

"Rejoice..."

**Letter to Religious,
towards the special Year for the Consecrated Life**

Circular Letter from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life
and Societies of Apostolic Life

Words from the teaching of Pope Francis

"I want to share a message, and the message is joy.
Wherever consecrated persons are, there must always be joy".

Pope Francis

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus.
With Jesus Christ joy is always born and reborn. "

The opening of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* resonates, like the rest of Pope Francis' teaching, with notable vitality: it recalls the wondrous mystery of the Good News which transforms life when it is welcomed in the heart. It tells a parable of joy: how the encounter with Jesus revives in us our original beauty, a beauty that radiates the glory of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:6), whose fruit is joy.

This Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life invites religious to reflect in this time of grace the special invitation extended by the Pope to those in consecrated life.

To accept this teaching will mean renewing our life according to the Gospel, not using a model of perfection focussed on radical separation, but as reaching out with all our hearts to encounter salvation as a life-transforming event. "It is about leaving everything to follow the Lord. But the term radical does not apply to religious only. The call to evangelical radicalism is made to everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. I look to you for this testimony. Religious need to be men and women capable of awakening the world."

Within the limits of our human condition and amid everyday concerns, when consecrated persons live with fidelity and express their joy, they offer luminous testimony, an effective message of accompaniment and closeness for women and men of our time looking to the Church as their proper home. Taking the gospel as his way of

life, Francis of Assisi "made the faith grow and renewed the Church; and at the same time renewed society, made it more fraternal, but always through witnessing the Gospel. *Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary also with words.*"

As we listen to Pope Francis' words we are challenged, among other things, by the simplicity with which he proposes his teaching, following the simple style of the Gospel: words without gloss, sown with the generous gesture of a confident seed-sower who does not leave any part of the field unsown. He issues a strong invitation that inspires confidence, an invitation to renounce institutional arguments and self-justifications. He poses provocative questions about our way of living, which can be drowsy and uncommitted. Often he repeats the challenge *If you have faith like a mustard seed* (Luke 17: 5). His invitation encourages us to raise our spirits so as to give reason to the Word dwelling among us, and to the Spirit who constantly creates and renews the Church.

This *Circular Letter* responds to that invitation and wants to start a shared reflection and promote sincere interaction between the Gospel and Life. The Congregation hopes to open up a journey of sharing and reflection, personal, fraternal, and at the level of institutes, towards 2015 - the year dedicated by the Church to the consecrated life - with the aim of prompting daring evangelical decisions that will bear fruits of renewal and joy. "God's primary desire is to give fullness of joy and meaning to human existence, since we were made for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in him."

Rejoice, rejoice, be full of joy...

Rejoice, Jerusalem, Rejoice with her, all who love her, rejoice in their joy, who mourned for her;

For thus says the Lord: "I will send peace to her like a river, the wealth of nations like a mighty flood.

They shall be carried in his arms and cherished on his knees. Like a child whom his mother comforts, so will I will comfort ye, and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

Seeing this your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like a meadow. The hand of the Lord shall be revealed to his servants."

Isaiah 66.10-14

Listening

The term joy (Hebrew: *śimhâ/śamh*) Holy Scripture expresses a multiplicity of experiences, both shared and private, relating in particular to religious worship and festivals, recognizing the sense of God's presence in the history of Israel. In the Bible

there are thirteen different verbs and nouns to describe the joy of God, the joy of the person and also the joy of creation, in the dialogue of salvation.

In the Old Testament we find many of these terms, especially in the Psalms and in the prophet Isaiah. With a creative and original linguistic richness it often invites us to joy, and this joy is linked to the nearness of God, so that we rejoice at the work of his hands. The Psalms so many expressions point to joy either as a result of the gracious presence of God and his glory, which resonates with the great promise for the future of his people. In the second and third part of the book of Isaiah we often find this reference to joy oriented towards the future: it will be overflowing (Is 9:2), the sky, the desert and the earth will exult with joy (Is 35.1; 44.23, 49.13); released prisoners will enter Jerusalem with shouts of joy (Is 35,9 f, 51,11)

Within the New Testament this special word occurs in various forms of the root *char* (*chàirein, chara*), along with other terms such as *agalliáomai, euphrosyne*, and usually implies fullness of joy, embracing both the past and the future. Joy is the messianic gift par excellence, just as Jesus himself prays that *My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete* (Jn 15,11; 16.24, 17.13). From the events preceding the birth of the Savior, Luke underlines the spreading of exultant joy (cf. Lk 1,14.44.47, 2.10; Cf. Mt 2:10), and shows how it accompanied the spread of the Good News (cf. Lk 10:17; 24,41.52) Joy is the typical sign of the presence and spread of the Kingdom (cf. Lk 15,7.10.32, Acts 8.39, 11.23, 15, 3; 16.34 cf Rm 15,10,13, etc).

