



The Holy See

LETTER OF POPE JOHN XXIII

"IL TEMPIO MASSIMO"

TO WOMEN RELIGIOUS

July 2, 1962

The greatest Church of Christendom is preparing to welcome the Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. On October 11 there will begin the great celebration on which is centered the prayerful expectation of all Catholics and, we might say, the expectation of all men of good will. This is a solemn hour for the history of the Church. It involves, therefore, increasing the fervor of its efforts for spiritual renewal, which are always at work, in order to give new impetus to the works and institutions of its millennial life. The clergy is already reciting their daily breviary in union with us for the happy outcome of the ecumenical council (1). The laity, invited more than once to offer prayers and sacrifices for this purpose—especially the children, the sick and the aged—are responding with generous promptness. All wish to collaborate in order that the council may become "as a new Pentecost" (2). It is natural that, in this atmosphere of intense preparation, those who have given themselves completely to God and who have become familiar with the exercise of prayer and of most fervent charity should distinguish themselves. Beloved Daughters, the Church has welcomed you under its mantle, it has approved your constitutions, it has defended your rights, it has derived and still derives benefits from your works. You deserve that the words of the Apostle Paul should be applied to you as an expression of gratitude of all that you have done until now, and as a joyful wish for the future: We remember you in our prayers "that the God of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may grant you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in deep knowledge of Him: the eyes of your mind being enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints" (3). Make this letter an object of consideration. Hear in the words of the humble Vicar of Christ whatever the Divine Master may suggest to each of you. The preparation for the council demands that souls consecrated to the Lord according to the forms approved by canonical legislation should reconsider with renewed fervor the commitments of their vocations. Thus, in its time, the response to the decisions of the council, having been prepared through a more intense personal sanctification, will be prompt and generous. In order that the life consecrated to God corresponds always more perfectly to the desires of the Divine Heart, it is necessary that it should in reality be [1] a life of prayer [2], a life of example and [3] a life of apostolate. **LIFE OF PRAYER** We turn in our thoughts especially towards the nuns and Sisters of the contemplative and penitential life. On the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple, February 2, 1961, while We were distributing the gifts of candles which We had received on that day, We said: "The first destination (of the candles) to the religious houses of more rigid mortification and penance is intended to affirm once again the pre-eminence of the duties of worship and of complete consecration of life to prayer over any other form of

apostolate; and at the same time it emphasizes the greatness and the necessity of vocations for this kind of life"(4).The Church will always encourage its daughters who, in order to conform more perfectly to the call of the Divine Master, give themselves in the contemplative life.This corresponds to a universally valid truth, also for the women religious of a chiefly active life: that is, that the only foundations and soul of the apostolate is the interior life.May all of you meditate on this truth, beloved daughters, who are justly called "quasi apes argumentosae" (like industrious bees), because you are in the constant practice of the fourteen works of mercy in sisterly community with your other fellow Sisters. You also who are consecrated to God in the secular institutes must derive all the efficacy of your undertakings from prayer.The life offered to the Lord entails difficulties and sacrifices like any other form of coexistence. Only prayer gives the gift of happy perseverance in it. The good works to which you dedicate yourselves are not always crowned with success. You meet with disappointments, misunderstanding and ingratitude.Without the help of prayer you could not continue along on this hard road. And do not forget that a wrongly understood dynamism could lead you to fall into that "heresy of action" which was reproved by our predecessors. Having overcome this danger, you can be confident that you are definitely co-operators in the salvation of souls, and you will add merits to your crown.All of you, whether dedicated to a contemplative or an active life, should understand the expression "life of prayer." It entails not a mechanical repetition of formulas but is rather the irreplaceable means by which one enters into intimacy with the Lord, to better understand the dignity of being daughters of God and spouses of the Holy Spirit, the "sweet guest of the soul" Who speaks to those who know how to listen in recollection.Your prayer draws nourishment from the sources of a deep knowledge of the sacred Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, and from the liturgy and the teachings of the Church in all its fullness.The holy Mass should be the center of your day, so much so that every action converges on it as a preparation or as a thanksgiving. Let Holy Communion be the daily food which sustains, comforts and strengthens you.Thus you will not run the risk, as happened to the foolish virgins of the parable, of leaving the lamp without oil. You will always be ready for everything: for glory or for ignominy, for health and for illness, to pursue your work and to die. "Behold the Bridegroom is coming, go forth to meet Him!"(5).It would be fitting at this point to recall to you that practice, repeated on many occasions, of the three devotions which We consider fundamental also for the simple faithful of the laity: "Nothing is better for enlightening and encouraging the adoration of Jesus than to meditate upon Him and invoke Him in the threefold light of the Name, the Heart and the Blood" (6).The Name, the Heart and the Blood of Jesus: this is the substantial nourishment for a sound life of piety.The Name of Jesus! In reality "nothing is sung more sweetly, nothing heard more joyfully, nothing more gently contemplated than Jesus the Son of God" (7).The Heart of Jesus! Pius XII of venerable memory, in the encyclical *Haurietis Aquas*, of May 15, 1956, which we recommend for attentive meditation, teaches thus:"If the arguments on which the worship given to the wounded heart of Jesus are rightly weighed, it is clear to all that we are dealing here, not with an ordinary form of piety which anyone may at his discretion slight in favor of other devotions, or esteem lightly, but with a duty of religion most conducive to Christian perfection" (8).The Blood of Christ! "This is the highest mark of the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus, which is renewed mystically and really in the holy Mass, and gives sense and orientation to Christian life" (9).**HONOR POVERTY**Hear the words of Jesus: "For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you should also do".(10) Here there is presented to souls who wish to follow faithfully in the footsteps of the Lord the practice of the evangelical counsels which are "the royal life of Christian sanctification" (11).1) Evangelical poverty.Jesus was born in a stable. During His public life He had no place to rest His head at night(12) and He died naked on the cross. This is the first requirement that He makes of anyone who wishes to follow Him: "If thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (13).You were attracted by the example of the teaching of the Divine Master and you offered Him everything: "the joyful oblation of all" (14). In the light of the imitation of Christ Who made Himself poor, the vow acquires full value.It makes us satisfied with the day to

