



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE THIRD SYMPOSIUM OF BENEDICTINE WOMEN**

11 September 1998

Dear Abbot Primate,

Dear Sisters in Christ, 1. Giving thanks to God, “because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (*Rm* 1:8), I welcome you, the participants in the Third International Symposium of Benedictine Women, on the theme: “The Experience of God and the Benedictine Approach to Prayer”. I greet you as heirs to the great tradition of Christian holiness which has its roots in Saint Benedict’s prayer in the silence of Subiaco, a tradition which lives on through your communities, which are “schools in the service of God” (*Rule*, Prol., 45). 2. Saint Benedict lived in the dark times that came with the collapse of the Roman Empire. For many, disorder brought despair and the escapism which despair always breeds. But Benedict’s response was different. Obeying impulses long known in the Christian East, he turned from all that was familiar and entered his cave, “searching for God” (*Rule*, 58,7). There Benedict grasped the very core of biblical revelation which begins with the original chaos described in the Book of Genesis and comes to its summit in the light and glory of the Paschal Mystery. He learned that even in darkness and in emptiness we can find the fullness of light and life. The mountain that Benedict climbed was Calvary, where he found the true light that enlightens all men (cf. *Jn* 1:9). How right it is then that the *Sacro Speco* at Subiaco contains the image of Benedict contemplating the Cross, since from the Cross alone comes the light, the order and the fullness of God for which all men and women long. There alone does the human heart find rest. The first word of his Rule reveals the core of Benedict’s experience in the cave: *Ausculata*, Listen! This is the secret: Benedict listens, trusting that God is there and that God will speak. Then he hears a word in the silence; and thus he becomes the father of a civilization, a civilization born from contemplation, a civilization of love born from listening to the word which springs from the depths of the Trinity. Benedict became the word which he heard, and slowly his voice “went forth through all the world” (cf. *Ps.* 19:4): disciples came, then monasteries appeared, then a civilization grew around them, not only salvaging what was precious in the classical world but opening as well an unimagined path into a new world. It was the sons and daughters of Saint Benedict who reclaimed the land, who organized society, who preached the Gospel as missionaries, who wrote the books as scholars, nurturing all that makes for a truly human life. It is astonishing to consider how much came from so little: “this is the Lord’s doing and a marvel in

our eyes” (*Ps* 118:23).³ The Rule which Benedict wrote is unforgettable not only for its burning passion for God and its wise concern for the discipline without which there is no discipleship, but also for its radiant *humanitas*. The Rule breathes a spirit of hospitality grounded upon the belief that the other is no enemy but is Christ himself who comes as guest; and this is a spirit given only to those who have known the magnanimity of God. In the Rule of Benedict, we find an order which is strict but never stern, a light which is clear but never cold, and a fullness which is absolute but never overwhelming. In a word, the Rule is radical but always hospitable – which is why, when other monastic Rules disappeared, the Rule of Benedict triumphed and continues to work its power even today in the lives of your communities.⁴ Dear Sisters, our society too knows much darkness at the end of this century and on the threshold of the new millennium. In such a time, the luminous figure of Benedict stands in our midst, pointing as always to Christ. You have been called in a special way into that mystery of light – which is why the Church continues to look to you and your communities so expectantly. We look to you because you are those who are not afraid to enter the cave which is dark and empty; those who listen in a truly contemplative silence; those who hear the word of God and become that word; those who help shape a truly civilized world where anxiety and despair lose their power, and the peace of Easter is experienced in the *tranquillitas ordinis*.⁵ The Church looks to you with special eagerness as we undertake the new evangelization to which the Holy Spirit is now summoning us at the dawn of the new millennium. There will be no evangelization without the contemplation which is the heart of Benedictine life. The whole Church must learn more of the meaning of “*Ora et labora*”, and who will teach us that, if not the sons and daughters of Saint Benedict? The world is longing for the truth which Benedict knew and taught so well; and now, no less than in the past, people are looking to the witness of prayer and work which your communities so joyfully offer. In all your prayer and work, it is the Virgin Mary who sheds light upon your path, since she is “Mother of the Star that never sets”, as the Liturgy of the Christian East still sings. She it is who teaches you to listen, who leads you into the depths of contemplation that you may bear witness in the power of the Holy Spirit to what you have heard. May Mary guard you and your communities with a mother’s love; may Benedict, Scholastica and the great host of Benedictine saints be your inspiration and your strength; and may the grace and peace of Christ, “the faithful witness and first-born from the dead” (*Rev* 1:5), be with you always. As a pledge of this, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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