In Paul, joy is the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22), a typical and clear note of the Kingdom (cf. Rom 14:17), which is reinforced even amid trials and tribulation (cf. 1 Th 1:6). In prayer, in charity, in ceaseless thanksgiving (cf. 1 Th 5:16; Phil 3:1, Col 1.11) we see the source of joy despite tribulation. The Apostle of the Gentiles feels full of joy and a partaker in the glory that await all (cf. 2 Cor 6.10, 7.4, Col 1.24). The final triumph of God and the Lamb will bring all joy and rejoicing to completion (cf. Rev 19:7), with a cosmic Hallelujah (Rev 19:6)

To grasp the full meaning of that text, we now offer a brief explanation of the words of Isaiah 66.10: *Rejoice Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all who love her. Be filled with joy for her.* This is the end of the third part of Isaiah. It should be borne in mind that chapters 65-66 are closely linked and complement each other, as noted in the conclusion of the second part (chapters 54-55).

Both these chapters evoke the theme of the past, sometimes with simplistic imagery, but with the invitation to forget it because God wants to make a new light shine, prompting a trust that will heal all infidelity and cruelty. The previous curse, arising from their breach of the covenant, will disappear because God wants to set Jerusalem a rejoicing and make her people a joy (cf. Is 65,18). Proof of this is that God answers even before they appeal to Him (cf. Is 65,24). This theme continues into the opening

verses of Isaiah 66, and later still also in symbols denoting their closing of heart and ears to the goodness of the Lord and His Word of hope.

We find the evocative comparison of Jerusalem to a mother, arising from the promises of Isaiah 49.18-29 and 54.1-3. Suddenly the land of Judah was full of the exiles returning from the humiliation of the Babylonian captivity. The word of liberation has so to speak "fertilized" Zion with new life and hope, and God, the Lord of life, will bring this pregnancy to term, easily giving birth to new children. Thus Zion-mother is surrounded by children, showing herself a tender and generous mother to them. This sweet image fascinated Saint Teresa of Lisieux, and is a crucial key to her spirituality.

These texts are rich in meaningful terms: *rejoice, exult, rejoice, solace and delight, abundance, prosperity, fondling*, etc. The people, lacking a relationship of loyalty and love, had fallen into sadness and sterility, but now the power and holiness of God reestablish meaning, full of life and happiness, expressed in terms close to the emotional roots of every human being and prompting emotions of special tenderness and security.

This is a finely-drawn and true profile of a God who vibrates with maternal feeling and intense emotions. It conveys joy of heart (cf. Is 66,14) which God - who shows a mother's face and whose arm uplifts - spreads it among the people who have suffered a thousand humiliations and whose bones are still brittle. It is the freely granted transformation that conveys a new heaven and a new earth (cf. Is 66,27) so that all people may know the glory of the Lord, the faithful One who redeems.

This is the beauty...

"This is the beauty of consecration: it is joy, joy!" The joy of bringing God's consolation to all. This is what Pope Francis said during his meeting with seminarians and novices. He went on, "There is no holiness in sorrow! For as St. Paul said "Do not grieve like those who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13).

Joy is not a superfluous ornament, it is a needed foundation for human life. Amid the cares of every day, every man and woman seeks to achieve and live joy with all our being.

This joy is often absent in our world. We are not called to make great gestures or to proclaim high-sounding words, but to witness the joy that comes from our certainty of being loved our confidence that we are saved.

Our short memory and our experience of fragility often prevent us from achieving the "land of happiness" where one can taste God's reflection. We have a thousand reasons for joy, which is nourished in the believer by persevering in listening to God's Word. In

the school of our Teacher we hear his desire "that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full" (Jn 15, 11-20) and are drawn to the practise of perfect joy.

"Sadness and fear must give way to joy: *Exult, Rejoice, Celebrate..*, says the Prophet (66,10) It is a great invitation to joy. Every Christian, especially ourselves, is called to be a bearer of this message of hope that gives serenity and joy, the consolation of God, his tenderness towards all.

But we can only be carriers if we first experience the joy of being comforted by Him, being loved by Him. I have sometimes found consecrated persons who are afraid of God's comfort, and these poor, poor souls are tormented because they don't trust in God's tenderness. But do not be afraid. Fear not, our God is the Lord of consolation, the Lord of tenderness. The Lord is our Father and He says He will treat us as a mother does her child, with tenderness. Do not be afraid of the consolation of the Lord."

To call you...

"When He calls God says: *You are important to me, I love you, I count on you!* Jesus tells this to each of us, and from this comes joy! The joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me with love. To understand and feel this is the secret of our happiness. Feeling loved by God, that we are for him not numbers, but persons, and know that it is He who calls us."

