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Audience with the Delegations of Missionary Institutes of Italian Foundation

At midday today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the delegations of missionary institutes of Italian foundation.

The following is the Pope's address to those present during the Audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I am happy to meet you, and I am grateful to you for having asked for this audience together, as religious institutes specifically founded in Italy as missionaries. I thank you for your greeting and introduction. I consider it providential that we meet on the eve of the Extraordinary Missionary Month, because it allows us to reflect together on the mission and, above all, to invoke the grace of God on it.

First of all, I feel the need to express gratitude to your Founders. In a troubled historical period - from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century - the foundation of your religious families, with their generous openness to the world, was a sign of courage and trust in the Lord. When everything seemed to lead to the preservation of what already existed, your Founders – though other figures could be added, such as Saint Cabrini – were on the contrary the protagonists of a new momentum towards the other and those who were distant. From conservation to momentum.

The missionary lives the courage of the Gospel without too much calculation, sometimes going beyond common sense because he or she is driven by the trust placed exclusively in Jesus. There is a mystique of the mission, a thirst for communion with Christ through witness, which your Founders have experienced, and which has led them to give themselves totally. It is necessary to rediscover this mysticism in all its fascinating beauty, because it retains its extraordinary power for all time. As Saint Paul says: "For the love of Christ controls us; because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died" (2 Cor 5: 14).

The Virgin Mary is also our teacher: she who, immediately after having conceived Jesus, left in haste to go and help her cousin; and so she brought Jesus into that house, into that family, and at the same time she brought Him to the people of Israel and brought Him into the world. Mary leaves because she is inhabited by Christ and His Spirit. That is why you also leave, because you are inhabited by Christ and His Spirit. There is no other reason but the Risen Christ to decide to leave, to leave your loved ones, your country, your friends, your culture. It is beautiful to hear in your words this passion for Christ and for His Kingdom; as in the memorable speech of Paul VI in Manila which you mention in your Document.

Then, on this basis, your confirmation of your dedication to the *missio ad gentes* is well founded. I thank you for your clear witness to this vocation of yours, which is indivisibly ecclesial and charismatic. Ecclesial at heart, rooted in Baptism, and at the same time linked to the charism to which the Lord has drawn you and in which your lives have taken shape.

It struck me to hear you repeat without hesitation: “We are missionaries, and missionaries *ad gentes... ad extra... ad vitam*”. And you do not say it as a slogan – that would be dangerous! – but with the due motivations and specifications. You say it without triumphalism or a sense of challenge, indeed, in the awareness of the current crisis, it is welcomed as an opportunity for discernment, conversion, renewal.

By consecrating yourselves to the mission *ad gentes*, you are making your specific contribution to the commitment of the whole Church to evangelization. With the richness of the charisms of your Institutes - which means hearts, faces, stories and also the blood of missionaries - you interpret the message of the *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Saint Paul VI, that of the *Redemptoris missio* of Saint John Paul II, and that of the *Evangelii gaudium*. And with this hermeneutics embodied in your life and that of your communities you enrich the feeling and the journey of the Church.

You help to keep alive in the people of God the awareness of being constitutionally “outgoing”, sent to bring to all nations the blessing of God, Who is Jesus Christ. And you also help remember that mission is not the work of individuals, of “solitary champions”, but rather it is communal, fraternal, shared. In this sense, collaboration between your Institutes is an added value: continue in this way!

Another typical contribution that you offer to the Church is to show that the mission is not “one-way” – from Europe to the rest of the world: these are the traces of old colonialism – but lives on an interchange, which is now evident but must be grasped as a value, a sign of the times. Today the majority of priestly and religious vocations arise in territories that previously only received missionaries. This fact, on the one hand, increases in us the sense of gratitude towards the holy evangelizers who have sown with great sacrifices in those lands; and on the other hand it constitutes a challenge for the Churches and for the Institutes: a challenge for communion and for formation. But it is a challenge to be accepted without fear, with confidence in the Holy Spirit Who is the Master in harmonizing differences. I remember, in our 32nd General Congregation – I am speaking of 1974 – I remember that there was talk of the Society of Jesus in several places, and someone said: “Perhaps we will have an Indian or African Superior General...”. At that time it was strange. All [the superiors] had to be European. And today how many, how many religious Congregations have superiors and superior generals who come from those lands! Today we also have a Latin American, as Superior General. The thing has been reversed: what in 1974 was a utopia, today is reality.

Dear brothers and sisters, leaving your beloved country is a sign that restores strength and courage to your communities of origin. With your departure you continue to say: with Christ there is no boredom, tiredness or sadness, because He is the continuous novelty of our life. The missionary needs the joy of the Gospel: without this one does not become a mission, one proclaims a Gospel that does not attract. And the core of the mission is this attraction of Christ: it is the only one that attracts. The men and women of today, in Italy and in the world, need to see people who have in their hearts the joy of the Risen One, who have been attracted by the Lord. This witness, visible in dialogue, in mutual charity, in mutual acceptance and sharing, declares the beauty of the Gospel, attracts to the joy of believing in Jesus and anchoring oneself in Him. It is Jesus Himself Who attracts us. It is Him! May this joy, this beauty of the Gospel always find space in your hearts, in your gestures, in your words, in the way you live relationships.

The proclamation of the beauty, joy and novelty of the Gospel is explicit and implicit; it touches all the situations of the human adventure. Do not be afraid to bear witness to Jesus even where it is uncomfortable or inconvenient. Witness Him with your whole life, not with entrepreneurial methods that respond more to a spirit of proselytism than to a true evangelization. Do not forget that the protagonist of evangelization is the Holy Spirit. He, the Lord, will know how to find ways to make that little seed, which is His name pronounced in love by a missionary, take root and transform little by little into a plant of solid faith in the shadow of which many will be able to rest. The buried seed... I think of something that Cardinal Hummes told me: he is “retired” but he is the person in charge of the Brazilian Episcopate for the whole region of the Amazon, and when he goes to a village, to a town, one of the first things he does is go to the cemetery, to see the graves of the missionaries. He told me this and then added: “All of them deserve to be canonized, for the seed they have sown there”. A good thought.

The Italian Church also needs you, your witness, your enthusiasm and your courage in taking new paths to proclaim the Gospel. She needs to realize that the distant *gentes* have now come to live in our countries, they are the strangers next door. Even the Italians next door, our fellow citizens. It is necessary to rediscover the fascinating adventure of becoming close to one another, of becoming friends, of welcoming one another and of helping one another. This attitude concerns everyone: priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful. The theme for the extraordinary missionary October 2019 is “Baptized and sent”, chosen precisely to remind us that the intrinsic nature of the Church is missionary. The Church exists on the road; on the couch there is no Church.

May your Institutes collaborate ever more with the particular Churches “with the aim of fostering an increased awareness of the *missio ad gentes* and taking up again with renewed fervour the missionary transformation of the Church’s life and pastoral activity” (*Letter for the convocation of the Extraordinary Missionary Month 2019*). I accompany you with my prayer and from my heart I bless you. And you, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
