the pope invoked another powerful figure and charism of consecrated life in the
Church's history. The Jesuits and the Franciscans are two of the largest religious orders or communities of
consecrated life in the Church today. They represent incredible histories and contributions to the identity
and mission of the Church in the world today.

Pope Francis was educated and formed by the Jesuits, founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola. He was
influenced by their unique way life and charism. As Pope, he chose to identify his papacy and the Church
with the charism and spirituality inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi. Pope Francis is the first Jesuit elected
to the papacy, and the first member of a consecrated life to become Pope since the Middle Ages. This
way of life is worth learning more about. It is clear that this way of life has influenced the Holy Father’s
way of reaching out to the world and the world’s most marginalized.

SLIDE 3 – What Does it Mean?

Ok. So if this is the Year of Consecrated Life. It is important because the Pope says so. But what does it
mean? Who are consecrated men and women, and what do they do? Well, we can get a clue from how
Pope Francis has acted as Pope. One of his first actions as Pope was to wash the feet of imprisoned
teenagers.
The word *consecrate* means to dedicate something to religious purpose. Consecrated men and women, also commonly called religious men and women, are persons who have chosen a *way of life* dedicated to religious purpose. This way of life is a *vocation* in the Church, along with marriage, the single life and Holy Orders, where men and women have chosen to respond to a call to seek God in prayer, and follow Christ in a special way.

**Slide 4 - What is Charism?**

What is this special way? You will hear this word a lot when discussing consecrated or religious life: charism. The word charism comes from the Greek *charis*, meaning the gift of grace given to individual Christians for the good of others. You each have charisms. They are your talents, your ideas and your lives. We will see that the founders of the many different communities of consecrated life used their gifts and lives to respond to specific needs in their times and in the Church. Consecrated life as a way of life is 1.) A gift *in* the Church renewing the life of all its members. 2.) A gift of the Church renewing the world. 3.) A gift to the Church ever renewing the identity and mission of the Church.

Before we get to the specific gifts unique to individual communities of consecrated men and women, all the forms of consecrated life share a common *charism* to follow Christ that revolves around the vows member profess. Consecrated men and women, after years of discernment and formation, profess vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. These vows may sound scary, but upon reflection, one can see that they provide an opportunity for profound solidarity with Jesus the Christ, and the poor and marginalized in our world today.

One way to look at the theology of these vows is that Jesus came to the world as a helpless child, grew up a poor man and was obedient to the Will of the Father. Like Jesus of Nazareth and the least among us, consecrated men and women do not own their own material possessions (poverty). Like Jesus of Nazareth and like many of the least among us who suffer loneliness, consecrated men and women do not marry creating a space in their lives for love to grow for all people (celibacy). Like Jesus of Nazareth and the least among us who do not have control over many aspects of their lives, consecrated men and women respond to the directives of their superiors and God in their conscience (obedience). One of the gifts of this way of life is a profound solidarity with the life of Jesus and the poor and marginalized among us today.
You might be wondering: “Who were the first men and women who felt called and chose to live this alternative way of life so different than a materialistic and individualistic culture?” This is a great question that goes straight to the origin of this vocation. It appears to be a human constant. From the beginning of Christianity, there have been men and women who desired to seek God in this way, for whom Church on Sunday was not enough. The first of what we now consider consecrated life were men and women who went into the desert in Egypt and Syria for solitude and prayer.

Saint Anthony (251-356 C.E), a resident of Alexandria, Egypt, began his life as a hermit at the age of fifteen and remained in the desert for 90 years. He became well known for his rigorous way of life and spirituality. Contemporary writers of this famous young monk portrayed him as a spiritual athlete in training. Many young men and women joined him out of a desire to live a similar disciplined way of life. Also in Alexandria, Amma Syncletica (270-350 C.E), was a well-educated women who, after the death of her parents, sold everything and gave the proceeds to the poor. She entered the desert and lived as a hermit outside of Alexandria. As it happened with Anthony, gradually a community of women joined her way of life and prayer. Just a few years after the death of Anthony and Syncletica, Saint Basil of Caesarea (330-379), wrote a rule of life for monks attracted to the same spiritual training, but rather than living and praying alone, these monks would live in community and work and pray together. These early groups became known as the “Desert Fathers and Mothers.”

