



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO RELIGIOUS MEN ON THE FEAST OF SAINT FRANCIS

Chicago

Thursday, 4 October 1979

Brothers in Christ,

1. " I thank my God whenever I think of you ; and every time I pray for you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present" (*Phil 1 :3-5*). These words of Saint Paul express my feelings this evening. It is good to be with you. And I am grateful to God for your presence in the Church and for your collaboration in proclaiming the Good News.

Brothers, Christ is the purpose and the measure of our lives. In the knowledge of Christ, your vocation took its origin; and in his love, your life is sustained. For he has called you to follow him more closely in a life consecrated through the gift of the evangelical counsels. You follow him in sacrifice and willing generosity. You follow him in joy, "singing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns, and inspired songs" (*Col 3 :16*). And you follow him in fidelity, even considering it an honor to suffer humiliation for the sake of his name (cf. *Acts 5:42*).

Your religious consecration is essentially an act of love. It is an imitation of Christ who gave himself to his Father for the salvation of the world. In Christ, the love of his Father and his love for mankind are united. And so it is with you. Your religious consecration has not only deepened your Baptismal gift of union with the Trinity, but it has also called you to greater service of the people of God. You are united more closely to the person of Christ, and you share more fully in his mission for the salvation of the world.

It is about your share in the mission of Christ that I wish to speak this evening.

2. Let me begin by reminding you of the personal qualities needed to share effectively with Christ in his mission. In the first place, you must be interiorly free, spiritually free. The freedom of which I speak is a paradox to many ; it is even misunderstood by some who are members of the Church. Nevertheless it is the fundamental human freedom, and it was won for us by Christ on the Cross. As Saint Paul said, "We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men" (*Rom 5 :6*).

This spiritual freedom which you received in Baptism you have sought to increase and strengthen through your willing acceptance of the call to follow Jesus more closely in poverty, chastity and obedience. No matter what others may contend or the world may believe, your promises to observe the evangelical counsels have not shackled your freedom : you are not less free because you are obedient; and you are not less loving because of your celibacy. On the contrary. The faithful practice of the evangelical counsels accentuates your human dignity, liberates the human heart and causes your spirit to burn with undivided love for Christ and for his brothers and sisters in the world (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1, 12).

But this freedom of an undivided heart (cf. *1 Cor 7 :32-35*) must be maintained by continual vigilance and fervent prayer. If you unite yourselves continually to Christ in prayer, you will always be free and ever more eager to share in his mission.

3. Secondly, you must center your life around the Eucharist. While you share in many ways in the passion, death and Resurrection of Christ, it is especially in the Eucharist where this is celebrated and made effective. At the Eucharist, your spirit is renewed, your mind and heart are refreshed and you will find the strength to live day by day for him who is the Redeemer of the world.

4. Thirdly, be dedicated to God's word. Remember the words of Jesus: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice" (*Lk 8 :21*). If you sincerely listen to God's word, and humbly but persistently try to put it into practice, like the seed sown in fertile soil, his word will bear fruit in your life.

5. The fourth and final element which makes effective your sharing in Christ's mission is fraternal life. Your life lived in religious community is the first concrete expression of love of neighbor. It is there that the first demands of self-sacrifice and generous service are exercised in order to build up the fraternal community. This love which unites you as brothers in community becomes in turn the force which supports you in your mission for the Church.

6. Brothers in Christ, today the universal Church honors Saint Francis of Assisi. As I think of this great saint, I am reminded of his delight in God's creation, his childlike simplicity, his poetic marriage to "Lady Poverty", his missionary zeal and his desire to share fully in the Cross of Christ.

What a splendid heritage he has handed on to those among you who are Franciscans, and to all of us.

7. Similarly, God has raised up many other men and women outstanding in holiness. These too he destined to found religious families which, each in a distinctive way, would play an important role in the mission of the Church. The key to the effectiveness of every one of these religious institutes has been their faithfulness to the original charism God had begun in their founder or foundress for the enrichment of the Church. For this reason, I repeat the words of Paul VI : "Be faithful to the spirit of your founders, to their evangelical intentions and to the example of their holiness ... It is precisely here that the dynamism proper to each religious family finds its origin" (*Evangelica Testificatio*, 11-12). And this remains a secure basis for judging what specific ecclesial activities each institute, and every individual member, should undertake in order to fulfill the mission of Christ.

8. Never forget the specific and ultimate aim of all apostolic service: to lead the men and women of our day to communion with the Most Holy Trinity. In the present age, mankind is increasingly tempted to seek security in possessions, knowledge and power. By the witness of your life consecrated to Christ in poverty, chastity and obedience, you challenge this false security. You are a living reminder that Christ alone is "the way, the truth and the life" (*Jn 14 :6*).

9. Religious brothers today are involved in a wide range of activities : teaching in Catholic schools, spreading God's word in missionary activity, responding to a variety of human needs by both your witness and your actions, and serving by prayer and sacrifice. As you go forward in your particular service, keep in mind the advice of Saint Paul: "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being. Do it for the Lord rather than for men" (*Col 3 :23*). For the measure of your effectiveness will be the degree of your love for Jesus Christ.

10. Finally, every form of apostolic service, of either an individual or a community, must be in accord with the Gospel as it is put forward by the Magisterium. For all Christian service is aimed at spreading the Gospel ; and all Christian service incorporates Gospel values.

Therefore be men of God's word: men whose hearts burn within them when they hear the word proclaimed (cf. *Lk 24 :32*) ; who shape every action according to its demands ; and who desire to see the Good News proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

Brothers, your presence in the Church and your collaboration in promoting the Gospel are an encouragement and joy to me in my role as Pastor of the whole Church. May God give each of you long life. May he call many others to follow Christ in the religious life. And may the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and model of consecrated life, obtain for you the joy and consolation of Christ, her son.

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