

Talk to Women Religious

The following is excerpted from the text of the pontiff's address to women religious at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

My first desire in this national shrine of the Immaculate Conception is to direct my thoughts, to turn my heart to the women of salvation history.

In the eternal design of God, this woman, Mary was chosen to enter into the work of the incarnation and redemption.

Through her yes — a yes that pervades and is reflected in all history, she consented to be the Virgin Mother of our saving God, the handmaid of the Lord and, at the same time, the Mother of all the faithful who in the course of centuries would become the brothers and sisters of her Son.

Through her, the sun of justice was to rise in the world. Through her, the great healer of humanity, the reconciler of hearts and consciences — her Son, the God-man Jesus Christ — was to transform the human condition and, by his death and resurrection, uplift the entire human family.

As a great sign that appeared in the heavens in the fullness of time, the woman dominates all history as the Virgin Mother of the Son, and as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit — as the handmaid of humanity.

And the woman becomes also, by association with her Son, the sign of contradiction to the world and, at the same time, the sign of hope whom all generations shall call blessed: the woman who conceived spiritually before she conceived physically; the woman who accepted the word of God; the woman who was inserted intimately and irrevocably into the mystery of the church, exercising a spiritual motherhood with regard to all people; the woman who is honored as Queen of Apostles, without herself being inserted into the hierarchical constitution of the church.

And yet this woman made all hierarchy possible, because she gave to the world the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.

This woman, this Mary of the Gospels, who is not mentioned as being at the Last Supper, comes back again at the foot of the cross, in order to consummate her contribution to the salvation history.

By her courageous act, she prefigures and anticipates the courage of all women throughout the ages who concur in bringing forth Christ in every generation.

I welcome this opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy for this occasion because of my esteem for religious life, and my gratitude to women religious for their invaluable contribution to the mission and very life of the church.

Desiring to perfect and intensify what God had begun in your life by baptism, and discerning that God was indeed offering you the gift of



Pope John Paul II lifts infant Heather Eastwood and a bunch of roses on his arrival at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington. Photo courtesy of the Democrat and Chronicle.

the evangelical counsels, you will be able to follow Christ more closely, to conform your life more completely to that of Jesus Christ, in and through a distinctive religious community.

This is the essence of religious consecration: to profess within and for the benefit of the church, poverty, chastity and obedience in response to God's special invitation, in order to praise and serve God in greater freedom of heart and to have one's life more closely conformed to Christ in the manner of life chosen by him and by his blessed Mother.

A good example in this regard would be the Catholic school system, which has been

invaluable for the church in the United States . . . It is one of the apostolates in which women religious have made, and are still making, an incomparable contribution.

Two dynamic forces are operative in religious life: your love for Jesus — and, in Jesus, for all who belong to him — and his love for you.

We cannot live without love. If we do not encounter it and make it our own, and if we do not participate intimately in it, our life is meaningless. Without love we remain incomprehensible to ourselves.

Thus every one of you needs a vibrant relationship of

love to the Lord, a profound loving union with Christ, your spouse, a love like that expressed in the psalm.

Like John the Baptist, you know that for Christ to increase, you must decrease. And so your life must be characterized by a complete availability, a readiness to serve as the needs of the church require, a readiness to give public witness to the Christ whom you love.

The need for this public witness becomes a constant call to inner conversion, to justice and holiness of life on the part of each religious. It also becomes an invitation to each institute to reflect on the purity of its corporate ecclesial witness.

And it is for this reason that in my address last November to the International Union of Superiors General, I mentioned that it is not unimportant that your consecration to God should be manifested in the permanent exterior sign of a simple and suitable religious garb. This is not only my personal conviction, but also the desire of the church, often expressed by so many of the faithful.

The contemplative life occupies today and forever a place of great honor in the church. The prayer of contemplation was found in the life of Jesus himself, and has been a part of religious life in every age.

therefore, as I did in Rome, in Mexico, in Poland and in Ireland, to encourage again all who are members of contemplative communities.

Know that you shall always fulfill an important place in the church, in her mission of salvation, in her service to the whole community of the people of God.

Continue faithfully, confidently and prayerfully in the rich tradition that has been handed down to you.

There is no greater service you can give; there is no greater fulfillment you can receive. Dear sisters, today and forever: Praised be Jesus Christ.