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Audience with participants in the 19th General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word (Verbites)

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 19th General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word (Verbites), on the theme: “Your light must shine before others” (*Mt 5:16*).

The following is the address delivered by the Pope to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

A special greeting to the Superior General, who has just been appointed Archbishop of Ende in Indonesia.

You have chosen a significant theme for your General Chapter: “*Your Light Must Shine Before Others (Mt 5:16): Faithful and Creative Disciples in a Wounded World*.” A Chapter is a pause for reflection on a Congregation’s charism and mission. Since you are the Society of the Divine Word, in these days you are returning to the source of your identity: the Lord Jesus, the Word of salvation.

God’s Word generates, gives life, inspires, and motivates; it is the focal point of your mission. That Word, which took flesh in Jesus, revealed the face of the Father and his merciful love. In this way, the Word incarnate became the light of the world, who then commanded his disciples, “Let your light shine before others” (*Mt 5:16*). How does this happen? By being with him and going forth, abiding in his love and bearing witness to him. Evangelization is only possible through this way, and “demands familiarity with God’s word” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 175). This, brothers and sisters, is the source from which you are always born and reborn as *faithful disciples and creative missionaries*. Let us pause for a moment to reflect on these two aspects.

Faithful disciples. All of the baptized are called to be missionary disciples, and fidelity to this vocation, always by the grace of God, is our commitment. Faithful disciples are recognized by the joy of the Gospel that lights up their face, from the way they live their life and thus transmit to others the love that they first received and continue to receive anew each day. Experiencing the love of the Trinity and keeping alive the flame of the Spirit is vital to our growth as missionary disciples and religious. That flame daily renews us; it purifies and transforms us as we make our pilgrim way, ever conscious of our sins, amid the blandishments of this world. Yet, you have to be courageous and confident in the mercy of God, who always forgives. We, too, must always forgive and never deny absolution.

Creative missionaries. What is the source of your creativity? Good and healthy creativity, not one that is always superficial, self-referential, and worldly. Instead, sound missionary work comes from the Word and the Spirit, that is, from Christ living within you, who makes you sharers. It is he, not we, who attracts hearts to himself! The Spirit is the “protagonist”, while our role consists in working with all our might, employing all our talents in the certainty that the Creator Spirit is always at work, whereas we are called to be his docile instruments, “channels” that transparently reflect his presence. You serve in seventy-nine different countries: you are there to proclaim the Gospel and “make present in the world the kingdom of God” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 176). This, as you well know, is done more by spreading joy than by imposing obligations. Creative missionary activities are born of love for the Word of God; and creativity is born of contemplation and discernment. While our personal initiatives are good, creative activity on the part of the community is better for the unity and strength of the Church.

Dear brothers, I thank you because your Chapter’s “guidelines” allow me to highlight some pressing current issues.

First: the need to be *peacemakers*. Our world is scarred by conflicts, wars, destruction of the environment, violent acts against human life and dignity, fundamentalist ideologies, and many other wounds. Peace is the cry rising from the world’s peoples. Let us listen to this plea and become peacemakers! The risen Jesus repeatedly said to the apostles: “Peace be with you” (*Jn* 20:19, 21, 26). He wants them to be sowers of peace, saying “Peace be with you”. To which he added, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (v. 21). Let us bring the peace of Christ to all, especially to the poor, migrants who suffer much, women who face discrimination, children, and the marginalized. God heard the cry of an enslaved people (cf. *Ex*3:9); may we not close our ears to the cry of those who are oppressed in our own day, and prove creative in fostering peace.

The second urgent need: *to be the hope for every culture*. You must be the hope for every culture. On the eve of the Jubilee Year, in this wounded world, our communities must become signs of hope. This is prophetic. It means that, before *giving* hope, we need to *be* hope, exercising the character that derives from our baptism. In your case, consecration in accordance with your original charism confirms and strengthens those baptismal gifts and impels you to become committed witnesses in the various social and cultural settings where you find yourselves, “being prophetic hope *for every culture*.” This is a great challenge! Only the Church can respond to it, because from the beginning she has been enlivened by the Spirit of Pentecost. I like to read in the Acts of the Apostles about what the Holy Spirit does. There is confusion, everyone is talking, but they all understand each other! So many times in confusing situations, the Spirit takes the Church forward. Do not be afraid of conflicts! Do not create conflicts, but don’t be afraid of conflicts either. Do not be afraid of the confusion of today’s culture. The Spirit can enter there. “Be the hope for every culture”. You are experts in *inculturation*, one of the fruits of your charism. In the course of the years, you have learned to live your missionary vocation by showing respect for all cultures and peoples. Yet discernment is needed. Today, the internet and social media, approached uncritically, are influencing people’s lifestyles and values. Saint John Paul II, on the other hand, called us to shape “a new culture of love and of hope inspired by the truth that frees us in Christ Jesus. This is the goal of inculturation.”[1] It takes discernment, so ask the Holy Spirit for this grace of discernment.

Now, a third aspect: to be *missionaries of synodality*. A Church that “goes forth” is open to others. It is a welcoming and embracing community where the Lord lives and the Spirit is active. The Church that goes out is extroverted, while a partisan Church is introverted. Always be open, put your heart into it! Today the Church must grow in a synodal approach, listening to everyone, dialoguing with everyone, and discerning in the Holy Spirit what is her mission. Synodality is not a question of being in fashion. “Synodality is essentially missionary and, vice versa, mission is always synodal” (*Message for World Mission Day*, 20 October 2024). For this reason,

I encourage you to promote synodality in every aspect of your life. May every community grow and enjoy a synodal “style” whereby each member feels listened to and accepted. Finally, do as the Spirit tells you, but be sure to be sensitive to the way the Spirit moves: gently, among the simple and in the most distant places.

Dear brothers and sisters, in 2025 you will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Society of the Divine Word. Your hearts are filled with gratitude to God for his immense love, which has moved you to go to every part of the world to preach the Word and to spread the love of God, forming communities, serving the poor, working for social justice, offering education and empowerment, and caring for the environment. In this spirit of gratitude, you are now reflecting on how to share creatively the joy of Jesus’ resurrection. Saint Arnold Janssen knew how to discern God’s will and to guide the Society in the way of the Spirit. This is the charism of a founder! Today, may you follow this charism, and may his example and intercession guide your communal discernment and help you to take courageous steps forward, in humility and in trusting abandonment to God. I thank you for who you are and for all that you do. I offer you my heartfelt blessing, and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you.

1Address to Participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 10 January 1992.
