



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF POPE PAUL VI  
TO THE GENERAL CHAPTERS  
OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS AND CONGREGATIONS**

*23 May 1964*

*Beloved Sons,*

We find ourselves filled with a spirit of great joy and no little hope as We gaze out upon this select gathering—an assembly of men burdened, as you are, with the government of such venerable and distinguished religious families within the Church. We take pleasure in greeting you here and in giving expression to that extraordinary esteem and gratitude which We hold in your regard.

You have come here to Rome to conduct the General Chapter for each of your various Religious Institutes. While these Chapters primarily have relevance to your own Orders and Congregations, yet they also influence the life of the Church; for the Church, to a great extent, derives Her vigor, Her apostolic zeal, and Her fervor in seeking holiness of life, from the flourishing condition of Her Religious Institutes.

Moreover, you have presented yourselves to Us, not only to offer your obedience to the Vicar of Christ as devoted and loving sons, but also to obtain the Apostolic Blessing that it might benefit you yourselves, your Institutes, and especially those matters that are being treated of in your Chapters. We have firm confidence that out of these deliberations and decisions there will come forth beneficial fruits whereby your religious life will be lived with greater earnestness and enthusiasm.

Although We would have most willingly granted separate audiences to each of your Capitular groups, and would have addressed each group in accordance with its proper character and current needs, yet We preferred to receive all of you together. By addressing the various Institutes all at once, We felt that We would thereby give greater weight to Our words, all the more so since

this occasion provides Us with the opportunity to set forth matters of importance to all Religious, however many they may be, throughout the world.

### *Religious Institutes Necessary for The Church*

In the first place, We wish to note the very great importance of your Religious Institutes, and to observe that your work is wholly necessary for the Church in these days. Admittedly, the doctrine of the universal vocation of all the Faithful to holiness of life (regardless of their position or social situation) has been advanced very much in modern times. This is as it should be, for it is based on the fact that all the Faithful are consecrated to God by their Baptism. Moreover, the very necessities of the times demand that the fervor of Christian life should inflame souls and radiate in the world itself. In other words, the needs of the times demand a consecration of the world and this task pertains pre-eminently to the laity. All these developments are unfolding under the counsel of Divine Providence and that is why We rejoice over such salutary undertakings.

### *The Religious State and Other Ways of Life*

However, we must be on guard lest, for this very reason, the true notion of religious life as it has traditionally flourished in the Church, should become obscured. We must beware lest our youth, becoming confused while thinking about their choice of a state in life, should be thereby hindered in some way from having a clear and distinct vision of the special function and immutable importance of the religious state within the Church. Therefore, it has seemed good to Us to recall here the priceless importance and necessary function of religious life; for this stable way of life, which receives its proper character from profession of the evangelical vows, is a perfect way of living according to the example and teaching of Jesus Christ. It is a state of life which keeps in view the constant growth of charity leading to its final perfection. In other ways of life, though legitimate in themselves, the specific ends, advantages and functions are of a temporal character.

### *Religious Life: A Social and Public Witness to the Church*

On the other hand, right now it is of supreme importance for the Church to bear witness socially and publicly. Such witness is proclaimed by the way of life embraced by the Religious Institutes. And the more it is stressed that the role of the laity demands that they live and advance the Christian life in the world, so much the more is it necessary for those who have truly renounced the world to let their example radiantly shine forth. In this way it will be clearly shown that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world. (Cfr. John 18:36)

### *Meaning of Religious Vows*

Hence it follows that the profession of the evangelical vows is a super-addition to that consecration which is proper to Baptism. It is indeed a special consecration which perfects the former one,

inasmuch as by it, the follower of Christ totally commits and dedicates himself to God, thereby making his entire life a service to God alone.

All these observations are connected with another point which solicitously, We wish to make with a fatherly heart. It is necessary that you hold the religious vows in highest esteem and that you attach the greatest importance to their religious function and practice. Only in this manner will you be able to lead a life that is becoming and in harmony with the state you have embraced—a state that you have freely chosen and in which, consequently, you now find yourselves caught up from day to day; only in this way will your state of life efficaciously aid you to progress toward the perfection of charity; only in this way will the Faithful thereby receive from you your witness to the Christian life and be inspired to follow it.

Although human conditions have changed notably in recent years, and consequently religious life must be accommodated to these changes, yet those things which follow from the very nature of the evangelical counsels still retain all their vigor and can in no wise be diminished.

### *Obedience*

Therefore, it is supremely important to cherish diligently religious obedience in your lives.