Slide 5 – Forms of Religious Life

The alternative path of lived spirituality, inspired by new gifts of the Holy Spirit, in new times and while facing new issues, has grown exponentially since the Desert Fathers and Mothers. There are numerous religious communities of consecrated men and women today. The creativity and innovation of the founders and ever-new members of consecrated life is endless and clearly a response to Spirit. To help us understand this inspired variety, this way of life can be divided into two basic categories: the contemplative life and the active life. (Teacher note: These are helpful categories but not exhaustive. The Franciscans, for example, defy simple categorization. They are a mendicant and evangelical order, meaning they reside in between these two basic categories.)

Contemplative life includes those communities, like those founded by Saint Anthony and Saint Synclética, who separated from the everyday world for the pursuit of prayer. There are still some hermit orders and communities of monks and nuns who live in cloistered monasteries. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, described their vocation as being like silent trees that provide oxygen for the world to breathe.
Those religious orders that live in communities with their Brother and Sister religious but leave the monastery walls to work in the world represent the active life. These men and women bring their gifts into the world in particular apostolic ministries such as education, care of the sick and activism on behalf of the poor and marginalized – and much more.

Each of these forms of consecrated life share a common charism associated with the vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, but also expresses and embodies the charism unique to each community.

**SLIDE 6 - Individual Charisms of Consecrated Life**

As mentioned before, the word charism signifies the gift of grace given to individual Christians for the good of others, and that the founders of communities of consecrated life used their gifts and lives to respond to specific needs in their world and in the Church. The current members of consecrated life continue to live out this missionary nature of the Church. When a charism of a community of consecrated life is approved by the Pope, that new gift is said to participate in the official mission of the Church, which is to make Christ present in the world.

For many communities of religious life, living in community is an important part of their specific charism. For many, the mission or type of ministry they perform and the spirit with which they carry it out are central to their unique charism. For others, particular theological or spiritual insights of their founders influence their manner of prayer and worldview which in turn form their charism. *Let’s look at some examples...*

*Transition to Founder(s) Small Group Activity*

**SLIDE 7 – Exploration**

These creative and innovative charisms are the result of people responding to a call. The vocation, or calling, to live consecrated life comes from the Holy Spirit speaking in the hearts of men and women to respond to the needs of the world around them. Let’s explore a few specific stories of that call and response from the Church’s history and the Church’s present.
1.3 Founder(s) Small Group Activity

Slide 8 – Founder(s) Activity

Have the young people form small groups or work in pairs. Provide each group with one of the Founder(s) Activity Readings. Ask groups to read their stories keeping the following questions in mind:

- What stands out to you?
- What was the situation that moved the founder(s) to action?
- What was the inspiration behind the founder(s) actions and choices?
- What is the mission of the community they founded?

Ask groups to share their insights with the class.

Concluding or Transitioning Reflection Questions:

- What would the Church be like without _______? (use names of religious men and women they have just researched).
- What are some needs, issues or conflicts in their world that may inspire similar actions of men and women to serve and change?
- These religious men and women have lived and written the history of Christianity. Who do you think are the religious men and women living their legacy today?
Eugene of Mazenod was born in Aix-en-Provence in France in 1782 to a wealthy merchant family. Eugene was on a smooth path to a successful life. His comfortable life came to an abrupt end at the start of the French Revolution in 1789. At the age of eight, he and his family fled into exile in Italy and lived as refugees.

When he returned to France, at the age of 20, Eugene wanted to get married and re-establish his life in his native country. However, after the death of his fiancé, Eugene experienced what he described as “an impulse from without” to enter the seminary and be ordained a priest. His dream became to be “a servant and priest of the poor.”

Eugene began his ordained ministry serving marginalized youth and prisoners of war, but realized there was just too much work for him to do alone. In September 1815, he experienced another “impulse from without” to found a society of missionaries. On January 25, 1816, the society of the Missionaries of Provence was born.

Father de Mazenod invited the new members of the society “to live together as brothers” and “to imitate the virtues and examples of our Saviour Jesus Christ, above all through the preaching of the Word of God to the poor.” The new community of Brothers and priests committed themselves to the work of the missions, binding themselves together through religious vows.