Pope Francis directs our attention to the spiritual foundation of our humanity, to recognize what we have received by the grace of God and our free human response: *Hearing this, Jesus said to him. "You still lack one thing Sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me"*(Lk 18, 22).

The Pope recalls how "Jesus at the Last Supper told the Apostles, *It was not you who chose me, but I who have chosen you* (Jn 15, 16). This reminds us all, and not just priests, that vocation is always God's initiative. It is Christ who has called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continually making an "exodus" from yourself to focus your life on Christ and his Gospel, on the will of God, setting aside your projects, so as to be able to say with St. Paul, *It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me* (Gal 2: 20).

He invites us to a pilgrimage into the past, a *camino* of wisdom to find ourselves in the streets of Palestine or in the boat of the humble fisherman of Galilee. He asks us to contemplate the beginnings of a better way or better into an encounter, inaugurated by Christ, leading us to leave the nets on the shore, the tax-collector's bench at the side of the road, the vagaries of the Zealot seeking the glories of the past, for all such ways do not allow us to be with Him.

He invites us to dwell in peace, as in an interior pilgrimage, like in those early days, warmed by a friendly relationship, with our minds open to the mystery, when we made the decision to give ourselves to the Master *who alone has the words of eternal life* (cf. Jn 6:68). He calls us to make our "whole existence a pilgrimage of transformation, in love."

Our Pope calls us to dwell on that starting-point: "The joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me," and recall the meaning and essence of our vocation: "It is the answer to a call, a call of love." Being with Christ means sharing our life and our choices and requires the obedience of faith, the blessedness of the poor, the radicality of love. It is letting our vocation be reborn. "I invite all Christians to renew their personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least to make the decision to let ourselves be found by Him, to seek Him every day without fail."

Saint Paul shares with us to this fundamental vision: *No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, Jesus Christ.* (1 Cor 3, 11). The term vocation indicates this free fact as a fount of life that continues renewing the Church and humanity in the depths of our being.

In the vocation experience, God is the mysterious subject of the call. We hear the voice that calls us to a life of discipleship for the Kingdom. Pope Francis uses the phrase, "You are important to me," a direct dialogue used in the first person, to raise awareness. Being conscious that my ideas and thoughts and behavior should be consistent with the call I feel directed at me, my personal call, "I would say to whoever feels indifferent toward God and faith, who has strayed from God or perhaps in small ways moved away from Him: Look deep into your heart, look into the depths of yourself and ask yourself: Have you a heart that desires great things like a heart merely careless of things? Has your heart retained the desire to seek, or have things stifled and paralysed it?"

Our relationship with Jesus Christ needs to be fueled by a spirit of searching. It makes us aware of the gratuitous gift of vocation and helps explain the reasons that led to our initial choice and to persevere: "To be conquered by Christ means always reaching out what lies ahead, toward the goal of Christ" (cf. Phil 3:14). Constantly listening to God requires that these questions are daily in our thoughts.

This deep mystery within us which is part of the ineffable mystery of God, can be read only in the light of faith: "Faith is the answer to a Word that summons us personally, to a Thou who called us by name" and "as a response to a word that precedes it, it will always be an act of memory. However, it does not remain in the past, but being the memory of a promise, is open to the future and illuminates the steps along the way." "Faith contains precisely the memory of the history of God with us, the memory of the encounter with God, who makes the first move, which creates and saves whoever

carries the memory of God, guided by it in our own life, so that we can awaken it in the hearts of others." This faith-memory makes us aware of being called here and now.

Found, achieved, transformed

The Pope asks that we reread our personal history and verify it in light of the loving gaze of God, because while vocation is always his initiative, it depends on us to freely opt to belong to this economy of human-divine relationship and to live the life of *agape*, the way of discipleship, "in the light of the Church's pilgrimage." Life in the Spirit is not fixed to set times but is constantly open to mystery while discerning to know the Lord and perceive reality in the light of God. When calling us, God makes us enter into His rest, and calls us to rest in Him, in a continuing knowledge of His love. Within us resonates the word "You are anxious and troubled about many things" (Luke 10.41). The way we walk is a *camino* of new life, for the old creation is reborn to a new life. *Whoever is in Christ is a new creation* (2 Cor 5:17).

Pope Francis gives a name to this revival, "This path has a name and a face: the face of Jesus Christ. It is He who teaches us to be holy. The Gospel shows us the way: the way of the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5, 1-12). This is the life of the saints, people who loved God and put no limits to His place in their life."

Consecrated life is called to embody the Good News, in following Christ, dead and risen, making its own the "mode of living and acting as the Incarnate Word of Jesus to the Father and to the brethren." It takes on our Lord's lifestyle, sharing His interior attitudes, lets itself be flooded by His Spirit, assimilates His amazing logic and his values, share in his risks and hopes, "guided by the humble and happy certainty of one who has been found, reached and transformed by the Truth that is Christ, and cannot fail to proclaim it."

