



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO ALL CONSECRATED PERSONS BELONGING
TO RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND SECULAR INSTITUTES
ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR**

"Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col 3: 3).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I INTRODUCTION

The encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* explains the meaning of the Marian Year which the whole Church has been celebrating since last Pentecost and which will continue until the coming Solemnity of the Assumption. In this period, we are seeking to follow the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, designated the *Mother of God* as the one who "precedes" the People of God in the pilgrimage of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ.⁽¹⁾ Because of this fact, *the whole Church finds a perfect "model" in Mary*. What the Council, following the tradition of the Fathers, affirms about the Church as the universal community of the People of God has to be meditated upon by those who together make up this same community, in the light of the vocation of each individual.

Certainly many of you, dear brothers and sisters, are trying during the Marian Year to renew your awareness of the link *between the Mother of God and your own specific vocation in the Church*. The present Letter which I am addressing to you as part of this Year is meant to help you in your meditations on this subject. In doing so I also wish to refer to the considerations already prepared by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.⁽²⁾ At the same time, my purpose in writing is to express *the love which the Church has for you*, for your vocation, for the mission you carry out in the midst of the People of God, in many different places and different ways. All this is a great gift for the Church. Since the Mother of God is constantly present in the life of the Church by reason of the part that she has in the mystery of Christ, your vocation and service are like a reflection of her presence. So we have to ask ourselves what relationship exists between this "model" and the vocation of the consecrated persons who in the various Orders, Congregations and Institutes strive to live their gift of self to Christ.

II TOGETHER WITH MARY

LET US MEDITATE

UPON THE MYSTERY OF OUR VOCATION

At the Visitation, Elizabeth, Mary's kinswoman, called her blessed because of her faith: "*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*" (Lk 1:45).

The words spoken to Mary at the Annunciation were certainly unusual. A careful reading of Luke's text shows that the angel's words to her contain the truth about God, in a manner that already conforms to the Gospel and to the New Covenant. The Virgin of Nazareth has been *introduced into the inscrutable mystery*, which is the living God, the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In that context the Virgin's vocation to be Mother of the Messiah was revealed to her, a vocation to which she responded with her *fiat*: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Meditating on what happened at the Annunciation, we also think about *our own vocation*. A vocation always marks a sort of turning point on the path of our relationship with the living God. Before each one of you a new perspective has opened up, and a new meaning and dimension have been given to your Christian existence.

This happens with a view to the future, to the life that the individual person will live, and to that person's choice and mature decision. The moment of vocation always directly concerns a particular person, but as with the Annunciation at Nazareth it also means a certain "unveiling" of the mystery of God. Before it becomes an accomplished fact within an individual, *before taking on the form of a choice and personal decision*, a vocation refers back to another choice, a choice on the part of God, which has preceded the human choice and decision. Christ spoke of this to the Apostles during his farewell discourse: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16).

This choice invites us - as it did Mary at the Annunciation - *to discover ourselves in the depths of the eternal mystery of God who is love*. We see that when Christ chooses us, when he says to us "Follow me", then, as the *Letter to the Ephesians* proclaims, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" chooses us in him: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world. He destined us in love to be his sons and daughters... to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved". In addition, "he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ" (Eph 1:4-6, 9).

These have a universal extension: they speak *of the eternal choice of each and every one in Christ*, of the vocation to holiness which is proper to the adopted children of God. At the same time, they enable us to search the depths of the mystery of each vocation, in particular the vocation which is proper to consecrated persons. In this way each one of you, dear brothers and sisters, is able to realize how deep and supernatural is the reality which we experience when we follow Christ, as he invites us with the words "Follow me". Then the truth of Saint Paul's words, "Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), becomes real and clear for us. Our vocation is hid in the eternal mystery of God before it becomes an accomplished fact within us, before it becomes our human "yes", our choice and decision.

Together with the Virgin at the Annunciation in Nazareth, let us meditate upon the mystery of the vocation which has become our "part" in Christ and in the Church.

