



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE VICARS FOR RELIGIOUS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Friday, 20 March 1981

Dear friends in Christ,

I wish to extend a very cordial welcome to each of you today. It is a joy for me to meet with Vicars for Religious from the United States, and with all who work with them in a very important area of the Church's life and ministry.

1. In speaking of the role of Episcopal Vicars for Religious Institutes, the Holy See's Document "[Mutuae Relationes](#)" shows that this task is a service of collaboration with the pastoral ministry of the Bishop. Indeed, the mandate given to the Episcopal Vicar consists in helping to accomplish a task which of its nature pertains exclusively to the Bishop, that is, a particular solicitude for religious life and the organic coordination of religious life within the pastoral activities of the diocese^[1]. All of you, in one way or another, are endeavoring *to assist your Bishops* while offering support and encouragement to thousands of men and women who have generously given their lives to Jesus Christ, and who are striving to live out their ecclesial consecration with a persevering love that is worthy of their permanent commitment, and consistent with their sacred vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Yours indeed is a splendid apostolate that can help sustain individuals and entire religious Congregations in hope and fervor and in the very truth of their charisms.

2. All of you, whether you yourselves are Religious or not, are called to offer your collaboration humbly as brothers and sisters who share with Religious a common discipleship of Christ the Lord. You have with those whom you serve a common calling to holiness in the following of Jesus. At the same time the professional requirements of your apostolate entail *a thorough understanding of religious life*, especially in its essential ecclesial dimensions.

For this reason, you yourselves must repeatedly reflect on all the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that affects religious life, as well as on the papal postconciliar directives and those of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. The Document [Mutuae Relationes](#), prepared jointly by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, is particularly relevant to the service that you are endeavoring to render in the Church.

3. It is important for you in the discussions and dialogue that you participate in, in the counsels you give, and in the decisions you may be called upon to take, to make *constant reference to the essence of religious life*. This will mean emphasizing the value of consecration to the person of Jesus Christ – a consecration that is effected in his Church and by his Church, and in response to a personal vocation received from Christ through the working of his Spirit. Yours is the role of effectively drawing attention to the finality of the religious vows, showing how, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, they are directed to “a more vigorous flowering of the Church’s Holiness and the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity, which in Christ and through Christ is the fountain and wellspring of all holiness”[2].

4. Your own esteem for religious life and your deep appreciation of the individual values that it embodies for the good of the Church can be a powerful support for your brothers and sisters both in the ordinary circumstances of their daily lives and in moment of crisis. Being aware of *the vital importance of Religious in the Church*, you will be in a position to help others to come to a serene realization that this ecclesial institution, like the rest of Christ’s Church, must undergo tribulation in the world[3]. Indeed, it is no wonder that the sanctity of religious life would be opposed and even attacked by the devil. Saint Peter’s call for calm vigilance is extremely relevant today: “Your opponent the devil is prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him solid in your faith...”[4].

5. Because you yourselves have a special role of *supporting and fostering religious life*, you will be in a position to propose and re-propose to individual Religious and to whole communities the perennial values inherent in consecrated religious life. It is an expression of your charity and part of your mission. Each of you will have opportunities to do this in one way or another: as the representative of a Bishop in his pastoral concern for religious life in its relationship to the local and universal Church, or simply as a friend, as a counsellor or confidant, an understanding fellow Christian, a spiritual director or a confessor.

6. By your contacts with them, you can be of great service to Religious and to the Church as a whole by *emphasizing the importance of prayer* in any genuine program of renewal. Personal intimacy with Jesus Christ, sustained by prayer and the Eucharist, is an essential condition for the effective contribution of Religious to the life of the Church. Society needs the incessant proclamation of the Beatitudes; and it needs to see them practised in the lives of Religious.

Besides your personal contacts, many of you will undoubtedly be involved in one way or another in planning or coordinating meetings, classes or seminars at which Religious will be in attendance. In all of these the Church’s sublime teaching on religious life should be presupposed and appropriately manifested. The ontological condition of union with God, of being a new creature in Jesus Christ, consecrated to him by ecclesial vows, gives the Religious a source of profound fecundity in the works of the apostolate. The lived renunciation that is linked to the Cross of Christ furnishes Religious with a singular effectiveness in speaking to their brothers and sisters about the fullness of paschal life in the Risen Jesus. In embracing the poverty of Christ, Religious have a real possibility of rendering genuine service to the poor and of being effective instruments of evangelization in their regard. By a humble recognition of the limits of their personal insights, Religious will be able to go forth with a fresh reassurance of the validity of the message they are trying to communicate.

Through the generous renunciation of conjugal love, Religious will be able to convince many people of the absolute primacy of Christ’s love and of its profound power to fill the human heart with a joy that is contagious. Having surrendered

their lives to Christ, Religious can be truly open to his Holy Spirit, embracing in its entirety the word of God as it is proclaimed by the Church, thus being equipped for a real dialogue of salvation, which leads to the uplifting of humanity and the glory of Christ's name.

But, like every category in the Church, *Religious need support*, understanding and love. They will find this in an eminent way in Mary, Mother of Jesus and Mother of the Church, who as a model of holiness has a special relationship with all Religious. At the same time, in the temporal sphere, this task belongs to all of you who are called by your Bishops to foster religious life in the Church today. Your is indeed an important apostolate in the Body of Christ. And may you yourselves find fresh strength and encouragement in the words of the Apostle Paul: "Help carry one another's burdens: in that way you will fulfill the law of Christ"^[5]. May Mary help you all to do this for the glory of her Son, Jesus, who is the Savior of us all.

[1] Cfr. *Mutuae Relationes*, 54.

[2] *Lumen Gentium*, 47.

[3] Cfr. *Io.* 16, 33.

[4] *1 Petr.* 5, 8 s.

[5] *Gal.* 6, 2.