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Meeting of the Holy Father with the participants in the 24th General Chapter of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians

This morning, after leaving the *Casa Santa Marta*, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to the Curia General of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco), where he met the participants in the 24th General Chapter of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, taking place in Rome from 11 September to 24 October 2021 on the theme “Communities that generate life in the heart of contemporaneity”.

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

Address of the Holy Father

I wish you good work, Mother, together with the new Council. And we thank the Superior and the outgoing Counsellors. I hope that Mother will return to Africa... And if there is no place in Africa, in Patagonia!

In these days of work you have followed the theme “Communities that generate life in the heart of contemporaneity”, illuminating it with the words of Mary at the wedding in Cana: “Do whatever he tells you” (*Jn* 2:5). This is Our Lady’s most beautiful gesture: Our Lady never takes for herself, she always points to Jesus. Think of this: imitate Our Lady and do the same [he makes the gesture of pointing]. On the one hand, therefore, keep in mind the multicultural social context, marked by tensions and challenges that are sometimes even dramatic, such as those caused by the pandemic; at the same time, listen to the word of the Lord, his will, at this time that is so fragile and uncertain, with the forms of poverty that the current crisis has produced and multiplied. You know, this is terrible. Poverty has multiplied, even hidden forms of poverty. Many well-off families, or at least in the middle class, do not have enough to live on. The pandemic has wreaked havoc.

To reawaken the original freshness of the vocational fruitfulness of the Institute: this is the objective you have set yourselves. It is a key perspective for responding to the needs of today’s world, which needs to discover in the consecrated life “the proclamation of what the Father, through the Son in the Spirit, accomplishes with his love,

his goodness, his beauty” (CICLSAL, *New Wine in New Wineskins*, 6). This does not mean denying the fragilities and the difficulties present in the communities, but believing that this situation can help them to transform the present day into a *kairós*, a favourable time to go to the charismatic roots, to work on the essential, rediscovering, for yourselves first, the beauty of consecrated life. This challenge invites you to renew your “yes” to God in this time, as women and communities who allow themselves to be questioned by the Lord and by reality, and thus become a prophecy of the Gospel, a witness to Christ and his way of life.

Vatican Council II showed the Church this path, which is the way of God: the incarnation in history, immersion in the human condition. But this presupposes being firmly rooted in Christ, so as not to be at the mercy of worldliness in its various forms and disguises. Do not forget that the worst evil that can happen in the Church is spiritual worldliness. I can almost say that it seems worse than a sin, because spiritual worldliness is that very subtle spirit that supplants proclamation, that supplants faith, that supplants the Holy Spirit. Father De Lubac, in his book *Méditation sur l'Eglise*, talks about this in the last pages. Go and look for them. The last four pages. He says this which is very strong: spiritual worldliness is the worst evil that can happen to the Church, worse than the scandal at the time of the concubine Popes. It is strong. The devil enters religious houses in this way. It helps me to understand how the devil enters among us. And it is not a sin, it is not a nun killing another one - a scandal! - or insulting another, no, this is an ugly sin, everyone is scandalised, they ask for forgiveness... No. Jesus teaches us how the devil comes in here, and he says this: “When the unclean spirit has been cast out of a person, he goes away, wanders about in deserts, is bored, then he says: ‘I will go back to my house to see how it is’. A house that is all clean, beautiful and prepared. And he goes, finds seven worse than himself and enters that house. But he doesn’t enter by force, no, he enters politely: he rings the bell, he says good morning. They are polite devils. We don’t realise they are coming in. So, they enter slowly and we say: ‘Ah, how nice, how nice, come, come in.... And in the end, that man’s condition is worse than in the beginning. It happens thus with spiritual worldliness. People who have left everything, have renounced marriage, have renounced children, family... and end up - excuse the word – are “spinsters”, that is, worldly, preoccupied with those things... And the horizon closes, because they say: “This one didn’t even look at me, this one insulted me, that one...”. The internal conflicts that close in. Please, escape from spiritual worldliness. And also from the status: “I am a religious man, I am a religious woman...”. Look at this closely. It is the worst thing that can happen. It’s like a [...] that slowly takes away your strength. And instead of being women consecrated to God, they become “educated young ladies” [...] where there is missionary service, where there is service, where there is mortification, to tolerate each other. And Saint John Berchmans used to say: ‘My greatest penance is community life’. And it takes [penance]! It takes a lot of penance to tolerate one another. [...] But beware of spiritual worldliness. It’s not that I need to change my mobile phone to live, that I need this, that, to take a holiday on the beach... I am talking about real things. But worldliness is that spirit that leads you to be not at peace, or towards a peace that is not beautiful, a sophisticated peace.

For you as consecrated persons this requires creative fidelity to the charism, which is why you always return to the charism. Is the charism a relic? No, it is a living reality, not an embalmed relic. It is life that creates and moves forward, not a museum piece. So, the great responsibility is to collaborate with the creativity of the Holy Spirit, to revisit the charism and ensure that it expresses its vitality today. From this comes true “youthfulness”, because the Spirit *makes all things new*. And we find elderly women and men religious who seem younger - like good wine - whom the strength of the Spirit helps to find new expressions of the same gift that is the charism. A charism that is the same for all, but different for all. It is the same, but with the nuances of one’s own person; and this means that that person is full of that charism, is creative even in the charism. Not outside of the charism, no. It is the charism itself. It is creativity that gives fidelity to the charism. This is the way of the Church that the Holy Popes of the Council and of the post-Council period have shown us: John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I - soon to be beatified - and John Paul II, whose memory we are celebrating today.