day necessities. It makes us give to the poor and to good works the superfluous of our goods according to obedience. It leads us to entrust the unknown future, sickness and old age, to the care of Divine Providence, while not excluding prudent foresight. Detachment from earthly goods attracts the attention of all, showing them that poverty is not pettiness nor avarice, and it makes one think more seriously of the Divine saying: "For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul?" (15). Live integrally the vow or the promise which makes you like Him Who, though being rich, became poor that we might become rich through His poverty (16). Temptations are not wanting in this respect, such as the search for small comforts, the satisfaction of food or the use of goods. You know that poverty has its thorns which must be loved in order that they may become roses in heaven. On other occasions, the legitimate need for modernization could exceed limits in ostentation of construction and of furnishings. These things have sometimes given rise to unfavorable comments, even though such novelties may not have concerned the modest lodging of the Sisters. Understand Us, beloved daughters: we do not mean that that which is necessary for physical health and for wise and fitting recreation is in contrast with the vow of poverty. But We like to be confident that the eyes of the Divine Master may never be saddened by that elegance which could even have a negative influence on the interior life of persons consecrated to God when they live in an environment lacking an atmosphere of austerity. May poverty be given great honor among you. We would like to direct a word of comfort especially to the cloistered nuns for whom "Sister poverty" often becomes "Sister destitution." Jesus the Son of God become poor will come to comfort you. Meanwhile, in His name, We Ourselves extend for you a hand to your fellow Sisters who are in more secure economic conditions and to generous benefactors. We encourage undertakings of this sort by the Federations of Cloistered Convents, affiliated with the Sacred Congregation of Religious, reminding all of the Divine promise: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (17).

RADIATE CHASTITY The Gospel tells us of all that Jesus suffered, of the insults that fell upon Him. But, from Bethlehem to Calvary, the brilliance that radiates from His divine purity spread more and more and won over the crowds. So great was the austerity and the enchantment of His conduct. So may it be with you, beloved daughters. Blessed be the discretion, the mortifications and the renuncements with which you seek to render this virtue more brilliant. Pius XII wrote about them in a memorable encyclical letter (18). Live its teachings. May your conduct prove to all that chastity is not only a possible virtue but a social virtue, which must be strongly defended through prayer, vigilance and the mortification of the senses. May your example show that the heart has not shut itself up in sterile egoism, but that it has chosen the condition which is necessary for it to open itself solicitously to its neighbor. For this purpose We urge you to cultivate the rules of good conduct—We repeat it—cultivate and apply them, without giving ear to anyone who would wish to introduce into your life a conduct less befitting the thoughtfulness and reserve to which you are bound. In the active apostolate reject the theory of those who would speak less or not at all of modesty and decency in order to introduce into the methods of education criteria and tendencies which are in contrast with the teachings of the sacred books and of Catholic tradition. Though theoretical or simple practical materialism on the one hand or hedonism and corruption on the other threaten to break every barrier, Our mind, is quieted by thought of the angelic legions who have offered their chastity to the Lord and who through prayer and sacrifice obtain prodigies of divine mercy for the errant in propitiation for the sins of individuals and nations.

