

Reflection of Cardinal Justin Rigali
CMSWR National Assembly - 25th Anniversary of the Council
The CMSWR: A Gift of the Church to Religious Life
St. Louis, Missouri
October 13, 2017

Dear Sisters,
Dear Friends in our Lord Jesus Christ,

It is a privilege to speak to you today on the subject that has been presented to both Archbishop Lori and myself for reflection. This subject is: “The CMSWR: A Gift of the Church to Religious Life.”

As the title for my talk, I was thinking of borrowing a Latin phrase that has been used in the sacred Liturgy, although in an entirely different context. The phrase is *Et scio et testificor*. These words have been used to assert the worthiness of candidates for sacred orders. I felt that I could apply this phrase to our present subject of the CMSWR as being a gift of the Church to Religious Life. I didn’t mean to be presumptuous but it seemed to me that from past experience I could say with so many others: “I know and I testify.” Yes, the CMSWR is indeed “A Gift of the Church to Religious Life” and so many people have experienced this.

We recall how the Second Vatican Council in its Decree *Perfectae Caritatis (PC)* formulated norms for the appropriate renewal of religious life, stating that *the fundamental norm is the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel* and that *this is the supreme law for all communities* (cf. *PC*, 2).

We remember how after Vatican II there was great zeal and much intensity in seeking to understand and to experience what was considered appropriate renewal in religious life. In those days there emerged, however, a great diversity of interpretation on how religious life was to be lived in the United States and elsewhere in the Church in the postconciliar period. This diversity was found in individual religious, their institutes and their associations. At that time efforts were being made to find clarity and mutual support in living in charity the essential elements of religious life, including the vow of obedience, common prayer, common life and a common apostolate. It became evident that the different viewpoints were expressed with significant tension and eventually manifested irreconcilable differences in the interpretation of the meaning of religious life and how it was to be lived.

In this context the CMSWR began to come into existence. Actually it was preceded by other associations like the Consortium *Perfectae Caritatis* and the Institute on Religious Life. During the early years of development while I served in the Secretariat of State, I could attest to the great interest there was in making sure that developing associations would not lead to further divisions for religious to cope with. There was sensitivity in the Roman Curia as to how to maintain the unity of religious. It was thought that there were certainly some advantages in

having one association whose members would respectfully hold different views on various aspects of religious life—aspects that were open to discussions.

As time passed, however, the limitations of sincere dialogue emerged. There was lack of agreement in important areas of the Church's teaching. Some religious felt that certain differences were now irreconcilable and that another association in which they would find support was needed for them.

By the early 1990s the situation had greatly evolved from what it was in the 1970s. It was easier now for some to see that certain matters could not be adequately treated in one association. At this point we might respectfully ask if the great understanding that the Church had always shown to the need for acknowledging variety and important differences in religious life was not a motivating cause that led finally to the approval of the CMSWR.

Before recalling some of the aspects of the CMSWR and its founding, it is fitting to recall some basic observations of Pope Francis just before he inaugurated the Year of Consecrated Life in November 2014. He presented to the Church what he called the three Aims of the Year of Consecrated Life about to be inaugurated. The first aim, he said, is “To look to the past with gratitude.” The second is “To live the present with passion.” The third is “To embrace the future with hope.” The words that Pope Francis spoke in regard to religious institutes lend themselves to a measure of valid application also for associations of institutes. With regard to history, Pope Francis observed: “Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging.” He went on to say: “To tell our story is to praise God and to thank him for all his gifts” (Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, 1).

After citing these encouraging words of Pope Francis I wish to refer briefly to that history of the CMSWR which helps lead to the conviction that, yes, the CMSWR is truly “A Gift of the Church to Religious Life.”

In 1992 the CMSWR came into being with the selection of 4 *ad hoc* interim officers for the new association. These Sisters have served generously in the association, helping to make it an effective means of support for all the members. These pioneers merit prayerful gratitude. They are: Mother Christine Born, O.P., Mother Vincent Marie Finnegan, O.C.D., (who was later also designated as *ad hoc* chair), Mother Mary Bernard Nettle, I.s.p. (who very graciously obtained for me useful archival matter), and Mother Mary Quentin Sheridan, R.S.M.

In subsequent years, the structure and the activities of the CMSWR developed and were solidified. The Council, for example, participated in Rome in the Synod of Bishops on the subject of Consecrated Life. In its November General Meeting in 1994 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to invite the CMSWR to be part of its mixed commission on Religious Life and Ministry. Up to this time the mixed commission had been known as the Tri-Conference Commission on Religious Life and Ministry. Earlier that year the Leadership Conference of Woman Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men had both voted to invite the CMSWR's participation. The positive vote of the two conferences of religious is of important significance in recognizing various differences but also the desire to collaborate.

In the following years the CMSWR continued to expand its activities. It participated in various World Youth Days and likewise in the Synod of Bishops on America, with Mother Mary Quentin speaking on the Priesthood and Mother Mary Bernard on the Elderly. In 2004 the CMSWR sponsored a Eucharistic Congress at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. This Eucharistic Congress certainly confirmed a Eucharistic priority for the Council. And this Eucharistic priority in various dimensions contributes greatly to recognizing the CMSWR as a gift of the Church to religious life.

There are multiple other reasons that lead us to this conviction. The teaching of the Lord Jesus is very clear when he says: “By their fruits you shall know them” (Mt 7:16). The achievements of these past years have indeed been praiseworthy, especially in promoting communion among religious superiors. This in turn has strengthened the association itself, offering to sisters from some 180 communities a joyful and dynamic vision of what it means to live faithfully both religious and ecclesial unity. By encouraging reflection, in the context of God’s word, on its history, identity and purpose, the CMSWR—itsself a gift of the Church to religious life—has assisted its members and those associated with them to thank God for his call to religious consecration and for the gift they themselves give to the Church and to the world by the way they live, the way they love and the way they serve. The words of Pope St. Leo the Great echo down the centuries: “O Christian, recognize your dignity” (*Agnosce, christiane, dignitatem tuam*). In offering these words in a particular way to religious, the Church calls religious to nurture a new desire for fidelity to God’s love, a new giving of themselves as a gift to God and his Church. The Church, in turn, is then able to offer them as a model of religious life.

The Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious has earnestly endeavored to embrace faithfully the teaching of the Church in general and in particular on religious life. The Council has looked to the Apostolic See and to the Holy Father himself for direction, maintaining many contacts with the Roman Curia. In doing so, they have had the repeated approval of their statutes, including an official approval of revisions given by the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on January 16, 2004.

Of great importance also is the fact that the activities of the Council have been carried out in union with the Bishops of the United States. The Council’s intention to collaborate closely with the Conference of Bishops and with the individual Bishops is noted in the Council’s Statutes. The Statutes also duly stress the transcendent nature of consecrated life as defined by Vatican II and postconciliar documents. They likewise attribute great importance, as is fitting, to the human needs of the people of God.

In conclusion, the experience of these past twenty-five years in the Church attests that the CMSWR has truly carried out its purpose, supporting major superiors of women religious, promoting with charity and joy collaboration among numerous religious and religious institutes, and significantly encouraging the living of religious life according to the teaching of the Church. All of this has been done to promote the glory of the Most Blessed Trinity and the good of the people of God.

For these reasons, it seems clear that the CMSWR, dedicated to Mary, Mother of the Church and Patroness of America, is rightly considered a gift that the Church herself gives to religious life. Hence, once again, I would like to express this conviction, which I believe is shared by many others who say: *Et scio et testificor*.