Pope Leo XII on February 17, 1826 formally approved the newly founded Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Its motto is: “He has sent me to evangelize the poor.” The motto expresses both its unique charism and way of life.

Historical details and quotes found on: www.omiworld.org
Founder(s) Activity Reading #2

The Society of Jesus

Ignatius of Loyola was born in the Basque area of Spain in 1491. He was a soldier, but his military career ended at the age of 30 when a cannon ball struck him in the legs during a battle. As he recovered from his wounds, he read stories of the life of Jesus and heroic lives of the saints. The determined young soldier had found a new way of life to follow.

Ignatius sought direction for his new calling in personal prayer and by meeting with well-known monks across Spain. Ignatius felt a tremendous call to share what he had experienced during his recovery from his wounds and through his discerning prayer. However, he was only a wounded soldier. Who would listen? He returned to school and became a priest. During his studies of philosophy and theology, he met his now famous friends, Frances Xavier and Peter Faber, each of whom shared a similar calling.

These companions, the original group grew to nine members, felt God was calling them to form a new type of religious order. Like soldiers, they desired to be on-call and be sent to any part of the world where the need was greatest, and where often no one else wanted to go. Ignatius became the first leader of this new religious order which was called the Society of Jesus – which many now simply call the Jesuits.

The largest male religious order today, the Jesuits are 17,000 Brothers and priests worldwide. While historically they are known for their work as missionaries and counter-reformation educators, Jesuits today seek God in all things and work for the greater glory of God in a range of capacities: doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, scientists and popes to name a few. Living in community and practicing Ignatian Spirituality, the Jesuit charism also includes taking a fourth vow: to accept the call of mission to wherever the pope decides they are needed.

Historical details found at: www.sjweb.info
Francis was born in Assisi Italy in 1181. The spoiled son of a textile merchant, Francis had a reputation for drinking and carousing. As a young man, he joined the other wealthy young men as knights in a battle with Assisi’s neighbor, Perugia. He wanted to be a hero. Instead he became a prisoner of war for almost a year.

When he was ransomed, Francis showed signs of a dramatic change. Prior to his captivity, Francis was disgusted by the poor and the sick. Upon his return to home, he began to see Christ in the faces of the poor. One story even tells of a time when Francis stopped to embrace and kiss a leper.

Francis famously stripped off his clothes in the town square of Assisi when his father tried to drag him back to his old life. Dramatically and graphically leaving the protection of his family, the local bishop covered the naked Francis in his own cloak symbolically welcoming him into the family of the Church.

Young Francis did not yet know exactly what to do with his new devotion to serve Christ and the Church. As he was searching for his next steps, he often stopped to pray in the crumbling chapel of San Damiano outside of Assisi. One day during prayer, the Crucifix spoke to him saying, “Francis, rebuild my church. It is falling down.”

Francis thought the vision was referring to the crumbling chapel around him. So Francis began to repair the chapel brick by brick. This powerful and simple example of service inspired many men and women to join him not only in rebuilding San Damiano but also in rebuilding and reforming the Medieval Church which had fallen into ruin.

The order that Saint Francis established (the Franciscans), continues to grow. Franciscans are known for living out the Gospel message with joy and enthusiasm through a variety of ministries.

Young Francis did not yet know exactly what to do with his new devotion to serve Christ and the Church. One day during prayer, the crucifix spoke to him saying, “Francis, rebuild my church. It is falling down.”
Years ago, Archbishop Matthias U. Shwe of the Archdiocese of Taunggyi in Myanmar helped Sisters Bibiana Bya and Natalie Su, and three lay missionaries, form a new Religious Congregation, the Zetaman Sisters of the Little Flower. Zetaman means “one who is sent.” The Sisters honor St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower and patroness of the Missions, by being sent in her name.

The Sisters work in parishes, teach catechism, provide an education for children, and offer health care for families and the elderly. From their founding, Zetaman Sisters of the Little Flower have worked closely with lay volunteers because of the lack of priests and nuns to reach people living in remote areas. These Zetaman volunteers often travel from village to village through vast and often difficult terrain.