SWEETEN OBEDIENCE The Apostle St. Paul develops the concept of the humiliation of Jesus made obedient unto the death of the Cross" (19). In order to follow better the Divine Master you have joined Him with the vow and promise of obedience. This constant sacrifice of your "ego," this annihilation of self can cost much, but it is also true that herein lies the victory (20), for heavenly graces correspond to this spiritual crucifixion for you and for all humanity. The Teaching of the Church on the inalienable rights of the human person is clear and precise. The special gifts of every man must be free to be duly developed in order that each may correspond to the gifts received from God. All this is acquired. But, if one passes from the respect of the person to the exaltation of the personality and to

the affirmation of personalism, the dangers become serious. May the words of Pius XII in the exhortation, *Menti Nostrae*, be of valuable direction also for you: "In an age like ours, in which the principle of authority is grievously disturbed, it is absolutely necessary that the priest, keeping the precepts of faith firmly in mind, should consider and duly accept this same authority, not only as the bulwark of the social and religious order, but also as the foundation of his personal sanctification" (21). Here We address Ourselves to those who have duties of direction and responsibility. Demand a most generous obedience to the rules, but also be understanding of your fellow Sisters. Favor in each of them the development of natural aptitudes. The office of superiors is to make obedience sweet and not to obtain an exterior respect, still less to impose unbearable burdens. Beloved daughters, We exhort all of you, live according to the spirit of this virtue, which is nourished by deep humility, by absolute disinterestedness and by complete detachment. When obedience has become the program of one's whole life, one can understand the words of St. Catherine of Siena: "How sweet and glorious is this virtue in which all the other virtues are contained! Oh, obedience, you navigate without effort or danger and reach port safely! You conform to the only-begotten Word . . . you mount the ship of the most holy Cross to sustain the obedience of the Word, to not transgress it or depart from its teachings . . . you are great in unflinching perseverance, and so great is your strength from heaven to earth that you open heaven's gates" (22).

LIFE OF APOSTOLATE St. Paul teaches that the mystery revealed to us by God is the plan ordained from all eternity in Christ which is to be realized in Him in the fullness of time, that is: "to re-establish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those in the earth" (23). No soul consecrated to the Lord is dispensed from the sublime duty of continuing the saving mission of the Divine Redeemer. The Church expects much from those who live in the silence of the cloister, and especially from there. They, like Moses, have their arms raised in prayer, conscious that in this prayerful attitude one obtains victory. So important is the contribution of women religious of the contemplative life to the apostolate that Pius XI wished to have as co-patron of the missions—and a rival therefore of St. Francis Xavier—not a Sister of the active life, but a Carmelite, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. Yes, you must be spiritually present to all the needs of the Church militant. You may not be alien to any disaster, to any mourning or calamity. Let no scientific discovery, cultural convention, social or political assembly lead you to think: "These things do not concern us." May the Church militant feel that you are present wherever your spiritual contribution is needed for the good of souls, as well as for real human progress and human peace. May the souls in purgatory have prayers so that they may be hastened to the beatific vision. Continue to repeat with the choirs of angels and saints the eternal alleluia to the august Trinity. May those who are dedicated to the active life realize that not only prayers but also works can bring about a new course of society which is nourished by the Gospel, and in which all things work toward the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Since the areas of education, charity and social service require personnel who are prepared for the increased demands imposed by the present-day order of things, you must strive in obedience to study and obtain the degrees which will allow you to surmount every difficulty. Thus, in addition to your merited and proven capability, you may be better appreciated also for your spirit of dedication, patience and sacrifice. There is, moreover, the presage of further demands in the new countries which have entered the community of free nations. Without lessening one's love for his own country, the world has become more than ever before a common fatherland. Many Sisters have already felt this call. The field is immense. It is useless to deplore the fact that the sons of this world arrive before the apostles of Christ. Lamentations solve nothing: one must act, forestall and trust. Not even the Sisters dedicated to contemplation are exempt from this duty. The people in certain regions of Africa and the Far East feel a greater attraction to contemplative life, which is more congenial to the development of their civilization. Certain of the more cultured social classes almost complain that the dynamic life of the missionaries can have a lesser influence on their matter of conceiving religion and of following Christianity. You can see, beloved Sisters, how many reasons prompt the encouragement of meetings among superiors general which have been