Another aspect I see in the theme of the Chapter is the need to nurture communities interwoven with intergenerational, intercultural, fraternal and cordial relationships. For this you can draw on your family spirit, which characterised the first community, at Mornese, and which helps you to see diversity as an opportunity to welcome and listen, valuing differences as a richness. From this perspective, I also encourage you to pursue your commitment to work in relation with other congregations, seeking to develop relationships of reciprocity and co-responsibility. But this can be done well if within your own congregation you have a good relationship like this; do not flee to other congregations because you are not able to tolerate your own. This for you is a concrete way

of living synodality; and, here too, the prerequisite is obedience to the Holy Spirit, openness to his newness and surprises.

I would like to focus on this: intergenerationality. I remember once a religious congregation - not yours - in Argentina, which had had problems, many years ago, forty years ago, more or less. The Mother General was a nun who was good at organising, and she said: "No no: we need young people here", because at that time there were many vocations. The elderly all stayed in a home for the elderly, and the young people were apart. But this is a sin, a sin against the family! The elderly must live, as far as possible, in the living community. And a duty of young people is to look after the elderly, to learn from them, to engage in dialogue with them. If in a congregation there is not this exchange, it is the way that leads to death. [He shows a picture that has been distributed, showing a young monk carrying an elderly monk on his shoulders] This one I have brought... This young monk carrying an old man. This is the "profession" of the young man. To be able to have grandmothers, grandfathers at home. I remember that in that congregation, which I mentioned earlier, the old women were dying of a broken heart. "She's dead... She's sick...". The heartbreak came from the sadness of not being able to enjoy the new generations. Examine your conscience: how do I welcome the elderly? It is true that the old sometimes become a little capricious - we are like that - and in old age, faults are more evident; but it is also true that the elderly have that wisdom, that great wisdom of life: the wisdom of fidelity to become old in vocation. And thank you for all you do. Never isolate the elderly! Yes, there will be homes for the elderly who cannot lead a normal life, who are bedridden... But going there all the time, visiting the elderly, visiting them... They are the treasure of history! I am so helped by the experience of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, when she accompanied an old nun who could hardly walk. But she was a slightly neurotic nun, which happens sometimes. And Theresa would do everything... And Theresa's smile would never fail. She would bring her in and then sit her down, and then cut her bread. The poor old woman, who was a bit neurotic, complained about everything, but she looked at her with love. And it happened once, on the way from the choir to the refectory, a noise could be heard from outside, the music of a dance could be heard, there was a party nearby. But Teresina said: "I will never exchange this for that". She had understood the greatness of the vocation. Respect for the elderly. Please, bring the elderly!

The same openness to the Spirit enables you to persevere in your commitment to be generative communities in the service of the young and the poorest. Missionary communities, outgoing, intent on proclaiming the Gospel to the peripheries, with the passion of the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. But that passion is impressive, that of the first Salesians! It was true, it amazed young people and girls. In a book I have brought you - I will leave one with the Mother General -, a book that talks about a Salesian priest from Lodi who was a missionary in Argentina, Fr. Enrico Pozzoli, in the introduction of the book - it is interesting - he shows the number of Salesians Don Bosco sent to Argentina. So many! And when they arrived in Buenos Aires - this is the beauty of the first Salesians - they did not go to the middle-class neighbourhoods, no, they went to look for the frontiers... What attracts a vocation? Holiness, zeal. Look for it, see this missionary spirit... As for young people, I want to encourage you, because it is not easy to accompany adolescent boys and girls. Parents know it well, and so do you. This is also why I wanted the Synod for young people and with young people, which resulted in the Exhortation *Christus vivit*. I know that you are using it; I encourage you to continue to do so: I am sure that there you can find various ideas in tune with your charism and your educational service.

Dear sisters, I know that you are preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. This too is an opportunity for renewal and vocational and missionary revitalisation. Do not forget the grace of the origins, the humility and smallness of the beginnings which made God's action clear in the lives and in the message of those who, filled with wonder, began this journey. Mary Help of Christians will guide you: you are her daughters! Her words at the wedding feast of Cana were and are a beacon of light for your discernment: "Do whatever he tells you". Mary is the attentive woman, fully embodied in the present and solicitous, a caring woman. In this way, you can listen attentively to reality, grasp situations of need, when the "wine", that is, the joy of love, is lacking, and bring Christ, not in words but in service, in closeness, with compassion and tenderness. I will stop there. For me a very ugly thing is an angry religious sister, a religious sister who seems to have breakfast not with milk but with vinegar. Be mothers. Tenderness. God's style is always closeness. He said it at the beginning, in Deuteronomy: "Think: 'what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us?' Closeness. And God's closeness is always compassionate and tender. Closeness is compassion and tenderness. Every day, as you examine your conscience, ask yourself: "Today, have I been close to others? Have I been compassionate? Have I been tender?" Go ahead in this way. Use the word "tenderness" a lot. It is

important for your way of being. Be bearers of the hope that does not disappoint. The true hope. Be like Mary, women of hope. Do this starting out from the Salesian identity, with the Salesian style: especially listening, active presence, love for the young. The creativity of the moment, as Don Bosco used to say.

“The Mother of Jesus was there” (*Jn 2,1*) of the Gospel of the wedding at Cana, in your Constitutions becomes “Mary ... is actively present in our lives and in the history of our Institute” (cf. *Constitution of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians*, 44). Accompanied by her, go forward enthusiastically on the path that the Spirit suggests to you. With a heart open to welcome the promptings of God’s grace, with a watchful eye to recognise the needs and urgencies of a world in continual change. Watching for change, but with a heart always in love with the Lord. A mother’s heart, a heart that is close, with compassion and tenderness.

And thank you for this meeting! Thank you for what you are and what you do. I am close to you in prayer and I bless you and all your sisters in the world. And I ask you to pray for me: it is not easy to be the Pope!
