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Audience with the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Saint Augustine

At 10.20 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Saint Augustine (Augustinians).

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers,

I welcome you all, gathered in Rome for the General Chapter, and I thank the Prior General for his words.

In this Chapter you have proposed to face the most important challenges of the moment, in the light of the Word of God, and of the teaching of the Church and of the great Father Augustine.

You are well aware that communities of consecrated persons are places where we want to live the experience of God from a deep interiority and in communion with our brothers and sisters. This is the first basic challenge that consecrated persons face and which today I wish to entrust to you in particular: to experience God together so that we can show God to this world in a clear, courageous and uncompromising way. It is a great responsibility!

I remember the words of Saint Paul VI in the wonderful Exhortation, *Evangelica testificatio*: "From the beginning, the tradition of the Church—is it perhaps necessary to recall it?—presents us with this privileged witness of a constant seeking for God, of an undivided love for Christ alone, and of an absolute dedication to the growth of His kingdom. Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the "salt" of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization" (3).

You Augustinians have been called to witness to that warm, living, visible, contagious charity of the Church, through a community life that clearly manifests the presence of the Risen One and His Spirit. Unity in charity – as your Constitutions also explain well – is a central point in the experience and spirituality of Saint Augustine and a foundation of all Augustinian life. From this perspective, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* I wished to recall “the sublime spiritual experience shared by Saint Augustine and his mother, Saint Monica!” (142): a moment in which their souls merged in the intuition of divine Wisdom. We always reread it with emotion on the liturgical memorial of Saint Monica. That desire of the Saint who in the end had what she sought, and even more. That “*cumulatius hoc mihi Deus meus prestitit*” (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, IX,11). This must encourage us to move forward.

“Such experiences, however”, I immediately added, “are neither the most frequent nor the most important. The common life ... is made up of small everyday things. ... A community that cherishes the little details of love, whose members care for one another and create an open and evangelizing environment, is a place where the risen Lord is present, sanctifying it in accordance with the Father’s plan” (*ibid*, 143, 145).

Certainly, keeping alive this flame of fraternal charity will not be possible without that “*in Deum*” of your Rule: “*Primum, propter quod in unum estis congregati, ut unanimes habitetis in domo et sit vobis anima una et cor unum in Deum*” (3). That is, *tending towards God*. This addition to the expression of the Acts of the Apostles is proper to Augustine, to underline that this is the profound dynamism of your communities, the first great source from which there springs all your service to the Church and to humanity. The *anima una et cor unum* is born of this perennial Wellspring: *in Deum*. Your hearts, always *tending towards God*. Always! May every member of the community be orientated, as the first “holy intention” of every day, towards the search for God, or letting oneself be sought by God. This “direction” should be declared, confessed, witnessed among you without false modesty. The search for God cannot be obscured by other aims, even those that are generous and apostolic. Because that is your first apostolate. We are here – you should be able to say, every day, among yourselves – because we walk towards God. And since God is Love, one walks towards Him in love.

As the dear father Agostino Trapé wrote: “According to the Rule, charity is not only the end and the means of religious life, but it is also its centre: from charity it must proceed and to charity it must be oriented, with a perpetual movement of circular causality, every thought, every affection, every attitude, every action” (Saint Augustine, *La Regola*, Milano 1971 Ancora, p. 137).

Writing to Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine expressed his own experience of community in this way: “Upon the love of such friends I readily cast myself without reservation, especially when chafed and wearied by the scandals of this world; and in their love I rest without any disturbing care: for I perceive that God is there” (*Letters* 73,10). And in the face of the scandals of the Church or the scandals of your family too, peace is on this road. Going back to this... and scandals fall by themselves, because they show that there is no other way, this is the way.

It is good to return often to that meditation that Augustine offered to his faithful, in the First Letter of John, where the Church is called by him “*mater charitas*”, a mother who weeps at the division of her children and calls to and recalls the unity of charity: “Then if you would know that you have received the Spirit, question your heart: lest haply you have the Sacrament, and have not the virtue of the Sacrament question your heart. If love of your brethren be there, set your mind at rest. There cannot be love without the Spirit of God: since Paul cries, The love of God is shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us. Romans 5: 5” (*ibid.*, VI, 10).

Your Constitutions refer to this fraternal charity as “a prophetic sign”, and there warning is wise when they say: “We will not be able to accomplish all this if we do not take our daily cross for the love of Christ, with humility and gentleness”. The cross is the measure of love, always. It is true that one can love without a cross, when there is no cross, but when there is a cross, the way in which I take up the cross is the measure of love. That is how it is.

Let us return to the Augustine meditation to listen from him, father and guide, what the *via charitas* is, in the final analysis: “A new commandment, says the Lord, give I unto you, that you love one another (*Jn* 13: 34) ... What is perfection of love? To love even enemies, and love them for this end, that they may be brethren. ... For so loved

He who, hanging on the cross, said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (*Lk 23: 34*). ... He was fixed upon the cross, and yet was He walking in this very way: this way is *the way of charity*" (*ibid.*, I, 9).

Dear brothers, this is also the challenge and the responsibility for your today: to live in your communities in such a way as to have the experience of God together, and to be able to show him, living, to the world! The experience of the Lord, as He is, as He looks for us every day. May Mary, mother of Jesus and luminous figure of the Church, accompany you and keep you always. I bless you heartily, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
