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The Pope receives the members of the Archconfraternity of the Virgen de la Cinta of Tortosa, Spain

This morning the Holy Father received in audience the members of the Archconfraternity of the Virgen de la Cinta of Tortosa, Spain, celebrating the fourth centenary of its founding.

In his greeting to the Pope, the bishop of Tortosa, H.E. Msgr. Enrique Benavent Vidal, explained that in accordance with a very ancient tradition, handed down through the liturgical books of the diocese, on the night of 24 to 25 March in the year 1178, the Virgin appeared to a priest who was about to celebrate matins in the Cathedral, and gave him the girdle that bound her mantle, saying to him, “since you have built this Church in honour of my Son and in mine, and because I love the people of Tortosa, I place this girdle of mine on the altar and I give it to you so that you may keep it as a sign of my love”.

“This girdle, which in material terms is that of a poor girl”, said the bishop, “is the most precious treasure our Cathedral conserves (*lo mostre tesor*). For centuries it has been the bond that binds the hearts of the people of Tortosa to that of the Virgin, uniting them in heaven and on earth, in life and in death. Thanks to this, devotion to the Blessed Virgin and the faith have been transmitted in our city from generation to generation”.

Then, referring to the centuries-old task of the Royal Archconfraternity, he recalled that thanks to this, devotion to the *Virgen de la Cinta* has been maintained and has grown. “It is a dedication that, from its origin (the feast of the Incarnation of the Lord)”, he explained, “leads to the protection and care for the life of the unborn human being. During these years I have heard the testimony of pregnant women in difficulty who have protected the lives of their children entrusting them to the Virgin, and have experienced her protection over their unborn children. During years of economic crisis the Archconfraternity has collaborated with charitable institutions of the diocese: the diocesan and inter-parish Caritas, reception homes, and with the various programmes to care for the poorest. If devotion to the Mother of the Lord is authentic, it leads us to be attentive to the needs of all her children”.

Following the bishop’s words, Pope Francis gave an address, the full text of which is given below:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear confreres and devotees of the *Virgen de la Cinta*:

I am pleased to receive you here for the fourth centenary of the founding of this association of consecrated faithful devoted to our Mother. I greet Msgr. Enrique Benavent, bishop of Tortosa, and Ms. Meritzell Roigé, mayor of the city, who accompanies you on this pilgrimage.

The Confraternity of *Nuestra Señora de la Cinta* has been linked to Peter's Successor ever since its inception. A few months after the constitution of the fraternity, approved by the bishop of this city, Luis de Tena, they wanted it to be confirmed by Pope Paul V. And now, with this pilgrimage to the tomb of Peter, you wish to renew that bond of communion.

This gesture of adhesion is not something from the past that inspires only a mere historical interest, but rather it keeps its relevance alive. You call yourselves brothers, confreres, and in that way you reveal the fundamental reality of your lives, that you are all sons of God. Etymologically, brotherhood means a "union of brothers". But it is not enough to say that you are brothers – you must always remember that "foundational" unity that marks you as such. Brothers – as we know – often quarrel, they fight over so many things, but even when that happens, they know how to keep alive that search for good that can not exclude peace and harmony between them. The bond of charity that as brothers unites you with your bishop and, through him, with the Pope, constitutes an important gift that enriches you but also entails a mission: to be a leaven of solidarity in society.

Looking to the example of Mary, you are called to take that fraternity to every corner of our society. You are present in different ecclesial realities in your diocese: in this way you collaborate so that the Church is first of all a home, a family, a place of welcome and love, in which everyone, especially the poor and marginalized, can feel a part, and never feel that they are excluded or rejected. Lived in this way, fraternity becomes a mission, which challenges us and does not leave us indifferent, because the mutual love that reaches out and is directed towards others is our letter of presentation. Thus, even those who do not believe can repeat that eulogy of Tertullian: "See how they love one another!" (*Apologeticum*, 39: PL I, 471).

To live in this way, as united brothers, requires effort and sacrifice, but it is worth it, as it offers a sign to a society that is so divided. I encourage you in your task so that you may be a sign to the world of this fraternity that comes from God.

May the Lord bless you and keep you always, and may the Holy Virgin care for you and accompany you in your labours.

And please, do not forget to pray for me.

Many thanks.
