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TO THE ORDER OF VIRGINS

Personal journeys in holiness at service of all

On Thursday, 15 May, 2008, in the Vatican's Clementine Hall, the Holy Father spoke to 500 consecrated virgins from 52 countries who were taking part in the International Congress-Pilgrimage of the *Ordo Virginum*, the Order of Virgins. The following is a translation of the Pope's Address, which was given in Italian.

Very Dear Sisters,

I greet and welcome with joy each one of you, consecrated with the "*solemn consecration as a bride of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (*Rite of Consecration to a life of virginity for women living in the world*) [RCV] n. 17), on the occasion of the International Pilgrimage and Congress of the *Ordo Virginum*, for which you are gathered in Rome during these days. In particular, I greet and thank Cardinal Franc Rode for his cordial greeting and his dedication to this initiative, while I address my heartfelt thanks to the Organizing Committee.

In choosing the theme for these days, you were inspired by one of my affirmations which sums up what I have already had the opportunity to say concerning your state as women who live consecrated virginity in the world: *A gift in the Church and for the Church*.

In this light I would like to strengthen you in your vocation and invite you to develop, from day to day, your understanding of a charism that is as luminous and fruitful in the eyes of the faith as it is obscure and futile to those of the world.

"Imitate the Mother of God; desire to be called and to be handmaids of the Lord." [RCV, n.16] The Order of Virgins is a special expression of consecrated life that blossomed anew in the Church after the Second Vatican Council (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, n. 7). Its roots, however, are ancient; they date back to the dawn of apostolic times when, with unheard of daring, certain women began to open their hearts to the desire for consecrated virginity, in other words, to the desire to give the whole of their being to God, which had had its first extraordinary fulfillment in the Virgin of Nazareth and her "yes".

In the thought of the Fathers, Mary was the prototype of Christian virgins and their perception highlighted the newness of this new state of life, to which a free choice of love gave access.

"They have chosen You [Lord] above all things; may they find all things in possessing You". (cf. RCV, n. 24). Your charism must reflect the intensity but also the freshness of its origins. It is founded on the simple Gospel invitation: "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it" (Mt. 19:12), and on St. Paul's recommendations of virginity for the Kingdom (I Cor 7:25-35). Yet the whole of the Christian mystery shines out in it.

Christian mystery in Christ's brides

When your charism came into being, it did not take shape in accordance with specific ways of life. Rather, it was institutionalized little by little until it became a true and proper solemn, public consecration, conferred by the Bishop in an evocative liturgical rite which made the consecrated woman the *sponsa Christi*, an image of the Church as Bride.

Dearest friends, your vocation is deeply rooted in the particular Church to which you belong; it is your Bishops' task to recognize the charism of virginity in you, to consecrate you and, possibly, to encourage you on your way, in order to *teach you the fear of the Lord*, as they commit themselves to do during the solemn liturgy of consecration.

May you open yourselves in your dialogue with God to a dialogue with all creatures, for whom you will find you are mothers, mothers of the children of God. (cf. RCV, n. 28).

However, your ideal, truly lofty in itself, demands no special external change. Each consecrated woman normally remains in her own life context. It is a way that seems to lack the specific characteristics of religious life, and above all that of obedience.

From the sphere of the Diocese with its traditions, its Saints, its values, its limits and its problems, you broaden your horizons to the universal Church, sharing above all in her liturgical prayer, which is also entrusted to you so that *"the praise of our heavenly Father be always on your lips; pray without ceasing"*, (RCV, n. 28). In this way your prayerful "I" will gradually be enlarged, until there is no longer anything except a great "we" in the prayer. This is ecclesial prayer and the true liturgy.

For you, however, love becomes the *sequela*: your charism entails a total gift to Christ, an assimilation of the Bridegroom who implicitly asks for observance of the evangelical counsels in order to keep your fidelity to Him unstained (cf. RCV, n. 26). Being with Christ demands interiority, but at the same time opens a person to communicating with the brethren: your mission is grafted on this.

Sisters, despite your differences

An essential "rule of life" defines the commitment that each one of you assumes, with the Bishop's consent, at both the spiritual and existential levels. These are personal journeys. There are among you different approaches and different ways of living the gift of consecrated virginity and this becomes much more obvious in the course of an international meeting such as this, which has gathered you together during these days.

I urge you to go beyond external appearances, experiencing the mystery of God's tenderness which each one of you bears in herself and recognizing one another as sisters, even in your diversity.

"That your whole life may be a faithful witness of God's love and a convincing sign of the Kingdom of heaven", (RCV n. 17). Take care always to radiate the dignity of being a bride of Christ, expressing the newness of Christian existence and the serene expectation of future life. Thus, with your own upright life you will be stars to guide the world on its journey.

The choice of virginal life, in fact, is a reference to the transient nature of earthly things and an anticipation of future rewards. Be witnesses of attentive and lively expectation, of joy and of the peace that characterizes those who abandon themselves to God's love. May you be present in the world, yet pilgrims bound for the Kingdom.

Indeed, the consecrated virgin is identified with that bride who, in unison with the Spirit, invokes the coming of the Lord: *"The Spirit and the Bride say: 'Come'"* (Rv 22:17).

As I take my leave of you, I entrust you to Mary; and I make my own the words of St. Ambrose who sang the praises of Christian virginity, addressing them to you: "May there be in each one the soul of Mary to magnify the Lord; may there be in each one the Spirit of Mary to exult in God. If there is only one Mother of Christ according to the flesh, Christ on the other hand, according to the faith, is the fruit of all, since every soul receives the Word of God so that, immaculate and immune to vice, she may preserve her chastity with irreproachable modesty" (*Comment on St. Luke 2, 26: Pl.15, 1642*).

With this heartfelt wish, I bless you.

Pope Benedict XVI