III TOGETHER WITH MARY

LET US MEDITATE UPON THE MYSTERY

OF OUR CONSECRATION

Saint Paul writes: "*For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God*" (Col 3:3). Let us move from the Annunciation to the Paschal Mystery. The Pauline expression "you have died" corresponds to his words in the Letter to the Romans, when he writes about the meaning of the sacrament that makes us part of Christ's life: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rm 6:3). Thus the expression *in the Letter to the Colossians* "you have died" means that "*we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*" (Rm 6:4).

From all eternity God has chosen us in his beloved Son, the Redeemer of the world. Our vocation to the grace of adoption as children of God corresponds to the eternal truth of this being "hid with Christ in God". This vocation for all Christians is realized in time by means of Baptism, which buries us in Christ's death. Baptism also marks the beginning of our being "hid with Christ in God" - a reality inscribed in the life story of a particular baptized person. By sharing sacramentally in Christ's redemptive death, we also come to be united with him in his Resurrection (cf. Rm 6:5). We share in this total "newness of life" (cf. Rm 6:4) initiated in human history by Christ, precisely through his Resurrection. This "newness of life" means in the first place being set free from the inheritance of sin, from slavery to sin (cf. Rm 6:1-11).

At the same time - and especially - it means "*consecration in the truth*" (cf. Jn 17:17), in which the perspective of union with God-life in God-is fully revealed. This is how our human life is "hid with Christ in God" in a way that is both sacramental and real. To the sacrament there corresponds the living reality of sanctifying grace, which permeates our human life through our sharing in the Trinitarian life of God.

Paul's words, especially in the *Letter to the Romans*, show that all of this "newness of life", which is first shared with us through Baptism, includes *the beginning of all the vocations* which during the course of a Christian's life will call for a choice and a conscious decision in the Church. Indeed, every vocation of a baptized person reflects some aspect of that "consecration in the truth" which Christ accomplished by his Death and Resurrection and made part of his Paschal Mystery: "*For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth*" (Jn 17:19).

A person's vocation to consecrate his or her whole life has a special relationship to Christ's own consecration for the sake of mankind. It stems from the sacramental root of Baptism, which embraces the first and fundamental consecration of the person to God. Consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels - through vows or promises - is an organic development of the beginning made at Baptism. Consecration includes the mature choice that one makes for God himself, *the spousal response to Christ's love*. When we give ourselves to him in a total and undivided way, we wish "to follow him", making a decision to observe chastity, poverty and obedience in the spirit of the evangelical counsels. We want to be like Christ in the closest possible way, shaping our lives according to the spirit of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. But above all we wish to have charity, which permeates all the elements of the consecrated life and unites them as a true "bond of perfection".(3)

All of this is included in the Pauline meaning of that "dying" which begins sacramentally at Baptism. *It is a dying with Christ which enables us to share in the fruits of his Resurrection*, like the grain of wheat which falls to the earth and "dies" for the sake of new life (cf. *Jn 12:24*). The consecration of a person through sacred bonds determines a "newness of life" which can only be realized on the basis of a "hiddenness" of everything that makes up our earthly life in Christ: our life is hid with Christ in God.

While from a human point of view a person's consecration can be compared to "losing one's life", it is also the most direct way of "finding" it. For Christ says: "He who loses his life for my sake will find it" (*Mt 10:39*). These words certainly express the radical nature of the Gospel. At the same time we cannot fail to notice how much they apply to the human being, and what a unique anthropological dimension they have. What is more fundamental for a human being - man or woman - than precisely this : finding oneself, finding oneself in Christ, since Christ is the "whole fullness" (cf. *Col 2:9*)?

These thoughts concerning the consecration of the person through the profession of the evangelical counsels keep us constantly within the sphere of the Paschal Mystery. *Together with Mary*, let us seek to be *sharers* in this death which brought forth fruits of "new life" in the Resurrection: a death like this on the Cross was infamous, and it was the death of her own Son! But precisely there, at the foot of the Cross, "where she stood, not without a divine plan",⁽⁴⁾ did not Mary realize in a new way everything that she had already heard on the day of the Annunciation? Precisely there, precisely through "the sword which pierced her soul" (cf. *Lk 2:35*), through an incomparable "kenosis of faith",⁽⁵⁾ did not Mary perceive completely the full *truth about her motherhood*? Precisely there, did she not definitively identify herself with that truth, "rediscovering her soul", the soul which, in the experience of Golgotha, she had to "lose" in the most painful way for the sake of Christ and the Gospel?