Abiding in Christ allows us to welcome the presence of the Mysterious God within us and expands the heart to the measure of God's Son. Whoever abides in love, as the branch is united to the vine (cf. Jn 15:1-8) enters familiarity with Christ and bears fruit: "Abiding in Jesus! We remain attached to Him, in Him, with Him, talking with Him."

"The sign of Christ is in our face and in our hearts... in our face to proclaim Him always, in our hearts to love... and in our arms, to do good." The consecrated life is indeed a continuous call to follow Christ and conformed to him. "The whole life of Jesus, his way of treating the poor, his actions, his consistency, his daily and simple generosity, and finally his total dedication, is all beautiful and speaks to one's life."

The encounter with the Lord sets us in motion, drawing us out of a self-referential lifestyle. The relationship with the Lord is not static, nor private, "Whoever puts Christ at the center of his life, moves aside. The more you join with Jesus and he becomes

the centre of your life, the more he takes you out of yourself, decentralizes you and opens you to others." "We are not in the centre, we are, so to speak, *displaced*, we are serving Christ and the Church."

The Christian life is determined by verbs of motion, is a continuous search, even when living in the monastic and contemplative, monastic dimension.

"You cannot persevere in fervent evangelization if you are not convinced, from experience, that knowing Jesus is not the same as not knowing Him; that walking with Him is not the same as walking in darkness; that hearing his Word is not the same as ignoring it; that contemplating, worshipping and resting in Him, is not the same as failing to do so. Nor is the effort at building up the world with his Gospel the same as trying to achieve it by reason only. We know that life with Him is much more fulfilled and that with Him it is easier to make sense of everything."

Pope Francis urges a restless search, like that of Augustine of Hippo, a "restlessness of heart that led him to a personal encounter with Christ, leads us to understand that the God he was looking for outside of himself is the very God who is near to everybody, the God close to our heart, nearer to us than our own selves." It is an ongoing search: "Augustine does not pause or dawdle or centre on himself like one who has reached his goal, but continues on the journey. *His tireless search for the truth*, his seeking of God, became transformed into a desire to know Him more and more, and then a going out from himself to make God known to others. This is what I mean by the restlessness of love."

In the joy of a faithful Yes

Whoever has found the Lord and faithfully follows Him is a messenger of joy of the Spirit.

"Only through this meeting or encounter with the love of God that leads to a sense of friendship, are we rescued from our self-referential individualism." A called person is called to be herself or himself, to become all that he or she can be. We can say that the crisis of consecrated life results from a failure to deeply recognize this deeper call, even by those who already live their vocation.

We are experiencing a crisis of fidelity, understood as a call to conscious pursuit of an ongoing call, a journey (*camino*) from its mysterious beginning to its mysterious end. Perhaps it is a crisis of humanization. We do not always live a genuine consistency, being wounded by the inability to live our life time as a unique vocation and journey of fidelity.

A daily round, whether of the individual or the community, that is marked by dissatisfaction or bitterness that keeps us complaining, permanently nostalgic for

paths unexplored and dreams unrealized, becomes a lonely road. And so our life, though called to the fulfilling relationship of love, can turn into barren land. We are invited at every age to return to the deep centre of personal life, where the wellsprings of our living as disciples of the Master find their true meaning.

Fidelity is an awareness of the love that guides us towards the Thou of God and to each person in a constant and dynamic way, as we experience in ourselves the life of the Risen Christ: "Those who let themselves be saved by Him are freed from sin, inner emptiness and isolation."

Faithful discipleship is a grace and an exercise of love, of self-sacrificing charity. "When we walk without the cross, when we build without the cross and when we profess a Christ without the cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, but worldly - even though we be bishops, priests, cardinals or pope. Such people are not disciples of the Lord."

Persevering to Golgotha, experiencing the laceration of doubt and denial, and eventually enjoying the wonder and amazement of Easter the Pentecost event and the evangelization of the nations - all these are stages of a joyous faith in the logic of *kenosis*, experienced throughout life even with the sign of martyrdom. This person also shares in the life of the risen Christ, since "from the Cross, the supreme act of mercy and love, we are reborn as a *new creature* (Gal 6.15)."

In the theological place where God's self-revelation reveals us to our own selves, the Lord asks us to look again, *quaerens fides* – with searching faith: *Search for justice, faith, charity, peace, along with all those who call on the Lord with a pure heart* (2 Tim 2, 22).

