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Audience with the participants in the 11th General Chapter of the Little Sisters of Jesus

At 11.30 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the eleventh General Chapter of the Little Sisters of Jesus.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters,

I am happy to welcome you on the occasion of your General Chapter. I greet the general Head and, through you, all the Little Sisters of Jesus.

The celebration of a General Chapter is a time of grace for every institute of consecrated life. In a climate of prayer and fraternal affection, the religious come together to listen to the Holy Spirit, to face together the many questions and challenges that the institute faces at that precise time of its history. However, before being a moment of reflection on practical matters, a Chapter is the common spiritual experience of a return to the source of the call, both personal and community.

And at the source of your institute there is your Founder Little Sister Magdaleine of Jesus' overwhelming experience of God's tenderness. In the footsteps of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, she perceived that the Almighty God, Creator and Lord of the Universe was not afraid to be a small, trustful child, in the arms of Mary, out of love for us, and still wants to give Himself humbly to each of us, for love. Today, almost eighty years after the founding of the Institute, there are more than a thousand Little Sisters around the world. They are situations that are difficult from a human point of view, with the smallest and the poorest. They are not primarily concerned with curing, educating, and catechising - though they do these things well - but with loving, being with the littlest ones, just as Jesus did, to announce the Gospel with the simple life of work, presence, friendship, unconditional welcome. It is important, of vital importance for you to return continually to this original experience of the

closeness of God, Who is gentle and humble to us to save us and fill us with His love. And this love of God must express itself more in the evangelisation of gestures than of words: the smile, silence, adoration, patience. I remember that dialogue between oak and almond. The oak said to the almond tree, "Tell me about God", and the almond blossomed. This is what the Church asks you to: to blossom, to flourish in the gestures of God's love.

Above all, dear sisters, be sure to keep your spiritual life fervent, for it is from this love, received from God in an incessant and ever-new way, that your love for your brothers and sisters overflows. It is for this spiritual life that young people thirst, and this allows them to respond in turn to the Lord's invitation. It is from this spiritual life that there springs the evangelical witness that the poor await. The recipes may serve, but later; if this is not present, they have no effect.

Do not be afraid to go ahead, bringing the little Child Jesus into your hearts, in all the places where there are the smallest of our world. Stay free from bonds with works and things, free to love those you encounter wherever the Spirit leads you. Free to fly, free to dream. The difficulties of the present time make you share the sorrows of so many brothers: you too, with them, sometimes find yourself forced to close or abandon your homes to flee elsewhere; you too know the trials of age, solitude and suffering; you too experience the hardness of the journey when you must remain faithful while crossing the desert. But in all this, the love you bear in your hearts makes you free women attached to the essentials.

Be mindful of the quality of fraternal life in your communities. Despite difficulties, Little Sister Magdaleine, following the poor Jesus among the poor, found true joy, a joy she shared with everyone, starting with her sisters. Simplicity and joy belong to consecrated life, and in a special way to yours. The Child Jesus was joyful in Nazareth; He certainly played and laughed with Mary and Joseph, with children of his age and with neighbours. To rediscover the taste of community life, you must always search for simplicity, affection, small attentions, service, and wonder.

It is from this fraternity among you that the service of authority is born. The exercise of responsibility in the Church is rooted in the common and fraternal will to listen to the Lord, to place yourselves in His school and to live in His Spirit so that His Kingdom can extend to all hearts. It is in this context of common and fraternal listening that dialogue and obedience find their place. And in such obedience, like the Child Jesus, all the little Sisters will grow "in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man" (*Lk 2:52*).

The fraternity lived between you opens your hearts to fraternity toward everyone. Your Foundress invited you to become "Arabs among the Arabs, nomads among nomads, workers among workers and, above all, human beings among humans" (Annie de Jésus, *The Little Sister Magdaleine of Jesus. The Experience of Bethlehem until the end of the world*, Cerf, 2008, p. 184). Fairground workers with fairground workers, like here in Rome. And so the Institute has spread to many countries and you have met many of these little ones, of all races, languages and religions. Your hearts have no barriers. Of course, you can not change the world by yourselves, but you can illuminate it by bringing the joy of the Gospel to the neighbourhoods, the streets, mixing with the crowds, always close to the smallest.

Since you are among the little ones that the Blessed Virgin presents to her Son Jesus our Lord, you can count on her maternal intercession, as well as on the Church's prayer for your Institute, especially during this General Chapter.

Thank you very much, thank you for your visit, and I beg you to pray for me. Thank you.
