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Cardinal Tagle in latest appointment could help revive religious life

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Cardinal Luis Tagle's latest appointment in the Roman Curia gives the Filipino church leader a chance to throw his experiences and talents behind efforts to revive consecrated life, said a professor of church nature and structure at the Jesuit institute here.

Maryknoll Fr. James Kroeger, who teaches ecclesiology at Loyola School of Theology and a special course on the Second Vatican Council at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in the same Ateneo de Manila University campus, said Tagle's appointment to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life comes at a crucial time.

Pope Francis during his November meeting in Rome with superiors of institutes of religious men reportedly [1] urged priests, brothers and sisters in Catholic religious orders to "wake up the world."

At the end of the meeting, he dedicated 2015 to consecrated life [2].

Part of waking up the world is challenging its values, Kroeger said. "It is not that the church is against the world or we don't engage in the world, but to say, 'Hey, we have to pay attention to the poor, we have to take some time for prayer, to see what kind of economics we are practicing,' " the missiologist explained.

In Kroeger's view, Tagle's experience, knowledge, skill and personality will "contribute greatly" to meeting Francis' challenge to religious.

The Vatican on Saturday announced that Tagle would be among members of the congregation [3] responsible for all concerns of institutes of consecrated life. These include orders and religious congregations of men and women, secular institutes, and societies of apostolic life. The congregation's responsibility covers matters of government, discipline, studies, goods, rights and privileges of the religious groups.

Kroeger said Tagle will contribute much to the congregation because the cardinal has interacted with religious men and women since his childhood and through his years as bishop.

"He understands well what consecrated and religious life is all about," Kroeger told *NCR*.

Tagle went for basic education at Saint Andrew's School [4] in Paranaque City southeast of Manila, hailed as one of the "great contributions" of missionaries of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. "His college and theology training were with another religious group -- the Jesuits here at the Ateneo and in San Jose Seminary," Kroeger said.

As a diocesan priest, Tagle worked for years at Loyola with the Jesuits, and while he was bishop of Imus in Cavite, he taught in the Society of the Divine Word [5] seminary there.

Tagle gives retreats and recollection to women congregations around the Philippines and abroad. In November,

he spent time with women theologians gathered in Tagaytay City, south of Manila, for the XVI Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious women on the theme "The Mystic-Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life."

Benedictine Sr. Mary John Mananzan told *NCR* then she was hopeful with "the opening" that Pope Francis offers for discussion of key issues about the role of women in the church, though his theology of women still needed to be articulated.

"Tagle demonstrates that same spirit of openness, and he listens," Mananzan said.

Religious life and church renewal

At the end of 2011, there were more than 900,000 religious priests, brothers and sisters in the world, including those with temporary vows, church reports [6] say, citing the Vatican's Statistical Yearbook [7].

Between 2008 and 2012, the congregation Tagle has been appointed to reportedly issued 11,805 dispensations releasing men and women from their religious vows. Other religious received dispensations from the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Bishops, and for Clergy. The average number of religious with permanent vows who left reportedly reached about 3,000 on average each year. Reasons for leaving were not revealed.

Vocations are dwindling in some places but thriving in others. In Manila, Franciscans of the Immaculate Conception Sr. Jo Aldana told *NCR*, "Three or four women join the congregation annually -- sometimes just two. It's partly because we screen applicants very well."

This year, there are five postulants. When Aldana was novice mistress from 1996 to 2004, she started her term with 19 novices, and by the end, there were nine.

She attributes this drop primarily to economic reasons.

"Many families do not encourage their daughters to explore their vocation because they need them to help earn income for the family," Aldana said.

She said some of the women far along in formation left on their parents' urging.

"The novices said it's hard to live a full life in the convent and watch their families living so poorly," Aldana said.

She said another major challenge is helping novices "balance their prayer life and their community engagement or prophetic ability."

Balance is also a concern of Fr. Bernard Roosendaal, a longtime Dutch missionary with the Order of Carmelites in the Philippines. In his view, a member working in the diocese follows its direction, but must use the Carmelite approach of involving poor people in decision-making in the parish.

"It is an exercise of our prophetic voice," Roosendaal said.

Before leaving for the latest consistory in Rome in February, Tagle celebrated Mass with members of religious congregations of men and women serving around Manila at Paco Church.

He told *NCR* after the Mass that he recognizes that one of the gifts of religious life to the church is "to be a prophetic voice" not only to society, but also to the church.

"That's why many movements to renew the church are related to the religious, for example, Francis of Assisi [8] ," and others, he said.

Tagle said, "As a person, I respect that gift." As bishop, he likes "to develop a lifestyle in which there is constant communication and participation in the common mission."

He said it works best to allow this spirit to operate in meetings, gatherings and planning sessions. He said he believes criticism and critiques can be tackled deeply and sincerely if done internally among the clergy and religious.

"We are encouraging within the church structures for working together, coming together, respecting the different voices, charisms and views. This way, you are purified from the beginning of the disagreement, instead of nurturing grudges," Tagle said.

Tagle can also be expected to allow the voice of religious in mission in developing countries to be heard in Rome.

"He is coming from an experience not of the West, but how religious life [9] is lived here in Asia-Oceania and other parts of the world he travels to," Kroeger pointed out.

He said Tagle can also contribute as a "joyful person." Citing Francis' homily [10] for the 18th World Day for Consecrated Life, Kroeger said, "Religious are supposed to show the joy of being a Christian and of living a consecrated life, and we know how the cardinal can brighten up a gathering."

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[2] http://www.romereports.com/pg154880-pope-francis-announces-2015-will-be-dedicated-to-consecrated-life-en
[3] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccscrlife/documents/rc_con_ccscrlife_profile_en.html
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