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Audience with participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy (Mercedarians)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy (Mercedarians).

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters – are there any sisters? Pure machismo, Mexican style.

Thank you for the words that the Father Grand Master addressed to me on behalf of you all, and I am glad to be able to receive you here on the occasion of the general chapter of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy. The theme of the assembly, fully consonant with the Marian origin of its vocation, is the verse from the Gospel of Saint John: “Do whatever he tells you” (2:5). It is a meaningful choice: it presupposes consideration of the plan you undertake to implement from the perspective of service. The fact is that we religious can never forget that there is no following without service, or without the cross (cf. *Jn* 12: 26).

In the same way, the first request the Virgin makes of you today, as members of the General Chapter, is to listen. The current situation could be compared to the one presented in the Gospel of the wedding feast of Cana: “They have no more wine”. Many situations that we can see today in the world, in the Church, in the Order, speak to us of this lack, they speak to us of this lack of hope, of lack of motivation, of lack of solutions. In the face of this, the Virgin asks you to listen! And you might ask me, what should we listen to? The voices that tell us about all the negative things? The voices that sell us easy solutions, elaborate programmes full of erudition, or perhaps those that propose compromise solutions? These are the temptations of a general chapter. Beware!

I believe that today Mary is telling you something else: she is asking you to let Jesus challenge your heart in a new, in an original way, and in an unexpected way. Perhaps even the servants at Cana gathered in chapter and

thought about what they could do. There were probably voices that presented the problems, others that brought feasible, if risky, solutions, and perhaps others that advised an honest dismissal of the guests, acknowledging their own inability to deal with the situation, that the wine was running out. And to conclude a wedding feast with *mate cocido* would certainly not have been the most appropriate thing to do, would it? It is possible that you have been down the path before, in the journey that led you here, with questions, projects, convictions and concerns.

Jesus does not answer these questions; he proposes something that surely no servant would have thought of, filling the jars for purification and moreover filling them with water. Even before examining the meaning of this gesture, the thing that interests to me, which I offer for your consideration, is the fact that Jesus does not tell them what they expect, but something they would never have imagined hearing. One does not go to the chapter to put oneself in the spotlight, one goes to listen with simplicity, with gratitude, with abandonment. First, to listen to God, however much he may speak to us through our brother or through circumstances.

On the other hand, the purification jars, which were certainly used at the beginning of the banquet, invite us to return to the first love, to the source, to recover the innocent and hopeful attitude of our first years of consecrated life. They also ask us to maintain the clear view of those who see the need and not the fruit they hope to obtain through their efforts. The jars that were seen to be empty must be filled again with the same anticipation with which they were filled before the banquet began. If you look closely, this is work that needs to be done, but which we do not undertake because we believe it no longer makes sense. And this is another great temptation. Does all this have any meaning? Does it have any meaning that you have come from so many places to meet? Or is it just a formality? This is the temptation. The Lord asks us this: "Begin, start over every day, in every project, do not tire, do not be discouraged".

It is something that Jesus repeats in his Gospel, when he asks Peter to cast the nets again, and he replies: "Master, we took nothing!" (*Lk 5:5*). The situation we referred to earlier may seem to us to be a long night, our work seems to be meaningless toil, if we do not perceive it as a generous response to Jesus' call, uniting us with the Church in the work of evangelizing, because the vocation of the Church is to evangelize, and seeing something interesting, that, despite everything – contradictions, problems – the net does not break (*cf. Jn 21:3*).

Let us open our heart to welcome the surprise that Jesus brings us. I do not know what it will be, and you do not know either. In the course of the chapter, you are halfway through, in the course of the chapter, things will therefore surface that some were thinking, and others will be a novelty; the Lord will bring them. John states in his Gospel that this truth is not known by the master of the table, who is amazed that at that point in the banquet the new wine is brought out; only "the servants" can know it. Therefore, listen to Mary: do not be afraid to let yourselves be surprised by this voice that invites you to fill the jars once again, to consume yourselves in practical service, simple service, in service that is useless in the table master's plans, but fundamental in recognizing a work that is not ours, but God's. And in all this, know how to be with Mary, beside Christ at the foot of the cross, in the suffering flesh of the poor man and the prisoner whom he made his own. And prisoners exist today too, as always; the geography changes, the ways change, the colour changes, but slavery is a reality that is increasingly being confirmed. Increasingly, and with more variety. Perhaps, without making a mistake, we can say that there are more slaves now than in the times in which you were founded, it is certain. And this must certainly be a new challenge to your response. The new forms of slavery, those that are disguised, those that are not known, those that although hidden, are many. Even in megalopolises like Rome, London, Paris, everywhere, there are forms of slavery that continue. Seek them out and ask the Lord: what do I do?

And thank you for what you do, look for the slaves of today, and do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