It is precisely into this complete "rediscovery" of the truth about her divine motherhood which became Mary's "part" from the moment of the Annunciation that there fit Christ's words on the Cross, the words referring to the Apostle John, referring to a man: "Behold, your son!" (cf. *Jn 19:26*).

Dear brothers and sisters: *let us constantly return*, with our vocation, with our consecration, *to the depths of the Paschal Mystery*. Let us present ourselves at Christ's Cross next to his Mother. Let us learn our vocation from her. Did not Christ himself say: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (*Mt 12:50*)?

IV TOGETHER WITH MARY LET US MEDITATE UPON YOUR SPECIFIC APOSTOLATE

The events of Easter direct us towards Pentecost, towards the day when "the Spirit of truth comes", to guide "into all the truth" (cf. *Jn 16:13*) the Apostles and the whole Church built on them as her foundation ⁽⁶⁾ in human history.

Mary brings to the Upper Room at Pentecost the "new motherhood" which became her "part" at the foot of the Cross. This motherhood is to remain in her, and at the same time it is to be transferred from her as a "model" to the whole Church, which will be revealed to the world on the day of the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. All those gathered in the Upper Room are aware that from the moment of Christ's return to the Father their life is hid with him in God. Mary

lives in this awareness more than anyone else.

God came into the world and was born of her as the "Son of Man" in order to fulfil the eternal will of the Father who "so loved the world" (cf. *Jn* 3:16). But through the Word's becoming Emmanuel (God with us), the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have also revealed still more profoundly *that the world "abides in God"* (cf. *1 Jn* 3:24). "In him we live and move and have our being" (*Acts* 17:28). God embraces the whole of creation with his creative power, which through Christ has been revealed above all as a power of love. The Incarnation of the Word, the inexpressible and indestructible sign of God's "immanence" in the world, has revealed in a new way his "transcendence". All of this has been already fulfilled and completed in the framework of the Paschal Mystery. The departure of the Son, "the first born of all creation", (*Col* 1:15), has brought about a new expectation of the one who fills all things: "Because the Spirit of the Lord has filled the world" (*Wis* 1:7).

Those who *together with Mary in the Upper Room in Jerusalem* were awaiting the day of Pentecost have already experienced the "new era". Having received the breath of the Spirit of truth they are to go out of the Upper Room in order to bear witness, in union with this Spirit, to Christ crucified and risen (cf. *Jn* 15:26-27). In doing so they are to reveal God who, as love, embraces and fills the world. They must convince everyone that together with Christ they are called to "die" in the power of his death, in order to rise to the life hid with Christ in God.

This is precisely what constitutes *the very core of the Church's apostolic mission*. Coming out of the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost, the Apostles initiated the Church, which is wholly apostolic and remains constantly in a state of mission (*in statu missionis*). In this Church each individual receives first in the Sacrament of Baptism and then in Confirmation the vocation which, in the words of the Council, is essentially a vocation to the apostolate. (7)

The Marian Year began on the Solemnity of Pentecost, so that everyone, together with Mary, might feel invited to the Upper Room, from which *the entire apostolic history of the Church from generation to generation* takes its beginning. Obviously, dear brothers and sisters, you are among those invited. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit you have built your lives and your vocation on the principle of a special consecration, a total self-giving to God. This invitation to the Upper Room at Pentecost means that you must renew and deepen your awareness of your vocation in two directions. The first consists in strengthening the apostolate contained in your consecration itself; the second consists in giving new life to the many different apostolic tasks which derive from this consecration in the context of the spirituality and goals of your Communities and Institutes, and of each of you individually.

