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Audience with participants in the General Assembly of the Union of Major Superiors of Italy (USMI)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the seventieth General Assembly of the Union of Major Superiors of Italy (USMI), taking place in Rome from 13 to 14 April, on the theme: “On the synodal path, women witnesses of the Risen One”.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters in Christ!

“Peace be with you!”. This is how the Lord greets the women: peace be with you. I thank the president for the words she addressed to me on behalf of you all.

In these days you are gathered for the seventieth General Assembly, guided by the theme “*On the synodal path, women witnesses of the Risen One*”. The number seventy already indicates a good journey accomplished together! For this we must thank the Lord, that as an organization you have not retired: let us thank the Lord very much!

I would like to highlight three aspects that this theme suggests:

First of all, *women witnesses of the Risen One*. The first witnesses of the Resurrection of the Lord were indeed women, disciples, who with their boldness remind us over and again that “Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity”. “Christ is the ‘eternal Gospel’” (Rev 14:6) and “his riches and beauty are inexhaustible”. Those courageous women let themselves be surprised and driven by the strength and the light of the Risen One, and set out in search of him. They were aware of how important it was to have the living Lord in their heart. Their attitude reminds us that if

we have the courage to “return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meanings for today’s world” (*ibid.*). It is curious, this, when we find ourselves saying, “What shall we do now, in this situation?” – “Pray a little, let’s see what the Lord says in the Gospel”, and so from there comes inspiration, from there a new path emerges, at times it comes out that a religious family makes decisions that seem frightening, but no, that is something from the Lord! Always go with courage, seek out the Lord, what he says to us today; not what he said yesterday, leave this to yesterday’s nuns, but what he says today. Certainly, each one of your Institutes has its own charism, and this is the spirit with which you want to ask the question, with that spirit of the founders you have in your heart, ask the question, today: “Lord, today what must I do? What must we do?”. And women are good at this, they know how to create new paths, they know how to give ... they are brave.

Second aspect: *On the synodal path*. The Gospel, in another passage, says that the women “departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (*Mt 28:8*). Someone who thinks rather badly might say: “They were sent to gossip”. No, no, they ran to make an announcement, it is not gossip: that is something else. The presence of Jesus does not close us up in ourselves, it drives us towards the encounter with others and towards the decision to walk with others. These women chose neither to keep the joy of the encounter to themselves, nor to walk alone: they chose to walk together to the others. Because it is typical of the woman to be generous, it is how it is. At times, yes, there are some neurotics, but this happens a bit everywhere, doesn’t it? But the woman gives life, opens up paths, calls others. Walking together, they chose to walk together: let us always remember that “in order to ‘journey together’, we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process”, because “synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word”[1].

At times I get a bit scared when we talk about the synodal spirit and immediately one thinks, “Now they have to change this, this and this...”, and we close up again in another way. No, the journey in a synodal spirit is listening, praying and walking. Then, the Lord will tell us the things we must do. I have seen in some proposals: “No we must make this decision, this one, this, this...”. No, this is not the synodal path. This is “parliament”. Let us not forget that the synodal journey is made by the Holy Spirit: He is the head of the synodal journey, He is the protagonist. And women, in this dynamic, go ahead with the Pastors, even when many times you do not feel valued or at times understood, you are willing to listen, to encounter, to engage in dialogue, to make plans together. Open, with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

And the third aspect: *sowers of hope*. Today this little humble virtue that is hope is missing; we miss it a lot. We have worldly versions: optimism, high common sense... No, hope, the smallest but the strongest of the virtues, that which never disappoints, it never disappoints. And you must be sowers of hope, which is not the same thing as being sowers of optimism, no, of hope, which is something else. The encounter with the Risen Jesus fills: “this means that we are to be God’s leaven in the midst of humanity”. In other words, “it means proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way” (*ibid.*, 114). “Challenges exist to be overcome”: the limited vocations, the interculturality of communities of consecrated life, the problem of works (but works are not the charism, beware!). Sometimes we find people who, faced with works, end badly, like slaves to their works, without the freedom that the Spirit gives to go forward. Sisters, remain faithful to your calling because the Lord is faithful. The calling, faithful response and hope, go ahead with hope. “Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment” (*ibid.*, 109). Your many projects tell of this devotion filled with hope. Continue on this path! Hope is very important to go forward.

So, we have seen three steps of women and witnesses of the Risen One. If a consecrated sister does not bear witness to the Risen One, her life ends there. Secondly, the synodal path, listening, looking at reality, touching reality, not being “in orbit”. And this is the third, sowers of hope. Dear sisters, inspired by the theme of your Assembly, I have permitted myself to turn it upside down a little, to arrive at the end to tell you that the Lord calls you to be “women witnesses of the Risen One, on the synodal path and sowers of hope”, with renewed enthusiasm.

The synodal path is not about having answers and making decisions. The synodal path is walking, listening – listening! – feeling, and going forward. The synodal path is not a parliament; the synodal path is not a collection of opinions. The synodal path is setting out to listen to life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is the protagonist of the Synod. And you go along this road with renewed enthusiasm, as women witnesses of the Risen One.

I bless you from my heart, and I entrust to the Lord and to Mary Most Holy each one of you, and every one of the consecrated women who live their mission in Italy, so that they may be witnesses in the Church and in society.

I would like to say something at the end: beware of the ailments of consecrated life, because they exist. I would like to underline one which goes against everything we have said: bitterness. That spirit of acidity within. Bitter. Always looking at the difficulties, always making a monument out of “yes, but...”, always repeating that things are not going well... But bitterness is the devil’s liquor: the devil cooks us from within, with this liquor. I am not talking about optimism: optimism is a psychological matter. I am talking about hope, openness to the Spirit, and this is theological, and a religious vocation must go on this path. But when we cultivate vinegar instead of sugar, something isn’t working. Bitterness, the acidity of the heart, does a great deal of harm. Please, when you see this in a community or in a sister, help them to come out of the situation; help them to come out of the situation of melancholy people who are always thinking, “Ah, the past times were better! Things aren’t going well, and here and there...”. This is the devil’s elixir, that bitterness, the liquor of bitterness. Please, none of that! Just let it be the Spirit who gives us that sweetness, which is a spiritual sweetness.

I wish you the best, and I ask you a favour: always pray for me, as usual. Because this job is not easy at all! Thank you.

[1] *Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (7 September 2021), no. 9.
