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Audience with the participants in the General Chapters of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour of Saint Bridget and the Combonian Missionary Sisters

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapters of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour of Saint Bridget and the Combonian Missionary Sisters.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters, good morning and welcome!

I am pleased to welcome you on the occasion of your General Chapters. Not to quarrel, no, but to be together, like sisters; and I thank the Superiors General for the words with which they presented the path they have taken and the operational lines for the future; and I wish them every success for the service to which they have been called by the trust of the sisters. Onward! I express the Church's gratitude for your witness and for the apostolic work deployed in the countries where you are present.

Every General Chapter constitutes a moment of grace for the religious Family that celebrates it. It is a time of docility and openness to the Holy Spirit, to understand the priorities of the mission of God he entrusts to you for the good of the Church and the world. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to start out again from Christ, who gives meaning and fullness to every ecclesial journey (cf. *Gaudete et exsultate*, 20). He, the Lord, is the starting point for inner and community renewal. There is no renewal without the Lord; we start out from him and return to him. Therefore, the first place for us is always spiritual life, the personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. If the spiritual life is lacking, you are finished, there is no exit.

“The relevance of our charism from the perspective of the Founding Mothers. The threefold love: the Order, the Church and the world”: this is the theme that you, Sisters of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour of Saint Bridget,

have chosen for your chapter assembly. It reminds you of the spirit of your origins, so that you may translate the founding charism into apostolic choices that are in keeping with changing contemporary situations. Therefore, faithful to the particular monastic vocation that distinguishes the Bridgettine family, you are called to confirm the primacy of God in the existence of each one of you and of your communities.

I urge you to devote yourselves in particular to prayer of adoration: this is important. Today the

meaning of prayer of adoration, of spending time *in worship*, has been somewhat lost. This prayer is not often done: I ask you to do it. To worship, to immerse yourselves in divine love and give it to those you meet on your path. It is beautiful to worship in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, to be in the consoling presence of Jesus and there to draw the apostolic impetus to be instruments of goodness, tenderness and welcome in the community, in the Church and in the world. Welcoming, one of the characteristic aspects of your mission, will be more fruitful to the extent that contemplative prayer will make you come out of yourself and focus your life on Jesus Christ, letting him do things in you, let him act in you. This inner movement will enable a service to your neighbour that is not philanthropy or welfarism, but openness to the other, proximity, sharing; in a word: charity. The charitable dimension, as the fruit of spiritual growth, demands to be lived out first of all in the daily details of community life. As in the family, it is there that love is seen, in caring for one another, making room for small gestures of attention and solicitude, guarding the heart and measuring words. And here I would like to emphasize, not just for you but for everyone, the measure of words. So often we are ready to talk, and from talking we move on to gossip. There are communities where they “flay” each other with their tongues. It is a great virtue not to speak ill of another, never! Gossip is a plague of consecrated life. Not only with women, also with men. It is a plague. Because it is like a woodworm that little by little destroys the coexistence and strength of community life. Beware of gossip. “But, Father, it's not easy... I don't know how to do it...”. I know a good remedy for this. I will offer it to you, if like. A nice remedy: bite your tongue; you know, your tongue will swell up and you won't be able to speak! Please, this destroys community life and religious life: no gossip. If you have an issue with another person, either say it to her face or tell the superior, but not the others. Excuse me, but for me this is a great evil of community life, both women and men, it is the same.

You, Comboni Missionary Sisters, you have placed the theme “Transformed by our charism, missionary disciples to the existential peripheries” at the centre of your work in these days. In listening to the Holy Spirit, I propose to you to find new ways of evangelization and proximity. This is a key word: proximity, because it is God's style. In Deuteronomy, it is said to Israel: “What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?”. God's style is proximity, mercy and tenderness. And you are seeking new paths of evangelization and proximity, with the purpose of realizing your charism, which puts you at the service of the mission *ad gentes*, with a preferential gaze at the most fragile. In this missionary giving, I encourage you to imitate the apostolic zeal of Saint Daniele Comboni, who 150 years ago, inspired by the love of God and the passion for the Gospel, felt the call to give life to your Institute, thinking of the poorest and most abandoned of Sudan, victims of slavery. When I see Africa, there is this bishop, Combonian; there is another who is good, Combonian; this sister, Combonian. You give life to the mission. Thank you, thank you for what you do.

Imitating compassion and tenderness – proximity, compassion, tenderness, the style of God – of your Founder, you know how to put yourselves at the service of the victims of modern slavery, which as social scourges continue, unfortunately, to be present on a large scale throughout the world. These people are enslaved in prostitution, in human trafficking, in forced labour, in migrants who are victims of hidden interests. You are there. The problem of these forms of slavery cannot be overcome without eliminating their deepest causes, which include poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Faced with, or rather in the midst of these realities – in the midst of reality – you propose to offer a Christian response, which does not lie in resigned observation, but in charity that, animated by trust in Providence, knows how to love its time and, with humility, bears witness to the Gospel. In doing so, you are aware that you are going against the tide, clashing with the culture of individualism and indifference, which generates loneliness and causes so many lives to be discarded.

Dear Bridgettine sisters, dear Comboni sisters, today we celebrate the liturgical memorial of Saint John Paul II. He was a man of God because he prayed a lot, he found the time to pray even when immersed in the numerous and burdensome commitments of his ministry. He thus bore concrete witness that the first task of a Christian, of

a consecrated person, of a priest and of a bishop, is to pray – the first task is to pray – and that one must not neglect personal prayer for any reason. It is the most important thing. Another aspect of the life and testimony of this Saint Pontiff was closeness to the people of God, which he expressed in seeking contact with the people and in travelling throughout all the Continents to be close to everyone, great and small, the healthy and the sick, the near and the far. To be inspired by him will do you good, so as to look at reality with the eyes of the Lord Jesus, and will help you to walk in joy, docile to the Holy Spirit, and to make of your charisms an incarnate prophecy.

Dear sisters, I pray to the Holy Spirit to grant you his gifts in abundance, so that you may be able to translate the choices and decisions resulting from the chapter work into the life of your communities. May the Spirit give you strength to face the challenges, present and future, and constancy in your ecclesial service. May the Virgin Mary protect you, help you and be the sure guide on the path of your Religious Institutes, to bring every good project to fruition. Thank you for your visit! From my heart I bless you and all your sisters of both congregations in every part of the world. And I ask you please to pray for me, for this work is not easy!
