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CARD. EDUARDO F. PIRONIO

*OPENING SPEECH TO THE ASSEMBLY  
OF DIRECTORS GENERAL*

*August 23rd, 1976*



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Dear brothers and friends,

1. I should like to greet you with the same words that the Apostle Paul addressed to the Romans: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope"* (Rom 15,13).

2. This is a heartfelt wish at the beginning of your encounter in the Lord (cfr. Mk 6,30), and it regards three attitudes that the contemporary world in which you are fully inserted by virtue of a special vocation expects of you: a profound and serene peace, a contagious joy, and an irresistible and creative hope.

3 May prayer, which is the theme of your Assembly, make you artificers of peace, harbingers of joy, and prophets of hope. We stand in great need of these. And they are needed no less by the men, our brethren, to whom Christ sends us in this hour of history to announce the Good News of salvation (cf. Rom 1,16).

4. In beginning the labours of this Assembly I should like to offer you some simple reflections. This is not intended to be an opening speech, but simply some reflections that a brother and friend desires to share with you. I just want to tell you, in all simplicity, what I feel your Assembly ought to be.

5. First of all, an ecclesial event, an ecclesial fact. Indeed, it is the Church as a whole that looks to you for an answer. It is the whole of the Church that sends you to the world to transform it from within "*like leaven*" (L.G., 31). For the Church, you represent a new way of being "universal sacrament of salvation" in the world: you are consecrated laymen, fully incorporated in the history of men by means of your professions and your style of life that are no different from those of the others, but at the same time radically dedicated to Christ, through the evangelical counsels, as witnesses of the Kingdom.

6. Your existence and your mission as consecrated laymen would have no meaning unless they sprang from within a Church that presents herself to us as the daily renewed presence of the Christ of the Passover, as the sign and instrument of communion (L.G., 1), as the universal sacrament of salvation. When all is said and done, the Church is this: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1,27). To be sign and communication of Christ for the complete salvation of all mankind - this is what gives meaning to your mission in the Church.

7. To live this Assembly as an ecclesial event must therefore mean two things: to live with joy the profundity of the mystery of the presence of Christ within her, and to feel with serenity the responsibility of responding to the expectations of the men of today. It is for this reason that we have to be open to the Word of God and, at one and the same time, have to pay heed to the needs of history. It is with fidelity and joy that we have to live this concrete moment of the Church: in her topicality of today, and in her specific physiognomy of local Church indissolubly bound to the universal Church.

8. But by very virtue of the fact that it is an ecclesial event, this Assembly is also a family event or, better still, it is the meeting of the family of Secular Institutes, with their diversity of charisms, but all with the same identity of consecrated secularity. It is a profound and fraternal encounter of all those who have been chosen in a special manner by Christ to realise their total consecration to God by means of the evangelical counsels, in the world, starting from the world, and for the transformation of the world, ordering the temporal realities according to God's design.

9. And because it is the meeting of a family brought together by the Holy Spirit from the four corners of the earth it has to take place in a climate of extraordinary simplicity, profound prayer, and sincere evangelical fraternity.

10. A climate of simplicity and poverty: all of us must be open to the Word of God, because we have great need of it, and open also to the fertile and manifold riches of brethren, all of whom are disposed to share in humility and generosity the different gifts and charisms with which the Spirit has endowed us for the common good (I Cor 12,4-7). Anyone who feels sure of himself and in exclusive possession of the whole truth, indeed, is not capable of opening to the Word of God and, consequently, incapable of a constructive Church dialogue. The Word of God, just as in the Holy Virgin Mary, calls for a great deal of poverty, much silence, and a great availability.

11. Then we need a climate of prayer, and even more than that because prayer is essential to your meeting. You have not come together for a technical reflection about prayer, but to consider, in the light of the Word of God and your own daily experience, what the prayer of consecrated laymen must be today. As far as you are concerned, this is not a case of discussing the various forms of prayer, but of seeing in practical terms, living to the very utmost your profession and your temporal commitment: how you can enter into an immediate and constant communion with God.

