



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE
INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SUPERIORS GENERAL (I.U.S.G.)**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 8 May 2013*

*Your Eminence, Venerable and Dear Brother in the Episcopate,
Dear Sisters,*

I am glad to meet you today and I wish to greet each one of you to thank you for all you do to ensure that the consecrated life is always a beacon on the Church's journey. Dear sisters, first of all I thank dear Brother Cardinal João Braz de Aviz for his words to me, and I appreciate the presence of the Secretary of the Congregation. The theme of your Meeting seems to me particularly important for the task entrusted to you: "The service of authority according to the Gospel". In light of this expression I would like to propose to you three simple thoughts, that I leave for your personal and communal analysis.

1. Jesus, at the Last Supper, turns to the Apostles with these words: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). They remind us all, not only us who are priests, that vocation is always an initiative of God. It is Christ who called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continuously making an "exodus" from yourselves in order *to centre your life on Christ and on his Gospel*, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This "exodus" from ourselves means setting out on a path of adoration and service. The exodus leads us on a journey of adoring the Lord and of serving him in our brothers and sisters. To adore and to serve: two attitudes that cannot be separated, but must always go hand in hand. To adore the Lord and to serve others, keeping nothing for oneself: this is the "self-emptying" of whoever exercises authority. May you live and always remember the centrality of Christ, the evangelical identity of the consecrated life. Help your communities to live the "exodus" from the self on a journey of adoration and service, above

all through the three pillars of your life.

Obedience as listening to the will of God, in the interior movement of the Holy Spirit authenticated by the Church, accepting that obedience also passes through human mediation. Remember that the relationship between authority and obedience fits into the broader context of the mystery of the Church and constitutes a special realization of her role as mediator (cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, n. 12).

Poverty as overcoming every kind of selfishness, in the logic of the Gospel which teaches us to trust in God's Providence. Poverty as a sign for the entire Church that it is not we who build the Kingdom of God. It is not human means that make it grow, but it is primarily the power and the grace of the Lord, working through our weakness. "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*", the Apostle to the Gentiles tells us (2 Cor 12:9). A poverty teaches solidarity, sharing and charity, and is also expressed in moderation and joy in the essential, to put us on guard against material idols that obscure the real meaning of life. A poverty learned with the humble, the poor, the sick and all those who are on the existential outskirts of life. A theoretical poverty is no use to us. Poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ, in the humble, in the poor, in the sick and in children.

Then there is *chastity*, as a precious charism that broadens the freedom of our gift to God and to others, with tenderness, mercy, closeness to Christ. Chastity for the Kingdom of Heaven shows how the emotions have their place in mature freedom and become a sign of the world to come, to make God's primacy shine out ever brighter. But, please, let it be a "fruitful" chastity which generates spiritual children in the Church. The consecrated woman is a mother, she must be a mother, not a "spinster"! Excuse me for speaking like this, but motherhood in the consecrated life is important, this fruitfulness! May this joy of spiritual fecundity motivate your life; be mothers, as a figure of Mary, Mother, and of Mother Church. It is impossible to understand Mary without her motherhood; it is impossible to understand the Church apart from her motherhood and you are icons of Mary and the Church.

2. A second element I would like to underline in the exercise of authority is *service*: we must never forget that true power, at any level, is service, whose bright summit is upon the Cross. [Benedict XVI](#), with great wisdom, often reminded the Church that although man frequently equates authority with control, dominion, success, for God authority is always synonymous with service, humility, love; it means entering the logic of Jesus who kneels to wash the Apostles' feet (cf. [Angelus, 29 January 2012](#)), and says to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.... It shall not be so among you", which is precisely the theme of your meeting, 'it shall not be so among you', "but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27). Let us think of the damage done to the People of God by men and women of the Church who are careerists, climbers, who "use" the

People, the Church, our brothers and sisters — those they should be serving — as a springboard for their own ends and personal ambitions. These people do the Church great harm.

May you always know how to exercise authority by accompanying, understanding, helping and loving; by embracing every man and every woman, especially people who feel alone, excluded, barren, on the existential margins of the human heart. Let us keep our gaze fixed on the Cross: there is found any authority in the Church, where the One who is the Lord becomes a servant to the point of the total gift of himself.

3. Lastly, *ecclesiality* as one of the constitutive dimensions of the consecrated life. It is a dimension that must be constantly reclaimed and deepened in life. Your vocation is a fundamental charism for the journey of the Church, and it is impossible for a consecrated man or woman not to “think” with the Church. “Thinking” with the Church begot us at Baptism; “thinking” with the Church finds one of its filial expressions in faithfulness to the Magisterium, in communion with the Pastors and the Successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome, a visible sign of unity. Proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel, for every Christian, are never an isolated act. This is important: for every Christian the proclamation of and witness to the Gospel are never an isolated act of an individual or a group. No evangelizer acts, as Paul VI recalled very well, “in virtue of a... personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 60). And *Paul VI* proceeded: It is an absurd dichotomy to think of living with Christ without the Church, of following Jesus outside his Church, of loving Jesus without loving the Church (cf. *ibid*, n. 16). Be aware of the responsibility that you have in forming your Institutes in the sound doctrine of the Church, in love for the Church and in the ecclesial spirit.

In short, the centrality of Christ and of his Gospel; authority as a service of love; “thinking” in and with Mother Church. These are the three indicators that I would like to leave with you, to which I add yet once again, my gratitude for your work, which is not always easy. What would the Church do without you? She would lack your motherhood, warmth, tenderness and motherly intuition!

Dear sisters, you may be sure that I follow you with affection. I pray for you, but please also pray for me. Please greet your communities for me, especially the sick and the young sisters. I encourage everyone to follow with *parresia* and with joy the Gospel of Christ. Be joyful, for it is beautiful to follow Jesus, it is beautiful to become a living icon of Our Lady and of our hierarchical Holy Mother Church. Thank you.