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To the Congregation of Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception: proclaim the Good News with methods and language understandable to people of our time

The Congregation of Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, present in twenty countries, is celebrating its General Chapter in Rome from 5 to 25 February. The Pope received them this morning in the Consistory Hall, and in his address to them he recalled that one of the main aims of this Chapter is to reflect on the laws and regulations of the Congregation.

“This is an important task”, Francis observed, before quoting from the apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of his predecessor St. John Paul II: “There is a pressing need today for every Institute to return to the Rule, since the Rule and Constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship, in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the Church”. He added, “I urge you, therefore, to carry out this reflection with fidelity to the charism of the Founder and the spiritual heritage of your Congregation and, at the same time, with a heart and mind open to the new needs of the people. It is true, we must go ahead towards the new needs, the new challenges, but remember: we cannot go ahead without memory. It is a continual tension. If I want to go ahead without memory of the past, of the history of the founders, the great figures and also the sins of the Congregation, I cannot do so. This is a rule: memory, this ‘deuteronomic’ dimension of life must always be used when we update the constitutions of a religious congregation”.

He went on to reiterate that their Founder, St. Stanislaus of Jesus and Mary, canonised last year, had fully understood the meaning of being a disciple of Christ when he prayed his “Christus Patiens”: “Lord Jesus, if You would unite me to You through charity, who will wrench me from You? If you will join me to You in mercy, who will sever me from You? Let my spirit cleave to You, let Your most merciful right hand support me”. “From this perspective”, he said, “your service to the Word is witness to the Risen Christ, Whom you have met on your journey and Whom, with your style of life, you are called to take wherever the Church sends you. Christian witness also requires commitment to and with the poor, a commitment that has characterised your Institute since the beginning. I encourage you to keep alive this tradition of service to the poor and humble, through the proclamation of the Gospel with language understandable to them, with works of mercy and prayer for the souls of the departed. That closeness to people like us, simple. I like the passage of St. Paul to Timothy: ‘a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother and your mother’, the simplicity of the mother, the grandmother. This is the foundation. We are not princes, sons of princes or counts or barons: we are simple people, of the people. And for this reason we draw close with this simplicity to the simple people and those who suffer the most: the sick,

children, the abandoned elderly, the poor ... all of them. And this poverty is at the heart of the Gospel: it is the poverty of Jesus, not sociological poverty, but that of Jesus”.

Another significant aspect of the spiritual heritage of this religious family consists of the writings of Blessed Jorge Matulaitis: the total dedication to the Church and to man, so as to “go bravely to work and fight for the Church, especially where there is greatest need”. “May his intercession help you to cultivate this attitude, which in recent decades has inspired your initiatives for spreading the charism of the Institute to poor countries, especially in Africa and Asia”, the Pope added.

“The great challenge of inculturation requires that today you proclaim the Good News using languages and methods comprehensible to the men of our time, involved in processes of rapid social and cultural change. Your Congregation has a long history, written by courageous witnesses of Christ and of the Gospel. You are called, in their wake, to walk with renewed zeal so as to set out, with prophetic freedom and wise discernment – both of them together! – along apostolic roads and missionary frontiers, cultivating close collaboration with the bishops and other members of the ecclesial community”.

The horizons of evangelisation and the urgent need to bear witness to the evangelical message before all, without distinctions, constitute the vast field of your apostolate. Many still await knowledge of Jesus, the sole Redeemer of man, and many situations of injustice and moral and material hardship challenge believers. Such an urgent mission requires conversion at personal and community levels. Only hearts that are fully open to the action of Grace are able to interpret the signs of the times and to hear the calls of humanity in need of hope and peace”.

“Dear brothers, following the example of your Founder, be courageous in your service to Christ and to the Church, responding to new challenges and new missions, even though at a human level they may seem risky. Indeed, the ‘genetic code’ of your community includes what St. Stanislaus himself affirmed from his own experience: ‘Despite the countless difficulties, divine goodness and wisdom initiate and conclude what they will, even when the means, by human judgement, are inadequate. Indeed, for the Almighty, nothing is impossible. This has been clearly demonstrated in me’. And this attitude – which comes from the smallness of means, even from our own smallness, even from our unworthiness, inasmuch as we are sinners, it comes from there, but has a broad horizon. [This attitude] is the act of faith in the power of the Lord: the Lord can, the Lord is capable. And our smallness is in fact the seed, that then germinates, grows; the Lord waters it, and in this way it goes ahead. But the sense of smallness is that first impulse towards trust in the power of God. Go, go ahead on this road”.

“To your Mother and Patroness, Mary Immaculate, I entrust your journey of faith and growth, in the constant union with Christ and with the Holy Spirit, that makes you witnesses of the power of the Resurrection”, Francis concluded, before imparting his apostolic blessing to all those present, to all the Congregation and to their lay collaborators.
