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# POPE PAUL SPEAKS TO NUNS

ADDRESS TO NUNS OF THE DIOCESE OF ALBANO  
GIVEN AT CASTELGANDOLFO ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1964

Beloved daughters in Christ:

It is a reason for great spiritual consolation for us to celebrate the feast of the Nativity of the Most Blessed Mary with you all, good and dear religious women!

Often, when celebrating sacred solemnities, our mind grows anxious about the understanding, about the participation of the faithful who attend the rite. We have reason to doubt whether they understand, whether they are united in the prayer of the Church, whether they fully realize the meaning of the mysteries remembered, of the prayers offered, of the spiritual and moral value of all that worship should offer to our souls.

This thought, this doubt, does not exist here! We are certain that all of you are with us in giving full significance and fervor to this holy Mass in honor of Mary's birth; and this for three evident reasons, which concur in making this ceremony solemn and memorable.

First, it compels us to recall the appearance of Our Lady in the world as the arrival of the dawn which precedes the light of salvation, Jesus Christ; as the opening on the earth, all covered with the mud of sin, of the most beautiful flower ever to have blossomed in the desolate garden of mankind—of the birth, that is to say, of the human creature who is the most pure, the most innocent, the most perfect, the most worthy of the definition God

Himself gave man when creating him: the image of God, the likeness of God, that is to say supreme, profound beauty, so ideal in its being and its form, and so real in its living expression as to let us perceive that this first-formed creature was destined, on the one hand, to the conversation, to the love of its Creator in an ineffable diffusion of the most blessed and beatifying Divinity and in an abandoned response of poetry and of joy—such as is the “Magnificat” of the Madonna—and destined on the other hand, to the regal dominion of the earth.

What was to appear and vanish miserably in Eve, God, by a design of infinite mercy—we might almost say by a desire to reconquer, like the artist who, seeing his work destroyed, wants to remake it more beautifully and more in keeping with his creating idea—caused to live again in Mary: “*ut dignum Filii tui habitaculum effici mereretur Spiritu Sancto cooperante praeeparasti*” (who, by the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, deserved to become a suitable dwelling for Your Son) [from the prayer said at the conclusion of the Divine Office during the season of Pentecost]—as the prayer says which is well-known to you all; and today, the day dedicated to veneration of this gift, of this masterpiece of God, we remember, we admire, we exult: Mary is born, Mary is ours, Mary restores to us the figure of perfect mankind, in her immaculate human conception, stupendously in keeping with the mysterious conception of the divine Mind of the creature who is the queen of the world.

And Mary, by a new and supreme joy, enchanting joy of our souls, attracts our glance to herself only to lead it to look further, to the miracle of light and sanctity of life which she announces on being born and will bring with herself, Christ the Lord, her Son, the Son of God from whom she herself receives everything. This is the celebrated play of grace which is called the Incarnation and which gives us a presage, in Mary, the lamp carrying the divine light, the doorway through which heaven will wind its steps toward the earth, the mother who will offer life to the Word of God, the advent of our salvation.

You know, beloved daughters, all these things; you ponder on them, you honor them, you imitate them; Mary gives you their sublime picture, in which she triumphs in unequalled humility and glory. Is this not a reason for making us happy—to know that you

are all closely associated with this joy of the Church and with the glorification of Our Lady?

Secondly, you celebrate with us this sweet and intimate feast, like a day of the family, like a domestic event, which binds the hearts in dear and common sentiments. It is the feast of the common, heavenly Mother; and we understand how your devotion is strengthened by the fact that you are celebrating it together with this common and earthly Father, with the Pope. And this pious satisfaction also gladdens us, who feel your devotion uniting itself to ours, your prayer to ours, and your trust to ours.

It seems to us, dear and good religious women, that you are this morning the bouquet of flowers with which we present ourselves before Mary to express to her our greetings—oh, let us rather say our homage—on the anniversary of her birth. A kind of childish speech rises to our lips: See, Mary, what we are offering you, these flowers; they are the most beautiful flowers of the Holy Church; they are the souls of the single love, of the love for your divine Son Jesus; they are the souls who have truly believed in His words, who left everything to follow Him alone; they heed Him, they imitate Him, they serve Him, they follow Him, with you, yes, to the Cross; and they do not complain, they are not afraid, they do not cry; on the contrary, they are always joyous, they are good, Mary, these daughters of the Church of God!

We hope that the Most Blessed Mary will listen to these simple words, and that she may feel honored by the offering of all of you Religious which we are making to her today. We will say more, [the offering] of all the religious women of the Holy Church. And we hope that she may look at them all, she the blessed among all, with ("*illos tuos misericordes oculos . . .*") those merciful eyes of hers, that she may gladden them, protect them and bless them; because they are hers, and they are hers because they are of the Church!

It seems to us that this meeting particularly emphasizes this aspect of your religious life. Why are you so glad today to be attending the holy Mass of the Pope and to venerate with him our Blessed Lady? And why is the Pope himself glad to have you with him? Because, as we said, you are of the Church; you belong, and with bonds of a particular tenacity, to the Mystical Body of Christ,

and have a special place in the ecclesiastical community: you are the joy of the Church, you are the honor, you are the beauty, you are the consolation, you are the example! We may also add: You are the strength! By your piety, by your humility, by your docility, by your spirit of sacrifice, you are the dearest daughters of the Church.

