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Audience with participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Servants of Mary

Impromptu address of the Holy Father

Prepared address of the Holy Father

The Holy Father Francis today received in audience in the Vatican the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Servants of Mary, taking place from 7 to 27 October 2019 in the *Casa Divin Maestro* in Ariccia.

After handing them the address prepared for the event, the Pope gave an impromptu address to the participants in the meeting.

The following is the impromptu address delivered by the Holy Father, and the address prepared for the circumstance and handed to those present:

Impromptu address of the Holy Father

Excuse me if I remain seated, as I am not going to read the written speech. I will give it to you [the Superior], because since yesterday, when I saw that I would meet you today, my memory turned to the year 1957, to the Seminary of Villa Devoto [in Buenos Aires]. At that time there were two of you who were studying there. I don't know if one of you is here. Then I lost sight of them. The year 1957: 62 years ago. You grow old in life! They told me the story of Alessio Falconieri and the other six, and I was enthusiastic about this as an example of holiness. To see rich men, merchants - indeed, Florentines [laughs] – who were able to make this decision for Our Lady. It is the word “servant”, “service”, in the service of Our Lady. This way of service, of humiliation, of the humble journey. And I was so enthusiastic that, throughout my life, from that moment on, I celebrate with particular love the 17th of February [liturgical memory of the Seven Founders of the Servants of Mary], even with Mass. I was

struck by that testimony, and this is what I want to tell you.

So, today, you “staked one and earned two”: take with you this written speech, and also what I will tell you now. I will give it to you so that you may give it to everyone.

The phrase “Servants of Mary” makes me think of something that Saint Ignatius [of Loyola, in the Exercises] puts in his meditation on the birth of Jesus. He says: “I must be present – in meditation – as *a servant* who helps Our Lady to do what she must Bethlehem, in the crib”. Servants of Our Lady. In this there is a great relationship with what Our Lady does. She enables Jesus to be born, she raises Him grow, and then she makes the Church grow. And those great merchants – because they had money, they were not without it – in the end left everything to become servants, servants of Our Lady, because they understood the role of Our Lady in redemption, a role that so often the so-called “modern” theologies forget. But Our Lady brought us Jesus! And your Founders understood this, they understood and they became servants. They went to pray [on Mount Senario]; and then they did all their work.

The word “service” is also the one Our Lady says to the Angel: “I am the servant, I am here to serve”. They imitate Our Lady in this service. And they make themselves her servants, so that she may lead them precisely in this way of service. The first word: service. You are servants. Never forget this. You are not masters. Serve. “Look at that other one...”. But you are the servant of the other. “But that bishop...”. You are the servant of that bishop. “But the Church...”. You are a servant of the Church. “And the people...”. You are the servant of the people. Never stray from that founding grace that is being a servant. A servant by choice. The other Saint Alexius [of Rome] had also become a beggar, he lived under the stairs. Your Alessio made a choice: he was a servant by choice, in order to become a saint. This is precisely the path taken by the Word: “He emptied Himself. ...He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (cf. *Phil 2: 7-8*). It is the way of service. Yes, but even more: servitude. “Does this mean that I must be a slave?” Yes. “That I must also renounce certain freedoms in order to become a servant?”. Yes, I do. Meditate on this name of yours: servants of Our Lady, the handmaid of the Lord, who as Lord became a servant, Jesus.

This is the first idea that comes to mind, but still thinking of the year 1957, when these two brothers of yours spoke to me about the spirituality of the congregation. It has remained impressed on me.

And service is a service of *hope*. If there is one person who does not seem to have reasons for human hope, it is Our Lady, with those strange things that happened in her life: from the birth of Jesus, then persecution and flight, then the return, and seeing the son growing in contradictions... But she looked forward: she was the Lady of hope. Today, we are all experts in the lack of hope. We always find loopholes to have no hope, when we begin to complain about the world: “But this... and these calamities, the things that happen...”. Bad things happen, but no worse than those which happened in Our Lady’s time. It is the same. The world changes its forms, but the slavery, wars and cruelty of that time are those of today. We must sow hope, look beyond. Our Lady also teaches us to sow hope. Think of Calvary; think of Pentecost when she prayed with her disciples. She is Our Lady of sorrows, and in sorrow, in poverty, in spoliation, hope comes, she sees herself clearly. When one is well, it is not so easy to express hope, but when there are difficulties, hope comes. And she [Mary] is a teacher, she has taught us so much. She has taught us so much.

Then, the other word [of the theme of your Chapter]: “in a changing world”. *Change*. Time is always changing. We are always tempted to stop time, to divide it, to dominate it... As one here said, at the Synod for the Amazon: “You Europeans have the clock, we [natives] have time”. Placing a stake on time. Yes, things change, but time is God’s. And do not close yourself off in our times, which are too human, too human. To go ahead according to God’s time: He knows.

To be *servants* of Our Lady, of *hope*, in a time that *changes*, in change, is only possible through prayer. Your seven Founders first of all withdrew to pray. And they prayed well! I recommend that you do not neglect prayer. It is the foundation of your life. Prayer is also like begging Our Lady for alms: “Help me to be a faithful servant”. This prayer is fruitful and will give you vocations and many things. Prayer is the instrument that works miracles. It works miracles. But there are many unbelievers regarding the power of prayer. And I am tempted to say – it is a

temptation but I say it myself – that very often we are the most incredulous: bishops, priests, who do not believe in the miracle of prayer. We do not believe what Jesus tells us: “Ask and you will receive”. We don't believe in our Father Who has such strength.

