



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO BOLOGNA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE
23rd ITALIAN NATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS
(SEPTEMBER 27-28, 1997)

***ADDRESS TO WOMEN RELIGIOUS
OF THE BOLOGNA AREA***

Sunday, 28 September 1997

Dear Sisters,

1. With great joy I offer my affectionate greetings to all of you who are gathered in this magnificent cathedral of Bologna and, through you, I would like to address the cloistered women religious in the monasteries of Italy who are spiritually united with the celebrations of the National Eucharistic Congress. I greet dear Cardinal Eduardo Martínez Somalo, who celebrated Holy Mass for you this morning; with him, I also greet dear Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, Archbishop of Bologna, together with all the Bishops and priests present.

The Eucharistic Congress taking place in Bologna at the moment is an extraordinary spiritual event involving the entire People of God. It particularly concerns you, whose contemplative vocation is found in the very heart of the Church. Indeed, your mission is to nourish and support the Church's pastoral activity with the precious contribution of contemplation, prayer and sacrifice, which you continually offer in your monasteries whose silent presence gives the people of our time the beginnings of God's kingdom.

2. Like the Church, the monastic community is born of the Eucharist, nourished by the sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood, and constantly oriented to it. Every day the liturgy invites you to contemplate, through the pierced side of Christ crucified, the mystery of the Father's eternal love,

to witness to it then in your lives which are totally dedicated to God. To you Jesus reveals the mystery of his love so that you may cherish him, like Mary, in the fruitful silence of faith, becoming collaborators with her in the work of salvation.

Beloved sisters, your life, absorbed and preserved in the mystery of the Trinity, makes you sharers in the intimate dialogue of love which the Word ceaselessly carries on with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Thus your daily "sacrificium laudis", united to the canticle of your lives as consecrated persons in your vocation to the cloister, already anticipates on this earth something of heaven's eternal liturgy. The contemplative, said Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity, "must always be occupied with thanksgiving. While every one of her acts and movements, every one of her thoughts and aspirations root her more deeply in love, at the same time they are like an echo of the eternal *Sanctus*" (*Writings, Retreat*, 10, 1).

3. The Eucharist is the gift Christ gave to his Bride when he left this world to return to the Father. Dear sisters, the Christian community sees in your lives "a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 59). The nuptial mystery which pertains to the Church in her entirety (cf. Eph 5:23-32) acquires a particular significance in vocations of special consecration, a significance which reaches its most eloquent expression in the consecrated woman: in fact, by her very nature she is a figure of the Church, virgin, bride and mother, who preserves intact the faith given to the Bridegroom, begetting individuals to new life in Baptism.

Precisely because she is dedicated to fully living the spousal mystery of exclusive union with Christ, in the cloistered woman religious "the Church's heavenly mystery is fulfilled" (St Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, 24, 255; *PL* 16, 325 C). The cloistered religious responds to the mystery of the "body given" and the "blood shed", which every Eucharist represents and renews, with the total sacrifice of herself, by her renunciation "not only of things, but also of "space, of contacts, of so many benefits of creation" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 59). Enclosure is a special way of "being with the Lord", participating in his self-emptying in a form of radical poverty, by which God is chosen as "the one thing needful" (cf. Lk 10:42), by loving him exclusively as the All of all things. In this way the dimensions of the monastery extend over immense horizons, because they are open to the love of God that embraces every creature.

Therefore enclosure is not only a means of immense value for achieving recollection, but a sublime way of participating in Christ's paschal mystery. The vocation to the cloister is rooted in the Eucharistic mystery, encouraging your participation in Jesus' redemptive sacrifice for the salvation of all.

4. In the light of these truths, we see the close link between contemplation and mission. Through the exclusive union with God in charity, your consecration becomes mysteriously but really fruitful.

This is your particular way of participating in the Church's life, the irreplaceable contribution to her mission that makes you "the co-workers of God himself and the support of the weak and hesitant members of his ineffable Body" (St Clare of Assisi, "Third Letter to Agnes of Prague", 8; *Fonti Francescane*, 2886).

Your "way of life" makes visible to the people of our time the Church's prayerful face and her heart entirely possessed by love for Christ and overflowing with gratitude to the Father. From every monastery prayers of praise and intercession are raised for the whole world, whose sufferings, expectations and hopes you are called to accept and to share.

Your contemplative vocation is also a joyful proclamation of God's closeness, a proclamation that is all the more important for people today who need to rediscover the transcendence of God and, at the same time, his loving presence at the side every person, especially if poor or confused.

Your life, with its separation from the world expressed concretely and effectively, proclaims the primacy of God and is a constant reminder of the preeminence of contemplation over action, of the eternal over the transitory. Consequently it suggests, as an expression and anticipation of the goal towards which the ecclesial community is heading, the future recapitulation of all things in Christ.

5. A significant testimony that this is all true was given by the example of St Theresa of Lisieux, the first centenary of whose death we are commemorating this year and whom I will have the joy of proclaiming a doctor of the Church on 19 October next. Her short life, spent in hiddenness, continues to speak to us of the fascination of seeking God and of the beauty of giving oneself totally to his love.

In her ardent desire to co-operate in the work of Redemption, she wondered, as you know, what her specific mission in the Church would be. No choice fully satisfied her, until the day when, enlightened interiorly, she understood that the Church had a heart, and that this heart was burning with love: "In the heart of the Church, my mother", she then decided, "I will be love".

To fulfil this exceptional vocation to love it is essential not to let oneself be dazzled by worldly wisdom; only to the little ones, in fact, did the Father reveal his mysteries, entering their hearts, which according to a lovely expression of St Clare of Assisi are the "*mansio et sedes*", the "dwelling place and abode" of the divine Majesty (cf. "Third Letter to Agnes of Prague", 21-26; *Fonti Francescane*, 2892-2893).

Your cloistered communities, with their own rhythms of prayer and the practice of fraternal charity, where solitude is filled with the Lord's sweet presence and silence prepares the soul to listen to his inner promptings, are the place where you are formed every day by this loving knowledge of the Father's Word. I deeply hope that your life will be imbued with this constant striving for God, with a ceaseless Eucharistic offering that will transform your life into a total holocaust of love in union

with Christ, for the world's salvation.

6. Thank you, dear cloistered sisters, for the precious gift of your specific contribution to the Church's life and, in particular, for the prayers with which you have accompanied this National Eucharistic Congress.

Thank you for your presence as contemplative women religious who keep the call to total love for Christ the Bridegroom alive in the heart of the Church. The Christian community is grateful to you for this witness.

By your life of union with the Lord, be eloquent signs of his love for all humanity. You will thus make the spiritual contribution of hope and joy to everyone, directing men to the meeting with Christ, our true peace.

I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to your cloistered communities and to your contemplative sisters throughout Italy.