Religious obedience is and must remain a holocaust of one's own will which is offered to God. A Religious makes this sacrifice of self with a view to humbly obeying lawful Superiors (whose authority, of course, should always be exercised within the confines of charity and with due regard for the human person), even though our times summon Religious to the performance of many and heavy burdens, and to carrying out these duties more cheerfully and more promptly.

### *Poverty*

Do not fail to inculcate a love for poverty, concerning which there is much discussion going on in the Church today. Religious must surpass all others by their example of true evangelical poverty. Therefore, they must love that poverty to which they have spontaneously committed themselves. It is not enough for Religious to depend merely on the Superior's decision with regard to their use of material things. Let the Religious, of their own will, be content with the things that are needed for properly fulfilling their way of life, shunning those conveniences and luxuries by which religious life is devitalized. Moreover, in addition to that poverty which should characterize the life of the individual Religious, we must not fail to take into account that poverty by which the family or whole body of Religious should be distinguished. Therefore let the Religious Institutes avoid a too exquisite style and ornamentation in their buildings and in carrying out their functions, as well as anything else that savors of luxury, always bearing in mind the social condition of the people among whom they live. Let them also refrain from excessive concern in gathering funds; rather let them be preoccupied with using the temporal goods which Divine Providence has bestowed upon

them to minister to the genuine necessities of needy brethren, whether those in need of assistance be their fellow countrymen or those who live in other parts of the world.

### *Chastity*

With singular care, Religious should preserve chastity as a treasured gem. Everyone knows that in the present condition of human society the practice of perfect chastity is made difficult, not only because of the prevalence of depraved morality but also on account of false teachings which glamorize excessively the merely natural condition of man, thereby pouring poison into his soul. An awareness of these facts should impel Religious to stir up their faith more energetically—that same faith by which we believe the declarations of Christ when He proclaims the supernatural value of chastity that is sought for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is this same faith which assures us beyond doubt that, with the help of divine grace, we can preserve unsullied, the flower of chastity.

To obtain this blessed objective, it is, of course, necessary to practice Christian mortification with more courageous zeal, and also to guard the senses with more diligent care. Therefore, the life of the Religious should find no place for books, periodicals or shows which are unbecoming or indecent, not even under the pretext of a desire to learn things useful to know or to broaden one's education, except possibly the case, duly ascertained by the Religious Superior, where there is proven necessity for the study of such things. In a world pervaded by so many sordid forms of vice, no one can adequately reckon the powerful effectiveness of the sacred ministry of one whose life is radiant with the light of a chastity consecrated to God and from which he draws his strength.

### *Structure and Government of Religious Institutes*

So much for these observations. And now We wish to speak very briefly about something which pertains to the structure and government of the Religious Institutes. For it is also in such matters that the General Chapters are currently engaged.

### *The Founder's Spirit and Rule of Life*

It is quite evident that the proper way of living religious life requires discipline. There must be laws and suitable conditions for observing them. Therefore, the principal task of the General Chapter is, as time goes on, to keep intact those norms of the Religious family which were set up by its Founder and Lawgiver. Therefore, it is your responsibility to firmly shut the door against all those modes of conduct which gradually devitalize the strength of religious discipline, namely, practices which are dangerous to religious life, unnecessary dispensations, and privileges not properly approved. You must likewise be wholly on guard against any relaxation of discipline which is urged, not by true necessity, but which rather arises from arrogance of spirit, or aversion to obedience, or love of worldly things. Moreover, with respect to undertaking new projects or

activities, you should refrain from taking on those which do not entirely correspond to the principal work of your Institute or to the mind of your Founder. For Religious Institutes will flourish and prosper so long as the integral spirit of their Founder continues to inspire their rule of life and apostolic works, as well as the actions and lives of their members.

Religious Communities, inasmuch as they resemble living bodies, rightly desire to experience continual growth. However, this growth of the Institute must be based firmly on the more diligent observance of your rules rather than on the number of members or the making of new laws. Multiplicity of laws is not always accompanied by progress in religious life. It often happens that the more rules there are, the less people pay attention to them. Therefore, let the General Chapters always use their right to make laws moderately and prudently.

