



The Holy See

**LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO FATHER MARIANO LABARCA ARAYA
ON THE OCCASION OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER
OF THE MERCEDIARIAN FRIARS**

*To Fr Mariano Labarca Araya
Master General of the
Order of Our Lady of Mercy,*

1. I am pleased to extend a cordial greeting to those taking part in the General Chapter of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy, and especially to the new Master General, Fr Mariano Labarca Araya. As I congratulate him on his election, I express my best wishes that, with renewed fidelity to the Mercedarian charism, he may lead his brothers into the new millennium with courage and far-sightedness. I also greet Fr Emilio Aguirre Herrera and express to him my appreciation of his generosity and dedication in guiding the Order for the last 12 years.

I hope that this General Chapter will renew in all Mercedarians the necessary zeal and enthusiasm to follow Christ the Redeemer and, sustained by his grace, to “preach good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18- 19) in new contexts and countries, especially those of Africa and Asia.

2. The centuries-old history of your order originated in the hearts and faith of great and determined men who, in accepting the challenges of their time, were “open to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit, who invites us to understand in depth the designs of Providence” (*Vita consecrata*, n. 73), and offered new answers and new plans of evangelization to witness to God’s love for the poorest. This was the initiative of St Peter Nolasco, who with the help and advice of St Raymond of Penyafort and King James I, gathered together a group of devout men under the rule of St Augustine and requested approval for it from Pope Gregory IX.

This providential decision gave rise to an admirable history of holiness and charity which has enriched the life of the

Church. In this respect, the generous concern they showed Christian prisoners, paying for their freedom and returning them to their home countries through the heroic generosity of so many brothers should be remembered. We should also point out the admirable work of evangelization, supported by the Mercedarians following the discovery of the New World, in which the great saints and theologians who have enriched your 780-year history distinguished themselves.

3. Deep charity and discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, after the abolition of slavery and the difficult period of the French Revolution, led your order to new dimensions of the Gospel, consistent with its original charism and the needs of the concrete historical situation. Thus, Pedro Armengol Valenzuela gave fresh vigour to the order, opening up new horizons where it could fulfil its vocation as a champion of freedom and prophet of charity. From that time, your apostolates have been the preservation of the faith, assistance to those suffering the consequences of the new forms of slavery, the apostolate of penance, education, missions and parishes, ever new areas where, in the name of Christ, you have fought every type of oppression in order to restore to man the liberating, saving truth.

In this regard, the Second Vatican Council encouraged the updating of your order. In accepting the impulse of renewal prompted by the Holy Spirit throughout the Church, it has placed its rich spiritual heritage at the service of the Gospel message and the advancement of our poor and marginalized brethren.

4. The rapid, continual changes that are affecting contemporary society and the coming of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 call you to give new horizons to your generosity, together with your traditional holiness and heroism. How, then, should your redemptive charism be presented to the men and women of the next millennium? Following the example of St Peter Nolasco and the great clerical and lay figures who have shared this charism, you have raised this question at the General Chapter, invoking the Holy Spirit to shed light and grace on it. The response calls for those courageous decisions which characterize the Church's mission and which have involved the Chapter's work and reflections.

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* recalls that for every ecclesial renewal conversion and holiness are needed. "This need in the first place challenges the consecrated life. In fact, the vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a 'transfigured' existence" (n. 35).

The holiness of each religious must be matched by a deep and fruitful fraternal communion that "will give power and forcefulness to their apostolic activity which, in the context of the prophetic mission of all the baptized, is generally distinguished by special forms of co-operation with the hierarchy. In a specific way, through the richness of their charisms, consecrated persons help the Church to reveal ever more deeply her nature as the sacrament 'of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind'" (*ibid.*, n. 46).

5. Your charism leads you to look attentively at the various forms of slavery present in human life today, with its moral and material poverty. It demands of you an ever greater commitment to proclaiming the Gospel.

As the Apostolic Exhortation recalls: "Another challenge today is that of a materialism which craves possessions, heedless of the needs and sufferings of the weakest, and lacking any concern for the balance of natural resources. The

reply of the consecrated life is found in the profession of evangelical poverty, which can be lived in different ways and is often expressed in an active involvement in the promotion of solidarity and charity” (*ibid.*, n. 89).

Your order’s long tradition calls you to a life of poverty strengthened and sustained by obedience and chastity, “with the Mercedarian spirit”, that is, as a continuous act of love for those who are the victims of slavery, as a capacity for sharing their sufferings and hopes, and as readiness to offer a warm welcome.

6. From its beginning, your order has venerated the Virgin Mary by the title of Mother of Mercy, and has chosen as its model her spirituality and apostolic action. By experiencing her continuous presence and imitating her availability, Mercedarians have faced with trust and courage the frequently burdensome and difficult obligations of their mission of redemption.

By contemplating her great faith and her total obedience to the Lord’s will, they will learn to interpret God’s call in historical events and to be ready with renewed generosity to serve the victims of poverty and violence. To her, a woman who was free because she was full of grace, they have directed their gaze, to discover in prayer and in the love of God the secret for living and proclaiming the freedom Christ won for us with his blood.

At the threshold of the new millennium, as the Church is preparing to celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the Incarnation of the Son of God, I would like to entrust your apostolic projects, the decisions of your Chapter and the hopes that sustain you to the Mother of God, so that she may give you the joy of being docile and generous instruments in proclaiming the Gospel to the people of our time.

With these heartfelt wishes, as I invoke the protection of St Peter Nolasco and all the saints of your order, I affectionately impart to the whole Mercedarian family a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 25 May 1998.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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