The interior pilgrimage begins in prayer: "For a disciple, the first thing is to be with the Master, to hear and learn from him. And it always goes on, for the journey lasts a lifetime. If the warmth of God is not in our hearts, God's own love and tenderness, how can we poor sinners, inflame the hearts of others?" This is the journey of a lifetime and the Holy Spirit, in the humility of prayer lets us understand the Lordship of Christ in us, "The Lord calls us to follow each day with courage and fidelity. He has given us the great gift of choosing us as his disciples, inviting us to proclaim with joy as the Risen One, but it requires us to do so by our words and the witness of our everyday lives. The Lord is the only God of our life, and He invites us to rid ourselves of many idols and worship Him alone."

The Pope suggests prayer as the source of fruitfulness of the mission, "Let us promote the contemplative dimension, even amid the maelstrom of the pressing and difficult commitments. The more you are called by mission to go to the marginalised, the more united your heart must be to Christ, who is full of mercy and love."

Being with Jesus forms in us a contemplative view of history, enabling us to see and hear in everything the presence of the Spirit, and His special guidance so as to live in time as God's time. When the eyes of faith are lacking, "life itself gradually loses meaning, the face of our companions becomes opaque and we cannot find in them the face of Christ. Even the historical events become ambiguous when we are lacking in hope."

Contemplation opens us to our prophetic capacity. The prophet is one "who has piercing eyes and listens and speaks the words of God, aware of three aspects of time: the promise from the past, the present being contemplated, and the courage to point the way into the future."

Finally, faithfulness in discipleship occurs and is tested by the experience of fraternity, the real theological place where we are called to cultivate a joyful Yes to the Gospel. "It is the Word of God that gives rise to faith, nourishes and regenerates it. It is the Word of God that touches the heart and turns it to God and *His* logic, which is very different from ours. It is the Word of God that continually renews our communities."

The Pope invites us to renew our vocation and let ourselves be marked with joy and passion, since the culmination of love "is a journey, which grows, grows, and grows." It is a constant development in uniting our will to His. In this sense "love never sees itself as fully *achieved* or *complete*; for it develops across the whole of one's lifetime, and by so maturing it remains faithful to itself."

Comfort, comfort my people

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

Isaiah 40: 1-2

Listening

With a stylistic peculiarity which we have already mentioned (cf. the *Awake, Awake!* of Is 51,17; 52.1), the oracles of Second Isaiah (Is 40-55) make an enthusiastic call about help to the exiles of Israel, who were tempted to remain trapped in the memory of failure. The historical context is that of the people's long exile in Babylon (587-538 BC), and their humiliating sense of inability to leave. But the disintegration of the Babylonian empire under pressure from the new emerging power, the Persians, led by Cyrus their rising star, enables the prophet to sense that an unexpected release was at hand. And so it was. The inspired prophet gives public voice to this possibility, interpreting political and military upheavals as actions mysteriously guided by God through Cyrus; and so he proclaims that release is close and return to their ancestral land is about to happen.

Isaiah's phrases: Comfort ye... speak to the heart, are often found in the Old Testament and have resonance in dialogues of tenderness and affection, like when Boaz recognizes Ruth and comforts her and talks to her heart (cf. Rt 2.12) or in the famous page in Hosea, telling his wife (Gomer) that he will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart (Hosea 2,16-17). We find the same in the Shechem's declaration of love for Dinah (cf. Gn 34.1-5) or in the appeal by Levite of Ephraim begging his concubine to return (cf. Jg 19.3).

This is a language which touches on the horizon of love, not just as a word of encouragement but as action joined to words, in a delicate and uplifting way, evoking the deep affection of God as "husband" of Israel. And *consolation* must be the upshot of such mutual belonging, an interplay of intense empathy, emotion and vital union. It is not a matter of superficial and sugary words but of heartfelt compassion, an embrace that gives strength and patient closeness in order to find the ways of trust.

Bring the embrace of God

"People today certainly need words, but above all they need a witness to the mercy and tenderness of the Lord, which inflames the heart, awaken hope, appeals to the good. The joy of bringing the consolation of God."

Pope Francis entrusts this mission to us in the consecrated life: Find the Lord, who comforts us like a mother, and comfort the people God. From the joy of meeting the Lord and His call flows the service in the Church 's mission: to bring men and women of our time the consolation of God, to bear witness to his mercy.

In the vision of Jesus, consolation is the gift of the Spirit, the *Paraclete*, the Comforter who comforts us in our difficulties and enkindles a hope that does not disappoint. Christian consolation thus becomes comfort, encouragement and hope. It is an active presence of the Spirit (cf. Jn 14, 16-17), a fruit of the Spirit. For *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance (Galatians 5, 22)*.

In a mistrustful world, discouraged and depressed, in a culture where men and women let themselves be overcome by fragility and weakness, by individualism and self-interest, we are asked to introduce trust in the possibility of true happiness and a hope not based only on one's talents, qualities and knowledge, but on God. All have the opportunity to find this, if we just seek it with a sincere heart. Men and women of our time are waiting for a word of comfort, closeness, forgiveness and true joy. We are called to bring to all the embrace of God, who tenderly leans toward us like a mother. Religious should be a sign of full humanity, facilitators and not drivers of grace, under the sign of consolation.

