



The Holy See

LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO BISHOP JEAN BONFILS OF VIVIERS OF FRANCE

To Bishop Jean Bonfils of Viviers

The fourth centenary of the birth of St John Francis Regis invites the universal Church to direct her gaze to this lofty figure of holiness, to draw from his example the best he can contribute to contemporary man.

In a France which had only just recovered from the havoc caused by the religious wars that stained the end of the 16th century with blood, St John Francis Regis appears as a man providentially called by God to restore strength and courage to a people abandoned and left to its own devices. While the state of the country and towns of Vivarais and Velay was truly disastrous, John Francis set off along the roads in search of lost sheep. By the simplicity of his words and his unlimited charity, he touched the hearts of the lowly and humble to raise them to the love of God and lead them in Christ's footsteps. The renown of his ministry as a preacher and confessor quickly spread. He could bring peace to souls and cities, reconciliation to families, convinced as he was of the power of Christ's words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give it to you" (Jn 14:27).

His activity was rooted in the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola. A member of the Society of Jesus, he knew in fact that without total submission to the divine will, the human being, the believer, the priest cannot be truly effective. "Apart from me you can do nothing", said Jesus Christ (Jn 15:5). That is why he sought throughout his life to practise the evangelical counsels and cultivate to the highest degree his availability to the action of Providence, and a servant's humility in the trials of his courageous missionary life.

Still and more than ever today, such an attitude is an eminent example for all who want to tread in

the footsteps of the Lord and entrust their life to him, that he may make it an offering in praise of his glory (cf. Eph 1:6). Bringing peace to hearts and societies appears as one of the essential missions of the end of the 20th century. While we face a certain loss of values, it is important to recall the bright truth of the Gospel. Just as John Francis Regis was able to do in his time, the faithful of our time are invited to put themselves in God's hands with total trust, to be among themselves and among "all the peoples that are on the face of the earth" (Dt 7:6), joyful and generous witnesses to the Good News of salvation offered to all men.

In less than 10 years of ministry, this saintly Frenchman succeeded, with God's help, in leading back to Christ an immense crowd of men, women and children of all ages and walks of life. May St John Francis Regis be a guide and a beacon in the years which separate us from the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000! May he show the ways of holiness, to priests that of priestly service, to lay people that of peace and brotherhood, to religious that of the gift of self in poverty; may he show everyone that Christ, our Pasch and our lasting peace, does not cease to call man to follow him to give him eternal life! May this year of the fourth centenary of the birth of St John Francis Regis be a source of grace for the Society of Jesus, for the faithful of the Diocese of Viviers and for all the people of Vivarais and Velay, which he traversed proclaiming the Gospel; may each one see more clearly that he is called to live fully in the great family of the Church!

These are the wishes I make for those who will be taking part in the centenary celebrations, as I pray the Virgin Mary to lead them to her risen Son, whom I most particularly ask to accompany those who will be making the pilgrimage to Lalouvesc. I cordially send my Apostolic Blessing to each one.

From the Vatican, 27 May 1997

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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