



The Holy See

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ABBOT GENERAL

OF THE VALLOMBROSAN BENEDICTINE CONGREGATION *To the Right Reverend*

Lorenzo Russo

Abbot General of the Vallombrosan

*Benedictine Congregation*¹. I learned with joy that the Vallombrosan monastic family is preparing this year to celebrate the 1,000th anniversary of the birth of their founder, St John Gualbert. With this in mind, I wish to address you, Rt Rev. Abbot General, and all the members of the congregation, so that this important commemoration may leave a deep impression for the renewal of your lives and for the good of the whole Church: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished!" (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 110). This anniversary will be celebrated on the eve of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, the year dedicated to the Father, and it is important that this celebration should become for each Vallombrosan monk an act of praise to God the Father for having raised up in the Church such a significant figure of holiness and apostolic courage: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:3-4).² St John Gualbert was chosen by God at a difficult moment in the Church's history, in an age of profound changes that were shaking the world of religious orders, so that he might contribute to the reawakening of the desire for a Christian and monastic life without compromise, by starting, after many difficulties, a new way of life that would respond to the inner promptings of the Spirit. This way of life, based on the Rule of St Benedict, enjoined that "nothing should be preferred to Christ" (*Regula Benedicti* 4:21 and 72:11). Thus it was possible for St John Gualbert and his followers to observe the requirements of a rigorous ascetical life, while at the same time making a valid contribution to the fight against simony and Nicolaism. As my venerable Predecessor Paul VI already said on the ninth centenary of his death, "although he was a monk, he shared the life of the Church in the truest and fullest sense and together with his associates he played a leading role in the midst of the most serious disturbances which plagued the Church, especially in Tuscany ... in very troubled and difficult times. From his monastery of Vallombrosa, as from a watchtower, he viewed the pressing needs of the Church.... The same care and attention which he devoted to the restoration of monastic discipline, he also applied to the reform of clerical behaviour. He stressed the common life and unconditional evangelical poverty" (cf. *Letter to the Abbot General of the Vallombrosans*, 10 July 1973: AAS 65 (1973) 434-436). It was precisely through the witness of poverty, "witness to the kingdom, beginning of beatitude, journey of freedom and means of apostolic fruitfulness" (*Vallombrosan Constitutions*, 147), expressed also through the simplicity of the buildings and austerity of life, that the monastic reform begun by St John Gualbert succeeded in becoming a rule of life for other monasteries as well.³ The power of the Holy Spirit was manifested in St John Gualbert when, still a knight with a promising military career in the

world, he descended from his horse upon meeting his brother's killer and embraced him in an act of pardon. This action, which profoundly marked his life to the point of making him leave everything for the kingdom (cf. Lk 18:28), is still very timely in our day: yielding to hatred and violence means being overcome by evil and spreading it; by forgiving him, St John Gualbert not only fulfilled the Lord's teaching: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Lk 6:37), but also won a great victory over himself and achieved profound inner peace. The example of your founder must find you involved in the Church so that the spirituality of communion can grow, first of all in the internal life of your monastic family and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 51).⁴ The call to holiness given to St John Gualbert was gradually fulfilled in him through a continuous exercise of prayer and asceticism, following the vital, centuries-old Benedictine tradition. As one of his biographers relates, he was "uneducated and almost illiterate", but "he had Sacred Scripture read to him night and day so that he became quite expert in divine law and wisdom" (Andrew of Strumi, *Life of St John Gualbert*, 32). The life of the Church is "nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, n. 21) and has its "summit and source" in the liturgy (cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10); monastic life too is characterized by these two basic elements and your monasteries cannot fail to bear witness to the Christian community and especially to the young, who are anxious to meet men capable of letting them taste the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8) through prayer, *lectio divina* and the liturgy. I deeply hope that this millenary anniversary will intensify your sequelae Christi and that, after the example of St John Gualbert, your monasteries will increasingly be "houses of God" (Regula Benedicti, 31:19; 53:22; 64:5), "welcoming abodes for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of study, dialogue and culture for the building up of the life of the Church and of the earthly city itself, in expectation of the heavenly city" (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 6).⁵ Before leaving this world, your founder, in his spiritual testament, wished to remind all his sons that the evangelical basis of the monastic family is charity. "In order inviolably to preserve this virtue, the communion of the brothers gathered together under the government of one person is immensely useful" (Andrew of Strumi, *Life of St John Gualbert*, 80). Your Constitutions stress that "the goal of the congregation, by the desire of its founder, is the *vinculum caritatis et consuetudinis* between the communities, who, under the authority of the Abbot General, help each other to safeguard and foster the consecrated life of their own monks" (*Vallombrosan Constitutions*, 2). I wish to repeat to you what I wrote in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita consecrata*: "The whole Church greatly depends on the witness of communities filled "with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). She wishes to hold up before the world the example of communities in which solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility, and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness, and each person's commitment to communion is strengthened. The nature of the charism in communities of this kind directs their energies, sustains their fidelity and directs the apostolic work of all towards the one mission. If the Church is to reveal her true face to today's world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelization, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the "new commandment" (n. 45). Therefore, may the exhortation of your father and founder remain strong in your hearts: preserve charity inviolably!⁶ On you, Rt Rev. Abbot General, and on all the monks of the Vallombrosan Congregation I invoke the maternal protection of Mary, your principal patron, fervently loved and revered by St John Gualbert. I ask the Blessed Virgin to guide the steps of your family towards the third millennium. May your lives always be inspired by her, as you learn at her school how to hear and keep the Word of God, to love virginity, poverty, silence, sacrifice and docility to the mysterious designs of Providence (cf. *Vallombrosan Constitutions*, 183), so that you can look with hope to the future that God continues to prepare for you, as he did in your glorious past. With these wishes, as I invoke the heavenly protection of St John Gualbert on the congregation, I affectionately impart to you, Rt

Rev. Father, and to all your brother Vallombrosan monks, a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 21 March 1999.*

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