Try to be present with Mary in the Upper Room at Pentecost. She more than anyone will bring you close to this saving vision of the truth about God and man, about God and the world, which is contained in Saint Paul's words: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God". These words contain the paradox and at the same time the very core of the Gospel message. Dear brothers and sisters, as persons consecrated to God, you have special qualities for bringing people close to this paradox and this Gospel message. You also have the special task of telling everyone - in the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection - *how much the world and the whole of creation are "in God"; how much "we live and move and exist" in him; how much this God, who is love, embraces everybody and everything; how much "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"* (*Rom* 5:5).

Christ has "*chosen you from the world*", and the world needs your calling, even though at times the world gives the impression of being indifferent to it and of attaching no importance to it. The world needs your being "hid with Christ in God", even though at times it criticizes the forms of monastic enclosure. For it is precisely through the power of this "hiddenness" that you are able, with the Apostles and the whole Church, to make your own the message of our Redeemer's Priestly Prayer : "As you (Father) did send me into the world, *so I have sent them* into the world" (*Jn 17:18*). You share in this mission, in the apostolic mission of the Church.⁽⁸⁾ You share in it in a singular way that is uniquely your own, according to your "own gift" (cf. *1 Cor 7:7*). Each one of you, men and women, shares in it, and the more you share in it the more your life "is hid with Christ in God". Herein lies the very source of your apostolate.

This fundamental "form" of the apostolate cannot *be hastily changed by being conformed to the mentality of this world* (cf. *Rm 12:2*). It is true that you often experience the fact that the world loves "its own": "If you were of the world, the world would love its own" (*Jn 15:19*). But it is Christ who has "chosen you from the world", chosen you so that "the world might be saved through him" (*Jn 3:17*). Precisely for this reason you cannot abandon your "being hid with Christ in God", since this is an indispensable condition for the world to believe in the saving power of Christ. This "hiddenness", deriving from your consecration, makes each of you a *credible and authentic* person. And this does not close the world to you but on the contrary opens it. Indeed, "the evangelical counsels", as I said to you in my Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*, "in their essential purpose aim at 'the renewal of creation': 'the world', thanks to them, is to be subjected to man and given to him in such a way that man himself may be perfectly given to God".⁽⁹⁾

Participation in the whole Church's growth in devotion to Mary, as a primary result of the Marian Year, will take different forms and expressions, according to the particular vocation of each Institute, and its fruitfulness will depend on the fidelity of each Institute to its specific gift. Therefore:

a) Institutes totally dedicated to *contemplation* "give themselves to God alone in solitude and silence, and through constant prayer and ready penance. No matter how urgent may be the needs of the active apostolate, such communities will always have a distinguished part to play in Christ's Mystical Body", as the Second Vatican Council reminds them.⁽¹⁰⁾

Thus the Church, looking to Mary in this special year of grace, feels particularly attentive to and respectful of the rich tradition of contemplative life, which men and women, in fidelity to this charism, have successfully established and fostered for the benefit of the ecclesial community and for the good of society as a whole. The Blessed Virgin had a spiritual fruitfulness so intense that it made her the Mother of the Church and of the human race. In silence and in constant attention to the Word of God, and through her intimate union with the Lord, Mary became an instrument of salvation at the side of her divine Son, Christ Jesus. Let all souls consecrated to the contemplative life therefore take comfort, since the Church and the world which she must evangelize receive much light and strength from the Lord thanks to their hidden life of prayer. And following the examples of humility, hiddenness and continual communion with God given by the Handmaid of the Lord, may they grow in love for their vocation as souls dedicated to contemplation.

b) All men and women Religious who are devoted to the *apostolic life*, to evangelization and to the works of charity and mercy, will find in Mary a model of charity towards God and man. Following this model with generous fidelity, they will respond successfully to the needs of humanity suffering from a lack of certainty, of truth and of a sense of God. It is a humanity that knows the anguish of injustice, discrimination, oppression, wars and hunger. With Mary, Religious will

share the plight of their brothers and sisters, and help the Church in her readiness to be of service for the salvation of the humanity she meets on her journey today.

c) The members of *Secular Institutes*, as they live their daily lives within the different strata of society, have in Mary an example and a help in offering the people with whom they share life in the world a sense of the harmony and beauty of a human existence which is all the greater and more joyful the more it is open to God. Members of Secular Institutes also offer the testimony of an existence lived in order to build up in goodness communities ever more worthy of the human person. They offer proof that temporal realities, lived with the power of the Gospel, can give life a to society, making it freer and more just, for the good of all the children of God, who is Lord of the universe and the Giver of every good thing. This will be the canticle which humanity, like Mary, will be able to raise to God, acknowledging him as almighty and merciful.

