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Audience with members of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré (Premonstratensians) on the occasion of the ninth centenary of the founding of the Abbey of Prémontré

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Canons Regular of Prémontré (Premonstratensians), on the occasion of the ninth centenary of the founding of the Abbey of Prémontré, to whom he addressed the following discourse:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome!

I thank the Abbot General for his words. I greet you all, and am pleased to meet you, with a year's delay. Indeed, last year you celebrated nine hundred years since the first profession of Saint Norbert and his first companions in Prémontré, on Christmas Day 1121. This event marked the birth of the Order of Premonstratensians,

This small village in the north of France thus became the forge in which your proto-community took shape. Already in its first century, the fledgling Order experienced extraordinary growth all over Europe. The different communities, associated with that of Prémontré, each had their own features, their own style. Thus, the Order of which Norbert laid the foundations became a federation of autonomous and stable communities. After all, Canons Regular make profession in a specific Church, rooted in a particular place.

The history of religious Orders often reveals a certain tension between the founder and his foundation. And this is good, because when this tension is not present, the founder takes everything with him, and the institute dies with the founder. The tension makes the community, the religious order grow. Saint Norbert, for example, was a missionary, an itinerant preacher, and as Archbishop of Magdeburg, he planned the evangelization of the borders of the then-Germanic empire. This raises the question of how Saint Norbert's missionary charism could be translated in stable communities linked to a given place.

In the coming years, many abbeys and monasteries of your Order will celebrate the ninth centenary of their founding. This fact makes your reflection even more utile, indeed necessary. The organization of the Order has favoured great stability over the centuries. Many of your monasteries and abbeys are deeply linked to happy events and to ordeals, and to the entire history of a particular region. This symbiosis already gives us an insight into how stability and mission, life in a place and evangelization can go hand in hand.

The presence of a community of sisters or brothers is a like a shining beacon in the surrounding environment. And yet, people also know that religious communities do not always fully respond to the life to which they are called. Concrete Christian experience is made up of good intentions and errors; it consists of starting over again, and again, and again. Do not be ashamed of this! It is the way. It is not for nothing that, in your canonical profession, you promise to lead a life of conversion and communion. Without conversion there is no communion. And this very restarting and conversion to fraternity is a clear witness to the Gospel, more so than many sermons.

The common and faithful celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist lead you back continually to the source of communion. The liturgy is at the centre of the spirituality of the Canons Regular, and involves the entire people of God. Besides, the prayer of the Church knows no bounds. Fidelity to common prayer, which is the prayer of Christ, has in itself a great apostolic value. It helps to open the hearts and minds of all; and this openness is expressed in the public and accessible nature of the celebrations in your churches. Faithful and passers-by are welcome and involved in the prayerful community. The culture of fraternal coexistence, of community prayer, which also makes room for personal prayer, is the foundation of true “missionary hospitality”, which aims to make “strangers” become brothers and sisters.

Throughout the course of history, many Premonstratensians were missionaries, embodying more clearly the missionary spirit of Saint Norbert. The history of mission is a history of courage and self-denial, out of love. Little by little, the realization grew that mission, in your Order, could involve the constitution of new stable communities in mission lands. And in this way, new monasteries and abbeys grew up in contexts very different from the European one. The challenge was to focus on the essential and to subject traditional forms to a just critique, to distinguish what is necessary and universal from what should be adapted to circumstance.

Today, your historical foundations in Europe are invited to rethink their history. To the extent that you relive, so to speak, your beginnings, you can understand what your fundamental inspiration is. Do not forget: being an Order means learning from each other; it means that federated communities, in their autonomy, must cultivate a fraternal interest in all the other communities. This is for you a way of living the Catholicity of the Church. Each community maintains its own identity, often determined by its origins and its history, and therefore no community can claim to impose its own identity on the others. Rather, it means recognizing how much is shared as an expression of the common charism.