arranged by the Sacred Congregation of Religious on the national and international level. In such meetings you can bring yourselves more up to date on present-day conditions, profit by mutual experience and comfort yourselves in the thought that the Church has a host of brave souls who are capable of facing any obstacle. The consecrated souls in the new secular institutes should know also that their work is appreciated and that they are encouraged to contribute toward making the Gospel penetrate every facet of the modern world. It is right that those who are able to attain positions of more outstanding responsibility should make themselves appreciated for their competence, diligence, sense of responsibility and also for those virtues which are exalted by grace. By doing so they may prevent that those who depend almost exclusively upon human cleverness and upon the power of economic, scientific and technical means should prevail. "But we call upon the name of the Lord our God" (24). We invite all of you, souls consecrated to the Lord in the contemplative or active life, to draw close together in fraternal charity. May the spirit of Pentecost prevail over your chosen families and may it unite them in that fusion of souls which was seen in the cenacle where, together with the Mother of God and the Apostles, several pious women were to be found (25).

PRAYER AND RENEWAL These are Our wishes, Our prayers and Our hopes. The Church has called upon all the faithful on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, proposing to each of them an act of presence, testimony and courage. May you, beloved daughters, be among the first to cultivate holy enthusiasm. The "Imitation of Christ" has a touching word on this point: "Every day we ought to renew our purpose, and stir ourselves up to fervor, as if it were the first day of our conversion." And to say: "Help me, O Lord God, in my good purpose, and in Thy holy service; and grant that I may this day begin indeed, since what I have hitherto done is nothing" (26). May the Mother of Jesus and Our Mother fire you with new fervor! Trust in this heavenly Mother, and at the same time remain familiar with her Spouse, St. Joseph, who is also the patron of the Second Vatican Council. Pray also to those sainted men and women who are held in special honor in your individual institutions, so that they may join their efficacious intercession to the purpose that the "holy Church, gathered in unanimous and intense prayer around Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and guided by Peter, may spread the Kingdom of the Divine Savior, which is the kingdom of truth, justice, love and peace." We impart to all the religious communities and to each individual consecrated to God the most abundant apostolic benediction, which We intend to be a token of heavenly favors and an encouragement to live and act well "in the Church and in Christ Jesus" (27).

From the Vatican Apostolic Palace, July 2, 1962, the fourth year of Our Pontificate.

POPE JOHN

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NOTES 1. Apostolic Exhortation *Sacrae Laudis*, Jan. 6, 1962, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* LIV, 1962, pp. 66 - 75. 2. Prayer for the council, cf. *A.A.S.* LI, 1959, p. 832. 3. Eph. 1:15 - 18. 4. Discourse, messages and allocutions of Pope John XXIII, vol. III, p. 143. 5. Matt. 25:6. 6. Discourse at conclusion of the Roman Synod, *A.A.S.* LII, 1960 p. 305. 7. Hymn at Vespers of the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. 8. *A.A.S.* XLVIII, 1956, p. 346. 9. Discourse to the Religious Family of the Most Precious Blood, June 2, 1962, cf. *Osservatore Romano*, June 3, 1962. 10. John 13:15. 11. Enc. *Letter Sacerdotii Nostri primordia*, *A.A.S.* LI, 1959, pp. 550 - 551. 12. cf. Matt. 8:20. 13. Matt. 19:21. 14. cf. *II Paralipomenon* 29:17. 15. Matt. 16:26. 16. cf. 2 Cor. 8:9. 17. Luke 6:20. 18. Enc. *Sacra Virginitas*, *A.A.S.* XLVI, 1954, p. 161. 19. Phil. 2:8. 20. cf. Prov. 21:28. 21. *A.A.S.* XLII, pp. 662 - 663. 22. Dialogue, ch. 155. 23. Eph. 1:10. 24. Ps. 18:8. 25. cf. Acts 1:14. 26. Bk. 1. ch. 19. para. 1 (Cath. Book Pub. Co. edition). 27. Eph. 3:21.