



The Holy See

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS

JOHN PAUL II

TO THE BISHOPS

OF THE UNITED STATES

*To my dear brother Bishops in the United States of America*¹. In this Extraordinary Holy Year which has just begun, the whole Church is seeking to live more intensely the mystery of the Redemption. She is seeking to respond ever more faithfully to the immense love of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world. In the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee, I pointed out that "the profound meaning and hidden beauty of this Year...are to be seen in the rediscovery and lived practice of the sacramental economy of the Church, through which the grace of God in Christ reaches individuals and communities" (*Aperite Portas Redemptori*, 3). While these words have a personal meaning for everyone, they are particularly relevant to individual men and women religious and to each religious community. It is my profound hope and ardent prayer that the grace of the Redemption will reach religious in great abundance, that it will take possession of their hearts, and become a source of Easter joy and hope for them—that the Holy Year will be a fresh beginning for them to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). By their very vocation, religious are intimately linked to the Redemption. In their consecration to Jesus Christ they are a sign of the Redemption that He accomplished. In the sacramental economy of the Church they are instruments for bringing this Redemption to the People of God. They do so by the vitality that radiates from the lives they live in union with Jesus, who continues to repeat to all His disciples: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5). Religious bring the People of God into contact with the Redemption by the evangelical and ecclesial witness they bear by word and example to the message of Jesus. Their communion with their local Churches and with the universal Church has a supernatural effectiveness by reason of the Redemption. The important collaboration they give to the ecclesial community helps it to live and perpetuate the mystery of the Redemption, especially through the Eucharistic Sacrifice in which the work of the Redemption is repeatedly actuated. The Church presents the Year of the Redemption to all the People of God as a call to holiness, a call to renewal and a call to penance and conversion, because "there is no spiritual renewal that does not pass through penance and conversion" (*Aperite Portas Redemptori*, 4). But this call is linked in a particular way with the life and mission of religious. Thus the Jubilee Year has a special value for religious; it affects them in a special way; it makes special demands on their love, reminding them how much they are loved by the Redeemer and by His Church. Especially relevant to religious are these words of the Apostolic Bull: "The specific grace of the Year of the Redemption is therefore a renewed discovery of the love of God" (no. 8). In this regard, as pastors of the Church, we must proclaim over and over again that the vocation to religious life that God gives is linked to His personal love for each and every religious. It is my earnest hope that the Holy Year of the Redemption will truly be for religious life a year of fruitful renewal in Christ's love. If all the faithful have a right—as they do—to the treasures of grace that a call to renewal in love offers, then the religious have a special title to that right.² During this Jubilee of the Redemption you will be coming to Rome for your *ad Limina* visits, and I shall have an

opportunity to consider with you some of the aspects of religious life as you see them. This makes my thoughts turn at this time in a special way to the religious of the United States. In reflecting on their history, their splendid contribution to the Church in your country, the great missionary activity that they have performed over the years, the influence they have exerted on religious life throughout the world, as well as on the particular needs which they experience at the present time, I am convinced that, as Bishops, we must offer them encouragement and the support of our pastoral love. The religious life in the United States has indeed been a great gift of God to the Church and to your country. From the early colonial days, by the grace of God, the evangelizing zeal of outstanding men and women religious, encouraged and sustained by the persevering efforts of the Bishops, has helped the Church to bring the fruits of the Redemption to your land. Religious were among your pioneers. They blazed a trail in Catholic education at all levels, helping to create a magnificent educational system from elementary school to university. They brought into being health care facilities remarkable both for their numbers and quality. They made a valuable contribution to the provision of social services. Working towards the establishment of justice, love and peace, they helped to build a social order rooted in the Gospel, striving to bring generation after generation to the maturity of Christ. Their witness to the primacy of Christ's love has been expressed through lives of prayer and dedicated service to others. Contemplative religious have contributed immensely to the vitality of the ecclesial community. At every stage in its growth, the Church in your nation, marked by a conspicuous fidelity to the See of Peter, has been deeply indebted to its religious; priests, sisters, brothers. The religious of America have also been a gift to the universal Church, for they have given generously to the Church in other countries; they have helped throughout the world to evangelize the poor and to spread Christ's Gospel of peace. This generosity has given evidence of a strong and vital religious life, ensured by a steady flow of vocations.³ And because I have stressed the pastoral character and the full participation of the local Churches in the celebration of the Holy Year, I now turn to you, the Bishops of the United States, asking you during this Holy Year to render special pastoral service to the religious of your dioceses and your country. I ask you to assist them in every way possible to open wide the doors of their heart to the Redeemer. I ask that, through the exercise of your pastoral office, as individual Bishops and united as an Episcopal Conference, you encourage the religious, their Institutes and associations to live fully the mystery of the Redemption, in union with the whole Church and according to the specific charism of their religious life. This pastoral service can be given in different ways, but it certainly includes the personal proclamation of the Gospel message to them and the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice with them. It will likewise mean proclaiming anew to all the People of God the Church's teaching on consecrated life. This teaching has been set forth in the great documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*. It has been further developed in *Evangelica Testificatio*, in the addresses of my predecessor Paul VI and in those which I myself have given on many occasions. More recently still, much of this doctrinal richness has been distilled and reflected in the revised Code of Canon Law promulgated earlier this year. The essential elements are lived in different ways from one Institute to another. You yourselves deal with this rich variety in the context of the American reality. Nevertheless, there are elements which are common to all forms of religious life and which the Church regards as essential. These include: a vocation given by God, an ecclesial consecration to Jesus Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels by public vows, a stable form of community life approved by the Church, fidelity to a specific founding gift and sound traditions, a sharing in Christ's mission by a corporate apostolate, personal and liturgical prayer- especially Eucharistic worship, public witness, a lifelong formation, a form of government calling for religious authority based on faith, a specific relation to the Church. Fidelity to these basic elements, laid down in the constitutions approved by the Church, guarantees the strength of religious life and grounds our hope for its future growth. I ask you, moreover, my brother Bishops, to show the Church's profound love and esteem for the religious life, directed as it is to the faithful and generous imitation of Christ and to union with God. I ask

