



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BENEDICTINE SISTERS  
OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE**

*Friday, 25 August 2000*

*Dear Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence!*

1. I am pleased to greet you and to extend my cordial welcome to each one. I thank you for this visit, with which you intend to strengthen your fidelity to the Successor of Peter on the occasion of your 22nd General Chapter, while the memory of the 150th anniversary of your institute, celebrated last year, is still vivid.

I would like to express to you my appreciation of the good you do in many countries of the world and, especially, of the love with which you serve the Gospel, attentive to the expectations and needs of the lowly, the poor and the suffering. At the same time, I would like to reflect with you on the new frontiers the Lord is indicating to you so that, at the beginning of the new millennium, the experience matured by your Congregation during these long years can be the happy premise for an even more fruitful apostolic and missionary season.

Your institute was born like a tiny mustard seed in the city of Voghera, in the Diocese of Tortona, from the faith and generosity of the sisters, Maria and Giustina Schiapparoli, called by the Lord to become loving mothers of numerous children given to begging and exposed to a future burdened with material and moral dangers. They therefore decided to open their house to some abandoned little girls, so that they could be "*formed in religion, virtue and work suited to their station*" (*Letter from Maria and Giustina Schiapparoli of 20 December 1860*) and, as a means to provide for their daily needs, they chose to do "needlework", at which they were expert.

The Lord blessed the new institute which soon began to develop, thanks to the arrival of numerous young women attracted by the same apostolic ideal. In 1936, the year in which the Apostolic See

approved and confirmed the congregation's Constitutions, it also began to spread its branches overseas. Today, your religious family is present, as well as in Italy, in Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Mexico, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Romania, Albania and India, as a "humble instrument of merciful charity", for "poor youth, maladjusted and in dangerous conditions" (*Constitutions*, 1 and 5).

2. In the context of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, richly blessed with grace and hope, you have chosen a very interesting theme for your General Chapter: "*Refoundation of religious life as Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence: mysticism, fraternal life and mission*". You thus intend to revisit the spiritual sources of your institute with humility and courage, to obtain new vigour and to accept the challenges facing your apostolic enterprise at the start of the third Christian millennium. Looking at the foundresses' unique experience, you would like to bring about as it were a "refoundation" of your "style of life" by greater adherence to Christ, the cornerstone, who "is the same yesterday and today and for ever!" (*Heb 13: 8*).

While this decision asks of each Benedictine Sister of Divine Providence a firm commitment to interior conversion and joyful availability to the Lord's call, it also demands creative fidelity to the charism and an attentive search for a style of religious life which can bring about "the harmonious convergence of the inner life with apostolic-charitable activity, understood as inseparable requirements of religious life" (*Constitutions*, 2). All this reflects the spirituality of St Benedict whose motto: "*Ora et labora*", stands out on your institute's coat of arms. In this way, you wish to propose once again the true face of your congregation to attract to the apostolic ideal which distinguishes it new young women, eager to encounter Christ and to recognize him in the often bewildered faces of so many weak and defenceless brothers and sisters.

3. To achieve your objective, in the course of the Chapter session you recognized *mysticism, fraternal life and mission* as the privileged paths to continue being a "presence of Providence", after your foundresses' example. You would like to carry out your mission particularly in the world of abandoned children, of small outcasts, of young people and of adolescents, conditioned by the modern consumerist mentality and who are often victims of every kind of violence.

You know well how any authentic project of renewal must be based on the deepening of fidelity to Christ in the Church. It is in this context that your consecration and mission should be rethought! You intend to do so by looking at the examples of Mary, the prayerful and faithful Virgin, and listening to the teachings of St Benedict, the great master of spiritual life. The Blessed Virgin has the keys of what God gives lovingly to human beings, and the saint of Norcia, your "special protector and father", guides you through the Rule, in which he recommends his sons not to put anything before love of Christ (cf. *Rule of St Benedict*, 4, 21).

Our Lady and the Holy Patriarch were the steadfast reference-points of the mystical experience of the Servants of God Maria and Giustina Schiapparoli, who lived in trusting abandonment to divine Providence to whom they entrusted their whole work. This trust led them to be simple and humble,

embracing their hard daily chores with simplicity and joy. They loved and knew how to inculcate a genuine family spirit in their spiritual daughters, capable of also involving the little girls they had taken in.

4. Dear sisters, may the example of the foundresses remind you that the authentic mystical dimension should be expressed in fraternal life and in apostolic commitment. Here, in fact, love of God, trust in Providence and the spirit of poverty find their visibility and concrete form. The Constitutions remind you that "communion with the sisters entails the ability to accept and fraternally help one another, putting everything in common: joys, sorrows, ideas, prayers and work, and knowing how to use mercy with one another" (art. 63).

In this perspective, you strive to overcome the temptation of individualism, endeavouring to cultivate an authentic spirituality of communion. This is what will bring the individual religious and every community to live a renewed and conscious belonging to the universal and local Church as well as to their own religious family, and to be an ever more visible and welcoming image of divine Providence.

5. "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ... your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (*Mt 6: 31-33*). These words of the Gospel constituted the spiritual horizon and programme of life of the Servants of God Maria and Giustina Schiapparoli. They learned from contemplation of the heavenly Father to make their lives a continuous act of love for little ones, with an attitude of total abandonment to Providence. To their spiritual daughters they bequeathed the task of continuing on the same Gospel path. This mission, at the beginning of the 21st century, is particularly timely. Is it not true that in vast areas of the globe, children are unfortunately still victims of hunger, wars, appalling illnesses such as AIDS and the perversion of unscrupulous adults, which threaten their innocence and gravely jeopardize their future? It is impossible to face so many forms of poverty and need without great trust in divine Providence; this can be in some way extended by abandoning oneself to it, "in accordance with the requirements and circumstances of the times and places".

This is the challenge that confronts your Chapter! It requires a great heart filled with faith, capable of seeking the kingdom of God and his justice always, with prophetic daring and absolute trust in divine Providence. I warmly hope that renewed fidelity to the charism of the foundresses will help you in witnessing to the acceptance of the "lowliest", recognizing in them the true image of Christ, who asks to be honoured, accepted and reinstated.

6. Dear Sisters, be aware of your vocation and continue on the way you have taken. Your vocation as Benedictine Sisters of Divine Providence is a precious gift for the Church; be committed to living it in perennial harmony with the evangelizing mission of the entire ecclesial community. Called to be "an extension of divine Providence", be prepared to witness everywhere with

constantly renewed zeal to the great values of prayer, fraternal communion, hard work and Gospel service to the little, the abandoned and the marginalized. May each of your communities be a concrete proclamation of the civilization of love, whose foundation and hope is in God's tender Providence.

I entrust the work of the Chapter meeting and your entire congregation to the heavenly protection of the Blessed Virgin and of St Benedict of Norcia. I assure you of my remembrance in prayer for all your intentions, and I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing to Mother General, to the Chapter participants, to all the sisters, to those you take into your houses, and to everyone who collaborates with your mission.

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