



The Holy See

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To my dear brother Bishops in the United States of America,

On April 3, 1983 I wrote to you requesting that you render special pastoral service to the religious of the United States. To facilitate your pastoral work with your religious I appointed Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco as Pontifical Delegate, along with Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly and Bishop Raymond W. Lessard as members of a special Commission. I thank them again for their untiring and dedicated labour in carrying out their task, for devising a program to guide and assist you in your own pastoral ministry and responsibility to the religious of your country. Also in order to assist you in your service to religious you were provided with a summary of current legislation on religious life under the title of "Essential Elements". I am grateful to you for your serious efforts in responding to this call.

SUMMARY

The report of the Pontifical Commission, as well as your own letters, attests to the fact that the program of listening and dialogue proved to be informative and beneficial both to you and to the religious.

The Commission reported on the two stages of their work, the listening and the dialogue stages. It is interesting to note that many of the positive and negative elements expressed by the religious were also set forth by you. The topics chosen for the series of dialogues continue to be central to the mystery and reality of religious life: Charism and identity; Public witness; Consecration and mission; Obedience; Structures of authority, and Community life.

In your letters you have generally been positive about the state of religious life in your dioceses. You rightfully expressed your profound gratitude for the many years of outstanding service given

by the religious in building up the local Church. This service is a precious legacy of American religious.

You have been realistic in assessing both their strengths and weaknesses. Among those strengths are generous and varied service, greater prayer life, eminent professional competence, a serious response to renewal. Included in the weaknesses you cited are a decline in vocations, decreasing numbers and aging membership, inadequate theological foundation, weakened presence in or absence from the traditional apostolates, insufficient public witness, cases of excessive introspection radical feminism and polarization.

TEACHING

The special pastoral service to which I invited you is obviously not something transitory or temporary. It is an essential component of your ministry as bishops (Cfr. *Mutuae Relationes*, 9; *Christus Dominus*, 15). I would urge you to continue to nourish your religious with the word of God, to call them to a more intimate union with Christ and to show them by word and example the way of discipleship. Because religious life is at the heart of the mystery of the Church, those who “belong inseparably to her life and holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44) must be constantly exhorted to remain faithful to the Church’s mission and teaching.

In your role as bishop you have the responsibility to teach all your people, including men and women religious. Related to that teaching office is the need and obligation to present a sound theological exposition of religious life.

Be confidently steadfast in proclaiming and teaching the reality of the mystery which is the Church; “*Lumen Gentium*” and “*Christus Dominus*” provide sound direction for this. You must continue to speak of the Church’s role as teacher of the authentic message of Christ and as custodian of the integrity of the Gospel.

GRATITUDE TO RELIGIOUS

You have said that you have so many wonderful men and women religious who deeply love the Lord, who pray fervently, who labour generously and zealously. So often those who are faithful and constant and who are always present and available to do any good work are taken for granted. Please thank them in my name and in your own name, in the name of Jesus Christ and his Church. Please continue to recognize, acknowledge and support them.

CONSECRATION

The study of the Pontifical Commission and your own letters point out an apparent tension between consecration and mission. The centrality of the evangelical counsels must continue to be

emphasized. Consecrated life of its very nature is linked to the profession and living of consecrated chastity, poverty, and obedience. Religious are not merely clerical or lay persons dedicated to good works.

Number 8 of "Perfectae Caritatis" points out the necessary unity between consecration and mission. In apostolic communities "the whole religious life of the members should be inspired by an apostolic spirit and all their apostolic activity formed by the spirit of religion". Thus the rules and customs of such institutes should be adapted and refined in keeping with the character and purpose of the institute.

All Christians are called to follow Christ. Religious are called to a radical discipleship. Through their consecration by profession of the evangelical counsels, they reflect Jesus who out of love for us "emptied himself... coming in human likeness... and becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (*Phil. 2, 7-8*).

Religious must truly bring Christ to others. Identification with Jesus brings with it death to self. You and I must be concerned that we call religious to that dying. Tendencies to excessive self-fulfillment and autonomy in living, working and decision-making are not reflections of Jesus, who came to do the will of the Father.

The ultimate criterion of authentic religious life is conformity to the person of Christ. You have every right and obligation to call religious to that conformity and to urge them to esteem the great dignity of their consecration.