Tenderness is good for us

As witnesses of communion, however our view and our limitations, we are called to bring God's smile, and fraternity is the first and most credible gospel we can share. We are asked to humanize our communities, "Cultivate friendship among you, a familial life of mutual love. The monastery should not be a purgatory but a family. Problems there will be, but, as in a family, seek a solution with love; don't destroy one thing so as to resolve another; let them not be in competition. Care for the community life, because when community life is familial as it should be, it is the Holy Spirit who is at the centre of the community. These two things I want to say: contemplation always, always with Jesus— Jesus, God and Man—; and community life, always with a big heart. Letting others be, not bragging, enduring all, smiling from the heart. The sign of this is joy."

Joy is strengthened by the experience of fraternity, as a theological space where everyone shares the responsibility for the others' fidelity to the Gospel and their growth. When fraternity is fed by the same Body and Blood of Jesus and is gathered around the Son of God, to share the journey of faith led by the Word, uniting with him, it is a fraternity in communion that knows the freedom of love and lives in festive mode, free, cheerful and full of daring.

"A joyless fraternity is a fraternity that will die out. But a joyous fraternity is a true gift from above to the sisters and brothers who know how to accept each other and commit themselves to community life, trusting in the Spirit."

In a time when fragmentation feeds a sterile individualism and the weakening of relationships is undermining care for other human beings, we are invited to humanize our relations of fraternity to foster communion of heart and soul in light of the Gospel. "There is a communion of life between those who belong to Christ, a communion that is born of faith." This "makes the Church, in its deepest truth, a communion with God, familiarity with God, loving communion with Christ and with the Father in the Holy Spirit, which reaches out into a fraternal communion."

For Pope Francis tenderness is a hallmark of fraternity, a "Eucharistic tenderness," because "the tenderness makes us good." Community will have "a huge drawing force, for such brotherliness, despite all differences, is a form of love that goes beyond conflict."

Proximity as accompaniment

We are called to make an exodus from ourselves to go on a journey of worship and of service. "Walk out the door to search and find! Have the courage to go against this efficientista culture, this culture of discarding. The meeting and welcoming all, solidarity is a word that are hiding in this culture, almost a dirty word, solidarity and fraternity, are elements that make our truly human civilization. Being communion

servers and culture of the game. The would almost obsessed in this regard. And do it without being pretentious."

"The ghost to be tackled is the image of religious life understood as a refuge and place of comfort in a difficult and complicated world outside." The Pope asks us to "leave the nest "to be sent to men and women of our time, giving ourselves to God and our neighbour.

"Joy is born of the freedom of an encounter. The joy of meeting with him and hearing his call not to be closed in on ourselves, but open - this leads to service in the Church. Saint Thomas said *bonum est diffusivum sui* - a simple Latin phrase that means *good spreads itself outward*. And joy also spreads. Do not be afraid to show the joy of having answered the call of the Lord to his choice of love, and witness the Gospel in service to the Church. And the joy, the truth is contagious, spread... makes going forward."

Meeting with the contagious witness of joy, serenity, fruitfulness, such a witness of tenderness and love, humility and unaffected charity, many feel the desire to *come and see*. Pope Francis has several times pointed to the path of attraction, contagion, as a way to grow the church, through the new evangelization. "The Church must be attractive. Wake up the World! Be witness to a different way of doing, acting, living! It is possible to live differently in this world. At least this is what I hope your witness will be."

When entrusting us with the the task of awakening the world, the Pope urges us to meet the men and women of today in light of two pastoral elements that are rooted in the newness of the Gospel: the closeness and find two ways by which God Himself has been revealed in the story until the Incarnation.

On the road to Emmaus, we make our own, as Jesus with the disciples, joys and sufferings of the people, "warming hearts" and caring tenderly for those who are tired and weak, so that our shared journey finds light and meaning in Christ.

Our way tends towards pastoral fathering, pastoral mothering, and when a priest is not a father to his community, when a sister is not motherly to those she works with, they become sad. So I say to the root of sadness in the pastoral life is precisely the lack of a parental spirit, that comes from poorly living our consecration, which instead should lead us to fruitfulness."

The restlessness of love

Let us become living icons of motherhood and the closeness of the Church, going out to those who wait for the word of consolation and leaning down with motherly love

and fatherly spirit to the poor and the weak. The Pope invites us not to *privatize love* but to be "forever seeking the good of others, of the other, the beloved person."