### *Norms for Accommodating the Rule to the Times*

The most important work of the General Chapters is the studied accommodation of the rules of their Institute to the changed conditions of the times. This, however, must be done in such a way that the proper nature and discipline of the Institute is kept intact. Every Religious family has its proper function and it must remain faithful to this role. The fruitfulness of the Institute's life is based on this fidelity to its specific purpose, and in this matter an abundance of heavenly graces will never be lacking. Therefore, no renovation of discipline is to be introduced which is incompatible with the nature of the Order or Congregation and which, in any way, departs from the mind of the Founder. Moreover, this renovation of discipline demands that it proceed only from competent authority. Therefore, until this accommodation of discipline is duly processed and brought into juridic effect, let the Religious members not introduce anything new on their own initiative, nor relax the restraints of discipline nor give way to censorious criticism. Let them act in such a way that they might rather help and more promptly effect this work of renewal by their fidelity and obedience. If the desired renovation takes place in this way, then the letter will have changed, but the spirit will have remained the same, in all its integrity.

### *Relationship of Interior Life to Apostolate*

In bringing about this renewal of your Institutes, your primary concern must always be the spiritual life of your members. Wherefore, among yourselves and among all other Religious whose duty it is to devote themselves to works of the sacred apostolate, We would be entirely opposed to see anyone espousing that false opinion which claims that primary concern must be given to external works and only secondary attention devoted to the interior life of perfection, as though this were demanded by the spirit of the times and the needs of the Church.

Zealous activity and the cultivation of one's interior life should not bring any harm to each other; indeed, they require the closest union, in order that both may ever proceed with equal pace and progress. Therefore, let zeal for prayer, the beauty of a pure conscience, patience in adversities,

active and vibrant charity devoted to the salvation of souls, increase in union with fervent works. When these virtues are neglected, not only will apostolic labor lack vigor and fruitfulness, but the spirit also will gradually lose fervor. As a consequence, the Religious will not be able to avoid, for long, the dangers which lie hidden in the very performance of the sacred ministry.

### *Adaptation of Apostolate to Contemporary Conditions*

With respect to that portion of the apostolate which is entrusted to the care of the Religious, We wish to make some further observations. Religious Institutes should sedulously adapt the work proper to their apostolates to modern conditions and circumstances. The younger Religious, particularly, are to be instructed and educated properly in this matter, in such a way, however, that the apostolic zeal with which they must be inflamed, does not remain circumscribed exclusively by the boundaries of one's own Order but rather opens outwardly toward the great spiritual necessities of our times. Nor is this enough. For while being educated along the lines We have indicated, they should also cultivate an exquisite sensitivity to their duties by force of which, both in words and deeds, they will constantly show themselves as true ministers of God, distinguished by soundness of doctrine and recommended to the people by holiness of life. However, in these matters, let not the Religious be left solely to their own initiative, since their work must always be subject to the vigilance of Superiors, especially if it is a matter of work that has notable relevance to civil life.

### *Relation of Religious Institutes to Holy See and Hierarchy*

It is of the greatest concern to Us that the work of the members of Religious Institutes should go along harmoniously with the norms established by the Sacred Hierarchy. As a matter of fact, the exemption of Religious Orders is in no conflict whatsoever with the divinely given Constitution of the Church, by force of which every priest, particularly in the performance of the sacred ministry, must obey the Sacred Hierarchy. For the members of these Religious Institutes are, at all times and in all places, subject principally to the Roman Pontiff, as to their highest Superior (Canon 499, par. 1). For this reason, the Religious Institutes are at the service of the Roman Pontiff in those works which pertain to the welfare of the universal Church. With regard to the exercise of the sacred apostolate in various dioceses, Religious are also under the jurisdiction of Bishops, to whom they are bound to give assistance, always without prejudice to the nature of their proper apostolate and the things that are necessary for their religious life. From all this, it is quite evident how much the allied and auxiliary ministry of the Religious given to the diocesan clergy conduces to the good of the Church, when their united forces result in more vigorous and more effective action.

### *Conclusion*

Now, my dearly beloved sons, from these brief observations, you know Our mind as to what We

consider as greatly contributing to the growth of religious life in our times. May all these remarks show you with what solicitude We view and esteem the religious life and what great hope We put in your helpful work. The road which We pointed out to you is certainly difficult and laborious. But lift up your soul in hope, for the cause is not ours but that of Jesus Christ. Christ is our strength, our hope, our power. He will be with us always. Continue to diffuse the good odor of Christ as widely as possible by the integrity of your faith, by the holiness of your life, by your great zeal for all the virtues. Meanwhile, as We thank you for your obedience, We pray God through the intercession of the Most Sweet Virgin Mary, Mother of God, the maternal nurse of religious virtues, that your Institutes may continue to grow daily and bear ever richer and more salutary fruits.

**PAUL VI**

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