APOSTOLATE-THEOLOGY

A sound theology of religious life is needed. Serious work must be done on the charisms, community life, and vowed life; and also on the integration of the apostolic life into this framework. In many instances the apostolate or ministry seems to have eclipsed the other values. Your own employment of men and women religious in the apostolates of your dioceses should take into account all the various aspects of this theology.

As bishops who are teachers of religious life and pastors to the religious, you are called to promote a sound ecclesiology. Some of the tensions cited both in the Pontifical Commission Report and in your own letters can be dispelled by a clear and unambiguous theology of the Church. For example, the role of the local bishop in the area of liturgy and the care of souls, his responsibility for the public good of the Church, and his right and obligation to ensure that sound doctrine is presented in his diocese should be made very clear.

While the bishop has the ultimate responsibility in these areas, one way of helping to promote a clear understanding of this would be to meet on a regular basis with the major superiors of the

men and women religious who serve in your dioceses so that there might be a more effective and coordinated planning for mission. The religious who are your collaborators in the apostolate can assist you in formulating and carrying out your pastoral plan.

Such meetings can also provide a forum for dealing effectively with common issues such as evangelization and ecclesiology.

AUTHORITY

The Pontifical Commission Report focused on structures of authority. The role of authority is a most sensitive one. In a legitimate attempt to correct present abuses, as well as those of the past, where at times there was a rigid and autocratic style of government, religious have moved to more participative models of government. Bad models and experiences of authority must be corrected, not by destroying authority but by continuing to purify it of domination, pride and self-seeking. Jesus remains our model for the existence and use of authority.

The substitution of a management model of authority for a government model is not the answer. Management may be useful in producing products, but the purpose of government in religious life is to safeguard the charism and stimulate its growth – in a word, to foster life. Certainly some techniques of good management can be most helpful in the administration of an institution. The problem arises when there is a loss of personal authority or an unwillingness to use it and thus accept responsibility for the life of the institute.

Without someone to exercise authority in a community there is the danger that situational and pragmatic values may replace objective values. The role of a superior must be to call religious to fidelity to that particular radical following of Christ which is the institute's charism.

An unwillingness to admit authority at the level of religious life leads to a self-direction and autonomy which are incompatible with being identified with Jesus, who came to do the will of the Father.

Because religious are public persons in the Church, their own obligation – as men and women who follow the obedient Christ – is to reflect accurately and clearly the teaching of the Church. When necessary you and their superiors must remind them of this reality.

ROLE OF WOMEN

Both the report of the Pontifical Commission and your own letters spoke of the topic of feminism. I concur with you in supporting and promoting the rights and dignity of women. I acknowledge and praise the tremendous contributions of thousands of dedicated and competent women religious. They continue to play a vital role in the life of the Church.

However, a radical feminism which seeks the rights of women by attacking and denying fundamental, clear and constant moral teaching does not reflect or promote the full reality and true dignity of women, who have not only a temporal worth but also an eternal destiny in the Divine Plan. Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of the Church, woman par excellence, embodies that radical dignity of women. She played a pivotal part as all history was changed; she continues to touch our lives today.

The equality of women with men must continue to be recognized, as I have pointed out in "[Mulieris Dignitatem](#)". That equality should in no way blur or ignore the reality that men and women are different. One is not better than the other but neither are they identical. Their complementarity is a precious asset for the Church and society.

I would ask that in your support and encouragement of the values of religious life you see them as applying to men religious as well as women religious. Religious life must not be treated as two distinct and different realities, one for men and the other for women. The fundamental elements of religious life pertain to all religious, men and women. In the works of the apostolate to which we invite religious we must be sensitive to their particular obligations and needs as men and women religious consecrated for mission. We must value and support them equally for who they are as religious and for what they do as collaborators in the apostolate.

CONFERENCES

In accordance with [canons 708 and 709](#) of the Code of Canon Law, there are two conferences of major superiors in the United States, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, established by the Holy See. These conferences exist to assist the major superiors in their task of strengthening and deepening the life of their individual institutes. They are also enabled to explore common problems, transact common business, and provide a vehicle for suitable coordination and cooperation with the conference of bishops, as well as with individual bishops. These conferences in no way lessen the authority and autonomy of each superior in his or her respective institute. These conferences have a direct relationship with the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes under whose jurisdiction they are.