The crisis of meaning of modern man and the economic and moral crisis of Western society and its institutions are not a passing event of our time, but a moment of exceptional historic importance. We are called as a church to head out to the margins, geographic, urban and existential - amid the mystery of sin, pain, injustice, poverty, towards the hiding places of the soul, where the individual experiences life's joy and suffering.

"We live in a culture clash, a culture of fragmentation, a culture where I discard whatever is not immediately useful, the throwaway culture of today, where finding a homeless person freezing to death is not news." But for Pope Francis, "poverty has a theological meaning, since the Son of God humbled himself, becoming poor in order to walk life's journey with us. A Church that is poor for the sake of the poor is approaching the very flesh of Christ. If we stay close to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something new, what is this poverty of the Lord."

If one lives the *blessedness* of the poor, the anguish of loneliness and limitation is overcome by the joy of one who is truly free in Christ and has learned to love.

During his pastoral visit to Assisi, Pope Francis raised the question of what the Church must discard, and gave this answer: "It must set aside all activity that is not for God, discard the fear of opening doors, and reach out without delay to all, especially those who are poorest, most needy and far off. This is not, certainly, to be lost in this world's shipwreck, but in order to bravely raise the light of Christ, the light of the Gospel, into the darkness, where one could lose their way and where offense can occur. It must set aside the apparent tranquility given by structures, which are certainly necessary and important, but which should not obscure the only real power it has: that of God. He is our strength."

This outlook is an invitation for us "not to be afraid to discard outdated structures. The Church is free, and is led forward by the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself teaches it to us: the necessary freedom to always discover the Gospel's newness in our lives and structures, freedom to choose new skins for a new time."

We are called to be bold frontiers-men and -women: "Ours is not a theoretical *laboratory-faith* but a *journeying-faith*, an historical faith. God has revealed Himself as history, not as a collection of abstract truths. We are not called to take the borders homewith us, but to live on the borders and be bold."

Along with his challenge about the blessedness of the poor, the Pope invites us to visit the frontiers of thought and culture, promoting dialogue also at the intellectual level, giving reason for our hope, based on ethical and spiritual criteria, asking questions

about what is truly good. Faith never reduces the range of reasoning, but rather opens it to an integral vision of humanity and of reality and prevents us from reducing people to "human resources."

Genuine culture, which should constantly be of service to humanity in all conditions, opens up hitherto unexplored routes, avenues of hope that promote the meaning of life and protect the common good. A real cultural process "promotes integral humanization and a culture of encounter and relationship. This is the Christian way of promoting the common good and the joy of living. And here converge faith and reason, the religious dimension to the different aspects of human culture. Art, science, work literature." Such a valid cultural search grapples with history and opens pathways to the vision of God.

The places where knowledge is produced and communicated are also places in which to create a culture of closeness, of encounter and dialogue, overcoming defenses, opening doors and building bridges.

For reflection

The world as a global network where we are all connected, where no local tradition holds the monopoly of truth and where technologies have effects that reach us all, is an ongoing challenge for those who live life according to the Gospel.

In this historical situation, Pope Francis is pointing out, through options and lifestyle, a living hermeneutics of dialogue between God and our world. He is introducing us to a way of wisdom, rooted in the Gospel and in human eschatology, promotes pluralism and seeks balance, invites us to use our ability to responsibly make changes in order to better communicate the truth of the Gospel, while we move "within limits and circumstances," aware of these limits but seeking to be *weak with the weak... all things to everyone* (1 Cor 9: 22)

We are invited to seek a generative dynamic, not just be administrators, to engage with the spiritual tides present in our communities and in the world, as a movement and grace of the Spirit in each person, seen as a person. We are invited to deconstruct lifeless models in order to announce humanity as touched by Christ, never fully revealed in our languages and customs.

Pope Francis invites us to a wisdom that offers to be an effective and consistent sign, the special ability of consecrated people to live according to the Gospel, to act and to choose according to the Gospel, without losing ourselves in life's various spheres, languages and relationships, but keeping a sense of responsibility to the ties that bind us, our own limits, and life's many expressions. A missionary heart is one that has known the joy of Christ's salvation and shares it as consolation in response to human need. "He knows that he himself needs to grow in understanding the Gospel and in

discerning the paths of the Spirit, yet does not neglect the good he may be able to do, and takes the risk of being stained with the mud of the journey."

We let ourselves be challenged by Pope's invitations to look at ourselves and the world with the eyes of Christ and to remain restless.

Questions posed by Pope Francis

- I wanted to give a message, and the message was joy. Always, amid consecrated people, seminarians, men and women religious, youth, let there be joy, always joy. It is the joy of freshness, the joy of following Christ, the joy given by the Holy Spirit, not the joy of this world. Joy, yes - but where does the joy come from?

