



# The Holy See

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## APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### **ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO WOMEN RELIGIOUS**

*Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington  
Sunday, 7 October 1979*

*Dear Sisters,*

May the grace, love and peace of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I welcome this opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy for this occasion because of my esteem for religious life, and my gratitude to women religious for their invaluable contribution to the mission and very life of the Church.

I am especially pleased that we are gathered here in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, for the Virgin Mary is the model of the Church, the Mother of the faithful and the perfect example of consecrated life.

1. On the day of our Baptism, we received the greatest gift God can bestow on any man or woman. No other honor, no other distinction will equal its value. For we were freed from sin and incorporated into Christ Jesus and his Body, the Church. That day and every day after, we were chosen "to live through love in his presence" (*Eph 1 :4*).

In the years that followed our Baptism, we grew in awareness—even wonder—of the mystery of Christ. By listening to the Beatitudes, by meditating on the Cross, conversing with Christ in prayer and receiving him in the Eucharist, we progressed toward the day, that particular moment of our life, when we solemnly ratified with full awareness and freedom our Baptismal consecration. We affirmed our determination to live always in union with Christ, and to be, according to the gifts

given us by the Holy Spirit, a generous and loving member of the People of God.

2. Your religious consecration builds on this common foundation which all Christians share in the Body of Christ. Desiring to perfect and intensify what God had begun in your life by Baptism, and discerning that God was indeed offering you the gift of the evangelical counsels, you willed to follow Christ more closely, to conform your life more completely to that of Jesus Christ, in and through a distinctive religious community. This is the essence of religious consecration: to profess within and for the benefit of the Church, poverty, chastity and obedience in response to God's special invitation, in order to praise and serve God in greater freedom of heart (cf. *1 Cor 7 :34-35*) and to have one's life more closely conformed to Christ in the manner of life chosen by him and his blessed Mother (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1; *Lumen Gentium*, 46).

3. Religious consecration not only deepens your personal commitment to Christ, but it also strengthens your relationship to his Spouse, the Church. Religious consecration is a distinctive manner of living in the Church, a particular way of fulfilling the life of faith and service begun in Baptism.

On her part, the Church assists you in your discernment of God's will. Having accepted and authenticated the charism of your various Institutes, she then unites your religious profession to the celebration of Christ's Paschal Mystery.

You are called by Jesus himself to verify and manifest in your lives and in your activities your deepened relationship with his Church. This bond of union with the Church must also be shown in the spirit and apostolic endeavors of every Religious Institute. For faithfulness to Christ, especially in religious life, can never be separated from faithfulness to the Church. This ecclesial dimension of the vocation of religious consecration has many important practical consequences for Institutes themselves and for each individual member. It implies, for example, a greater public witness to the Gospel, since you represent, in a special way as women religious, the spousal relationship of the Church to Christ. The ecclesial dimension also requires, on the part of individual members as well as entire Institutes, a faithfulness to the original charism which God has given to his Church, through your founders and foundresses. It means that Institutes are called to continue to foster, in dynamic faithfulness, those corporate commitments which were related to the original charism, which were authenticated by the Church, and which still fulfill important needs of the People of God. A good example in this regard would be the Catholic School system which has been invaluable for the Church in the United States, a excellent means not only for communicating the Gospel of Christ to the students, but also for permeating the entire community wit. Christ's truth and his love. It is one of the apostolates in which women religious have made, and are still making, an incomparable contribution.

4. Dear Sisters in Christ: Jesus must always be first in your lives. His person must be at the center of your activities—the activities of every day. No other person and no activity can take precedence

over him. For your whole life has been consecrated to him. With Saint Paul you have to say: "All I want is to know Christ and the power of his Resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death" (*Phil 3 :10*).

Christ remains primary in your life only when he enjoys the first place in your mind and heart. Thus you must continuously unite yourself to him in prayer. Without prayer, religious life has no meaning. It has lost contact with its source, it has emptied itself of substance, and it no longer can fulfill its goal. Without prayer there can be no joy, no hope, no peace. For prayer is what keeps us in touch with Christ. The incisive words written in *Evangelica Testificatio* cause us all to reflect : "Do not forget the witness of history : faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment is the test of the vitality or decadence of religious life" (*Evangelica Testificatio*, 42).

5. Two dynamic forces are operative in religious life: your love for Jesus—and, in Jesus, for all who belong to him—and his love for you.

We cannot live without love. If we do not encounter love, if we do not experience it and make it our own, and if we do not participate intimately in it, our life is meaningless. Without love we remain incomprehensible to ourselves (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

Thus every one of you needs a vibrant relationship of love to the Lord, a profound loving union with Christ, your spouse, a love like that expressed in the psalm: "God, you are my God whom I seek, for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water. Thus have I gazed toward you in the sanctuary to see your power and your glory" (*Psalms 63 :1-2*).

Yet far more important than your love for Christ is Christ's love for you. You have been called by him, made a member of his Body, consecrated in a life of the evangelical counsels and destined by him to have a share in the mission that Christ has entrusted to the Church: his own mission of salvation. For this reason, you center your life in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, you celebrate his death and Resurrection and receive from him the Bread of eternal life. And it is in the Eucharist especially that you are united to the one who is the object of all your love. Here, with him, you find ever greater reason to love and serve his brothers and sisters. Here, with him—with Christ—you find greater understanding and compassion for God's people. And here you find the strength to persevere in your commitment to selfless service.

6. Your service in the Church is then an extension of Christ to whom you have dedicated your life. For it is not yourself that you put forward, but Christ Jesus as Lord. Like John the Baptist, you know that for Christ to increase, you must decrease. And so your life must be characterized by a complete availability: a readiness to serve as the needs of the Church require, a readiness to give public witness to the Christ whom you love.

The need for this public witness becomes a constant call to inner conversion, to justice and

holiness of life on the part of each religious. It also becomes an invitation to each Institute to reflect on the purity of its corporate ecclesial witness. And it is for this reason that in my address last November to the International Union of Superiors General I mentioned that it is not unimportant that your consecration to God should be manifested in the permanent exterior sign of a simple and suitable religious garb. This is not only my personal conviction, but also the desire of the Church, often expressed by so many of the faithful.

As daughters of the Church—a title cherished by so many of your great saints—you are called to a generous and loving adherence to the authentic Magisterium of the Church, which is a solid guarantee of the fruitfulness of all your apostolates and an indispensable condition for the proper interpretation of the "signs of the times".

7. The contemplative life occupies today and for ever a place of great honor in the Church. The prayer of contemplation was found in the life of Jesus himself, and has been a part of religious life in every age. I take this opportunity therefore—as I did in Rome, in Mexico, in Poland and in Ireland—to encourage again all who are members of contemplative communities. Know that you will always fulfill an important place in the Church, in her mission of salvation, in her service to the whole community of the People of God. Continue faithfully, confidently and prayerfully, in the rich tradition that has been handed down to you.

In closing, I remind you, with sentiments of admiration and love, that the aim of religious life is to render praise and glory to the Most Holy Trinity, and, through your consecration, to help humanity enter into fullness of life in the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. In all your planning and in all your activities, try also to keep this aim before you. There is no greater service you can give; there is no greater fulfillment you can receive. Dear Sisters : today and forever: Praised be Jesus Christ !

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