Any woman who would like to join the community as a vowed sister first serves for three years as one of these Zetaman volunteers. She then spends time as an aspirant, discerning her vocation. If she continues, she studies for one year as a postulant and two more years as a novice. Then she would make her first vows, renewed annually for five years before she can make her perpetual vows.

Based in Mobye, the Sisters’ mission today is evangelization and total human development through education and health care. There are now 35 Sisters in this growing congregation. Their motto is “All else forsaken for the love of Jesus.”
Part II | MCA MATERIALS

Presentation of Consecrated Life

From the beginnings of Monasticism to the “new communities” of our time, every form of consecrated life has been born of the Spirit’s call to follow Jesus as the Gospel teaches.

~ Pope Francis
2.1 Buiding Reflection Questions 2.1

- Who do you think chooses this way of life; this way of prayerful action? Where do you think they come from?
- Do you know any religious Brothers, Sisters or priests?
- Teacher note: Have young people identify some key questions they have about why some men and women choose to live consecrated lives.

2.2 Research Activity - Explore Consecrated Life Fact Sheet (15-20 minutes)

- Teacher note: Ask young people to form small groups. Distribute the “Consecrated Life Fact Sheet” and consecrated life biographies (available at the USCCB website), and encourage them to discuss the following and prepare to share their ideas with the larger group.
- What do they find most surprising?
- Most interesting?
- Most important?

Optional Activity – Invite a guest speaker from a religious community to participate in this activity and/or share briefly their vocation story, a description of their community and their own ministry.

Transition question to Mission Learning and Event Development:

So we know a little more about who consecrated men and women are…but what are they doing? And how can we help!??
In 2014, religious men and women professed solemn vows in 799 different religious communities in the United States. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop’s Secretariat for Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations commissioned a survey with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and released the following information on the new class of consecrated men and women:

- **96% of the communities welcoming new members are directly involved in mission**
- 42% of responding religious attended Catholic elementary school
- 31% attended Catholic high school
- 34% attended Catholic college
- 89% attended some form of vocation program experience to learn more about religious life
- 61% of women entered religious life having already earned a bachelor’s degree
- 80% of men entered religious life have already earned a bachelor’s degree
- 18% of all religious entered religious having earned a graduate degree
- The average age is 37. The youngest is 24. The oldest is 64. Half of all new members are under the age of 34
- 67% of men and women entering religious life are white. 95% of those identifying as white were born in the U.S.
- 17% of men and women entering religious life are Latino. 67% of those who identified as Latino were born in the U.S.
- 14% of men and women entering religious life are Asian. 94% of those identifying as Asian were foreign born
- 76% of men and women entering religious life are were born in the United States
- 14% of men and women entering religious life are not Catholic from birth
- 88% had some experience of ministry and service prior to entering
- 91% regularly participate in some type of personal prayer practice
- 88% had work experience before entering religious life
- On average, responding religious reported they were 19 years old when they first considered a vocation to religious life
- 58% reported they were discouraged from considering religious life by one or more persons, including family and friends

Supporting the Charism of Consecrated Life

Like Jesus, who compassionately spoke His gracious word, healed the sick, gave bread to the hungry and offered his own life in sacrifice, so our founders and foundresses sought in different ways to be in service to all those to whom the Spirit sent them. They did so by their prayers of intercession, their preaching of the Gospel, their works of catechesis, education, their service to the poor and the infirm. The creativity of mission is boundless; it is able to find countless new ways of bringing the newness of the Gospel to every culture and every corner of society.

~ Pope Francis
3.1 Guiding Reflection Questions:

- With what you have learned, what would you say is the mission of men and women living the charism of consecrated life?
- If it were you, where would you go? What would you do? What would your mission be?
- How do you think we can help?

3.2 Culminating Action or Event to Celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life:

- The final piece to this session plan is a move into action. Take the learning into real life. Make it real. Invite young people to brainstorm how they may help further the aims of the Year of Consecrated Life.
- Who can they share this with?
- How can they support consecrated men and women in mission?

Model Events:

Host a screening of a documentary or film on consecrated life and mission. Have youth present their learning before or after the film. Present the event as an educational opportunity and fundraiser for a particular mission project.

Collaborate with local religious communities to host a parish-wide event to explore consecrated Life.