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Message of the Holy Father to the participants in the 25th General Assembly of CONFER (Spanish Conference of Men and Women Religious)

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father to the participants in the 25th General Assembly of CONFER (Spanish Conference of Men and Women Religious), taking place in Madrid from 13 to 15 November, on the theme: "I will give you a future full of hope".

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am happy to greet you on the occasion of your General Assembly, in which you celebrate twenty-five years of the union of the male and female CONFERS. These years of close collaboration between men and women religious have undoubtedly been fruitful. Links of fraternity, reciprocity and communion have been created, both in the tasks of the CONFER and through solidarity and assistance between consecrated men and women in many moments and circumstances.

I invite you to look confidently to the future of consecrated life in Spain, in accordance with the theme chosen for this Assembly: "I will give you a future full of hope" (cf. *Jer 29: 11*).

The Lord gives us hope with His constant messages of love and with His surprises, which can sometimes leave us disoriented, but help us to leave behind our mental and spiritual limitations. His presence is that of tenderness, which accompanies us and involves us. That is why He says: "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you ... and I will restore your fortunes" (*Jer 29,11-14*). The path followed by CONFER has a fruitful history, full of examples of dedication, and of hidden and silent holiness. No effort should be spared in serving and encouraging Spanish consecrated life, so that it lacks neither grateful memory nor an outlook towards the future, as there is no doubt that the state of religious life, without hiding uncertainties and worries, is full of opportunities

and also of the enthusiasm, passion and awareness that the consecrated life today makes one feel.

The Church needs us to be prophets, that is, men and women of hope. Rightly, one of the objectives of the year of consecrated life encouraged us to “embrace the future with hope”. We know the difficulties that religious life faces today, such as the diminution of vocations and the aging of its members, economic problems and the challenge of internationality and globalization, the snares of relativism, marginalization and social irrelevance; but in these circumstances we raise our hope to the Lord, the only One who can aid and save us (cf. *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated Persons on the occasion of the year of consecrated life*, 21 November 2014, 3). This hope leads us to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers to His harvest (*Mt* 9: 38), and to work in the evangelization of young people so that they may open themselves to the call of the Lord. This is a great challenge: to be with young people so as to spread with them the joy of the Gospel and of belonging to Christ. Bold men and women religious are needed, able to open new paths and an approach to the vocational question as a fundamental Christian option. Each section of history is God’s time, also ours, because His Spirit blows where He wants, as He wants and when He wants (*Jn* 3: 8). Any moment and circumstance can be transformed into a “kairós”; one must be attentive to recognize it and live it as such.

Mary, our Mother, who “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (*Lk* 2: 19), will help us contemplate and keep everything that we do not understand at the present moment, welcoming it, waiting for a future that, although different, it will continue to be fruitful for consecrated life.

Consecrated life journeys in holiness. As men and women religious we must become obsessed, worn out and tired through living the works of mercy, which are the programme of our life (see Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 107). It is not about being heroes or presenting ourselves to others as models, but rather about being with those who suffer, accompanying, looking for other alternative ways, aware of our poverty, but also with the trust placed in the Lord and in His boundless love. Hence the need to listen again to the call to live with the Church and in the Church, leaving behind our mentality and comforts, to be close to the human situations of suffering and despair that await the light of the Gospel. The challenges that present themselves to religious life today are many. The reality that we have to live requires answers and bold decisions in the face of these challenges. Times have changed and our answers must be different. I encourage you to give an answer, both to structural situations that require new forms of organization, and to the need to go out and look for new presences to be faithful to the Gospel and to be channels of God’s love. The life of prayer, the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, community discernment, and dialogue with the bishop must be a priority when making decisions. We have to live with humble audacity, looking to the future and in listening attitude of the Spirit; with Him we can be prophets of hope.

May the Lord bless you and the Holy Virgin accompany you and help you discover the path to follow. And please, do not forget to pray for me.

Vatican City, 5 November 2018
