



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSE
OF THE BIENNIAL ASSEMBLY SPONSORED BY
THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL**

Thursday, 16 May 1991

Dear Sisters,

1. This meeting, during the course of the biennial assembly sponsored by the International Union of Superiors General, gives me the opportunity to welcome *the Superiors General and General Counselors of a great number of Religious Congregations of women*. You come from sixty-three countries on five continents. Through you I send cordial greetings to the members of your respective communities throughout the world, and I praise God for all that is achieved through the testimony of your religious consecration and your generous dedication to the apostolate, for the good of his Church and the coming of his kingdom: "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (*Eph. 1, 16-18*).

I greet Cardinal Hamer, who shares my pastoral responsibility for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life. I thank Sister Helen McLaughlin, Superior General of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and President of your Union, for her kind words on your behalf. Above all I am heartened by your manifest resolve to go on fulfilling with ever greater competence and commitment the unique and indispensable role which women Religious exercise in the Church's mission of evangelization and service.

2. The theme of your meeting, "Religious Women, Partners in Evangelization", has led you to reflect on the question of how to bring the contemporary world into contact with the life-giving power of the Gospel. *The Gospel and the world*: these have been the two poles of your study days, just as they are the essential reference points of your religious consecration itself. For

religious consecration flows from the Gospel, from "the words and example of the Lord" (*Lumen Gentium*, 43), and constitutes a special sign of God's dominion over his creation, a special sign of *the presence of the kingdom of his Son in the world*. The Gospel and the world: the Lord himself has called you to be prophetic witnesses to the Gospel, "the power of God for salvation" (*Rom.* 1, 16), and thus to render the greatest possible service to the world, to lead it back to its Creator and Redeemer.

Although your religious consecration is expressed in a multitude of specific charisms and apostolates, it has one essential purpose: "the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship" (*Lumen Gentium*, 44). By keeping this superior goal in mind, you will be better able to assist the members of your Congregations to appreciate ever more fully the special link which binds them to the mystery of Christ and the mystery of his Church, avoiding a sterile reduction of the religious life to the level of merely temporal endeavour or purely humanitarian activity. My pilgrimage a few days ago to Fatima was *a profession of faith in the spiritual and transcendent nature of our Christian life*. For me, it was an opportunity to thank the Blessed Virgin Mary for her protection ten years ago. It also gave me encouragement to continue my ministry after the example of Mary, "the model of that maternal love which should inspire all who cooperate in the Church's apostolic mission for the rebirth of humanity" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptoris Missio*, 92).

3. Evangelization is a complex enterprise, and no partial or fragmentary definition can do it justice (Cfr. Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19-24). It consists in carrying the Good News to every person and to all peoples, and through its impact it aims at giving rise to a "new humanity". It is directed to "the multitudes - the millions and millions of men and women who as yet do not know Christ the Redeemer of humanity" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptoris Missio*, 31). Evangelization embraces different cultures in order to purify them and ennoble them, and in order to receive from them means by which to spread and preach the message of Christ to every nation, to understand it better and express it better in the liturgy and daily life of the Christian faithful. In its course, evangelization succeeds in "affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the world of God and the plan of salvation" (Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19).

In my recent Encyclical on the Missions, I recalled that the task of Christ the Redeemer, entrusted to the Church, is still far from being completed, and that we must all give it our full attention and energy. I wished to reaffirm the value of the vocation of missionaries *ad gentes*. They, especially in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, constitute as it were "the model of the Church's missionary commitment, which always stands in need of radical and total self-giving, of new and bold endeavours" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptoris Missio*, 66). The Church would not in fact be true to her essentially missionary nature if she did not *continue to send men and women whose commitment to the mission involves their whole person and their whole life*, all their

energies and all their time.

In this sense it is impossible to think of the worldwide task of evangelization without the vital and specific contribution of women Religious. The witness of your religious consecration is a source of abundant new life in the younger Churches and a necessary antidote to the "secularization of salvation" which too often occurs in more developed societies (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptoris Missio*, 11). To this urgent task you bring the deep inner experience of your following of Christ in spousal love and your complete readiness to serve the human family through "all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius'..., all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women... the victories which (the Church) owes to their faith, hope and charity" (Eiusdem *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31).

