



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON THE OCCASION OF THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE INSTITUTES
OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE***

*To my Venerable Brother
Archbishop Franc Rodé, C.M.
Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of
Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*

On the occasion of this Congregation's Plenary Assembly, I very gladly address my cordial greeting to all the participants. In particular, I greet you, the Secretary and all who work in the Dicastery that you head.

With my greetings, I also express my gratitude and joy: gratitude because you share with me attention and service to consecrated persons; joy, because through you I know I am addressing the world of consecrated women and men who follow Christ on the path of the evangelical counsels and of their respective charism, inspired by the Spirit.

The Church's history is marked by interventions of the Holy Spirit, who has not only enriched her with his gifts of wisdom, prophecy and holiness, but has endowed her with ever new forms of evangelical life through the work of the founders and foundresses who have passed on their charism to the family of their spiritual sons and daughters.

This has meant that today, in monasteries and spirituality centres, monks, Religious and consecrated persons can offer the faithful oases of contemplation and schools of prayer, education in the faith and of spiritual guidance.

Above all, however, consecrated persons continue the great work of evangelization and witness on all the continents, even on the front lines of the faith, with generosity and often with the sacrifice

of their lives, even to the point of martyrdom.

Many of them are totally dedicated to catechesis, education, teaching, the advancement of culture and the ministry of communications. They are close to young people and their families, the poor, the elderly, the sick and lonely people.

There is no human or ecclesial context where they are not present, frequently silent but always effective and creative, a continuation as it were of the presence of Jesus who went about doing good works to all (cf. Acts 10: 38).

The Church is grateful for the witness of fidelity and holiness borne by so many of the members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life, for the ceaseless prayers of praise and intercession raised by their communities, and for their life spent at the service of the People of God.

Today, the consecrated life, like other sectors of ecclesial life, certainly has no lack of trials and problems. "The great treasure of the gift of God", you recalled at the end of your last Plenary Assembly, "is held in fragile earthen vessels (cf. II Cor 4: 7), and the mystery of evil also threatens those who dedicate their whole lives to God" (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, n. 11).

Rather than listing the difficulties that consecrated life encounters today, I would like to confirm to all consecrated men and women the closeness, concern and love for them of the whole Church. At the beginning of the new millennium, the consecrated life is facing formidable challenges that it can only confront in communion with the whole People of God, their Pastors and all the faithful. The attention of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life fits into this context at your Plenary Assembly, which is addressing three very precise themes.

The *first theme* concerns the exercise of authority.

To assure an authentically fraternal life in the search for God's will, this is a precious and necessary service. In fact, it is the Risen Lord himself, newly present among the brothers and sisters gathered in his name (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 15), who points out the path to take.

Only if the Superior himself or herself lives in obedience to Christ and sincerely observes the Rule can the community members clearly see not only that their obedience to the Superior is not contrary to the freedom of God's children but that it leads them to maturity in conformity with Christ, obedient to the Father (cf. *ibid.*, n. 14).

The *other theme* chosen for the Plenary Meeting concerns the criteria for the discernment and approval of new forms of consecrated life.

"Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts through their office", the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* recalls, speaking of charisms in general, "not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good" (n. 12).

And this is what you too are seeking to do in these days, not forgetting that you must carry out your precious and delicate work in a context of gratitude to God, who continues still today to enrich his Church with ever new charisms with the creativity and generosity of his Spirit.

The *third theme* you have addressed concerns monastic life.

Starting with the contingent situations that also require wise and effective practical interventions, you mean to survey the vast horizon of this reality which has been and still is so important in the Church's history. You seek appropriate ways to relaunch in the new millennium the monastic experience of which the Church today stands in so great a need, for she recognizes in it an eloquent witness to the primacy of God, constantly praised, adored, served and loved with the whole heart, the whole soul and the whole mind (cf. Mt 22: 37).

Lastly, I am pleased to note that the Plenary Meeting is taking place within the framework of the solemn celebration that the Dicastery has organized on the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of the conciliar Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* on the renewal of religious life.

I hope that the fundamental guidelines offered by the Council Fathers at that time for the progress of the consecrated life will also be a source of inspiration today for all who dedicate their lives to the service of the Kingdom of God.

I am referring primarily to what the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* describes as "*vitae religiosae ultima norma*", "the final norm of the religious life", that is, the "sequela Christi". A genuine recovery of religious life is impossible without seeking to live in complete conformity with the Gospel, without putting anything before the one Love, but finding in Christ and in his words the essence that is deeper than any Founder's or Foundress' charism.

Another basic directive of the Council was to give oneself generously and creatively to one's brothers and sisters, never giving in to the temptation of withdrawal into self, never being content with past achievement and never indulging in pessimism or weariness.

The flame of love that the Spirit kindles in hearts is an incentive to questioning oneself constantly on humanity's needs and on how to respond to them, knowing well that only those who recognize and live the primacy of God can truly respond to the real needs of men and women, made in the image of God.

I would like to take up yet another of the very important directives presented by the Council Fathers in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*: the consecrated person's constant commitment to cultivate a sincere life of communion (cf. n. 15), not only in the individual communities but with the whole Church, because charisms should always be safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed "in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth" (*Mutuae Relationes*, n. 11).

These are the thoughts on the themes treated at your Plenary Assembly which I am eager to entrust to you for reflection. I accompany you with my prayers, and as I invoke God's help and the protection of the Most Holy Virgin upon you and your activity, I impart my Blessing to each one of you as a pledge of my affection.

From Castel Gandolfo, 27 September 2005, Memorial of St Vincent de Paul.

JOHN PAUL II

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