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Audience with participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Dear National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies and all associated with the Dicastery for Evangelization,

Brothers and sisters, good morning!

I greet you with joy on the occasion of the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies. I greet the Cardinal Pro-Prefect, the President – Archbishop Nappa – and all of you who work and serve in the Church's mission of evangelization.

At this moment of history, as we carry the synodal process forward, it is important to remember that the Christian community is missionary by its very nature. In fact, every Christian has received the gift of the Holy Spirit and is sent forth to continue the work of Jesus, announcing the joy of the Gospel to all and bringing his consolation to the various situations of our often wounded history. Those who allow themselves to be drawn by the love of Christ, thus becoming his disciples, also experience the desire to bring to everyone the mercy and compassion flowing from his heart. Missionary work does not come naturally, for we always tend to prefer life to be comfortable, with everything in order. It was necessary, then, for the Holy Spirit to come and make the tremendous "disorder" that was the day of Pentecost. This is because, in order to initiate missionary outreach, to

create the life of the Church, the Spirit is first the creator of confusion and then draws out harmony. Both are of the Holy Spirit.

I want to invite you to contemplate the heart of Jesus, whose Solemnity occurs in this month of June. In gazing upon his merciful and compassionate heart, we can reflect on the charism and mission of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

1. *The heart of Jesus and mission.* First of all, as we contemplate the heart of Christ, we discover the greatness of God's plan for humanity. Indeed, the Father "so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3:16). In the pierced heart of the Crucified we can discover the infinite measure of the Father's love: he loves us with eternal love; he calls us to be his sons and daughters and to share in the joy that comes from Him. He comes to seek us when we are lost; he lifts us up when we fall and raises us from the dead. Jesus himself speaks to us about the love of the Father in this way when, for example, he affirms: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me" (*Jn* 6:39).

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus shows us this throughout his life: in his compassion for those who are wounded, in his concern when faced with suffering, in the mercy with which he anoints sinners, in his sacrifice for the sins of the world. He has shown us the heart of God, that of a Father who always awaits us, sees us from afar, comes toward us with open arms; a Father who turns no one away, but welcomes all; who excludes no one, but calls everyone. I once enjoyed a pop-style youth play about the parable of the prodigal son. At one point in the play, the prodigal son tells a friend that he misses his father. "I mean, I would like to go back, because I miss my father, but I can't, surely he won't accept me". The friend then tells him: "Write him a letter, telling him that you want to go home; apologize and say that if he wishes to welcome you back, he should take a white handkerchief and display it on the window of the house". The play continues and towards the end, when the son is still on his way home, we see that the house is awash with white handkerchiefs. This tells us that God's love, God's forgiveness, is without measure. We too must confidently travel along that same path.

We have been sent to continue this mission: to be signs of the heart of Christ and the love of the Father, embracing the whole world. Here we find the "heart" of the evangelical mission of the Church: to reach all through the gift of God's infinite love, to seek all, to welcome all, excluding no one, to offer our lives for all. *All!* That is the key word. What does Jesus tell us in the parable about the wedding banquet (cf. *Mt* 22:1-14) – which went wrong because the guests did not come... one was concerned with his farm, another had to travel, a third was getting married, and so on – what does the Lord tell us? He says, Go to the crossroads and invite everyone, *everyone*: those who are healthy, sick, bad, good, sinners... all. This is the heart of mission: that "all", excluding no one. Every mission of ours, then, is born from the heart of Christ in order that he may draw all to himself. This was the mystical and missionary spirit of Blessed Pauline Marie Jaricot, the foundress of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, who was very devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

2. *The charism of the Pontifical Mission Societies today.* In this perspective, I want to reiterate what I emphasized in the Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, in recalling the vocation of the Societies to be "instruments for promoting responsibility for the missions on the part of all the baptized and for the support of new particular Churches" (art. 67 § 1).

The Societies, therefore, are not a mere agency for the distribution of funds for those in need of help, but a reality called to support the "mission of evangelization in the Church, both universal and local" and to "fostering the missionary spirit among the People of God" (*Message for World Mission Day 2022*, n. 3). I urge you, therefore, to intensify even more, with the boldness and creativity of the Holy Spirit, the various activities directed to guiding, educating and forming the missionary spirit. I invite you to promote the missionary responsibility of the baptized, supporting the capillary network of national offices, both in newly evangelized countries and those of ancient Christian tradition, who perhaps need another first evangelization; the latter, we know, are marked by a serious crisis of faith and are in need of renewed evangelization and pastoral conversion. Please do not reduce the Societies to money! They certainly need money, which is a means, but do not reduce them to that, for they are bigger than money. Money is what we need to move forward. Yet if spirituality is missing and they

become merely a business, then immediately corruption arises. Indeed, even in these days, we have seen newspaper reports of alleged corruption having occurred in the name of the Church's missionary work.

3. *Prospects and dreams for renewal.* In light of all this, allow me finally to dream with you, "with eyes wide open", that is to say, to look far ahead with you, towards those horizons to which the Pontifical Mission Societies are called to advance at the service of the evangelizing mission of the whole Church.

The greatest dream is that of an ever closer and more coordinated missionary cooperation among all members of the Church. In this endeavour you have an important role, of which we are reminded by Father Manna's motto for the Pontifical Missionary Union: "The whole Church for the whole world". I confirm you in your call to become leaven, to help promote and foster a missionary style in the Church and support the works of evangelization.

This call, which requires in you a particular aptitude for cultivating communion and fraternity, is also realized through the structures established in all Episcopal Conferences and Dioceses for the good of the entire People of God. It is significant that the founders of the Societies were a bishop, a priest and two laywomen, that is to say, representatives of different categories of the baptized. This is a sign that commits us to involve all members of the People of God in missionary activity! Let us not stop dreaming of "a new era of missionary activity among Christian communities" (*Message for World Mission Day 2022*, 3). Please, let us keep this dream alive!

I thank those of you here and all your co-workers for your generous service, often performed "behind the scenes" and amid many difficulties. I wish you always to burn with apostolic zeal and to be animated by a passion for evangelization. Bear the Gospel with joy, that it may spread throughout the world, and may Our Lady accompany you as a Mother! I bless you from my heart. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.
