

**Homily on the occasion of the  
17<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word  
July 11, 2012 – 17.30**

**FEAST OF SAINT BENEDICT, ABBOT**

**Dear Father General, fathers and brothers, missionaries of the Divine Word!**

On this Feast of St. Benedict, Abbot, outstanding evangelizer and master of the spiritual life, I would like to offer a word of thanks to the General Administration of your Society, for kindly inviting me to celebrate this Liturgy and to share with you some reflections on mission from the perspective of the Dicastery of the Holy See specifically entrusted by the Holy Father for the promotion, coordination and support of the Church's lasting obligation to proclaim the *Gospel to the Nations!*

Today's patron saint, whose name is echoed in the responsorial psalm, responded wholeheartedly to Jesus' call to "*give up everything*" to follow him. In turn he "*received a hundred times more*", (Matt. 19:28) for the task of evangelization. Indeed, six hundred years after Jesus' great commission to his disciples to "*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that he had commanded*" (Matt. 28:19-20), saint Benedict began establishing centres of Christian life that would bring the light of the Gospel to peoples living in darkness.

In our own day, Blessed John Paul II reminded the Church that the "*mission of Christ the Redeemer...is still very far from completion... in fact... an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service*" (**Red.Miss.1**). He himself, convinced of the *urgency of missionary activity*, came to be known as the missionary Pope, making pastoral voyages to over 100 different countries and visiting all 5 continents.

The Church's missionary task is certainly as urgent today as it was in the days shortly after Pentecost. Even after 2,000 years, there are still too many people who have yet to hear the Good News for the first time, others who have already been evangelized and are now in need of pastoral care, and still others who were once actively Christian, but have grown weak or completely ambivalent to the faith and inactive in their discipleship. All three groups must be the concern of missionaries in today's context, each group in a way properly adapted to its particular situation.

It is for this reason that the Holy Father announced the upcoming **YEAR OF FAITH**, “to give a fresh impetus to the mission of the whole Church”. This mission, the Pope affirms, “like that of Christ, is essentially to speak of God, to remember his sovereignty, to remind all, especially Christians who have lost their own identity, of the right of God to what belongs to him, that is, our life”. (**homily: 16/10/12**)

The Holy Father also noted that the social and intellectual situation of many people today presents a serious obstacle to the Church’s mission. In his Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith, he said that we can no longer “*think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society. In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, it is often openly denied*” (**Motu Proprio – Porta Fidei 2**).

This intellectual and practical atheism is no longer confined to the developed world, but has made inroads into typically missionary regions and has resulted in an ambivalent approach to all things related to God with disastrous consequences in every other sphere of human life: moral ambivalence, which has provoked a profound economic crisis, the breakup of the family threatening the future of society, the systematic exploitation of the vulnerable, human trafficking, the coercion of children into local militias, just to mention a few.

The other major obstacle to mission today, as outlined by the Holy Father, is the attempt to reduce the faith to something unreasonable or beyond reason, denying the place of reason in matters of faith and thereby marginalizing its role in the public square. In his eloquent lecture at the University of Regensburg the Holy Father reminded us that, “*whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... since not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature*”.

To confront these challenges by effective missionary endeavours, new ways must be found to reawaken the experience of God in the hearts of men and women of our day, to help them encounter the living God in the Person of His Son, and to mature in a reasoned faith that respects the integrity of their personhood. To this end, the Holy Father has called the upcoming Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to reflect on the ***New Evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith***. Thus, every missionary body needs to reflect upon this challenge and to develop appropriate responses to further the mission of the Church in our day.

**Dear missionaries of the Divine Word!** Your founder, *Father Arnold Janssen*, had a dream of bringing the Gospel to places where it had never been preached. After 1875, as like-minded men joined the ranks of his newly formed Society of Apostolic Life, missions were established throughout the world. Today, **50 years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council**, his dream remains alive and urgently in need of fulfilling, albeit from a new perspective that emerges from the context of our contemporary world.

Your religious family is well prepared to confront these challenges. It now counts over 6,000 priests and brothers and continues to grow in number and apostolic fervor to zealously engage in the Church's missionary task of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

This proclamation of the Kingdom certainly includes, the promotion of integral human development, respect for every culture, respect for the environment, as well as the promotion of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, all of which were serious concerns of the Fathers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council. They continue to be an important part of the Church's mission today, in a world that is too often marked by ethnic and religious tensions, which have frequently erupted in manifestations of violence and the death of the innocent.

In his encyclical on Mission, Blessed John Paul II reminded us that *"the kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness"*. (**Red.Miss. 14**) But he also warned of the temptation to *"reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world a "gradual secularization of salvation" has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension. We know, however, that Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation"*. (**Red.Miss. 11**)

In preparing for this, your 17<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, you published a book containing reports from the many different Provinces of your Society. I was impressed by its thoroughness and scope. I also noticed that the prevalent theme, which appears to be the present chapter's overwhelming concern, is that of promoting internationality and inter-cultural exchange based on a *prophetic dialogue* with other cultures *ad extra* and of

members of different nationalities *ad intra*. The hope expressed in this document is the promotion of a multicultural Church, which would be an instrument of intercultural dialogue, a home for people of different cultures and a sign of God's Kingdom, which is all inclusive, so that it might truly become an image of what the Book of Revelation refers to as the universal gathering in the end time "of people of every nation, race, tribe and language...standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb (Rev.7:9).

As important as these issues are, I invite you to go further and to reflect on your mission through the prism of the Year of Faith and the New Evangelization proposed for the upcoming Synod. To this end, as a contemporary missionary body, it would be most opportune for you to ask: "How are we to respond to the profound challenges of announcing the Gospel of Christ today?" "How can we assist people of every race, tongue and culture to encounter, on a profound level, the Redeemer of the world?" "How can we help them to respond to his invitation to discipleship, bearing witness to the presence of his Kingdom?"

This task is not so much a question of new techniques but of personal and communal preparation for the challenge of announcing the Gospel in a new context. Missionaries must have an integral knowledge of the faith of Christ as it is handed down in the Church, so as to give a reasoned presentation of the truths of faith to their contemporaries. They must be alive with zeal for God and His Kingdom. Above all, they must be deeply rooted in the living God and have a profound relationship with Christ.

**Dear brothers engaged in the work of evangelization!** As you continue the deliberations of your 17<sup>th</sup> General Chapter and prepare to go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel, may the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, whose heart is always in perfect communion with her Son and with the Church, intercede for you! May she continue to inspire you to dedicate your lives in the service of evangelization for the salvation of the world!

I would like to conclude with some beautiful words taken from the Rule of Saint Benedict, found in today's Office of Readings: "In the first place, when you begin something good you must beg of the Lord with indefatigable prayer to bring it to completion" and then, "prefer nothing whatever to Christ". **Amen.**