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Message of the Holy Father to participants in the Conference “Charism and creativity. Catalogues, management and innovation regarding the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life” (Antonianum Auditorium, 4 to 5 May 2022)

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father Francis to participants at the inauguration of the *Conference Charism and Creativity. Catalogues, management and innovation regarding the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life*, organized by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, and the Pontifical Council for Culture, taking place in Rome at the Antonianum Auditorium, from 4 to 5 May 2022:

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

The Pentateuch tells the story of the people of Israel who in the desert go towards the Promised Land.

Israel is constituted as a people in the experience of God’s proximity, acquires the modalities of worship pleasing to the Lord, and learns the divine law, which is essentially love of God and neighbour. In this narrative, one notices that a certain amount of attention is paid not only to the people, but also to the sacred objects, especially the tent of the sanctuary and the furnishings of worship. These objects are symbols of the Lord’s presence and are also signs of the Israelites’ identity in relation to the nations with which they come into contact. Their importance is underlined by the care with which these objects must be surrounded, starting with the detailed inventory that describes them, as narrated in the following passage taken from the book of Numbers:

“And this is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting: the frames of the tabernacle, with its bars, pillars, and bases, and the pillars of the court round about with their bases, pegs, and cords, with all their equipment and all their accessories; and *you shall assign by name the objects which they are required to carry*. This is the service of the families of the sons of Merari” (4: 31-33).

This little-known passage can inspire your conference, “Charism and Creativity”, on the cultural heritage of the Institutes of Consecrated Life, organized by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the

Societies of Apostolic Life, and by the Pontifical Council for Culture, with the collaboration of the Italian Episcopal Conference, the Pontifical Gregorian University and the University of Bologna, and with the participation of the International Union of Superiors General, the Union of Superiors General and the Nuns' Assistance Secretariat.

Ever since the beginning of my Pontificate, I have drawn attention to the management of ecclesiastical temporal goods, in the conviction that, like “the wise steward, whom his master will set over his household” (*Lk* 12: 42), in this way “the Church is conscious of her call to safeguard and carefully administer her goods in light of her mission of evangelization, with special care for the needy” [1].

For some years now the Congregation for consecrated life has been concerned with guiding the various institutes in the administration of their respective ecclesiastical goods in the service of the *humanum* and in the mission of the Church. This was followed by a series of conferences and documents of doctrinal importance and practicality, with the aim of promoting a more mature awareness of the management of these goods, which have an eminently ecclesial nature, since they must fulfil the purposes assigned to them by the Church. [2] Consequently, in respect of the just autonomy which they enjoy (cf. can. 586), communities of consecrated life exercise their patrimonial capacity (cf. can. 634§1; can. 1255) in the name of the Church, with a view to the common good.

This Conference, which arose from cooperation between two Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, focuses on the ecclesial, historic, artistic and cultural value that many of these assets possess. The Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life have indeed been, and continue to be, promoters of art and culture in the service of faith, custodians of a very relevant part of the cultural heritage of the Church and of humanity: archives, books, historical and liturgical works, and the buildings themselves. In effect, it is possible to “formulate a theological discourse on cultural heritage, considering that it is part of the sacred liturgy, of evangelization and of the exercise of charity” [3].

Today, it may be added that the value they assume consists essentially of the capacity to transmit a religious, spiritual and cultural meaning that, for the cultural goods of the Institutes of Consecrated Life, consists above all in acknowledging their relationship with history, spirituality and traditions proper to the specific Communities, in practice with their “charism”. In particular, these may be considered as testimonial goods in which to preserve this charism in order to proclaim it anew, to rethink it and actualize it. Hence the title of your conference: “Charism and Creativity”, where we understand that the need and, at times, the burden of preservation, can become an opportunity to renew, to rethink one's charism, to recompose it in the current socio-cultural context and to plan it for the future.

In this regard, I reiterate what I said at the first conference mentioned above, promoted by the Congregation: “*Fidelity to the founding charism* and to the subsequent spiritual heritage, together with the finality proper to each Institute, remain the first criterion for evaluating the administration, management and all of the work carried out in the Institutes at every level” [4].

There is therefore a need to identify, first of all, *specific elements for understanding* these goods, in order to define their historical, spiritual, theological, ecclesiological and juridical characteristics.

It is then necessary to promote the *cataloguing* of assets in their entirety and variety (archives, books, movable and immovable art), as a primary act of knowledge and therefore of study, of juridical protection, of scientific conservation, and of recognizing pastoral value. Cataloguing is necessary for reasons of service to culture, management transparency, and prudence, considering the many natural and human dangers to which these fragile treasures are exposed. Computer technology today makes available tools that make it possible to collect an infinite amount of data and images and to make them public or confidential in a selective and extremely accurate manner.

It is also important to address the issues involved in *managing cultural heritage*, both in terms of its economic sustainability and the contribution it can make to evangelization and the deepening of faith.

Finally, there is a need to focus on the *reuse of disused real estate*, a need that is all the more urgent today, not only because of the reduction in the number of communities of consecrated life and the need to find the resources necessary to care for elderly and sick sisters and brothers, but also, in particular, because of the effects of the acceleration of legislative change and the necessary need for adaptation. This disuse is due, not least, to the economic burdens of ordinary and extraordinary maintenance and upkeep borne by these communities, especially in Europe. The problem should not be tackled through hasty or impromptu decisions, but as part of an overall vision and far-sighted planning, and possibly through the use of proven professional expertise. The disposal of heritage is a particularly sensitive and complex issue, which can attract misleading interests on the part of unscrupulous individuals and be a cause of scandal for the faithful: hence the need to act with great prudence and shrewdness and also to create institutional structures to accompany communities that are less well equipped.

All these issues will be explored further in the two days of your conference, with the opportunity to identify not only the problems, but also some successful experiences and good practices to be shared.

It is particularly through the use of real estate that the Church, and therefore all the communities that she is made up of, can bear good witness and announce the possibility of an economy of culture, solidarity and acceptance.

In entrusting you to Mary, Mother of the Lord and of the Church, to whom the month of May is dedicated, I give you my blessing, I pray for you, and I also ask you to pray for me.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 4 May 2022

[1] Apostolic Letter issued *Motu proprio Fidelis dispensator et prudens* (24 February 2014), *Proemio*.

[2] Cf. *CIC* canon 1254§2 and 1257§1.

[3] Message to the conference “*Doesn’t God dwell here anymore? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage*” (29 November 2018), 2.

[4] Message to the participants in the international Symposium on the theme: “*The management of the ecclesiastical goods of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, at the service of the humanum and of mission in the Church*” (8 March 2014).
