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Audience with participants in the General Chapter of the Society of African Missions

At 11.00 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Society of African Missions, held in Rome from 30 April to 24 May, on the theme: "A family faithful to its missionary charism in today's complex and changing context".

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you, members of the Society of African Missions, on the occasion of your General Assembly held in Rome. This meeting allows me to thank the Lord for the great work of evangelization that you carry out in Africa, especially among the most remote rural populations, where the Christian community is still fragile or non-existent. I also welcome your willingness to develop new forms of presence among people of African origin in other parts of the world, with particular attention to migrants.

These new pastoral horizons are the sign of the vitality of the Holy Spirit who lives in you and who urges you to respond to the "ever new challenges to the Church's mission of evangelization" to "reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 20). I thank you for your missionary zeal, imbued with courage, which leads you to go out to offer to all the life of Jesus Christ, sometimes putting your own at risk, following in the footsteps of your founding fathers, the Servant of God Melchior de Marion Brésillac and Fr. Augustin Planque. In this regard, I would like to join in your prayer for your brother Fr. Pierluigi Maccalli, kidnapped for several months in Niger, and to assure the concern and attention of the Holy See regarding this worrying situation.

This year you wanted to highlight the fact that your apostolic community forms a family, with the Missionary Sisters and the associated lay people. A joyful family, which is growing thanks to the many vocations in Africa

and Asia. This family character is certainly a wealth that you do well to emphasize and develop.

Indeed, evangelization is always carried out by a community that acts “by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (*ibid.*, 24). I also encourage you to persevere in your commitment, in close collaboration with members of other religions and institutions, at the service of children and the most fragile people, victims of war, disease, and human trafficking. Because the option for the least, for those that society rejects and sets aside, is a sign that concretely manifests the presence and solicitude of the merciful Christ. Thus, driven by the Spirit, you can be servants of a *culture of dialogue and encounter*, which takes care of the little ones and the poor, to contribute to the advent of a true human fraternity.

Faithful to your roots, you are called, as a family and since you are a family, to bear witness to the risen Christ through the love that unites you to one another, and with the radiant joy of an authentic fraternal life. I therefore invite you to constantly seek, in listening to the Word of God, in the sacramental life and in the service of brothers, the means to renew, in each of you, your personal encounter with Christ. In fact, “the primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of Him. ... But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life” (*ibid.*, 264).

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you once again for your visit, as well as for the witness you are giving. I encourage you to persevere, with renewed enthusiasm and dynamism, on the path travelled by the Society of African Missions and which has produced many fruits of conversion to Christ. In listening to the Spirit, do not be afraid to open new roads, to show that “God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond” (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, 135). With this hope, I entrust your missionary family to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, asking her to support your efforts. I bless you and pray for you. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