This meeting must revive in you the "sense of the Church." It happens at times that this "sense of the Church" is less realized and less cultivated in certain religious families owing to the fact that they live a secluded life and that they find within the framework of their community every object of immediate interest and know little of what happens outside the bounds of the occupations to which they are completely dedicated. It happens at times that their religious life has limited horizons, not only as regards the development of the things of this world, but also as regards the life of the Church, its events, its thoughts, and its teaching, its spiritual fervor, its sorrows and its fortunes.

This is not an ideal attitude for the religious woman. She loses the complete and great vision of the divine design for our salvation and for our sanctification. It is not a privilege to remain on the margin of the life of the Church and to build for oneself a spirituality which prescind from the circulation of the word, of the grace and of charity in the Catholic community of the brothers in Christ. Without taking from the religious woman the silence, the meditation, the relative autonomy, the style which her proper form of life needs, we look to more direct and fuller participation restored to her in the life of the Church, particularly in liturgy, social charity, modern apostolate in the service of the brothers. Much is being done in this direction; and, we believe, with benefit both for the sanctification of the religious woman as well as for the edification of the faithful.

We remember that in Milan, on the occasion of this very feast, we invited the dear Sisters of the Infant Mary to attend our solemn Mass in that duomo which is certainly one of the most beautiful and largest cathedrals of the world, and which is indeed dedicated to the nativity of Mary. None of those Sisters had felt called through her own devotion to participate in the solemn and splendid rite in honor of Mary's birth in the cathedral of the town

where they have their motherhouse and a magnificent network of charitable activities: it was the archbishop who invited them. Then, they came to the cathedral every year, on the eighth of September, and in large numbers; and they were happy to feel on that day that they were the dearest of the Church, as we were when greeting them during the homily and in blessing them as exemplary and worthy of our benevolence.

We also remember how edifying it seemed to us to see in the churches of the flourishing missionary communities in Southern Rhodesia and Nigeria the Sisters of the various religious families attend, in reserved seats, the Sunday functions, to their great honor and to the great consolation and admiration of all the faithful.

Indeed, this meeting, we repeat, will serve to rekindle in you and, we hope, in all of the immense flock of women religious, love for the Church, and to bring you into ever closer communion with her. This, remember, is a great thought which can open the window on the spiritual reality to which you have dedicated your life: the Church is, in fact, the work of salvation established by Christ—a great thought which can comfort and sustain the simplicity and the hidden nature of your occupations: the Church is the kingdom of God; those who belong to it and serve it participate in the dignity, the fortune of this kingdom—A great thought, yes, it is the Church which opens up for your oblation the ways whereby it can be ever more fruitful in apostolic results, in wise charity, in immense merits.

I believe the day has come to give higher honor and more efficiency to the religious life of women, and that this can be achieved by perfecting the ties uniting it to that of the whole Church. In this regard we reveal to you that we have arranged that some qualified and devout women may also attend several solemn rites and several general congregations of the forthcoming third session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council as auditors; we mean those congregations at which questions of special interest to the life of woman are being debated. In that way—perhaps for the first time—we will have present at an ecumenical council some small—obviously—but significant and almost symbolic representation of women, first of all of you Religious, and

then of the great Catholic women's organizations, so that woman may know how much the Church honors her in the dignity of her being and of her human and Christian mission.

While we are glad to announce this to you, we are saddened by the thought of the many manifestations of modern life in which woman appears to have fallen from the lofty spiritual and moral level accorded her by good civil usage and by elevation to the Christian vocation to the level of moral insensibility and often to pagan license; while the paths to the most dangerous and morbid experiences are open to her, woman is deprived of true happiness and of true love which can never be dissociated from the sacred meaning of life.

And we are also pained to see how many feminine souls, made for high and generous things, are no longer capable today of giving to their lives full and superior meaning because they lack two factors of inner fullness; prayer, in its complete, personal and sacramental expression, and the spirit of dedication, that is to say love which gives and vivifies. They remain poor tormented souls to whom external distractions give a false remedy.

Here, then, we come to the third reason for our spiritual joy in this meeting which consoles us: It is that of noting by your number and your fervor, that there are still today pure and strong souls who thirst for perfection and who are neither afraid nor ashamed to wear the religious habit, the habit of the total consecration of one's own life to the Lord.

Truly, in this respect also, we should make a twofold and not very happy remark; that is to say that religious vocations, even of women, are decreasing, and that the Church and secular society both have a growing need for such vocations. This is one of the problems of our time, for whose solution it will be necessary to work and pray.

But let us now dwell on the proof of religious vitality which your presence offers us. We thank Our Lady for this consolation, which enables us to perceive her providential and maternal assistance to the Church. It offers us the example of an ever re-flowering Christian generosity, which makes us think of the whole treasure of good works to which your life is consecrated.

We pray to Our Lady for you: May she give you the certainty of the goodness of the choice you have made. It is the best, it is the most difficult and at the same time the easiest. It is the one nearest to that of the Most Blessed Mary, because, like hers, it is wholly governed by a simple and total surrender to the divine will: *Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum* (Be it done unto me according to your Word)!

We will pray to her that she may make you strong. Religious life today demands strength. Yesterday, it was perhaps the refuge of many weak and timid souls; today, it is the workshop of strong, constant and heroic souls.

Lastly, we will pray to Our Lady that she may make you glad and happy. Religious life, however poor and austere, can be true only in inner joyousness. That is what we wish you, in memory of this meeting, while asking all of you for prayers for the council and for the whole Church, and giving to you all our benediction.

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