A common concern that has been expressed both in the Report and by many of you individually is that of polarization, particularly among women religious. The right of all major superiors of religious institutes of women to belong to the established conference is clear. The members have a right to make their concerns heard. The conference must find realistic and equitable ways to express the concerns of all women religious. Both as individual bishops in your own dioceses and as a conference of bishops you are called to exhort the various religious to find effective ways to remove the causes of their division. They must speak to one another about the issues which divide them; they must also rediscover and build on the shared patrimony of the Church's teaching. This

teaching on religious life has demonstrated its vitality through the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Code of Canon Law and the various documents of the Holy See. Dialogue among religious should thus be based on this body of Church teaching.

There are other organizations in your country which were founded to promote religious life. The existence of these organizations is based on those canons which deal with associations of the Christian faithful (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 298ss.](#)). These associations are distinct from those conferences referred to above, which are established under [canons 708 and 709](#). There is certainly also a place for such organizations which promote and foster religious life according to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

VOCATIONS

The lack of sufficient vocations to religious life remains a pressing concern. The report of the Pontifical Commission was quite extensive and helpful in this area. It presented very thoroughly the cultural and sociological factors contributing to the decline in vocations; this study could, however, be strengthened by the inclusion of a theological study and analysis of this section. Religious institutes must maintain a clear and firm sense of their own identity and mission. A continual state of flux about direction, an inconsistency between how values and ideals are expressed and how they are in fact lived, an excessive self-absorption and introspection, an overemphasis on the needs of the members as opposed to the needs of God's people are often stumbling blocks for those who sense Christ's call: "Come, follow me".

My Brothers, it is a part of our pastoral mission to help the religious to nurture and proclaim as clearly as possible their identity. This is something, as vital and dynamic as their own charism, which they must understand and to which they must be faithful.

The promotion of vocations to the religious life must continue to be a joint effort of the bishops, by their teaching and encouragement; of the religious, by their example and invitation; of families, by their appreciation of the gift of a vocation to one of their members; and of all of us, by our fervent and constant prayer.

OTHER ISSUES

Community life is at the heart of religious life; it is a distinguishing feature of this type of consecrated life. Religious life is vowed life lived in community. Religious are called to be an exemplary community within the community of the Church. The breakdown of community life has its effect in all aspects of religious life. Community life is intended to be life-giving for the individual religious; the holiness of religious is inexorably bound to the full living of their community life. This is not to advocate a closed, static, merely formalistic common life, but rather a healthy and vibrant community life based on shared charism, shared vowed commitment, and shared formative

experiences of a spiritual, liturgical and social nature.

Many of you are concerned about what you identify as a growing secularization in religious life. Renewal and adaptation were called for by the Second Vatican Council. Religious are not merely professional persons who assist in the work of the Church. They are at the heart of the mystery of the Church, they belong inseparably to her life and holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, 44). They are called to a radical living of the baptismal commitment common to all.

It is important for you in your pastoral mission to understand fully and to promote all the authentic values of religious life. The call to consecration and mission, to deeper prayer, to the witness of community – all this needs to be supported and encouraged in its entirety.

An opportune way to carry out some aspects of your special pastoral service to religious is to continue to provide occasions for common prayer and for dialogue especially between yourselves and major superiors. Some provision should be made to facilitate understanding and communication between the religious and the diocesan clergy. Your vicars for religious can be of great service in this area. The office of vicar or delegate for religious is indeed an apt vehicle for assisting you in your relationship with the religious of your diocese.

CONCLUSION

As I have urged you to teach, to support, to encourage, and to dialogue and plan with the religious, I exhort you to nourish them with the word of God. Pray for them; pray with them. Continue to minister to them in special pastoral service. Love them and call them to love one another so that all will know that we are disciples of Jesus.

Religious by their style of life are called to be a sign of contradiction, a witness of counter-culture in a world which so often seeks self-gratification and fulfillment, which alienates the poor and the powerless, which is intolerant and hostile to minorities, which is noisy and strident and frenetic. Religious, by their love for all people expressed through consecrated chastity, by their dependence and simplicity of life expressed through vowed poverty, by their availability and submission of will through obedience, by their willingness to live interdependently with others in community, and by their relationship with the Triune God offer a viable and feasible alternative to what is, and speak the promise of what is to be. Encourage and exhort them as they strive to live what they profess; like us they bear the weaknesses of the flawed human condition.

I entrust you and your religious to the loving care of Mary, Mother of the Church. May she who carried Jesus within herself and who gave him to us who so needed him, help you and your religious to be formed more and more into his likeness. May she assist you all in giving Jesus to a people longing for his peace, his healing and his love.

As a sign of my own fraternal love, I send you all my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, February 22, 1989, Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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