12. For this reason your Assembly--which is concerned with prayer as the expression of secular consecration, as the fountainhead of mission, and as the key to formation--must in the last resort be an Assembly of prayer. In other words, the primary purpose of our meeting is to pray together. And Jesus will be in our midst and assure the infallible efficacy of our prayers because we are gathered together in his name (cfr. Mt 18,20).

13. Lastly, we need a climate of evangelical fraternity: this is a truly profound meeting of brethren whom the Spirit has brought together in Jesus, each preserving his specific identity, specially

faithful to the charism of his own Institute, but living to the very full the selfsame experience of Church, because we all feel ourselves members of the People of God (cfr. Eph 2,19), members of the same body of Christ (I Co 12,27), and living stones of the same temple of the Spirit (I Pet 2,5; Eph 2,20-22). For this is what the Church is: the calling of all into Christ by the Spirit, for the glory of the Father and the salvation of man.

14. This evangelical fraternity expresses itself wondrously in the simplicity and the joy of everyday life. These were the characteristics of the early Christian community: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2, 46). When things become unduly complicated and faces become painfully sad, you may be sure that there is no authentic and constructive evangelical fraternity.

15. These, then, are the three conditions or needs of this Assembly of consecrated laymen: the simplicity of the poor, a profundity of prayer, and sincere fraternity in Christ.

16. I should now like to mention--only touch upon, mind you, because I do not want this introduction to become unduly long--three things that seem to me to be essential for this Congress that is beginning today: the Church, consecrated secularity, and prayer.

17. Permit me to do this--seeing that the Assembly is concerned with prayer--in the light of the priestly and apostolic prayer pronounced by Jesus. Indeed, let us listen together to some of the verses of our Lord's most beautiful orison: *"Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, ... Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one ... and know in truth that I came from thee... As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth... And for their sake consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (John 17).*

18. Taking as our starting point this prayer spoken by Jesus, who always illumines your fundamental activity of men who live in the world and pray, I should like to underscore the three points I mentioned before: ecclesial sense, needs of consecrated secularity, mode of praying.

19. 1° Ecclesial sense. Our prayer is realised from within the Church conceived as a fraternal communion of men with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. " I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one", this is what the Church is. And therefore our prayer, even when we are praying alone or in small groups, always has an ecclesial dimension. It is the whole of the Church that is praying in us. In short, it is Christ himself--mysteriously present in the Church (Sacrosanctum concilium, 7)--who is within us and prays to the Father with us. Through the Spirit, who dwells within us (Rom 8,9 and 11), he intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8,26) and cries: "*Abba! Father!*" (Rom 8,15).

20. This ecclesial sense ensures that our prayer will have a profoundly human and cosmic dimension, that it will be directed towards men and history. A prayer that illumines and epitomises the sorrow and the joy of man and, from within history, offers them to the Father. A prayer that tends to transform the world "*saved in hope*" (cfr. Rom 8,24) and to accelerate the final coming of the kingdom (cfr. I Cor 15,24 28). Indeed, in the Our Father we ask each day: "*Thy kingdom come*".

21. Ecclesial sense! It is essential if we are to be Christians. It is essential if we are to be consecrated. It is essential for our prayer. When one feels fully Church or saving presence in the world of the Christ of the Passover one also feels the urgent need for prayer, just as Jesus did, starting from the Heart of Christ, Son and redeemer, the adored of the Father and servant of man.

22. This Assembly will have to reflect continually about this ecclesial sense. The Church will have to be felt here in a tangible form, as presence of the Paschal Christ, as a sacrament of unity, as universal sign and instrument of salvation. Live the Church, express

the Church, communicate the Church, so that you may pray with Christ from within the Church.

23. But for this you will need the gift of the Holy Spirit, who in the Church is *"the principle of unity in communion"* (L.G., 13). The Holy Spirit is at the beginning of our prayer, he cries out within us with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8,26) and *"no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit"* (1 Co 12,3). But he is also the fruit of our prayer, the central content of the very thing we ask in prayer. *"How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Lk 11,13).

