



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL
UNION OF SUPERIOR GENERALS**

Clementine Hall

Thursday, 16 November 1978

Dear Sisters,

"Ecce quam bonum et iucundum habitare fratres in unum ... " You love this psalm and you are living it at this moment. The time when Religious Congregations met but little, for geographical reasons and others perhaps, is practically over. God be praised! And congratulations to you, too, my Sisters: you bear witness, in various ways, to one treasure entrusted by Christ himself to his Church, the incomparable treasure of the evangelical counsels!

Certainly, your International Union of Mothers General is just emerging from infancy. It is only thirteen years old! But it has already yielded good fruit. The new Pope, like his very deserving predecessor Paul VI who received you so many times, would like it to yield even more. The famous parable of the vine and the vinedresser must often be present to my spirit and yours (Jn 15:1-8).

Your meeting had as its subject "Religious life and new mankind". It is a fundamental subject, a very old one and very relevant today. Though the whole people of God is called to become a new mankind in Christ and through Christ (*Lumen Gentium*, ch. 5), the ways of access to this new mankind, in other words to holiness, are different and must remain so. Precisely chapter six of *Lumen Gentium*, without making the least discrimination among members of the People of God which would contradict the redeeming plan of Christ Jesus—a plan of holiness and unity for the world—always illumines your way.

Since the Council, the Religious Congregations have in fact multiplied the times and the means of

deepening essential religious values. They have rightly put them back into the wake of the primary, ontological, ineffaceable consecration which is baptism. And all Sisters have, as it were, conveyed, to one another a password: "Let us first be Christians!", a certain number preferring or adding the following: "Let us first be women!". It is evident that the two do not exclude each other. These striking formulas have found a favourable echo in a large part of the People of God. But the positive side of this awareness cannot dispense from continuous and prudent vigilance. The treasure of the evangelical counsels and the commitment—taken after mature reflection and irrevocable—to make them the charter of a Christian existence cannot be relativized by public opinion, even if it were ecclesial. The Church and, let us say, the world itself need, more than ever, men and women who sacrifice everything to follow Christ in the way of the apostles. And to such an extent that the sacrifice of conjugal love, of material possessions, of the completely autonomous exercise of freedom, becomes incomprehensible without love of Christ.

This radicalism is necessary to proclaim prophetically, but always very humbly, this new mankind according to Christ, completely available for God and completely available for other men. Every woman religious must bear witness to the primacy of God and must dedicate a sufficiently long period of time every day to stand before the Lord, to tell him her love, and above all to let herself be loved by him. Every woman religious must signify every day, by her way of life, that she chooses simplicity and poor means for everything that concerns her personal and community life. Every woman religious must do God's will and not her own every day, to signify that human plans, hers and those of society, are not the only plans in history, but that there exists a plan of God which calls for the sacrifice of one's own freedom. This real prophetic element of the evangelical counsels, lived day after day, and altogether possible with the grace of God, is not a proud lesson given to the Christian people. It is a light absolutely indispensable for the life of the Church—which is sometimes tempted to have recourse to the means of power—and even indispensable for mankind wandering along the alluring and disappointing paths of materialism and atheism.

And if your consecration to God is really such a deep reality, it is not unimportant to bear permanently its exterior sign which a simple and suitable religious habit constitutes: it is the means to remind yourselves constantly of your commitment which contrasts strongly with the spirit of the world; it is a silent but eloquent testimony; it is a sign that our secularized world needs to find on its way, as many Christians, moreover, desire. I ask you to turn this over carefully in your minds.

That is, my Sisters, the price of your realistic participation in the proclamation and the building up of this "new mankind". For man cannot be fully satisfied—beyond earthly goods, necessary for his life and, alas!, so badly shared out—except by knowledge and love of God, inseparable from acceptance and love of all men, especially the poorest on the human and moral plane. All the efforts, all the transformations of your Congregations, must be carried out in this perspective, otherwise you are working in vain!

All that, my Sisters, is the ideal towards which you are striving personally, and towards which you

draw along your companions of the evangelical way in a motherly and firm manner. In practice, you know it better than others, from time to time you come up against unavoidable contingencies: either the rapid social changes in a country, or the small number and aging of your subjects, or again the wind of interminable researches and experiments, the requests of the young, etc.... Accept all these realities. Take them seriously, never tragically. Seek calmly for progressive, clear, and courageous solutions. While remaining yourselves, seek with others. Above all, be daughters of the Church, not only in words but in deeds! In ever-renewed faithfulness to the charism of their founders, the Congregations must, in fact, endeavour to meet the expectations of the Church and the commitments which the Church, with her Pastors, considers most urgent today in order to face up to a mission which needs skilled workers so much. A guarantee of this exemplary love of the Church—inseparable from love of Christ Jesus—is your dialogue with those in charge of your local Churches, with a resolution of faithfulness and devotion to these Churches; also a guarantee are your trustful relations with our Congregation for Religious and for the Secular Institutes. Dear Sisters, the capital of generosity of your Congregations is immense. Use these forces responsibly. Do not allow them to be scattered thoughtlessly.

I ask you to express to each of your Sisters, whatever her place may be in the Congregation for which you are responsible, the Pope's affection but also the hope that he sets in her for the renewal of an exacting practice of the evangelical counsels, for the significant witness of all religious communities whose ardent faith, apostolic inspiration and, of course, interpersonal relations would make those who are seeking new ways in our society harassed by materialism, violence and fear, say: "we have found a model to imitate ... " Yes, my Sisters, in the Church herself, in the footsteps of St Catherine of Siena and of St Theresa of Avila, among so many others, you can show the place that is due to woman.

May the Holy Spirit act powerfully in you! With Mary, who was perfectly docile to him, live listening to God's Word and put it into practice, unto the cross. May your complete gift to Christ always be a source of joy, dynamism and peace! To all of you, to all of those whom you represent, our Apostolic Blessing.

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