- Look deep in your heart, look into your own depths and ask yourself, do you have a heart that desires something great or a heart that is indifferent ? Has your heart remained in a ceaseless search or have you let it be stifled by *things*, so that it is deadened? God waits for you, is searching for you, and how do you respond ? Have you noticed the state of your soul, or are you asleep ? Do you believe that God waits for you, or do you think this is merely "words"?

- We are victims of this culture of provisionality. I would like you to think about this: how I can break free from this provisional culture?

- This is a responsibility primarily of leaders and formators. It's yours, formators who are here present, to give an example of consistency to the younger people. Do we want the young to be consistent ? Let us be consistent ourselves! Otherwise, the Lord will say of us what he said to the people about the Pharisees: "Do whatever they say, but not what they do". Consistency and authenticity.

- We can ask: am I restless for God, to announce Him, to make Him known ? Or do I let myself fascinate by a worldly spirit, always motivated by self -love? Are we consecrated persons caught up in self-interest, the functionalism of works or careerism. Bah! There are so many things we can think of... Have I become so to speak "settled "in my Christian life, in my priestly life, my religious life, my community life? Or do I retain some restlessness for God, for his word, which makes me "go out" to others?

- How are we doing with this restlessness of love? Do we believe in the love of God and others? Or are we nominalist in this? Not just an abstract love, merely in words, but in concrete ways, for the sister or brother next to us! Do we let their needs trouble us, or we locked up in ourselves and our communities, often for us a "community of comfort "?

- This is a lovely, beautiful way to holiness: Do not speak ill of others. *But father, there are problems....* Tell them to the superior, Tell them to the bishop, who can provide a

remedy. Do not tell people who cannot help. Family spirit is important! But tell me, do you talk bad about your mom, your dad, your brothers? Never. Then why do it in the consecrated life, in the seminary, in the priesthood ? Only this: think, think about fraternity and brotherly love.

- At the foot of the cross stood a woman in sorrow and at the same time, one who awaits a mystery soon to be realized, that is greater than the pain. Everything seems truly finished; it seems there is no hope. At that moment she too, remembering the promises of the Annunciation, might have said *They were not kept, I have been deceived*. But she did not say this. Instead, she was blessed because she believed. By faith she sees the birth of the new future and waits with hope for God's tomorrow. Sometimes I wonder: do we expect God's tomorrow? Or do we want only today? The tomorrow of God for her is the dawn of Easter morning of the first day of the week. We do well to meditate about the embrace of the child with the mother. The only lamp lit in the tomb of Jesus is the hope of his mother, who at that time held the hope of all mankind. I ask myself and you: in our monasteries, is this lamp still alight? In our monasteries, is the tomorrow of God still expected?

- The restlessness of love always pushes to go and encounter the other, without waiting for the other to express his or her need. The restlessness of love gives us the gift of pastoral fecundity, and we must ask ourselves, each of us: what about my spiritual fruitfulness, my pastoral fertility?

- A true faith always involves a deep desire to change the world. Here's a question to ask ourselves: How large are our views and impulses? Are we audacious enough? Have we a high dream ? Are we consumed with zeal? (Ps 69, 10) Or, instead, are we mediocre, contenting ourselves with merely theoretical apostolic programmes?

Ave, Mother of Joy

Hail, full of grace (Luke 1: 28), "The angel's greeting to Mary is an invitation to joy, deep joy, heralding the end of sorrow. It is a greeting that marks the beginning of the Gospel, the Good News."

In the company of Mary, joy is spread: the Son she carries in her womb is the God of joy, of contagious rejoicing. Mary opens the doors of the heart and hurries to Elizabeth.

"Glad in fulfilling her desire, considerate in doing her duty, diligent in her joy, she hastened towards the hill-country. Where else but to the summits, should she hasten, who was already full of God? "

She went *with haste* (Lk 1: 39) to bring the world the good news, to share the irrepressible joy she carried in her womb: Jesus the Lord. *With haste*: but Mary moved

not only with speed; the word also expresses her diligence, loving intent of her journey, her enthusiasm.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord (Luke 1:38). The handmaid of the Lord hurries in order to be the handmaid of us all, wherever the love of God is shown and demonstrated in love towards every brother and every sister.

In Mary it is the whole Church journeying together: in the charity of one who goes out to the more fragile, in the hope of one who knows herself accompanied on her journey by one who has a special gift to share. In Mary, each of us, driven by the breath of the Spirit, can live our vocation as a journey!

Star of the new evangelization, help us to shine in witnessing to communion, to service, to a generous and ardent faith, justice and love for the poor, so that the joy of the Gospel can reach to the ends of the earth and none of its margins are deprived of light.

Mother of the living Gospel, source of joy for the little ones, pray for us. Amen.
Hallelujah.

Rome, February 2, 2014, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

João Braz Card. Aviz
(Prefect)

José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M.
(Archbishop Secretary)

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