



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES
DURING THEIR PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

Friday, 20 November 1998

Your Eminence,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I am pleased to extend a cordial welcome to you all, members of the plenary assembly and officials of the Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples. I thank Cardinal Jozef Tomko for his kind words expressed also on behalf of those present. I greet each of you and thank you for your generous efforts in helping to spread the Gospel message.

The theme of your plenary meeting this year deals with the “*missionary dimension of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life*”. A very important and timely subject, it closely follows the teaching contained in the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*.

You have rightly focused your reflections on the role of consecrated life in the mission ad gentes. Indeed, this vast throng of monks, religious, members of religious and missionary institutes and societies of apostolic life has made a great contribution to evangelization. In the last century, large numbers of women religious also shared this missionary impulse, expressing by their particular charism the merciful face of God and the motherly heart of the Church.

The history of every people has been affected by the presence of consecrated persons, by their witness, their work of charity and evangelization, and their sacrifice. And all this is not just past history. In mission territories there are still many religious priests; together with women religious and brothers they form the majority of the vital forces for mission. In countries where the Church’s presence has recently been re-established, again it is religious who are on the front lines in

proclaiming the Gospel to all peoples.

Today I would like to renew my heartfelt and grateful encouragement to men and women religious. Dear friends, the Pope and the whole Church count on you especially for the mission *ad gentes*, which is the primordial task and paradigm of the Church's entire mission (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 34, 36).

2. In the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, there are many signs of the Spirit that affect consecrated life itself and its missionary role. Through Synods too, the Church has gained a greater awareness of the missionary vocation connected with the various states of life: lay Christians, ordained ministers, consecrated persons. These states within the Christian community are necessary and complementary: this is why they are promoted and encouraged in reciprocal communion.

Moreover, in the years since the Council, members of the institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life have generously committed themselves to the renewal proposed by the Church and to a deeper understanding of their specific missionary charisms. Thus they rediscovered the missionary dimension inherent in each one's constitution and practices.

We thank the Lord, then, that vocations to the various forms of consecrated life are clearly on the rise in the young Churches, promising good hopes for the future of mission. The men and women religious who have come from those Churches make their active presence available and contribute to the universal missionary task.

In recent years Bishops too, as Pastors of the Christian people, leaders of ecclesial communion and supporters of pastoral commitment, have more clearly perceived their role as guardians and promoters of the charisms of consecrated life. As I wrote in the above-mentioned Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*: "The Bishops at the Synod frequently reaffirmed this: '*de re nostra agitur*', 'this is something which concerns us all'. In effect, the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission" (n. 3). In this regard I make a pressing appeal to Bishops, who are responsible for the numerous diocesan institutes in many mission territories, to devote special attention to the formation and spiritual growth of candidates.

3. Despite the great progress achieved thus far, the mission *ad gentes* still has immense and urgent needs. In *Redemptoris missio* I wrote: "Today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church. As the end of the second millennium of the Redemption draws near, it is clear that the peoples which have not yet received an initial proclamation of Christ constitute the majority of mankind" (n. 40). And I added: "Our own time, with humanity on the move and in continual search, demands a resurgence of the Church's missionary activity. The horizons and possibilities for mission are growing ever wider, and we Christians are called to an apostolic courage based upon trust in the Spirit" (*ibid.*, n. 30). Also on the occasion of appointing Bishops in certain Dioceses, especially in Asia, I realize that this mission is still in its early stages.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the mission *ad gentes* requires fresh enthusiasm and new missionaries, calling on consecrated persons themselves precisely because of their vocation. I stressed this in the Apostolic Exhortation already mentioned: "Today too this duty continues to present a pressing call to institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life: they are expected to make the greatest possible contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ.

Also those institutes which are being established and are at work in the younger Churches are invited to open themselves to the mission among non-Christians, inside and outside their own countries of origin. Despite the understandable difficulties which some of them will meet, it is good to remind everyone that just as ‘faith is strengthened when it is given to others’, so the mission strengthens the consecrated life, gives it new enthusiasm and new motivation, and elicits faithfulness. For its part, missionary activity offers ample room for all the different forms of the consecrated life” (*Vita consecrata*, n. 78).

I therefore invite institutes of special consecration to be even more committed to the mission *ad gentes*, convinced as I am that this missionary zeal will attract genuine vocations and will be a leaven for their communities’ authentic renewal.

I now address you, dear Pastors of Churches both old and new, asking you not only to foster the consecrated life but also to increase its awareness of these issues. Institutes which are exclusively missionary are waiting to be strengthened and encouraged in the work of initial evangelization and in stirring up missionary fervour (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 65-66); men and women religious, both contemplative and active, must be encouraged to “play a special part in missionary activity, in a manner appropriate to their institute” (*CIC, can. 783; Redemptoris missio*, n. 69); consecrated persons, together with the diocesan priests and lay people, must be encouraged to commit themselves to the mission *ad gentes*, even for a limited time in their ministry (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 67-68; 71-72).

It is the entire Church that needs this flourishing apostolic commitment. Indeed, evangelization and missionary work represent the first, fundamental contribution she offers to humanity.

4. Mission clearly does not consist of and is not exhausted in mere organizational activity, but is closely connected with the universal vocation to holiness (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 90). This applies to every Christian, and even more so to those Christians who live their faith by sharing in the project of an institute of consecrated life or society of apostolic life. They are called to an intimate relationship with God who is love (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 84). Religious profession requires them to be ever more completely and visibly conformed to the chaste, poor and obedient Christ (cf. *ibid.*, n. 93). Community life spurs them to live communion and to be signs and instruments of unity among the People of God (cf. *ibid.*, n. 51), while ecclesial service challenges them to be consistent in their life and apostolic activity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 85).

“To tend towards holiness”: this is in summary the programme of every consecrated life. “Leaving everything behind for the sake of Christ ..., preferring him above all things, in order to share fully in his paschal mystery” (*ibid.*, n. 93): this is what it means to follow Christ in a way that can involve and transform people.

Communities of consecrated life, including those in the young Churches, will devote their greatest attention to this programme and this following of Christ, and will become oases and “schools of true Gospel spirituality” by showing to one another, to the other faithful and to the world the definitive values and ultimate goals of the human journey.

As I entrust your plenary meeting to the protection of Blessed Mary, Queen of Apostles, I invoke her motherly help upon all the consecrated men and women involved in missionary activity in every corner of the earth.

I assure each and every one that I will remember them in prayer, and I willingly impart to them a special Apostolic

Blessing.

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