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To all the religious of the Society of Mary

“ATTRACT OTHERS TO SHARE IN OUR LIFE” (R. 38)

Once again, I wish to take the occasion of the *World Day of Prayer for Vocations* (Sunday, April 13, 2008) to address to you a brief message. It is not primarily to draw attention to that particular day, but rather to use the occasion to revitalize within each of us an active hope in cultivating the gift of God. Let me share with you a picture. In my office in Rome, conscious of my numerous absences, I have two cactus cuttings. It seemed to me that only these plants which require infrequent watering would be able to survive the unstable rhythm of my presence/absence. Yet I have to admit already that all the plants did not survive my initial care for them. “Little water” does not mean “too little water,” and to try to make up for occasional forgetfulness by an increase in watering brings almost inevitably rotting and death. Eventually, what count, more than the quantity of water, are the watchfulness and the attention that allow one to perceive the small signs of a very slow development; what counts also is the choice of the quality of soil which in its composition and aeration permits the flourishing of these species. Finally, the informed advice of a specialist is always welcome, but cannot diminish the importance of one’s personal experience.

It seems to me that the care we can give to vocations is not so different from this little gardening image. It is doubtless not an activity which occupies a significant part of our time for most of us, and yet without habitual attention it simply won’t happen. We need it recalled periodically to our attention: it is not just carrying out a program once a year (for the World Day), or even once a month or once a week, that guarantees a solution; the care of vocations is first of all an attitude, a state of mind, a way of being, before its translation into activities which might be its necessary expression.

The state of mind in question is the love of Christ and of his Church, our confidence in Mary, the joy maintained and cultivated about my own vocation and that of my Brothers; it is the quality of our community life in all its human and spiritual components, the renewed missionary fervor towards the world and its calls, a hopeful view of the youth of our times, but also the patient struggle against the inevitable obstacles in each of these domains. All of that constitutes the favorable soil in which can grow the fruits which God and a sensible pastoral approach will produce. I cannot in one day a year, one day a month, one day a week compensate for all that I have forgotten to do all year long; my life as human, relational and spiritual also grows in the slow rhythm of nature, from which I am not exempt. But I can take the occasion of this Day to assess and reawaken in myself what might have dozed off; and also to select means adapted to doing better from here on out.

Last year on this occasion I sent you some questions to encourage your reflections. This year let me address to you three more:

- **In comparing today with last year, do I have additional reasons to be happy and proud of my Marianist vocation?** If yes, I thank God and I cultivate this gift; if no, how can I reawaken that joy? My enthusiasm and my fidelity are the best means of calling others (directly or indirectly) to the religious life. Am I not sometimes too timid in witnessing to that joy when the occasion presents itself? Here I am not forgetting our elderly Brothers; just because of the isolation that age and health problems sometimes bring, your enthusiasm and your fidelity are all the more remarkable and precious.

- **In community, how do we promote a welcome and an openness to others?** Ambiance, personal and collective availability and time, warmth in our contacts, without forgetting concrete opportunities for invitations, both foreseen and spontaneous. The “others” are our colleagues, our friends, our families and of course young people: how do they feel inside our houses and just being with us: not only with one or the other of us, but with the entire community?
- **Are my life and that of the community animated by an inspired and communicative missionary fervor?**

I would like to reinforce this last reflection with two excerpts from the message of Pope Benedict XVI for the World Day of Prayer of 2008.¹ I have picked out in particular two characteristics that can renew our missionary fervor and which, all things considered, are truly inspiring for disciples of Father Chaminade.

Compassion:

"Jesus already in his public life, while preaching in Galilee, chose some disciples to be his close collaborators in the messianic ministry. For example, on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves, he said to the Apostles: "You give them something to eat" (Mt 14: 16), encouraging them to assume the needs of the crowds to whom he wished to offer nourishment, but also to reveal the food "which endures to eternal life" (Jn 6: 27). He was moved to compassion for the people, because while visiting cities and villages, he found the crowds weary and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mt 9: 36). From this gaze of love came the invitation to his disciples: "Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9: 38), and he sent the Twelve initially "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" with precise instructions. If we pause to meditate on this passage of Matthew's Gospel, commonly called the "missionary discourse" [Mt 10], we may take note of those aspects which distinguish the missionary activity of a Christian community, eager to remain faithful to the example and teaching of Jesus.


Community spirit:

"Vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life can only flourish in a spiritual soil that is well cultivated. Christian communities that live the missionary dimension of the mystery of the Church in a profound way will never be inward looking. Mission, as a witness of divine love, becomes particularly effective when it is shared in a community, "so that the world may believe" (cf. Jn 17: 21)." (§ 8)

In coming to the end of this message, let me repeat that I am always pleased to receive the fruits of your reflections or of your activities. I hope in the future to set up a means of sharing our experiences and our documentation concerning vocations. My thanks to the Brothers who have already shared their experience, thanks to those who send me the Vocation Bulletin of their Unit and to those who will do so.

May these simple reflections (or others) assist you in maintaining or reawakening in yourselves the desire to transmit to others this precious gift given to us, the gift of our vocation.

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¹ Message of His Holiness pope Benedict XVI for the 45th World day of prayer for vocations (13 April 2008) - Theme: "Vocations at the service of the Church on mission", Cf. : http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/vocations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071203_xlv-vocations_en.html