you to invite all the religious throughout your land, in my name, and in your own name as Bishops, in the name of the Church and in the name of Jesus, to seize this opportunity of the Holy Year to walk in newness of life, in solidarity with all the pastors and faithful, along the path necessary for us all-the way of penance and conversion. In their lives of poverty, religious will discover that they are truly relevant to the poor. Through chastity they are able to love with the love of Christ and to experience His love for themselves. And through obedience they find their deepest configuration to Christ in the most fundamental expression of His union with the Father-in fulfilling His Father's will: "I always do what pleases him" (Jn. 8:29). It is especially through obedience that Christ Himself offers to religious the experience of full Christian freedom. Possessing peace in their hearts and the justice of God from which that peace flows, they can be authentic ministers of Christ's peace and justice to a world in need. In those cases, too, where individuals or groups, for whatever reason, have departed from the indispensable norms of religious life, or have even, to the scandal of the faithful, adopted positions at variance with the Church's teaching, I ask you my brother Bishops, sustained by hope in the power of Christ's grace and performing an act of authentic pastoral service, to proclaim once again the Church's universal call to conversion, spiritual renewal and holiness. And be sure that the same Holy Spirit who has placed you as Bishops to shepherd the Church (cf. Acts 20:28) is ready to utilize your ministry to help those who were called by Him to a life of perfect charity, who were repeatedly sustained by His grace and who have given evidence of a desire-which must be rekindled-to live totally for Christ and His Church in accordance with their proper ecclesial charism. In the local Churches the discernment of the exercise of these charisms is authenticated by the Bishops in union with the Successor of Peter. This work is a truly important aspect of your episcopal ministry, an aspect to which the universal Church, through me, asks you to attach special priority in this Jubilee Year.⁴ As an expression of my solidarity with you in this area of your pastoral service, acknowledging the special links between religious life and the Holy See, I am hereby appointing Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco as Pontifical Delegate to head a special Commission of three Bishops whose task it will be to facilitate the pastoral work of their brother Bishops in the United States in helping the religious of your country whose Institutes are engaged in apostolic works to live their ecclesial vocation to the full. Associated with him in the Commission are Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly of Louisville and Bishop Raymond W. Lessard of Savannah. Working in union with the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and following a document of guidelines which the Congregation is making available to them and to you, the Commission has authority to set up a suitable program of work which, it is hoped, will be of valuable help to the individual Bishops and to the Episcopal Conference. I would further ask the Commission to consult with a number of religious, to profit from the insights that come from the experience of religious life lived in union with the Church. I am confident that the religious of contemplative life will accompany this work with their prayers. In asking the Commission to be of assistance to you in your pastoral ministry and responsibility, I know that it will be very sensitive to the marked decline in recent years in the numbers of young people seeking to enter religious life, particularly in the case of Institutes of apostolic life. This decline in numbers is a matter of grave concern to me-a concern which I know that you and the religious also share. As a result of this decline, the median age of religious is rising and their ability to serve the needs of the Church is becoming increasingly more limited. I am concerned that, in a generous effort to continue manifold services without adequate numbers, many religious are over-burdened, with a consequent risk to their health and spiritual vitality. In the face of this shared concern, I would ask the Commission, in collaboration with religious, utilizing the prayerful insights of individual religious and major superiors, to analyze the reasons for this decline in vocations. I ask them to do this with a view to encouraging a new growth and a fresh move forward in this most important sector of the Church's life. And in addressing the many issues affecting the consecrated life and ecclesial mission of religious, these Bishops will work closely with you, their brother Bishops. Besides having as an aid the document on the salient points of the Church's teaching on religious life prepared

by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, you and they will have my full fraternal and prayerful support. The ad Limina visits of the American Bishops will truly offer an excellent opportunity for you and me to speak personally about the pastoral service that we wish to render together in the name of Jesus, Chief Shepherd of the Church and Redeemer of the world. By requesting that this call to holiness, to spiritual renewal and to conversion and penance be initiated during the Jubilee Year of the Redemption, I am trusting that the Lord Jesus, who always sends laborers into His vineyard, will bless the project with His redeeming love. The power of the Holy Spirit can make this call a vital experience for all who respond to it, and a sign of hope for the future of religious life in your country. May Mary the patroness of the United States, the first of the redeemed and the model of all religious, support your episcopal ministry with her motherly prayer, so that it may come to fruition, bringing renewed joy and peace to all the religious of America, and offering ever greater glory to the Most Holy Trinity. *From the Vatican, the Solemnity of the Resurrection, April 3, 1983.*

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