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Audience with participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life.

The following is his address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I welcome you at the end of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. I thank the prefect, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, for his words of presentation. I greet the secretary, Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, and all the members of the Dicastery, present and absent. So many Cardinals in the dicastery, it seems almost like a conclave!

I thank you for all the work you are doing in the service of consecrated life in the universal Church. I would like to say: at the service of the Gospel, because everything we do is at the service of the Gospel, and you in particular serve that “gospel” which is consecrated life, so that it may be such, that it may be the gospel for today’s world. I want to express my gratitude and I want to encourage you, because I know that your task is not easy. That is why I want to express my closeness to all those who believe in the future of consecrated life. I am close to you.

I think back to the spirit that animated Saint John Paul II when he convoked the Synod of Bishops on this theme: on the one hand there was the awareness of a time of travail, of innovative experiences not always with positive results (cf. Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 13); there was, and there is even more now, the reality of the decline in numbers in various parts of the world; but above all hope prevailed, and prevails, founded on the beauty of the gift that is the consecrated life (cf. *ibid.*). This is what is decisive: focusing on God’s gift, on

the gratuitousness of his call, on the transforming power of his Word and his Spirit. With this attitude I encourage you and all those who, in the various institutes and in the particular Churches, help consecrated men and women, starting from a “Deuteronomic” memory, to look to the future with confidence. Why do I say Deuteronomic memory? Because it is very important to remember. That message of Deuteronomy: “Remember Israel, remember”. That memory of history, of one's own history, of one's own institution. That memory of the roots. And that makes us grow. When we lose that memory, that memory of the wonders that God has done in the Church, in our institute, in my life - everyone can say that - we lose strength and we will not be able to give life. That is why I say *deuteronomic* memory.

I think that your service, today more than ever, can be summed up in two words: discerning and accompanying. I know the multiplicity of situations you have to deal with on a daily basis. Situations that are often complex, requiring in-depth study, in their history, in dialogue with the Superiors of the institutes and with the pastors. This is the serious and patient work of discernment, which can only be carried out within the horizon of faith and prayer. Discerning and accompanying. Accompany especially the recently founded communities, which are also more exposed to the risk of self-referentiality.

And in this regard, there is an essential criterion of discernment: the ability of a community, of an institute, “to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 130). Is this institute capable of integrating itself into the life of God’s holy and faithful people, or not? This criterion is decisive for discernment. Consecrated life is born in the Church, it grows and can bear evangelical fruit only in the Church, in the living communion of the faithful people of God. Therefore, “the faithful have the right to be warned by the Pastors about the authenticity of charisms and the reliability of those who present themselves as founders” (Motu Proprio *Authenticum charismatis*, 1 November 2020).

In discerning and accompanying, there are certain attentions that must always be kept alive. Attention to the founders, who sometimes tend to be self-referential, to feel that they are the sole custodians or interpreters of the charism, as if they were above the Church. Attention to the pastoral care of vocations and the formation proposed to candidates. Attention to the way in which the service of authority is exercised, with particular regard to the separation between the internal and external forums - a matter of great concern to me -, to the duration of mandates and the accumulation of powers. And attention to abuses of authority and power. On this last theme I had in my hands a recently published book by Salvatore Cernuzio on the problem of abuses, but not the glaring abuses, on the everyday abuses that hurt the strength of the vocation.

With regard to discernment in view of the approval of new institutes, new forms of consecrated life or new communities, I invite you to develop collaboration with the diocesan bishops. And I urge the Pastors not to be frightened and to fully welcome your accompaniment. It is the responsibility of the Pastor to accompany and, at the same time, accept this service. This collaboration, this synergy between the dicastery and the bishops also makes it possible to avoid - as the Council asks - the inappropriate creation of institutes without sufficient motivation or adequate vigour (cf. Decree *Perfectae caritatis*, 19), perhaps with good will, but with something missing. Your service is valuable in trying to provide pastors and the people of God with valid criteria for discernment.

Mutual listening between the offices of the Holy See and the pastors, as well as the Superiors General, is an essential aspect of the synodal journey we have begun. But in a broader and more fundamental sense, I would say that consecrated men and women are called to offer an important contribution in this process: a contribution for which they draw - or should draw - from familiarity with the practice of fraternity and sharing both in community life and in apostolic commitment.

At the beginning I spoke about “Deuteronomic memory”, and I am reminded, with regard to the memory of roots, of what Malachi says: what is God's punishment? When God wants to annihilate a person, annihilate a people, or - let's say - an institution, he makes it remain - says Malachi – “without roots and without buds”. If we do not have this Deuteronomic memory and do not have the courage to take from it the sap to grow, we will not even have buds. A powerful curse: to be rootless and budless.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for the daily work you carry out in discernment and accompaniment. May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady protect you. And please - as the Spanish say – "*paso la gorra*" [I ask for alms] and I ask you to pray for me because I need it. I wish you a happy Advent journey, and Merry Christmas!