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## **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

A Reflection on Religious Life

Celebration of Consecrated Life

Diocese of San Jose

May 9, 2009 | Leontyne Chapel, Bellarmine College Prep, San Jose

*Introduction*

+ *Readings*

+ *Brother's vocation*

*Conclusion*

In our ever-changing contemporary parlance the noun “power” is often used as an adjective.

We hear persons speak of a power nap, a power lunch, a power tie, a power suit. We may regard today’s Scriptural readings as “power readings.” They are especially appropriate in this Eucharistic liturgy for celebrating religious life and for reflecting on the meaning of our way of life in the religious state.

The Fathers of the Church, both East and West, taught us that liturgy is nothing less than the ongoing saving work of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, still present and operative among us now through the Holy Spirit. The great Latin Father, Pope St. Leo the Great, in the fifth century explained it in this way: “What was visible in our Redeemer has passed over into sacraments.” In other words, what Jesus did historically during his earthly life, he continues to do sacramentally through the liturgical mysteries he celebrates in and with his Church.

Remember that *sacramenta*, sacraments in the language of the Fathers refers to the whole visible, liturgical ministry of the Church, not just the seven sacraments in the popular, technical sense of the term. All three readings

remind us that Jesus is working in us and through us. In effect, each of us is a sacrament of Christ.

The first and third readings call all followers of Jesus “disciples.” And so we are. From time to time the question is raised, “What’s in a name?” The name “disciple,” or the name “religious” is a symbol of the reality. These names capture the essence of our being.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul spoke and acted boldly. Because of the fervor of his dedication Paul was eventually accepted by the disciples of Christ and the Christian community. We strive to follow his example.

The First Letter of John offers a criterion of faithfulness. He admonishes us to demonstrate our belief in Jesus Christ in action by loving and serving as he commanded.

The first two readings set the stage for the dynamic metaphor of the vine and the branches presented by the Gospel. This figure of a living organism is used to indicate our union with the Redeemer in the Mystical Body of Christ. The wide ranging variety of clergy, religious, and laity comprise the many and diverse organs functioning in union with the head to form the Whole Christ, St. Augustine’s apt description of the Church. Though many, we are one in Christ, each of us filling a God-given specific purpose in the living organism of human society.

In this context, what can be said of the religious Brother’s vocation? Of all the vocations to religious life, the Brother’s vocation is the least understood. The generality of human society, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, usually catch the idea of what a priest is and what a religious Sister is. But what a Brother is remains a puzzle to most, especially if they have never known a Brother. Many think Brothers have failed the test for the priesthood, or have gone only “half-way.” Frequently such people, when speaking of religious vocations, mention priests and Sisters and unwittingly omit any mention of Brothers.

This happens because they do not correctly understand the religious state of life, and Brothers are much fewer in number. Marriage and the single life are very evident. But to understand religious life as a state of life and a way of life is more challenging, and many lack close contact or conversation with religious. Some erroneously think all priests are religious. But the priesthood and the diaconate are offices belonging to Holy Orders, a function of service. The call of a Brother is to a way of life, not to an office or service. Like Sisters and Brothers, some priests embrace the religious state.

But all Brothers enter the religious state to accept a distinctive way of life in a Church-approved congregation. All religious – Sisters, Brothers, and priests – dedicate themselves to a way of life characterized by the evangelical vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience lived in community. The vows, common life, and community life are the hallmarks of the religious state. The works of charity they perform are secondary to being persons of prayer and sacrifice.

The essence of religious life is being someone consecrated to God, not doing a particular work. Being is more important than doing. It is necessary to see the Brother's vocation as a call to being totally Christ-centered in a particular way of life in the religious state. This is the distinctive place of the Brother in the life of the Mystical Body of Christ. Our call from God is to a special way of life, not to a special work.

For all of us – lay, religious, and cleric – Jesus calls us to share his life and to collaborate with him. He invites us not to imitate his life or to reproduce his life, but to participate in his life.

Today we religious in the Diocese of San Jose thank God for the gift of our vocation. We ask God to make us proclaimers of his Gospel by our holiness of life.

Let us also continue to wonder who will take our places. Let us be resolute

in explaining more clearly the way of life we have entered, and more active in inviting the young to consider God's call to serve in the religious state.

Using the words of today's Gospel reading, let us all – religious and lay branches of the true vine – glorify God by bearing much fruit as his disciples.

Brother John Samaha, S.M.