Through an increased resolve on your part to live your consecration to the full, taking Mary the Mother of Jesus and of the Church as the sublime model of perfect consecration to God, your evangelical witness will grow in effectiveness and lead to a greater fruitfulness of *pastoral work for vocations*.

It is true that a considerable number of Institutes today are experiencing a serious lack of vocations, and in many parts of the world the Church feels the need for more vocations to the consecrated life. In fact the Marian Year may mark a reawakening of vocations through a more trusting recourse to Mary, as to a Mother who provides for her family's needs, and also through a deepened sense of responsibility among all members of the Church for the promotion of the consecrated life in the Church.

V CONCLUSION

During the Marian Year all Christians are called to meditate, according to the mind of the Church, *upon the presence of the Virgin Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.*⁽¹¹⁾ The present Letter is meant to be an encouragement to you to meditate upon this presence in your hearts, in the personal history of your soul and your vocation, and at the same time in your Religious Communities, Orders, Congregations and Secular Institutes.

We can truly say that the Marian Year has become *the time for a unique "pilgrimage"* in the footsteps of her who "precedes" the whole People of God in the pilgrimage of faith: she precedes each individual and everyone together. This pilgrimage has many dimensions and contexts : whole nations and even continents are gathering at the Marian shrines, not to mention the fact that individual Christians have their own "interior" shrines, in which Mary is their guide along the path of faith, hope and loving union with Christ.⁽¹²⁾

The Orders, Congregations and Institutes, with their experiences, sometimes centuries old, often have their own shrines, *"places" of Mary's presence*, which are linked to their spirituality and even the history of their life and mission in the Church. These "places" recall the particular mysteries of the Virgin Mother, the qualities, the events of her life, the testimonies of the spiritual experiences of the Founders or the manifestations of their charism which has then passed to the whole community.

During this Year, try to be particularly present in these "places", in these "shrines". Look to them for new strength, for the paths to an authentic renewal of your consecrated life, to the right direction and form for your apostolate. *Seek in them your identity*, like that householder, that wise man, who "brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (cf. *Mt* 13:52). Yes ! Through Mary seek spiritual vitality, be rejuvenated with her. Pray for vocations. Finally, "do whatever he tells you", as the Virgin said at Cana in Galilee (cf. *Jn* 2:5). Mary, the Mystical Spouse of the Holy Spirit and our Mother, desires this *from you* and *for you*. Indeed, I exhort you to respond to this desire of Mary's with a community act of dedication; which is precisely "the response to the love of a Mother"⁽¹³⁾.

During this Marian Year, I too with all my heart entrust each one of you and your Communities to her, and I bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 22 May, the Solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 1988, the tenth of my Pontificate.

⁽¹⁾ Cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 58, 63.

⁽²⁾ Cf. *I Religiosi sulle orme di Maria*, Ed. Vaticana, 1987.

⁽³⁾ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 44; Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1; 6; *C.I.C.*, 573, § 1; 607, § 1; 710.

⁽⁴⁾ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

⁽⁵⁾ Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (25 March 1987), 18: AAS 79 (1987), p. 383.

⁽⁶⁾ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 19.

⁽⁷⁾ Cf. Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2.

⁽⁸⁾ Cf. *C.I.C.* 574, § 2.

⁽⁹⁾ Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum* (25 March 1984), 9: AAS 76 (1984), p. 530.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

⁽¹¹⁾ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter VIII, Nos. 52-69.

⁽¹²⁾ Cf. *ibid.* 63; 68.

⁽¹³⁾ Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (25 March 1987), 45: AAS 79 (1987), p. 423.

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