That's what I wish to tell you, in this way, fraternally. Remembering that experience in 1957 and also on 17 February every year, when I look at those good men who gave this sign; they did so through inspiration of the Lord, but they were faithful to that inspiration. This shows you the way to go. The other things I say there, in the written address.

A final reference, finally, to the spirit... but not to the Holy Spirit! The beautiful gesture of bringing me a bit of spirit to lift the heart! [wine produced on the farm of the Servants of Mary in Tuscany] Thank you, thank you so much! And pray for me, as I am in need, so that I too may be something of a servant to Our Lady in a changing time, a servant of hope. Thank you!

Prepared address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers,

You are now at the end of your 214th General Chapter, and you wished to meet the Successor of Peter to be confirmed in faith and encouraged in your commitment to witness and to service. I greet you all with affection, and I thank the Prior General for his words.

The Order of the Servants of Mary had its origins and its first development in thirteenth-century Florence, a city as lively as it was bellicose. It was born of a group of men: the Seven Holy Founders, dedicated to trade and volunteering. However, your religious family places the germinal core of its charism in its special consecration to the Virgin Mary, recognized as the true “foundress”. You live your personal consecration to Mary as a daily commitment to assimilate her style, as it is handed down by the Sacred Scripture. The theological-pastoral study of the figure of Mary of Nazareth also becomes for you an integral part of a vocation, which you transmit in particular through teaching in the “Marianum” Pontifical Theological Faculty.

Another area in which you bear witness to the Gospel, inspired by the Blessed Virgin, is that of the apostolate and mission. Here you strive to imitate Mary, inspired in particular by four of her attitudes. When after the Annunciation she goes to help Elizabeth; when at Cana in Galilee she obtains from Jesus the sign of water changed into wine for the joy of the newlyweds; when she remains full of faith and pain at the foot of Jesus' cross; and finally when she prays in the Upper Room with the Apostles awaiting the Holy Spirit. Starting from these four Marian “moments”, you are always called to deepen your understanding of the founding charism in order to make it present, so that it may respond with hope to the challenges that the contemporary world is launching for the Church and also for your Order. The theme that guided your General Chapter, “Servants of Hope in a Changing World”, expresses precisely this intention, which becomes a roadmap and a mission for the coming years.

From this perspective, I would like to recall an important aspect of your history, which can be paradigmatic. The Seven Holy Founders knew how to live *the mountain* and *the city*. Indeed, from Florence they climbed Mount Senario, where they had the profound experience of the encounter with the One who is Hope, Jesus Christ. They then descended again from the mountain, establishing their home in Cafaggio, immediately outside the walls of Florence, on the outskirts of the city, to commit themselves in their daily life, in witness and in service to society and the Church.

It may be good to re-read, in the light of the Gospel account of the Transfiguration (cf. *Lk* 9: 28-36), this journey of your Founders. Strengthened by the experience of God, they descend more deeply into history, renewed inwardly. In this way they can live the Gospel, responding to the needs of the people, of brothers and sisters who

ask to be welcomed, supported, accompanied and helped throughout their lives. Going back to their unique human and vocational experience, you too increasingly become men of hope, capable of dispelling the fears that sometimes torment the heart, even in a religious community. I am thinking, for example, of the scarcity of vocations in certain parts of the world; as well as of the difficulty of being faithful to Jesus and to the Gospel in certain community or social contexts. The Lord, He alone, allows you to take everywhere, through the holiness of life, a presence of hope and an outlook of trust, identifying and valuing the many emerging buds of positivity. Let us think of vocations in the new territories where you are present. I urge you to enjoy the beauty and cultural and spiritual novelty of the many peoples to whom you have been sent to proclaim the Gospel.

To be men of hope means to cultivate dialogue, communion and fraternity, which are the profiles of holiness. Indeed, sanctification “is a journey in community, side by side with others. We see this in some holy communities” (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 141).

Being men of hope means finding the courage to face some everyday challenges. I think, for example, of that of using in a responsible way the means of communication, which convey positive news, but which can also destroy the dignity of people, weaken spiritual momentum, and harm fraternal life. It is a matter of educating oneself in an evangelical use of these instruments. Another challenge to be taken on and managed is that of multiculturalism, which in fact you have addressed in this Chapter. There is no doubt that Catholic religious communities have become “laboratories” in this sense, certainly not without problems and yet offering to all a clear sign of the Kingdom of God, to which all peoples are invited, through the one Gospel of salvation. It is not easy to experience human differences in harmony, but it is possible, and a reason for joy if we make room for the Holy Spirit, who in this, as they say, “goes to the wedding”.

May your communities also be a sign of universal brotherhood, schools of welcome and integration, places of openness and relationality. With this witness you will help to keep away divisions and foreclosures, prejudices of superiority or inferiority, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, walls of separation. And your communities will be so to the extent that you are men of communion, fraternity and unity, as were your Founders.

May the Virgin Mary always safeguard in you the joy of the Gospel. I cordially bless you and all the brothers of the Order, as well as the communities entrusted to you. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.
