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Alle 12.15 di questa mattina, nella Sala del Concistoro del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI riceve in Udienza i partecipanti all'Incontro dei Superiori Generali delle Società Missionarie di Vita Apostolica, promosso dalla Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli, e rivolge loro il discorso che riportiamo di seguito:

● **DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE**

Your Eminence,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Fathers,

It is a particular pleasure for me to greet you, the Superiors General of Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life, meeting here in Rome at the invitation of the Congregation for the Evangelization of People. Your assembly, which brings together the Superiors of the fifteen Missionary Societies of pontifical right and the six of diocesan

right, bears eloquent witness to the continuing vitality of the missionary impulse in the Church and the spirit of communion uniting your members and their manifold activities to the Successor of Peter and his universal apostolic ministry.

Your meeting is also a concrete sign of the historic relationship between the various Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In these days you have sought to examine new ways of consolidating and strengthening this privileged relationship. As the Second Vatican Council observed, Christ's command to preach the Gospel to every creature applies primarily and immediately to the College of Bishops, *cum et sub Petro* (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 38). Within the hierarchical unity of the Body of Christ, enriched by the variety of gifts and charisms bestowed by the Spirit, communion with the successors of the Apostles remains the criterion and guarantee of the spiritual fruitfulness of all missionary activity. For the Church's communion in faith, hope and love is itself the sign and foretaste of that unity and peace which is God's plan in Christ for the whole human family.

One of the promising indications of a renewal in the Church's missionary consciousness in recent decades has been the growing desire of many lay men and women, whether single or married, to cooperate generously in the *missio ad gentes*. As the Council stressed, the work of evangelization is a fundamental duty incumbent upon the whole People of God, and all the baptized are called to "a lively awareness of their personal responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel" (*Ad Gentes*, 36). While some Missionary Societies have had a long history of close collaboration with lay men and women, others have only more recently developed forms of lay association with their apostolate. Given the extent and the importance of the contribution made by these associates to the work of the various Societies, the proper forms of their cooperation should naturally be governed by specific statutes and clear directives respectful of each institute's proper canonical identity.

Dear friends, our meeting today gives me a welcome opportunity to express my gratitude to you and to all the members of your Societies, past and present, for your enduring commitment to the Church's mission. Today, as in the past, missionaries continue to leave their families and homes, often at great sacrifice, for the sole purpose of proclaiming the Good News of Christ and serving him in their brothers and sisters. Many of them, also in our time, have heroically confirmed their preaching by the shedding of their blood, and contributed to establishing the Church in distant lands. Today, changed circumstances have led in many cases to a decrease in the number of young people who are attracted to missionary societies, and a consequent decline in missionary outreach. All the same, as the late Pope John Paul II insisted, the mission *ad gentes* is still only beginning, and the Lord is summoning us, all of us, to be committed wholeheartedly to its service (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 1). "The harvest is great!" (*Mt 9:37*) While conscious of the challenges you face, I encourage you to follow faithfully in the footsteps of your founders, and to stir into flame the charisms and apostolic zeal which you have inherited from them, confident that Christ will continue to work with you and to confirm your preaching with signs of his presence and power (cf. *Mk 16:20*).

With great affection, I commend you, together with the members and associates of your various Societies, to the loving protection of Mary, Mother of the Church. To all of you I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of wisdom, strength and peace in the Lord.

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