



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE SUPERIORS GENERAL OF MEN'S RELIGIOUS ORDERS

Consistory Hall

Friday, 24 November 1978

Beloved Sons,

1. This is my first opportunity to meet the Superiors General of the male Orders, a meeting to which I attach particular importance. When I see you gathered here, there appear before my eyes magnificent figures of Saints, the great Saints who gave rise to your religious Families: Basil, Augustine, Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul, John-Baptist de La Salle, Paul of the Cross, Alphonsus Liguori. And then nearer to us, there are Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, John Bosco, Vincent Pallotti; not to speak of the most recent ones, whose holiness still awaits the definitive judgment of the Church, but whose beneficial influence is testified by the host of generous souls who have chosen to follow their example.

All these names—and I have mentioned only some—bear witness that the ways to holiness, to which the members of the People of God are called, passed and still pass, to a great extent, through the religious life. This should not surprise us, since religious life is based on the most precise "recipe" for holiness, which is constituted by love realized according to the evangelical counsels.

Furthermore, each of your Founders, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit promised by Christ to the Church, was a man who possessed a particular charism. Christ had in him an exceptional "instrument" for his work of salvation, which especially in this way is perpetuated in the history of the human family. The Church has gradually assumed these charisms, evaluated them and, when she found them authentic, thanked the Lord for them and tried to "put them in a safe place" in the life of the community, so that they could always yield fruit.

This was recalled by the Second Vatican Council, which stressed how the ecclesiastical hierarchy, on which there falls the task of feeding the People of God and leading them to good pastures, "in docile response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit accepts rules of religious life which are presented for its approval by outstanding men and women, improves them further and then officially authorizes them. It uses its supervisory and protective authority, too, to ensure that religious institutes established all over the world for building up the Body of Christ may develop and flourish in accordance with the spirit of their founders." (*Lumen Gentium*, 45).

This is what I desire first of all to recognize and express during our first meeting. I do not intend here to make reference "to the past" understood as a historical period that is concluded in itself; I intend to refer "to the life" of the Church in her deepest dynamics. To her life, as it is presented before us, *today*, bringing with it the riches of the traditions of the past, to offer us the possibility of taking advantage of them *today*.

2. The religious vocation is a great problem of the Church of our time. For this very reason it is necessary in the first place to reaffirm forcefully that it belongs to that spiritual fullness which the Spirit himself—the spirit of Christ—brings forth and moulds in the People of God. Without religious Orders, without "consecrated" life, by means of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, the Church would not be fully herself. Religious, in fact, "at the deepest level of their being are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. They embody the Church in her desire to give herself completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. By their lives they are a sign of total availability to God, the Church and the brethren" (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69).

Accepting this axiom, we must examine with all perspicacity *how* the religious vocation must be helped today to become aware of itself and mature, and how religious life must "function" in the life of the contemporary Church as a whole. To this question we are still seeking an answer—and rightly so. We can find it:

- a) in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council;
- b) in the exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*;
- c) in the many statements of the Pontiffs, the Synods and the Episcopal Conferences.

This answer is a fundamental and multiform one. One postulate, however, seems to stand out particularly therein: If the whole life of the Church has two dimensions the vertical and the horizontal, the religious Orders must take the vertical dimension into account above all!

It is well known that the religious Orders have always set great store by the vertical dimension, entering life with the Gospel and bearing witness to it with their own example. With the Gospel

reread authentically: that is, on the basis of the teaching of the Church and in faithfulness to her Magisterium. It must be so today also, *Testificatio—sic, contestatio—non!*

On every community, on every religious there weighs a particular co-responsibility for the real presence of Christ, who is meek and humble of heart, in the world of today—of the Crucified and Risen Christ—Christ among brothers: the spirit of evangelical maximalism, which is differentiated from any socio-political radicalism. "At the same time as being a challenge to the world and to the Church herself, this silent witness of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience", which Religious are called to bear, "can become an eloquent witness capable of touching also non-Christians who have good will and are sensitive to certain values" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 69).

3. The joint document of the S. Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and of the S. Congregation for Bishops indicates what the relationship of the Orders and religious Congregations must be with the episcopal college, the bishops of the individual dioceses and the episcopal conferences. It is a document of great importance, to which special attention should be devoted in the next few years, in the attempt to assume the interior attitude of maximum availability, in harmony, moreover, with that humble and ready docility, which must be a distinctive note of the true Religious.

Wherever you are in the world, you are, with your vocation, "for *the universal Church*", through your mission "*in a given local Church*". Therefore—your vocation for the universal Church is realized in the structures of the local Church. Every effort must be made in order that "consecrated life" may develop in the individual local Churches, in order that it may contribute to their spiritual building up, in order that it may constitute their particular strength. Unity with the universal Church, through the local Church: that is your way.

4. Before concluding, allow me to return to a point which I consider a fundamental one in the life of every Religious, whatever may be the Family to which he belongs: I mean the contemplative dimension, the commitment to prayer. The Religious is a man consecrated to God by means of Christ, in the charity of the Spirit. This is an ontological datum which demands to emerge to consciousness and to orientate life, not only for the benefit of the individual person, but also for the advantage of the whole community, which, in consecrated souls, experiences and enjoys in a quite special way the life-bringing presence of the divine Bridegroom.

You must not be afraid, therefore, beloved sons, to remind your confreres frequently that a pause for true worship has greater value and spiritual fruit than the most intense activity, were it apostolic activity itself. This is the most urgent "contestatio" that Religious must oppose to a society in which efficiency has become an idol, on the altar of which human dignity itself is not infrequently sacrificed.

Your houses must be above all centres of prayer, meditation and dialogue—personal and of the whole community—with Him who is and must remain the first and principal interlocutor in the industrious succession of your days. . If you are able to nourish this "climate" of intense and loving communion with God, it will be possible for you to carry forward, without traumatic tensions or dangerous confusion, that renewal of life and discipline, to which the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council committed you.

The soul that lives in habitual contact with God and moves within the warm range of his love, can easily protect itself from the temptation of particularisms and oppositions, which create the risk of painful divisions. It can interpret in the right evangelical light the option for the poorest and for every victim of human selfishness, without surrendering to socio-political radicalizations, which in the long run turn out to be inopportune, self-defeating and often causes of new forms of tyranny. It can approach people and take its place in the midst of the people, without questioning its own religious identity, or dimming that "specific originality" of its own vocation, which derives from the peculiar "following of Christ" poor, chaste and obedient.

These, beloved sons, are the reflections which I was anxious to submit to your consideration in this first meeting of ours. I am certain that you will not fail to undertake to transmit them to your confreres, enriching them with the contribution of your experience and your wisdom. May you be assisted in your delicate task by the Blessed Virgin! She, whom my Predecessor Paul VI of venerable memory indicated in his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* as the Virgin listening, the Virgin in prayer, the Virgin who begets Christ and offers him for the salvation of the world, remains the unsurpassable model of every consecrated life. May it be She who acts as your guide in the laborious but fascinating ascent towards the ideal of full assimilation with Christ the Lord.

I accompany the wish with my Apostolic Blessing.

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