



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO CISTERCIAN ABBESSES**

Friday, 25 September 1998

Dear Abbesses of the Cistercian Order,

1. I am particularly pleased to address you today on the occasion of your second assembly which concludes an essential stage in the process undertaken by the Cistercian Order to enable the feminine branch to share fully in the Order's structures of responsibility and communion.

In a letter sent to the Abbot General, Dom Mauro Esteva, during the last General Chapter, I expressed the wish that your deliberations would take advantage of the nuns' contribution to carrying out the Cistercian mission in the Church and in the world (cf. *Address to Capitulars of the Cistercian Order*, 8 September 1995; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 4 October 1995, p. 3). I am pleased to see that this objective has been successfully achieved.

It has been a careful process, preceded by deep reflection and supported by what I wrote in the Apostolic Letter on the dignity and vocation of women, published for the Marian Year of 1988. In fact, I noted in the document that "the dignity and the vocation of women — a subject of constant human and Christian reflection — have gained exceptional prominence in recent years" (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 1).

2. For some time now your order has undertaken a journey aimed at better defining its characteristic features and juridical identity, with the participation of the nuns as well in its structures of responsibility and communion.

This process has also included the delicate question of the nuns' co-operation in exercising the power of governance within the order itself. This process was fundamentally motivated by the "*accomodata renovatio*" of religious life desired by the Second Vatican Council in the Decree *Perfectae caritatis* (cf. n. 1). While considering the renewal and adaptation of structures as two inseparable aspects of the same reality, the Cistercian Order assigned a pre-eminence to renewal, giving it an inspirational and directional role in the process of adaptation, making sure, however, that it was motivated by

true spiritual renewal.

The commitment to return to the sources, called for by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 2), supported your order in studying its own identity, spurring it to a sincere conversion of heart and mind. This examination then enabled you to find new solutions for more adequately expressing the nuns' presence in your order and their more direct participation in its life and affairs.

3. The progress achieved follows this pattern, finding its basis in the Declaration of the order's General Chapter held in 1968-69 on the principal elements of Cistercian life today. The fraternal meeting stated at the time that "Cistercians nuns do not constitute a 'second order' alongside the 'first', that of the monks, but are an integral part of the same Cistercian Order. Thus there is no doubt that the nuns' participation in decisions concerning not only their own life but that of their congregation or the entire order must be promoted, however cautiously, but constantly and effectively" (n. 78).

This same basic document of your family clearly expresses what the sources of your life are: the Gospel and the Church's Magisterium, the monastic tradition, the Rule of St Benedict, the Cistercian traditions, active participation in the life of the Church and of society, the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. nn. 3-10).

Your order has moved "cautiously but constantly", in accordance with those deliberations. Thanks also to the collaboration of the *Commissio pro monialibus* and the discreet but effective service of the General Curia, the Cistercians, over a span of 30 years, have "effectively" promoted the participation of the feminine branch in the structures of responsibility and communion.

4. Today, with the nuns' participation in the Abbot General's Council, in the order's Synod, in a single General Chapter and in other forms of collaboration and service within your family, the dignity of women and expressions of the "feminine genius" can be acknowledged, appreciated and made fruitful in the Cistercian Order for the glory of God and the common benefit of the Church and of humanity, especially in today's circumstances.

It is certainly right to apply to you, dear cloistered sisters, what the Second Vatican Council said in addressing women: "The hour is coming, in fact it has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with the spirit of the Gospel can do much to aid mankind in not falling" (*Message to Women*).

As the Cistercian Order is preparing with the Church to cross the threshold of the third millennium, the opportunities acknowledged and entrusted to you, dear sisters, really open a new era in which you can play a leading role in the life and history of your religious family, which this year is celebrating the ninth centenary of the foundation of the monastery of Cîteaux, from which it arose.

Like your fathers, the founders of the *Novum Monasterium* of which you, too, are disciples and heirs, dear sisters, do not be afraid to undertake this journey of commitment and collaboration to fully live your vocation. Continue to seek constantly and solely the will of God, who has called you and placed you in the school of his service, the school of love.

Draw from the sources of your own religious community, always letting yourselves be guided by the Spirit of God as you participate in the order's structures of responsibility and communion.

5. As I offer you my fervent wishes that the progress made in appreciating the value of women's dignity and the "feminine genius" may continue according to the Spirit of Christ, I turn my thoughts to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the Woman *par excellence*, called by the Father to take part in his saving plan, co-operating in a completely unique way in the work of Redemption.

To her, tenderly venerated by St Bernard, I entrust those of you present here, your sisters and the entire Cistercian Order, which has been hers since the beginning. With these sentiments, I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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