4. My second Encyclical of recent months, "*Centesimus Annus*", offers a reflection on the Church's social doctrine, on her involvement in the world in defending the human person and safeguarding human dignity (Cfr. Eiusdem *Centesimus Annus*, 3). In this sense it is a meditation on *the world in all its perfectibility and need of redemption*, in its need for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here, I have an earnest invitation to address to women Religious: that in your search for justice and genuine liberation you will not lose sight of the truth which inspires the Church's pastoral, social and charitable activity, namely, the truth that our destiny is transcendent, our identity is only fully revealed through faith, and consequently *all works of the apostolate are in one way or another aimed at helping man on the path of salvation* (Cfr. *ibid.* 54). As we come to the end of the twentieth century and approach the Third Christian Millennium, the world stands in need of a religious and spiritual witness that is clear and does not compromise with the forces of evil and the "pride of life" (1 Jo. 2, 16). It is my prayerful hope that the women Religious of the world, continuing a vocation which they have often dramatically fulfilled in the past, will constantly remind the Church of the pre-eminence of grace and the priority of love in the cause of evangelization, which is the source of authentic liberation.

5. Religieuses, partenaires dans l'évangélisation, vous l'êtes en tant que femmes. Vous l'êtes comme les femmes qui, avec les Douze, suivaient Jésus et l'assistaient de leurs biens (Cfr. *Luc.* 8, 1-3). Vous l'êtes surtout comme Marie-Madeleine, *apostola apostolorum*, manifestant comme elle, dans un rapport privilégié avec Jésus, votre accueil de sa parole et votre fidélité à son message. Vous l'êtes comme la Samaritaine, qui porte elle-même la bonne nouvelle, après avoir reconnu en Celui qui parle le Messie attendu.

Partenaires dans l'évangélisation, vous l'êtes selon ces "deux dimensions particulières où se réalise la personnalité féminine", la virginité et la maternité (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 17), deux dimensions qui s'expliquent et se complètent l'une l'autre dans la vocation de la femme. Si "la maternité de la femme dans son sens bio-physique montre une apparente passivité, ... en même temps, au sens personnel et éthique [elle] manifeste une créativité très importante" (*Ibid.* 19). C'est cette créativité que les religieuses sont appelées à déployer au

service de l'évangélisation. La maternité d'ailleurs, telle que l'Évangile nous la révèle, «n'est pas seulement "de chair et de sang": en elle, s'exprime la profonde "écoute de la parole du Dieu vivant" et l'admission à "garder" cette parole qui est "la parole de la vie éternelle" (*Ibid*)».

Quant à la virginité, que l'on ne peut comprendre correctement sans faire appel à l'amour sponsal, c'est-à-dire un amour dans lequel la personne devient don pour l'autre (Cfr. *ibid.* 20), elle ouvre à l'expérience d'une maternité dans un sens nouveau: la maternité "selon l'Esprit" (Cfr. *Rom.* 8, 4; *Ioannis Pauli PP. II Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21). Nous ne pouvons oublier, en effet, que saint Paul lui-même ressent le besoin de recourir à ce qui est par nature féminin pour exprimer la vérité de son service apostolique, quand il s'adresse aux Galates comme à ses "petits enfants, vous que j'enfante à nouveau dans la douleur" (*Gal.* 4, 19). Bien d'autres aspects pourraient être évoqués pour mettre en relief la dignité de la femme et sa vocation, mais j'ai voulu simplement évoquer ceux qui me paraissent se rapporter plus étroitement au service de l'évangélisation.

6. Je vous encourage donc, mes Sœurs, à poursuivre dans l'espérance la mission que l'Église vous a confiée, et dont une part essentielle consiste dans le témoignage de votre vie consacrée. J'invite celles d'entre vous qui seraient tentées de se laisser abattre par le manque de vocations et le vieillissement de leurs sœurs à se rappeler la parole de Jésus: "Sois sans crainte, petit troupeau, car votre Père s'est complu à vous donner le Royaume" (*Luc.* 12, 32). Je souhaite enfin que les Instituts qui accueillent des candidates nombreuses préparent les formatrices qui les accompagneront avec compétence, patience et efficacité tout au long de leur formation initiale et permanente.

Je prie le Seigneur Jésus, par l'intercession de la Vierge Marie, de soutenir vos efforts, de nourrir votre espérance et d'accomplir dans chacune de vos familles religieuses l'œuvre de grâce qu'il a commencée depuis leur fondation, afin que les Instituts de vie consacrée et les Sociétés de vie apostolique demeurent des instruments privilégiés au service de l'évangélisation.

Et je vous donne de tout cœur ma Bénédiction Apostolique.

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