



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE SUPERIOR COUNCIL
OF THE PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES**

Friday, 16 May 2003

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies,*

1. I am pleased to welcome you for this annual appointment to which you have come from the various Churches throughout the world.

I thank *Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, who has expressed your joint sentiments. I also extend a special thought to Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, President of the Pontifical Mission Societies, and to the many Bishops present.

Lastly, I greet the General Secretaries and members of the "Superior Council" who, with dedication, assure the proper functioning of these important structures for missionary activity in the life of the Church.

My Predecessors saw fit to qualify the Mission Societies with the title of "Pontifical" and to establish their headquarters in Rome precisely to indicate that in them is expressed the duty and concern of the whole Church to carry out her "*opera maxima*" (essential task), that is, the evangelization of the world.

2. The Pope's solicitude for all the Churches is expressed in the Mission Societies (cf. II Cor 11: 28). Their task is to promote and sustain missionary awareness in all the people of God, first of all by keeping the apostolic spirit alive in the individual Churches and endeavouring to meet the

needs of the Churches in difficulty. Therefore, they can justifiably be described as "pontifical works for the missions". At the same time, however, these "Societies" are also the responsibility of the Bishops, for it is through them that the task of proclaiming the Good News which Christ entrusted to the Apostolic College is expressed and carried out.

"Because they are under the auspices of the Pope and of the College of Bishops, these Societies, also within the boundaries of the particular Churches, rightly have "the first place... since they are the means by which Catholics from their very infancy are imbued with a genuinely universal and missionary spirit; they are also the means which ensure an effective collection of resources for the good of all the missions, in accordance with the needs of each one' (cf. *Ad Gentes*, n. 38). Another purpose of the Mission Societies is the fostering of lifelong vocations *ad gentes*, in both the older and younger Churches" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 84).

3. Dear friends, in all this important missionary activity which places you in the very heart of the Church's life, you closely collaborate with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, to which the Pontifical Mission Societies are entrusted, thereby becoming the official body of universal missionary cooperation (cf. *Pastor Bonus*, nn. 85 and 91; *Cooperatio Missionalis*, nn. 3 and 6).

All this expresses the genuinely universal and missionary spirit of the Pontifical Mission Societies, whose deeply "catholic" charism you safeguard and witness to in your prayer, activity and sacrifice.

This is also the spirit that emanates from your *Statutes*. It should be jealously guarded and constantly readapted to the changing requirements of the apostolate. In this regard, I was pleased to learn that you are undertaking a timely revision, with the intention of bringing the *Statutes* into line with the changed conditions of the times. Therefore, I can only praise you and all who are working on this renewal, which aims to foster increased collaboration and the appropriate use of the means of assistance to the Churches.

4. On this happy occasion, I cannot forget the *160th anniversary* of the *Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood or Missionary Childhood*, which is being celebrated this year. I would like to recall and underline the important work of spreading missionary information and awareness that this Society has carried out "from its infancy", to promote the missionary cause. The Message I addressed to the members of the Society on the Solemnity of the Epiphany expresses my full appreciation of these "missionary children". It will therefore be a joy for me to receive in the near future a large and lively delegation of children from all over the world who will be coming to Rome to celebrate the important anniversary of your praiseworthy Society.

I also had the pleasure of welcoming last February numerous representatives of the Pontifical Mission Societies from the United States of America, led by their National Director. Through their

generous offerings for our needy brethren, these Societies are a sign in that nation of authentic universal love.

5. I would like to urge you always to keep in mind in your work of "missionary cooperation" the growing needs of the Churches in different parts of the world. For contingent reasons, a disturbing decrease has recently been recorded in the "exchange of gifts" between the Churches, as far as material aid is concerned.

I urge you not to let these setbacks dishearten you. Like St Paul, who recommended "some contribution" be collected to help the Church of Jerusalem (cf. Rom 15: 25-27), remind everyone that "cooperation, which is indispensable for the evangelization of the world, is a duty and a right of all baptized Christians" (*Cooperatio Missionalis*, n. 2 [ORE, 25 November 1998, p. 1]; *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 77; cf. also CIC, cann. 211, 781).

Continue, therefore, to offer to all the Churches, old and new, the privilege of "*helping the Gospel*", so that it may be proclaimed to all the peoples on earth: "The missionary Church gives what she receives, and distributes to the poor the material goods that her materially richer sons and daughters generously put at her disposal.... "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*' (Acts 20: 35)" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 81).

6. Dear friends, in the month of May in which we are living we naturally turn to Mary, whom we invoke as "Queen of the Missions". Let us clasp tightly in our hands the rosary whose recitation in the history of the Church has always brought, with growth in the faith, special protection for devotees of the Virgin. I would also like to repeat here my invitation to the little members of the Missionary Childhood: "The missionary Rosary links us with the missions... a decade... the white one is for Europe, so that it can regain the evangelizing fervour that gives rise to so many Churches; the yellow decade is for Asia, which is exploding with life and youth; the green decade is for Africa, tried by suffering but ready for the proclamation; the red decade is for America, the promise of new missionary forces; the blue decade is for the continent of Oceania, which awaits a more grassroots spread of the Gospel" (*Message to the Society of the Holy Childhood for its 160th Anniversary*, n. 5; ORE, 22 January 2003, p. 3.).

With these sentiments, I entrust you all to our common Mother to whom - I am sure - you will offer continual prayers and sacrifices in the fulfilment of your precious missionary work. May the Apostolic Blessing which I warmly impart to you, obtain for you and for your collaborators an abundant outpouring of heavenly favours.