24. It is the Holy Spirit that creates unity in the Church. For this ecclesial unity, the true communion of all in Christ, is the fruit of our prayers made with authenticity in the Spirit. And this unity is something urgent in our Church today, in our Church so painfully shaken and under stress, just as it is urgent also in the heart of the history of mankind that is advancing towards the final encounter through a series of contrasts and profound misunderstandings, through insensitivity and hate.

25. But this Church communion a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (St. Cyprian, quoted in L.G., 4) is sent to the world in order to be *"universal sacrament of salvation"* (A.G.1). It is a Church that is essentially missionary and evangelising, inserted in the world as the light, the salt and the leaven of God for the salvation of all men. *"The Church"...*, says the Council, *"goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family"* (G.S., 40).

26. This need of the Church – essentially a Church of witness and of prophecy, of the incarnation and the presence, of mission and of service – presupposes that there will be an irreplaceable contemplative profundity in all the members of the Church. Faced with the urgent needs of the Church of today, as also with the expectations of the men of today, the only thing that remains possible is the simple and essential attitude expressed by the words *"Lord, teach us to pray"* (Lk 11,1) .

27. And it is precisely this that brings us together here.

28. 2. Consecrated Secularity. Your specific vocation, dear friends, is collocated precisely in this fundamental Church world relationship, in this missionary insertion of the Church in the history of mankind. Because the whole Church is missionary, albeit not in the same way; the whole Church is prophetic, but not at the same level; the whole Church is incarnated in the world, but not in the same manner. Your manner is irreplaceable, original and unique, lived with generosity and joy as a special gift of the Spirit.

29. In fact, we are here concerned with your consecrated secularity. You are fully consecrated, radically dedicated to "*following Christ*" through the evangelical counsels, but you continue to be laymen in the full sense of the word, living in Christ your profession, your temporal commitment, your "*duties in the ordinary conditions of life*" (A.A., 4).

30. The consecration to God does not remove you from the world, but rather incorporates you in it in a new way. Interiorly you give plenitude to your baptismal consecration, but you continue to live in the world, in each and all of its activities and professions, as also in the ordinary conditions of family and social life. It fully belongs to you, it is within your competence by virtue of your peculiar vocation to seek the kingdom of God by dealing with temporal things and ordering them according to God (L.G., 31). Indeed, the prayer of Jesus assumes special significance in you when he says: "*I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. And for their sake I consecrate myself (= immolate and sacrifice myself), that they also may be consecrated in truth*" (Jn, 17).

31. It is a new way of the Church's presence in the world. Nobody in the Church ever ceases to be present in the world, not even the contemplative, nobody is ever estranged from history. And nobody who has been "anointed by the Holy One" in baptism (I Jn 2,20) ever ceases to be radically dedicated to the Gospel as a witness in the world of our Lord's Passover. But your special consecration to

God by means of the evangelical counsels commits you to being witnesses of the kingdom in the world and incorporates you in Jesus' paschal mystery in his death and resurrection in a more profound and radical manner, but this without in any way lessening your normal responsibilities connected with your family, or social and political activities, which constitute the peculiar ambit of your vocation and your mission.

32. These then, dear friends, are the two aspects of your wondrously rich and providential vocation in the Church: your secularity and your consecration. You have to live both of them with the same intensity and fullness, inseparably united, like two essential elements of the selfsame reality: your consecrated secularity. As far as you are concerned, the only way of living your consecration is that of dedicating yourself to the radicality of the Gospel from within the world, starting from the world, remaining indissolubly faithful to your temporal tasks and to the interior needs of the Spirit as privileged witnesses of the kingdom (cfr. G.S., 43). And the only way of realising fully your secular vocation right now because the Lord has entered mysteriously into your lives and has called you in a special manner to follow him radically is to live with a daily renewed joy your fidelity to God in the fecundity of contemplation, in the serenity of the cross, in the generous practice of the evangelical counsels.

33. This world has to be transformed, it has to be sanctified from within, by living the spirit of the evangelical beatitudes to the very limit and thus preparing "*new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Pt 3,13).