The Canons Regular are missionaries because, by virtue of their charism, they always seek to start out from the Gospel and the practical needs of the people. A population is not an abstraction. It is made up of people we know: communities, families, individuals with a real face. They are linked to the abbey or to the monastery because they live and work in the same region. At times they share a long common history with your communities. And having the capacity to be culturally integrated in the people, and to enter into dialogue with the people, and not deny the people from whom we have come, this is a charism that continually grounds us in reality.

In a real sense, the missionary impetus of a Premonstratensian house is translated into concrete decisions in the social, economic and cultural fields. The economic activity of a religious community is aimed at the sustenance of its members, their formation, and their apostolate. For many of you there is often the maintenance and conservation of cultural and architectural heritage. Economic activities serve the mission and the realization of the charism: it is never an end in itself, but orientated towards a spiritual goal. It can never contradict the purpose it serves. This means that when the means to an income is selected, it is necessary to ask: what is the impact on the people of the area? What will the consequences be for the poor, for our guests, for visitors? Are our choices an expression of evangelical simplicity? And this will be the question, won't it? – do they foster

welcome and fraternal life? Here we see how decisions in the economic field must be harmonized with the mission, with the people, with the community, not the opposite, no? When in a religious order, perhaps also in a diocese, economic activity takes the upper hand and everything goes forward, the people are immediately forgotten, and we forget what Jesus said: what you cannot serve two masters. “Either you serve God” – I expected him to say “or the devil”, right? He does not say “the devil” – “or money”. The idolatry of money. This distances us from our true vocation. This is why there are always these questions. The consequences... what are the consequences for the poor, for our guests, for visitors who see our economic activity? Are our economic choices an expression of evangelical simplicity, or are we already entrepreneurs? Do they foster welcome and fraternal life? And one cannot serve two masters. Be careful. The devil usually enters via our pockets.

We must also ask ourselves what the consequences are for the environment. The stability of the community and its long experience help to foresee the long-term consequences. Sustainability is a key criterion, as is social justice. As an employer, an abbey or a monastery can take into consideration the hiring of people who have difficulty finding employment, or collaborate with an agency specialized in social engagement. A wise openness to the sharing of cultural assets, gardens and natural areas can contribute to the dynamism of a larger area. Besides, it is part of your tradition to take account of the environment and the people who inhabit it with you. This creates the conditions for an effective pastoral ministry and a credible proclamation of the Gospel. Economic and social choices are not separate from the mission. Even contacts with public bodies and various companies, as well as a community’s investments, can contribute to developing good initiatives. May the reciprocal contacts within the Order keep your outlook open, fostering solidarity between communities and attention to the context in which each one of them lives and bears witness to the Gospel.

Alongside this concern for good management, it is necessary to exercise this concern for those who are outside the social network, for those who are marginalized due to extreme poverty or fragility and, for this reason, difficult to reach. Some needs can be alleviated only through charity, a first step towards better integration into society.

Many Premonstratensians have served as parish priests, teachers and missionaries. They live on in the memory of your communities, as in the parishes, schools and villages where they have served. They constitute the lifeblood of your tradition, as echoed in the motto of your Jubilee: “Together, with God, with the people”.

Following in the footsteps of Saint Norbert, the piety of the Premonstratensians reserves an increasingly central place for the Eucharist, both in the solemn and intimate community celebration, and in silent worship. Precisely as he is present *for us* in the Sacrament, so the Lord wants to be present *through us* in the life of those we meet. May you, brothers and sisters, become what you celebrate, receive and worship: the body of Christ, and in him a hearth of communion at which many can be warmed.

The first profession of Norbert and his disciples, on the day of the Holy Nativity, will always link your Order to the Mystery of Incarnation. May the simplicity and the poverty of Bethlehem inspire in you the sense of human brotherhood. May the maternal presence of Mary Most Holy guide you on the path of faith and caring charity. Her prayer with the disciples accompanied the birth of the apostolic Church, which has always inspired your way of living. May the Mother of Christ and the Church help us to become fully human, so as to be credible witnesses to the Gospel of salvation.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten you on your path and in your service to the Church. I heartily bless all of you and your communities. And, as the Abbot General said, pray for me. Thank you!
