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Audience with representatives of the Confederation of Confraternities of the Dioceses of Italy

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the representatives of the Confederation of the Confraternities of the dioceses of Italy, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I am pleased to meet you. I thank the president, Dr. Rino Bisignano, and Msgr. Michele Pennisi, national ecclesiastical assistant, as well as the members of the Governing Council of the Confederation of Confraternities of the Dioceses of Italy, the coordinators, and the regional assistants present here.

Founded in 2000, in the context of the great Jubilee, your Confederation has by now worked for more than twenty years to welcome, support and coordinate the very rich and variegated presence of the Confraternities in the dioceses of Italy. Now you are about to celebrate, in two years' time, your twenty-fifth anniversary in the context of another Jubilee, that of 2025, which has as its motto "Pilgrims of hope". We are preparing for this important moment in the life of the Church, and you are a very significant entity for this preparation and then for the celebration.

This is firstly because of your grass-roots presence throughout the country and the number of people you involve, with some three thousand two hundred registered Confraternities – and just as many existing but unregistered – and two million members; and to these must be added the extended community of family members and friends who, through them, join in your activities. It is an impressive picture, which brings to mind what Vatican Council II says about the nature and mission of the laity in the Church, namely that "they are called there by God that ... they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 31).

Your "leaven" is indeed present in the Italian ecclesial and social fabric, and must be kept alive, in order to be

able to ferment the whole dough. Saint John Paul II recommended this in a homily in 1984, when he said: “Today the urgency of evangelization demands that the Confraternities also participate more intensely and more directly in the work that the Church is doing to bring the light, the redemption, the grace of Christ to the people of our time” (Jubilee of the Confraternities, 1 April 1984). In the context of the *new evangelization*, popular piety indeed constitutes a powerful form of proclamation, which has much to give to the men and women of our time (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 126). Here I refer to *Evangelii Gaudium* 126. But on popular piety, the text which continues to be the strongest, which is of great help, is that of Saint Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi*. It is always good to return to that text, which clarified well the place of popular piety in the life of the Church. *Evangelii nuntiandi* is still valid today: it is a prophetic Apostolic Exhortation which helps, which makes us go forward!

Therefore, I encourage you to cultivate, with creative and dynamic effort, your life as an association and your charitable presence, which are based on the gift of Baptism and which involve a journey of growth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let yourselves be inspired by the Spirit, and *walk*: as you do in processions, do so in all your community life. May the richness and memory of your history never become a reason for you to withdraw into yourselves, for the nostalgic celebration of the past, for closure towards the present or pessimism about the future; may they instead be a powerful stimulus to reinvest today your spiritual, human, economic, artistic, historic and even folkloristic heritage, open to the signs of the times and to God’s surprises. It was with this faith and with this openness that your predecessors once gave rise to your fraternities. Without this faith and this openness, we would not be here today, in such large numbers, to give thanks to the Lord for all the good that has been received and accomplished! With many Confraternities!

I would like, then, to invite you to structure your journey along three fundamental lines: *evangelism*, *ecclesiality* and *missionary spirit*. I would summarize this direction as follows:

- to walk *in Christ’s footsteps*;
- to walk *together*,
- to walk *proclaiming the Gospel*.

First and foremost, walking *in Christ’s footsteps*. I urge you to cultivate the centrality of Christ in your life, in daily listening to the Word of God. This is very important: closeness to the Gospel. We must read the Gospel every day. I advise you: get a pocket-sized copy of the Gospel and carry it in your pocket or your bag, and then read something during the day, whenever you have some time. A little bit each day. It makes the Gospel grow, it makes the heart grow. Physical contact with the Gospel and then spiritual contact. I urge you, then, to cultivate the centrality of Christ, organizing and participating regularly in formative moments, in assiduous partaking of the Sacraments, in an intense life of personal and liturgical prayer. May your ancient liturgical and devotional traditions be inspired by an intense spiritual life, with fervency, and concrete commitment to charity. And do not be afraid of to refresh them in communion with the journey of the Church, so that they may be a gift that is accessible and comprehensible to all, in the contexts in which you live and work, and a stimulus to approach the faith also for those who are distant.

Secondly: walking *together*. The history of the Confraternities offers the Church a centuries-long experience of synodality, which is expressed through community tools of formation, discernment and deliberation, and through living contact with the local Church, with the Bishops and with the Dioceses. May your councils and your assemblies – as beloved Pope Benedict XVI asked you – never be reduced to purely administrative or particularistic meetings[1]; may they always be first and foremost places of listening to God and of the Church, and of fraternal dialogue, characterized by an atmosphere of prayer and sincere charity. Only in this way can they help you to be lively entities and to find new ways of service and evangelization.

And this brings us to the third dimension of your journey: to walk *proclaiming the Gospel*, bearing witness to your faith and taking care of your brothers and sisters, especially in the new forms of poverty of our time, as many of you have demonstrated in this time of the pandemic. Study these new forms of poverty carefully. Perhaps we do

not know of them, but there are many of these new forms of poverty. In this regard, the history of the Confraternities has a great charismatic heritage. Do not let this heritage go to waste! Keep alive the *charism of service and mission*, responding with creativity and courage to the needs of our time.

Evangelism, ecclesiality and mission: these, dear brothers and sisters, are the three words I leave with you today. And I would like to conclude by renewing my invitation to be “missionaries of God’s love and tenderness ... missionaries of God’s mercy, which always forgives us, always awaits us and loves us dearly” (*Homily on the Day of Confraternities and Popular Piety*, 5 May 2013).

May Our Lady, whom you venerate with many titles as your Mother, keep you and guide you always. I heartily bless you, all your brothers and sisters, and your families. And I urge you: do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] Cf *Address to the Confederation of Confraternities of the Dioceses of Italy*, 10 November 2007.
