



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE FRANCISCAN HOSPITALLER SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

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One hundred and twenty-five years ago, Bl. Pope Pius IX granted this congregation pontifical approval, through the rescript "Sanctissimus Dominus" of 27 March 1876. The occasion of the current anniversary offers me the chance to express to you my sincere appreciation for the wonderful evangelical path opened by the Religious Family of Sr Maria Clara do Menino Jesus throughout these years with its manifold works of love. It did not disappoint the trust placed in it by my venerable predecessor!

In the second half of the 19th century, the winds of history were stormy blasts, causing numerous hopes to flounder and forcing the good God to find "life belts" from among the castaways themselves. Sr Maria Clara was one of these. Born in 1843, she was baptized with the name of Libania do Carmo; she lived her first years in her home, blessed and noble in every sense of the word; however, an epidemic deprived her of her mother when she was seven years old, and she lost her father when she was only 13. She thus found herself without parents, gathered together with others in the "Asilo da Ajuda", where she was able to enjoy and admire the loving care of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, devoted to the work of starting to grow again of those frightened shoots of life. Suddenly, however, a religious persecution drove those sisters from Portugal, and Libania once again witnessed the collapse of the "family roof" that protected her.

Later she found shelter in the palace of a friendly family. There she witnessed the luxury and pleasures of worldly life, which appeared to her as noisy as they were empty; and in the emptiness they left, Libania heard ever more insistently the secret calls, which rose like a murmur from the depths of her heart. When she was 25 years old, after having conquered the opposition standing in her way, she left the palace and devoted herself to the service of God in the "Pensionato de S. Patrício". This work had emerged from the apostolic heart of Don Raimondo dos Anjos Beirão, with the double aim of promoting the education of youth and helping the nearby monastery of

Capuchin Sisters of Our Lady of the Conception to overcome their great penury. They had been founded in 1710 as Tertiaries of St Francis of Assisi; among their vows was that of publicly and particularly professing the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. Libania was welcomed into the community receiving the name of Maria Clara do Menino Jesus.

Because the persecution in force forbade religious profession in Portugal, Maria Clara and two fellow sisters went to France to do their novitiate in the house of the Third Order Regular of St Francis of Assisi, which was in Calais. "Having examined and understood the great works of charity" which were being done there, on their return to Portugal, Sr Maria Clara and her companions "wished to adopt the same Rule, the same customs and also a similar habit, with the greatest possible perfection": this is what is written in the request for approval presented by the Foundress to the Holy See; and her request was received favourably as the Hospitaller Sisters of Portugal were granted "the same spiritual privileges which the above named Franciscan congregation legitimately enjoys" (Pontifical rescript).

In the eyes of shortsighted Portuguese law, the new body just appeared as one more "charitable association"; but before God, it was "the loving and saving presence of Christ,... a prolongation of his humanity" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 76), because "those who follow Christ on the path of the evangelical counsels intend to go where Christ went and to do what he did" (*ibid.*, n. 75). And what did Jesus do? - "He came to seek and save the lost" (Lk 19,10), and he did it at the cost of his own life. This eternal design, which lasts throughout successive generations, is visible in the charism of hospitality offered to the poor and abandoned: interrupted lives that yearn for life.

There is a passage in the Bible from the time of the Patriarchs, which reads like a parable of the mission of the Hospitaller Sisters, it offers a parallel view of the spiritual journey and charism of Sr Maria Clara. It says: "Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham.... Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of springing water, and the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying: 'The water is ours'. So he called the name of the well Esek, because they contended with him.... And he moved from there and dug another well, and over that they did not quarrel; so he called its name Rehoboth, saying, 'For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land'" (Gn 26,18-22).

This text makes us think of the strength of God, that moved Sr Maria Clara to move the community of the Capuchin Sisters of Our Lady of the Conception from its state of abandonment and develop it into a religious institution, "with the aim of being more intimately united with God who was calling them to higher things" (Appeal for approval, 28-11-1875); the strength of God that moved her when the congregation decided to recover, as a name and also as a challenge of holiness, the commitment assumed by the Capuchin Sisters to profess the Immaculate Conception who in her womb hosted the Word of God; or again of divine strength that moved her when, on the death of

the last Trinitarian religious in the "Convento das Trinas", Sr Maria Clara had to fight tirelessly to see her ownership of that building acknowledged, as had been promised long before by the Government, making it the second Mother House of the congregation; and, lastly, when in Goa, India, smallpox spread terror among the people of the city, who did not know what else to do except unload those who were infected in the "Lazareto dos Reis Magos": nobody dared approach the contaminated except the Hospitaller Sisters, who offered themselves to the local Governor as volunteers to care for those unfortunates, obedient to the norm that they had laid down: "Where there is good to be done, let it be done".

This unlimited trust in the Providence of the heavenly Father will keep peace in the hearts of the Franciscan Hospitaller Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, involved today as yesterday in healing the "human wells" which life has mistreated. They know that God wished for these "wells" to be opened to the heavens, and desires that "they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10,10).

Faced with the many and pressing problems that seem to compromise and even overwhelm the consecrated life, the daughters of Sr Maria Clara try to "understand in depth the designs of Providence. He calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to the new problems of today's world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God's will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 73). Among the suitable occasions for such an interpretation are the General Chapters, and the 24th General Chapter of this congregation is coming up. On all the Chapter Sisters I implore abundant gifts and light from Above, for a fraternal, courageous and fruitful work according to God.

While I thank the Lord for the great good that he has sown throughout these 125 years through the Franciscan Hospitaller Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, I renew to the entire congregation the trust of the Successor of Peter and I impart my Blessing to each one of its members, and to all those whom they care for.

From the Vatican, 27 March 2001.