



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO WOMEN RELIGIOUS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

Friday, 10 November 1978

Dear Sisters,

1. Yesterday, on the festivity of the dedication of the Basilica of the Holy Saviour in the Lateran, I began the preparation for the great act of taking possession of this Basilica—the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome—which will take place on Sunday next. For this reason I met yesterday the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome, the priests engaged particularly in the diocesan apostolate. Today I meet you Sisters. I wanted this meeting to follow yesterday's immediately. Thus, as new Bishop of Rome, I can approach those who constitute, in a certain way, the principal spiritual reserves of this Diocese, the first among all the dioceses in the Church, and I can have at least a first contact with them. This approach and this acquaintance are of great concern to me.

You have come here in very large numbers! Perhaps no episcopal See in the world can count so many. The Cardinal Vicar of Rome has informed me that in the territory of the Diocese there are about 20,000 religious women, about 200 generalates, and about 500 provincial houses of various female Orders and Congregations. These houses are in the service of your religious families in the range of the whole Church, or of the provinces, which go beyond the territory of the city of Rome. During the years of my episcopal ministry, I often met the female Orders (Krakow is the richest in them in Poland), and I had the opportunity to realize how much each Congregation wishes to have a house, and above all the generalate, right in Rome, near the Pope. I rejoice in this and thank you, even if I am of the opinion that you should always remain faithful to your birthplace, where the motherhouse is, where the light of the new community, of the new vocation, of the new mission in the Church appeared for the first time.

2. I welcome all of you, Sisters, gathered here today. I wish to greet you in the first place as the new Bishop of Rome and I wish to specify your place in this "local Church", in this actual Diocese, of which I am preparing to take possession solemnly on Sunday next. Judging by the living

centuries-old tradition of the Church, by the recent doctrine of the Second Vatican Council and also by my previous experiences as a Bishop, I come here with the deep conviction that this is a special "place".

This is seen from the vision of man and of his vocation which Christ himself expressed to us. "Qui potest capere, capiat" (Mt 19:12) ("He who is able to receive this, let him receive it"); thus he spoke to his disciples who were asking him insistent questions on the legislation of the Old Testament and especially on the legislation regarding marriage. In these questions, as also in the tradition of the Old Testament, there was included a certain limitation of that freedom of children of God which Christ brought us, and which St Paul, subsequently, confirmed so forcefully. The religious vocation is precisely the fruit of this freedom of spirit, reawakened by Christ, from which there springs the availability of complete giving to God himself. The religious vocation lies in the acceptance of a severe discipline, which does not come from an order, but from an evangelical counsel: the counsel of chastity, the counsel of poverty, the counsel of obedience. And all that, embraced consciously and rooted in love for the Divine Bridegroom, is, in fact, the particular revelation of the depth of the freedom of the human spirit. Freedom of the children of God: sons and daughters.

This vocation is derived from a living faith, consistent to the ultimate consequences, which opens up to man the final perspective, that is, the perspective of the meeting with God himself, who alone is worthy of a love "above everything", an exclusive and nuptial love. This love, consists in the giving of our whole human being, body and soul, to him who gave himself completely to us men by means of the Incarnation, the Cross and abasement, by means of poverty, chastity, obedience: He became poor for us...so that we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). In this way, therefore, the religious vocation takes life from these riches of living faith. This vocation is, as it were, the spark which lights a "bright flame of love" in the soul, as St John of the Cross wrote. This vocation, once accepted, once solemnly confirmed by means of the vows, must continually be nourished by the riches of faith; not only when it brings with it inner joy, but also when it is accompanied by difficulties, aridity, and inner suffering, which is called the "night" of the soul.

This vocation is a special treasure of the Church, which can never cease to pray that the Spirit of Jesus Christ will bring forth religious vocations in souls. They are, in fact, both for the community of the People of God, and for the "world", a living sign of the "future life": a sign which, at the same time, is rooted (also by means of your religious habit) in the everyday life of the Church and of society, and permeates its most delicate tissues. The persons who have loved God unreservedly are particularly capable of loving man, and of giving themselves to him without personal interests and without limits. Do we need proofs? We can find them in every age of the Church's life; we find them also in our times. During my preceding episcopal ministry, I met such testimonies at every step. I remember the Institutes and Hospitals for the seriously ill and for the handicapped. Everywhere, in places where no one could render service as a good Samaritan any longer, there was always still a Sister to be found.

