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Audience with the participants in the General Assembly of the Focolare Movement

At 12.10 today, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Assembly of the Focolare Movement, taking place online from 24 January to 7 February 2021.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence,

Dear brothers and sisters!

I am glad to welcome you at the end of your General Assembly, in which you discussed important issues and chose your new leaders. I thank the outgoing president, Maria Voce, and the newly elected president, Margaret Karam, for their kind words. To the former we say a big "thank you"; to the latter heartfelt good wishes, which we extend to the co-president and the councillors. We are grateful to Cardinal Kevin Farrell and to Mrs Linda Ghisoni for being with us. I greet all of you here present and those who are streaming in; and I extend my greeting to all the members of the Work of Mary, which you represent. In order to encourage you on your journey, I would like to offer you some reflections, which I will divide into three points: the post-founder period; the importance of crises; and living spirituality with coherence and realism.

The post-founder period. Twelve years after Chiara Lubich left for Heaven, you are called to overcome the natural bewilderment and also a decrease in numbers, in order to continue to be a living expression of the founding charism. As we know, this requires a dynamic fidelity, capable of interpreting the signs and needs of the times and responding to the new demands of humanity. Every charism is creative, it is not a statue in a museum, no, it is creative. It is a question of remaining faithful to the original source, striving to rethink it and express it in dialogue with the new social and cultural situations. It is firmly rooted, but the tree grows in dialogue with reality. This task of updating is all the more fruitful the more it is carried out by harmonising creativity,

wisdom, sensitivity to all and fidelity to the Church. Your spirituality, characterised by dialogue and openness to different cultural, social and religious contexts, can certainly encourage this process. Openness to others, whoever they may be, must always be cultivated: the Gospel is meant for everyone, but not by proselytism, no, it is meant for everyone, it is a leaven of new humanity in every place and time.

This attitude of openness and dialogue will help you to avoid any self-absorption, which is always a sin, it is a temptation to look in the mirror. No, this is bad. Only to comb your hair in the morning and nothing more! This avoidance of all self-absorption, which never comes from the good spirit, is our hope for the whole Church: to beware of self-centredness, which always leads to defending the institution to the detriment of individuals, and which can also lead to justifying or covering up forms of abuse. We have experienced this with much pain, we have discovered it in recent years. Self-absorption prevents us from seeing mistakes and shortcomings, it hampers progress, and it prevents an open review of institutional procedures and styles of governance. Instead, it is better to be courageous and to face problems with *parrhesia* and truth, always following the indications of the Church, which is Mother, the true Mother, and responding to the demands of justice and charity. Self-celebration does no good service to the charism. No. Rather, it is a matter of welcoming each day with wonder - don't forget wonder always indicates the presence of God - the freely-given gift you have received by meeting your ideal of life and, with God's help, trying to correspond to it with faith, humility and courage, like the Virgin Mary after the Annunciation.

The second theme I would like to propose to you is the importance of crises. You cannot live without crises. Crises are a blessing, even on a natural level - the crises of a child growing up to maturity are important - and even in the life of institutions. I spoke about this at length in my recent address to the Roman Curia. There is always the temptation to turn crisis into conflict. Conflict is ugly, it can become ugly, it can divide, but crisis is an opportunity to grow. Every crisis is a call to new maturity; it is a time of the Spirit, which arouses the need to update, without becoming discouraged in the face of human complexity and its contradictions. Today there is much emphasis on the importance of resilience in the face of difficulties, that is, the ability to face them positively, drawing opportunities from them. Every crisis is an opportunity to grow. On the other hand, the spiritual crises of individuals, which involve the intimacy of the individual and the sphere of conscience, must be dealt with prudently by those who do not hold positions of governance, at all levels, within the Movement. And this has been a good rule of the Church since time immemorial - for monks, always - which applies not only to moments of crisis in people, but also in general to their accompaniment in the spiritual journey. It is that wise distinction between the external and internal forum that the experience and tradition of the Church teaches us is indispensable. In fact, the intermingling of the sphere of governance and the sphere of conscience gives rise to abuses of power and the other abuses we have witnessed, once the cauldron of these unpleasant problems has been uncovered.

Finally, the third point: living spirituality with consistency and realism. Consistency and realism. "This person is authoritative... Why is he authoritative? Because he is consistent". Very often we say this. The final aim of your charism coincides with the intention presented to the Father in His final great prayer: that "they may all be one" (*Jn 17: 21*), united, well aware that this is the work of the grace of the Triune God: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (*ibid.*). This intention demands commitment from a dual perspective: outside the Movement and within it. With regard to acting outside the Movement, I encourage you to be . And in this, the Servant of God Chiara Lubich gave many examples! - witnesses of closeness with fraternal love that overcomes every barrier and reaches every human condition. Overcome barriers, do not be afraid! It is the path of fraternal closeness, that transmits the presence of the Risen Christ to man and women of our time, starting from the poor, the last, the rejected: working together with people of good will for the promotion of justice and peace. Do not forget that closeness, nearness, was God's most authentic language. Think of that passage of Deuteronomy, when the Lord says: "What other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to Him?" That style of God, of closeness, went farther and farther until it reached that great, essential closeness: the Word incarnate, God who made Himself one with us. Do not forget: closeness is God's style, it is the most authentic language, in my opinion.

With regard to your effort within the Movement, I urge you increasingly to promote synodality, so that all members, as depositaries of the same charism, may be co-responsible for and participate in the life of the Work of Mary and its specific goals. Those who are responsible for governance are called to foster and implement

transparent consultation not only within the governing bodies, but at all levels, by virtue of that logic of communion according to which all can place their gifts and opinions at the service of others, in truth and with freedom.

Dear brothers and sisters, in imitation of Chiara Lubich, always listen to Christ's cry of abandonment on the cross, which manifests the highest measure of love. The grace that comes from it is capable of inspiring in us, weak and sinners as we are, generous and sometimes heroic responses; it is capable of transforming suffering and even tragedy into a source of light and hope for humanity. In this passing from death to life lies the heart of Christianity and also of your charism. Thank you so much for your joyful witness to the Gospel that you continue to offer to the Church and to the world. Joyful witness. It is said that the *Focolarini* always smile, they always have a smile on their face. And I remember once I heard a talk about the ignorance of God. They said to me: "But do you know that God is ignorant? There are four things that God cannot know" - "But what are they?" - "What the Jesuits think, how much money the Salesians have, how many congregations of nuns there are and what the *Focolarini* smile about". I entrust your good intentions and projects to the maternal intercession of Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church, and I bless you from my heart. And please do not forget to pray for me, for I need it. Thank you!
