



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE MISSIONARIES OF SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES

To the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales! warmly greet you as the General Chapter of your Congregation meets in Rome. In particular, I welcome the Superior General, Father Émile Mayoraz, the members of the Council, the Provincials and the representatives of the nine Provinces of the Congregation. I join you all in giving thanks to God for the many graces bestowed upon the Church through the generous and devoted work of your members since the foundation of the Congregation by Father Pierre-Marie Mermier in 1838. Father Mermier's decision to found the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales was prompted by the spiritual needs of French society in his own time. Following the upheavals of the early years of the nineteenth century, the consequent decline of religious knowledge and practice called for a determined missionary approach, to rouse people from their apathy and urge them to be converted. Inspired by Saint Francis de Sales' simplicity, benevolence and confidence, Father Mermier imitated his evangelizing fervour and quickly gathered about himself a group of priests committed to prayer, study and missionary work in the spirit of the saintly Bishop of Geneva. Today, that same spirit continues to inspire your Congregation, which is present in many parts of the world, and continues to grow and make progress. Guided by the deep spirituality and evangelical creativity of your Founder, you look to Saint Francis de Sales as your heavenly Patron and seek to implement his teaching and example in your apostolate. The General Chapter has come together to reflect upon your missionary commitment, your educational activities and social apostolate, and to refresh your dedication to the work of evangelization. I am confident that this will be an occasion for all of you to be strengthened in charity, to imitate your Patron's surrender to God's will and "to reflect his love of God and of neighbour, his apostolic zeal, his humility and simplicity, his joy and his optimism, his welcoming attitude, and his sympathy for everything human" (*Constitution*, 13). The Chapter is taking place in this special year of grace when the whole Church celebrates the Great Jubilee, when the entire Christian community is called "to lift its eyes of faith to embrace new horizons in proclaiming the Kingdom of God" (Bull of Indiction *Mysterium Incarnationis*, 2). Today, more than ever, people need to hear the message of salvation which our Lord Jesus Christ made known "when the fullness of time had come" (*Gal* 4:4) and to welcome into their lives the mercy of God who makes us his adopted children and heals the wounds of our hearts. All Christ's disciples should have a deep sense of the need to pass on to others the light and joy of the faith. As missionaries, you especially should feel invigorated in the knowledge that you bring to the world the true Light of the nations, Christ the Saviour, in whom all humanity "can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth" (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53). The preaching of the Gospel *ad gentes*, to which you are deeply committed, is essential to the Church's mission "to reveal and communicate the love of God to all peoples and nations" (*Ad Gentes*, 10). With the confidence born of faith I encourage you to press on in this task, secure in the knowledge that the Holy

Spirit, who directs the mission of the Church and opens people's minds and hearts to Christ, goes ahead of you. In fidelity to the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales and to the charism of your Founder, I invite you to be attentive to the new challenges of our times and to be creative in responding to emerging missionary needs. Your work of evangelization will be effective provided that you are committed to an intense life of prayer, always open to receiving the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Trust in God's Providence, which is always at work in the world, will help you to meet the challenges before you, and will make your contribution to the building of the Kingdom bear fruit in your various activities: missions and retreats, the education of the young, the training of seminarians and the social apostolate. In the field of education you must bear radical witness to the values of the Gospel, and instruct young people in the ways of unselfish commitment and holiness. Your students, as Saint John Bosco so memorably put it, "should not only be loved, but should also know that they are loved" (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 96). In serving the poor, you must be simple and austere in your way of life, and you must love them in a dedicated and self-giving way, as Christ did. It is my prayer that the Lord will continue to bless the work of your Congregation and inspire many young people to give themselves joyfully and generously to his service as Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales. In the joy of this Easter season, I entrust you to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, and to the intercession of Saint Francis de Sales. I warmly impart my Apostolic Blessing to all the members of the Congregation, to your benefactors and to all whom you serve. *From the Vatican, 27 May 2000* ©

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