34. Consecrated secularity expresses and realises in a privileged manner the harmonious union between edifying the kingdom of God and constructing the earthly city, the explicit announcement of Jesus, in evangelization and in the Christian need of the full promotion of man.

35. You live the joy of this secular consecration, which in the world of today is topical more than ever before. There is great need for courageous witnesses of the kingdom. May you be faithful to

the needs of the Gospel and prepare a new world from within. May you live with responsibility and strength of heart the risk of your committed secularity in a special consecration to Christ by means of the Spirit. May you be faithful to your hour, to your profession, to your temporal commitment, to the fame of Jesus and his kingdom.

36. May you fully live your consecration based on a wholly realised secularity with your hearts open to the kingdom, to the Gospel, to Jesus and may you commit yourselves to transforming the world starting from the joy of your consecration, in the spirit of the Beatitudes that you generously express and have made your own. May you be deeply contemplative to discern the Lord who is passing by in the present circumstances of our history and thus to collaborate in God's plan of salvation that wants "to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship " (Eph 1,10).

37. 3. Prayer. This introduces us to the last point of our simple reflection: prayer. This Assembly of yours is dedicated not only to thinking, to reflecting about prayer, but also and above all to celebrating it. In the restless heart of each one of us there exists an ardent and simple desire: *"Lord, teach us to pray!"* (Lk 11,1). This is the invocation resplendent with hope of the poor who seek in Jesus, the Master of prayer. And it is in him, too, that we as concrete men of a new age will learn to pray. *"Lord, in this tormented moment of history, in this difficult period of the Church, I who am living in the world as a person radically consecrated to the Gospel, to transform the world in accordance with thy design, Lord, I who am suffering and hoping with the suffering and hope of the men of today, how must I pray? How must I pray in order not to lose the contemplative profundity, nor the permanent capacity for serving my brethren? How must I pray in order not to escape either the problems of man or to abandon the needs of my daily life, yet all the time bearing clearly in mind that thou are the only, God, that only one thing is needful (Lk 10,42) and that it is urgent to begin by seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness (Mt 6,33) ? How must I pray in the world and starting from the world? How can I find a moment of silence and a deserted spot to listen to Thee in an exclusive form*

*and dedicate myself with joy to thy Word in the midst of a city that reverberates with the words of men and where I am pressed on all sides by activities and problems? Lord, teach us to pray !"*

38. And this, my dear friends, is your desire. It is your painful preoccupation and also your serene hope. In this Assembly, a communitarian celebration of prayer, the Lord will teach you to pray. Above all, he will tell you that prayer is neither difficult nor, even less so, impossible. Because he has commanded us to pray always and untiringly (Lk 18,1) and God never asks us to do impossible things (Saint Augustin, De Natura et Gratia 43, 50).

39. I do not want to go into the details of the theme of your Assembly. I only ask you, as a brother and a friend, to permit me to suggest some outlines for your work.

40. First and foremost, the very person of Christ. In the Gospel we have to seek the figure of Christ in the act of praying: in the desert, on the mountain, at the last supper, in an agony on the Mount of Olives, and on the cross. When, how and why did Christ pray? I only want to remind you that the prayer of Jesus--so profoundly filial and redeeming was always permeated by a strong experience of the Father in solitude, by a very dear consciousness that all were seeking him, and by an untiring missionary activity as harbinger of the glad tidings of the kingdom to the humble and as spiritual physician for the all embracing cure of the sick. Saint Luke sums it all up in a passage that would merit a detailed analysis: "But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (Lk 5,1 5 1 6).

41. Secondly, I should like to remind you that the beginning of your prayer is always the Holy Spirit, but that the specific manner the only one for you is that of praying on the basis of your consecrated secularity. And this feature obliges you, in an altogether particular manner, to seek the unity of contemplation and action, and to avoid "*this split between the faith that many profess and their daily lives*", a split that "deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" (G. S., 43).

