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Audience with the Theatine Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

This morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Theatine Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, commemorating the death of their founder, the Venerable Orsola Benincasa, 400 years ago.

The following is the Pope's address to the religious sisters present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters!

I welcome you and I rejoice to be able to do so while you are celebrating the fourth centenary of the return to the house of the Father of your founder, the Venerable Orsola Benincasa. I thank you for all the good you do in the Church and where you work for the Kingdom of God: America, Africa and Europe. With you I also greet the Theatine Fathers who accompany you. You know that we Jesuits have something of a bad history with the Theatines... We clashed in the time of Paul IV, a long time ago. Now we are friends. You are particularly attached to them since Mother Orsola, just before she died, entrusted her work and her Rules to the Theatine Clerics Regular, since she held them in great esteem.

Orsola Benincasa was a contemplative woman, this I would like to highlight: contemplation. Like the prophet Jeremiah, she too felt seduced by the Lord and allowed herself to be seduced (cf. *Jer* 20: 7). Throughout her life she sought full conformity to the crucified Christ, also through mystical experiences. She loved the Eucharist, and made this Sacrament the centre and nourishment of her life. Rooted in Christ and attracted by the light of the Immaculate Conception, she has left a charism that is inseparably Christocentric and Marian; and, as a testament, to live "without any rule other than love". And this is not easy! Starting from this centrality of Christ in her life, she was able to grasp the needs of people, especially the young, living for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.

Your daily life of prayer rests on this spiritual structure, where Christ is the only highest good. It is a prayer that, far from separating you from the world and its needs, leads you to love the world as the Lord loves it and wants it. In a particular way, it leads you to dedicate yourselves to the education and formation of the new generations, attentive to their human development and their growth in faith; this without neglecting your presence close to the suffering people, in whom you recognize the crucified Jesus. In this way the Lord calls you to come out of yourself and to go to the existential peripheries, with freedom of heart. You find life by giving life, find hope by giving hope, and find your reason for being in the Church and in the world, by loving and living always according to the logic of giving, the logic of the Gospel.

I encourage you to be, following the example of your founder, teachers of the experiential knowledge of God. Today's world needs witnesses of transcendence, of people who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. *Mt* 5: 13-14), let them be leaven in the dough (cf. *Mt* 13: 33). Do not deprive the men and women of today of this nourishment, as necessary as the material bread. Together with people in material poverty, there are many who have lost the meaning of life, hearts parched and thirsty for good bread and living water, that even without realizing it, are waiting to meet Jesus. There are also hearts that hunger and thirst. Go to assuage that hunger, that thirst, where there is not the capacity to be satiated with that illusion, the illusion of lights that do not give life, of lights that do not illuminate. And also to you, as to the disciples, Jesus says today: give them something to drink and to eat (cf. *Mk* 6:37), that bread that satiates, the water that slakes thirst. If you are open to the action of the Spirit, He will guide you to respond creatively to the cry of the poor and of the many who hunger and thirst for God. The Spirit Himself will help you to ask: what do the Lord and our brethren ask of us? It will help you to stay awake, vigilant as sentinels of the Lord, so that the light and the warmth of God's love can reach the people you meet and reawaken hope in them.

The world also needs your testimony of fraternal life in community. Fraternal life is not easy, it is not easy. There is always something to argue about, to speak badly about. It is true, isn't it? Always, always. It is ugly to speak badly in the family. It is ugly, but there is a cure, a very good medicine for not gossiping: biting your tongue. It will swell up, but it will not speak badly. Try it! So, spirituality of communion, the spirituality of living together, so that the community journey becomes a "holy pilgrimage" (see Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 87). Banishing criticism, gossip, rivalries, and practicing instead welcome and mutual attention, the sharing of material goods, respect for the most fragile people (cf. Letter to all consecrated persons, 21 November 2014, II, 3). This is very important: take care of the elderly. They are the memory of the congregation. Do not leave them there in the infirmary, abandoned, no. Go to them, let them speak – they are the memory – caress them. Do not forget the elderly. May your founder's legacy always resound in your hearts: "Love one another. Respect each other. May each one seek the good of the other". This is a good path to holiness! In this way, you will incarnate the commandment of love wherever you live and work: in schools, in parishes, in nursing homes, in every place where the Gospel of Christ is brought with life and words. In this way you always will be constructors of communion within your Institute and beyond it (cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Consecrated Life*, 51).

May Mary Immaculate, whom you venerate as a model and patroness, obtain for you the grace of being passionate women of Christ and of humanity; to continually set out on a journey to serve those most in need, as she did in the Visitation (cf. *Lk* 1: 39); and to know how to be where your presence is necessary as disciples of the Lord and consecrated women (cf. *Acts* 1: 14).

For all this, I cordially impart my blessing. And you, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
