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Audience with Diocesan Assistants from Milan and Diocesan Apostolic Collaborators from Padua and Treviso

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a group of diocesan assistants from Milan and diocesan apostolic collaborators from Padua and Treviso.

After handing to those present the discourse prepared for the occasion, the Pope gave an impromptu address to the participants in the meeting.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters,

I welcome you and I thank you for coming, and I am grateful to the bishops and priests who have accompanied you. I thank in particular the archbishop of Milan, Msgr. Mario Delpini, for the words with which he introduced our meeting.

It is close to my heart to emphasize the central aspect of your identity, which is significant as a form of presence of women in the Church. And this reflection should be carried out starting from your history, which in Milan began in the period of the episcopate of Saint Giovanni Battista Montini.

Your history shows that you were not born "at the drawing board", and far less out of an ideological need, but you were born from life, from the experience of the associated apostolate, especially in Catholic Action. That associated apostolate of which the conciliar Decree on the Action of the Lay Faithful speaks (nos. 18-20). You were born out of collaboration with priests in parish and diocesan pastoral work. This is very important.

When Jesus welcomed “some women” among His disciples, even in close collaboration with the Twelve, He did not do so out of an *ante litteram* feminism, but because the Father made Him meet these sisters, sometimes in need of healing, just like men (cf. *Lk 8: 2*). Among them, Mary Magdalene had a particular charism of faith and love for the Lord, and He showed himself to her first on Easter morning and commissioned her to go and take the message to her brothers and sisters: the apostle of the apostles. But the other women also have a decisive presence in the stories of the Resurrection. Therefore it is quite right, as well as beautiful, this name of yours as “women of the Resurrection”, attributed to you by Archbishop Montini himself.

But let us return to the Council. Where he speaks in particular of Catholic Action, he says: “Whether they offer themselves spontaneously or are invited to action and direct cooperation with the apostolate of the hierarchy, the laity function under the higher direction of the hierarchy itself, and the latter can sanction this cooperation by an explicit mandate” (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 20). Here we see an original and qualifying point: the experience of collaborating directly with pastors in the service of the people, of the people of God, in parishes, in oratories, with the poor, in prisons... In those who perform this “work”, sometimes hard and tiring (cf. *Rom 16:6*), the Holy Spirit sows special gifts of dedication, which can also become gifts of consecration in the Church.

And here it is important that the bishop and the priests appointed by him carry out discernment. This is what happened to you, in your different diocesan situations: Milan, Treviso, Padua and Vicenza. There are some constants among the different experiences, and the essential one is that the bishop is attentive to a gift that exists in the community, a gift that corresponds to a pastoral need – but not only to a function, it is not a functionalism – and then carries out discernment. In this way the charism is screened, accepted and recognized, and receives its own form in that diocesan community. Therefore, the element of close collaboration with the bishop proves to be qualifying.

Of course there are other forms of cooperation of women in the Church, whether lay, religious or secular consecrated, but yours has this specific feature.

I appreciate - and I am grateful to you - that in presenting your charism you refer to a passage from *Evangelii gaudium*, where you read: “Mission is a passion for Jesus but, at the same time, it is a passion for his people. In this way we rediscover that he wants to use us to get ever closer to his beloved people. He takes us among the people and sends us to the people, so that our identity cannot be understood without this belonging” (n. 268). For you, this people has the concrete face of your diocese. In fact, the names of all the Institutes represented here qualify you as “diocesan”. It is a delimitation, of course, but it has the sense of rootedness and not of closure, of fidelity and not of particularism, of dedication and not of exclusion.

This aspect of fidelity not to a generic people, but to this people, with its history, its riches and its poverty, is an essential trait of the mission of Jesus Christ, sent by the Father to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (*Mt 15:24*). And his giving his life for all necessarily passes through giving it for those concrete people, for that community, for those friends, and for those enemies. This fidelity costs money, it has the hardness of the cross, but it is fruitful, generative, according to God's plans.

Dear sisters, I thank you for your witness. Go ahead, with the joy of the Resurrection and the passion for your people. I bless you and pray for you. And you too, please, pray for me. Thank you!
