

Message to the European Congress of the Secular Franciscan Order and the Youfra

The theme of the Congress of the Secular Franciscan Order and Youfra, “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received!” (Ephesians 4:1), calls to us in the midst of our thanksgiving during the Year of Consecrated Life. During 2015, the entire Church is contemplating its richness, granted by God through the great founders of the religious orders, like Saint Francis of Assisi, and through his Order. Your presence here is therefore precious as it provides a witness that the Franciscan way of life is not only a narrow pathway for those called to religious life, but also for those willing to follow the spirituality of St. Francis in the world, a spirituality characterized by prayer and loving fraternity. Like the Poverello, his followers continue to express their love of God and of people, and recognize the calling of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Therefore, I encourage you during these days to study and deepen your awareness of how St. Francis of Assisi experienced faith, love and prayer, and identify yourself with him and his spirituality. In this way, you will be able to recognize what is to be accomplished by simply imitating him, and what is to be reconsidered. This is the way in which you will be able to answer the call of the apostle: Live a life worthy of the calling you have received! (Eph. 4:1)

The historical and geographic environment in which your congress is being held calls our attention to a moment in the history of the Order which can also be understood as a sign of the times. We recall one of the well-known stories from the life of St. Francis. When passing by the castle of a rich man, he encouraged his companion to enter so that the good news of the Gospel could be proclaimed in this place. As we know, the fruit of this visit was Mount La Verna, which became a place of divine grace for St. Francis and for many of his followers¹. For St. Francis, even riches was not an obstacle that would exempt him from the responsibility to bring the love of God to every creature. If we take a look at the history of the Order, we see the power that can form everyday life and society in its entirety. By proclaiming the Gospel, by making visible the joy and sadness of those in different life situations, Francis was able to connect the poor and the rich, to make friends with the enemy, to bring peace and acceptance between different cultures, and to form people who are willing to exceed their limits in daily life.

Today, through various means of communications, continents are connected instantly. Regrettably, however, high walls continue to rise as borders are drawn between God and man, and between those who are living together every day. These walls can only be destroyed by the Gospel, as we believe in our faith. This is where your vocation is situated today! This work must be started from the inside and can be experienced when you, as members of the Franciscan Youth, are brave enough to think equally about being called by God to the priesthood, to religious life or to family life. These moments are lived when you support one another in your fraternities in taking radical decisions, even if these come with some loss for the sake of Christ. These moments are lived when you provide inspiration, personal witness and enthusiasm to each other in following Christ more closely in everyday life, instead of opening the doors to opportunism. Even today, the radical approach of St. Francis of Assisi, and the zest for life of Franciscan Youth and your fraternities, could create a new world and could bring fruits of conversion and new vocations to the priesthood, religious life and family life!

Similarly, we can reflect on the Secular Franciscan Order and its members whose lives have to demonstrate how they respect the Church and the Eucharist, how they engage in the different forms of Eucharistic devotions, how they value the service of the priests, and how they believe that

1 Cf. Fioretti, the history of the stigmata of St. Francis, 1.

the Gospel can transform the context of life, even when it is sometimes hostile, especially by visiting the poor and sharing their experience with others. Avoid therefore the temptation to appear as “quasi-religious”; instead, be good seculars, holy lay persons who can live in and convey to the world the radicalism necessary for living a religious life in conformity with Christ, in the world but not of the world. Live a life worthy of the calling you have received! (Eph. 4:1)

I ask you to keep enriching the local Churches of Europe by going further along the way of this great person who was born on this continent and endeavored to renew it, who experienced God and who loved his neighbor. Many areas, even the most secular ones of our daily lives, have been impacted by the ideas, practical initiatives and inventions of the former generations of Franciscans, based on their faith and on their close proximity to the reality of life around them – for example, Franciscan pawnshops², pharmacies ... or, the use of the modern Croatian language in a former friary of Bosnian Franciscans here in the neighborhood of our archiepiscopal seat. Follow your faith with a creativity that can form, transform, and pervade the reality of Europe’s everyday life!

Budapest, August 7th, 2015

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² *The first pawnshop in Europe was opened by the Franciscans of Perugia in 1462, in order to provide loan to the poor in a regulated way, avoiding usury – added by the translator*