42. Not only must your prayer precede your task and render it fruitful, it must wholly permeate it and give it an altogether special sense of offering and redemption. Not only can your occupation neither prevent you from praying nor cause you to suspend your prayer, it must rather serve you as a source of inspiration, of life, of contemplative realism. This certainly is not easy, and you will have to look for ways and means of doing it. I shall limit myself to suggesting just two of them: try to be truly poor, and ask this insistently of the Holy Spirit and of Our Lady of Silence and of Contemplation.

43. Lastly, I should like to underscore three evangelical conditions that are essential for every type of prayer: poverty, authenticity of silence, and true charity.

44 Poverty: to be conscious of our limits, of our inability to pray as we ought (cfr. Rom 8,26), of the need for dialogue with others, and above all of our profound thirst for God. Only the poor will have the secrets of the kingdom of God revealed to them (cfr. Lk 10,21). The poor have a simple and serene manner of praying, a manner that is infallibly effective: *"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean" "I will; be clean"* (Mt 8,2 3).

45. Silence: this is not easy in the world, but it is not easy even in a convent. Everything depends on an interiority that is pacified and centered on God. What opposes true silence is not external noise, activity, or words; what really opposes silence is one's own self constituted as the centre. The primary condition for praying well is therefore to forget oneself. At times, indeed, a layman committed in the world will pray better than a monastic wholly concentrated on his problem. And this is also why we speak of the *"authenticity of silence"*. For this, at least in part, is what Jesus meant when he said: *"When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Mt 6,6). The essential thing here is not the going into your room; what is really important is the fact that the Father is there and is waiting for us.

46. True charity: it seems to me that this is the secret of a fertile prayer. We have to enter into prayer with the heart of a "universal brother". Nobody can open his heart to God without a fundamental aperture to his fellows. The consequence or the fruit of a true prayer will be a more profound and joyful opening to others. One cannot feel the presence of Jesus in men unless and until one has had a profound experience of God in the fecund solitude of the wilderness. But this encounter with the Lord, an encounter in the privileged intimacy of contemplation, must lead us to the unceasing discovery of his presence in the needy (cfr. Mt. 25).

47. What I am trying to say is this: if one wants to pray well, one has to live charity at least in an elementary form; but if one prays well entering with sincerity into communion with the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit one comes out of one's prayer with an inexhaustible capacity for donation and service of one's fellows. Authentic charity conceived as immolation to God and donation to one's brethren therefore stands at the beginning, the centre and the end of true prayer.

48. The prayer of a consecrated layman--if it is to be a true expression of his joyous donation to Jesus Christ, the fecund source of his mission and an essential key to his formation--must be offered *"in the name of Jesus"* (Jn 16,23 27), that is to say, under the infallibly effective impulse of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of Truth that guides us into all truth (Jn 16,13) and helps us, at one and the same time, to give witness of Christ (cfr. Jn 15,26 27) in the concrete and daily reality of our lives. He not only helps us to enter more profoundly into Christ and to cherish his Word, but also reveals to us his passage in history and causes us to listen with responsibility to the calls and the expectations of man.

49. In other words, the Holy Spirit dwells within us (Jn 14,17) and makes us understand, deep down in the profound unity of consecrated life in the world, that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him"* (Jn 3,16 17).

50. Secular consecration is a testimony of this intimate and universal love of the Father. The life of a consecrated layman, through the continually re-creative action of prayer, thus becomes converted into a simple manifestation and communication of the inexhaustible goodness of the Father. Because the Holy Spirit turns it into a new presence of Christ: *"You are a letter from Christ..., written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of human hearts"* (2 Co 3,3).

51. May the Most Blessed Mary, model and master of prayer, accompany you and illumine you in these days of your gathering; may she introduce you into her contemplative heart (cfr. Lk 2,19) and teach you to be poor. May she prepare you for the profound action of the Spirit and make you faithful to the Word. May she repeat within you these two simple phrases of the Gospel, one spoken by herself, the other by her Son: *"Do whatever he tells you"* (Jn 2,5); *"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"* (Lk 11,27).