3. This is certainly only one of the fields of activity, and therefore only an example. These fields are certainly far more numerous, in actual fact. Well, meeting you here, today, for the first time, dear Sisters, I wish to tell you in the first place that your presence is indispensable in the whole Church, and especially here in Rome, in this Diocese. It must be a visible sign of the Gospel for all. It must also be the source of a particular apostolate. This apostolate is so varied and rich that it is even difficult for me to list here all its forms, its fields, its orientations. It is united with the specific charism of every Congregation, with its apostolic spirit, which the Church and the Holy See approve with joy, seeing in it the expression of the vitality of the Mystical Body of Christ! This apostolate is usually discreet, hidden, near to the human being, and so is more suited to a woman's soul, sensitive to her neighbour, and hence called to the task of a sister and mother. It is precisely this vocation which is at the very "heart" of your religious being. As Bishop of Rome I beg you: be spiritually mothers and sisters for all the people of this Church which Jesus, in his ineffable mercy and grace, has wished to entrust to me. Be it for everyone, without exception, but especially for the sick, the suffering, the abandoned, the children, the young, families in difficult situations... Go out towards them! Do not wait for them to come to you! Look for them yourselves! Love drives us to do so. Love must seek! "Caritas Christi urget nos—the love of Christ drives us!" (2 Cor 5:14).

And I entrust to you another request at the beginning of this pastoral ministry of mine: commit yourselves generously to collaborating with the grace of God, in order that so many young souls may accept the Lord's call and new forces come to swell your ranks, to meet the growing requirements that are emerging in the vast fields of the modern apostolate. The first form of collaboration is certainly assiduous invocation to "the Lord of the harvest" (cf. Mt 9:38) to enlighten and guide the hearts of the many girls "in quest" who certainly exist, today too, in this diocese, as in every part of the world. May they understand that there is no greater ideal to which to dedicate their lives, than that of the complete gift of themselves to Christ for the service of the Kingdom. But there is a second way, no less important, of assisting God's call, and it is that of the witness that emanates from your lives:

— the witness, in the first place, of sincere consistency with Gospel values and with the specific charism of your Institute: any surrender to compromise is a disappointment for those who approach you, do not forget!

— the witness, moreover, of a harmonious and mature personality, which is able to establish relations with others without unjustified prejudices or ingenuous imprudence, but with cordial openness and serene balance;

— the witness, finally, of your joy, a joy that can be read in your eyes and in your attitude as well as in your words; a joy which clearly manifests, to those who look at you, awareness of possessing that "hidden treasure", that "pearl of great value", the purchase of which takes away all regret at having renounced everything in accordance with the evangelical counsel (cf. Mt 13:44-45).

And now, before concluding, I wish to address a special word to the dear enclosed Sisters, to those present at this meeting and to those who are in their austere enclosure, chosen for a special love of the Divine Bridegroom. I greet you all with particular intensity of sentiments, and in spirit I visit your convents, apparently closed, but actually so deeply open to the presence of God living in our human world, and therefore so necessary for the world. I commend to you the Church and Rome; I commend to you men and the world! To you, to your prayers, to your "holocaust" I commend also myself, Bishop of Rome. Be with me, close to me, you who are "in the heart of the Church!" May there be fulfilled in each of you that which was the programme of life for St Theresa of the Child Jesus: "in corde Ecclesiae amor ero" —"I will be love in the heart of the Church!"

In this way, I end my first meeting with the Sisters of Holy Rome. In you continues the extraordinary sowing of the Gospel, the extraordinary expression of that call to holiness which the Council recently recalled to us in the [Constitution on the Church](#). I expect a great deal from you. I place great hopes in you. I wish to enclose and express all this in the Blessing which I willingly impart to you.

I commend you to Mary, the Bride of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of the noblest love!

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