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Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Pontifical Mission Societies

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father Francis to the Pontifical Mission Societies:

Message of the Holy Father

When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth". When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1:6-9).

The Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. Nonetheless, they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs (Mk 16:19-20).

Then he led them [out] as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them, he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God (Lk 24:50-53).

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year I had decided to participate in your annual General Assembly on Thursday, 21 May, the feast of the Ascension of the Lord. The Assembly was subsequently cancelled because of the pandemic that affects us all. I would now like to send this Message in order to share what I had intended to say to you personally. This Christian feast, in the remarkable times in which we are living, appears to me even more fruitful as a source of

reflection for the journey and mission belonging to each one of us and to the entire Church.

We celebrate the Ascension as a feast, yet it commemorates the departure of Jesus from his disciples and from this world. The Lord ascends to heaven and the Eastern liturgy narrates the astonishment of the angels in seeing a man who in his flesh rises to be seated at the right hand of the Father. Even so, while Christ is at the point of ascending to heaven, the disciples, who had seen him risen, still do not seem to understand what is happening. He is about to bring his Kingdom to fulfilment and they are still caught up in their own ideas. They ask him if he is going to restore the kingdom to Israel (cf. *Acts* 1:6). Yet, when Christ leaves them, instead of being sad, they return to Jerusalem “with great joy”, as Luke tells us (cf. 24:52). It would be odd if something had not occurred. Indeed, Jesus had already promised them the power of the Holy Spirit, who was to descend upon them at Pentecost. This is the miracle that changes everything. They become more confident when they entrust everything to the Lord. They are filled with joy. Moreover, that joy is the fullness of consolation, the fullness of the presence of the Lord.

Paul writes to the Galatians that the Apostles’ fullness of joy is not the effect of pleasant feelings that make them happy. It is an overflowing joy that can only be experienced as a fruit and gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 5:22). Receiving the joy of the Spirit is a grace. Moreover, it is the only force that enables us to preach the Gospel and to confess our faith in the Lord. Faith means bearing witness to the joy that the Lord gives to us. A joy such as this cannot be the result of our own efforts.

Jesus told his disciples that he would send them the Spirit, the Comforter, prior to his departure. In this way, he also entrusted the apostolic work of the Church to the Spirit for all time, until his return. The mystery of the Ascension, together with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, indelibly marks the mission of the Church: it is the work of the Holy Spirit and not the consequence of our ideas and projects. This is the feature that makes missionary activity bear fruit and preserves it from the presumption of self-sufficiency, much less the temptation to commandeer Christ’s flesh, ascended to heaven, for narrowly “clerical” projects and aims.

When the ongoing work and efficacy of the Holy Spirit is not appreciated in the Church’s mission, it means that even the most carefully chosen missionary language becomes like “words of human wisdom” aimed at glorifying oneself or concealing one’s own interior deserts.

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

Salvation is an encounter with Jesus, who loves and forgives us by sending the Spirit who comforts and defends us. Salvation is not the consequence of our missionary initiatives nor of our talking about the incarnation of the Word. For each one of us, salvation can take place only through the lens of an encounter with the one who calls us. For this reason, the mystery of predilection begins and can only begin with an outburst of joy and gratitude. The joy of the Gospel is that “great joy” of the poor women who on Easter morning went to the tomb of Christ, found it empty, then encountered the risen Jesus and raced home to tell the others (cf. *Mt* 28:8-10). Only because we have been chosen and singled out can we bear witness to the glory of the risen Christ before the entire world.

In every human context witnesses are those who vouch for what someone else has done. In this sense, and only in this sense, can we be witnesses of Christ and his Spirit. As described in the conclusion of the Gospel of Mark, after the Ascension the apostles and disciples “went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs” (16:20). By his Spirit, Christ testifies to himself through the works that he fulfils in and with us. As Saint Augustine explains, the Church would not pray to the Lord to ask that faith be given to those who do not know Christ unless she believed that it is God himself who directs and draws our wills towards himself. The Church would not make her children pray to the Lord to persevere in the faith of Christ if she did not believe that it is the Lord himself who possesses our hearts. Indeed, if she asked him for these things, but thought that she could give them to herself, it would mean that all her prayers would be empty words, rote formulas or platitudes imposed by ecclesiastical custom rather than authentic prayer (cf. *On the Gift of Perseverance. To Prosper and Hilary*, 23, 63).

Unless we realise that faith is a gift of God, even the prayers which the Church raises to God are meaningless. Nor do they reflect a sincere passion for the happiness and salvation of others and for those who do not recognise the risen Christ, however much time we may spend on planning for the conversion of the world to Christianity.

If we recognise that the Holy Spirit ignites and preserves the faith in our hearts, everything changes. Indeed, the Spirit enkindles and enlivens the Church's mission, bestowing all those individual accents and styles that make the proclamation of the Gospel and the confession of the Christian faith something different from all political, cultural, psychological or religious forms of proselytism.

I considered many of these features of mission in my Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, and here I shall recall a few of them.

Attractiveness. The mystery of the Redemption entered into and continues to work in the world through an attraction that can draw the hearts of men and women because it is and appears more alluring than the seductions which appeal to the selfishness that is a result of sin. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him" (6:44). The Church has always insisted that this is the reason why we follow Jesus and proclaim his Gospel: through the force of attraction wrought by Christ himself and by his Spirit. The Church, as Pope Benedict XVI has said, grows in the world through attraction and not through proselytism (cf. Homily, *Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean*, Aparecida, 13 May 2007: AAS 99 [2007], 437). Saint Augustine says that Christ reveals himself by attracting us. Moreover, he cites the poet Virgil, who states that all are attracted to what gives them pleasure. Jesus does not just persuade our wills, but awakens our pleasure (Commentary on the Gospel of John, 26, 4). If one follows Jesus, happy to be attracted by him, others will take notice. They may even be astonished. The joy that radiates from those attracted by Christ and by his Spirit is what can make any missionary initiative fruitful.

Gratitude and Gratuitousness. The joy of proclaiming the Gospel always shines brightly against the backdrop of a grateful memory. The Apostles never forgot the moment that Jesus touched their hearts: "It was about four in the afternoon" (*Jn* 1:39). The reality of the Church shines forth whenever gratitude is manifested within her by the free initiative of God, for "he loved us" first (*1 Jn* 4:10) and "it is only God who gives the growth" (*1 Cor* 3:7). The loving predilection of God surprises us, and surprise by its very nature cannot be owned or imposed by us. One cannot be "necessarily surprised". Only in this way can the miracle of gratuitousness, the gratuitous gift of self, blossom. Nor can missionary fervour ever be obtained as the result of reasoning or calculation. To be "in a state of mission" is a reflection of gratitude. It is the response of one who by gratitude is made docile to the Spirit and is therefore free. Without a recognition of the predilection of the Lord, who inspires gratitude in us, even knowledge of the truth and of God himself would, presented as a goal to be achieved by our own efforts, in fact become a "letter that brings death" (cf. *2 Cor* 3:6), as Saint Paul and Saint Augustine were the first to point out. Only in the freedom of gratitude can one truly know the Lord, whereas it is useless and above all improper to insist on presenting missionary activity and the proclamation of the Gospel as if they were a binding duty, a kind of "contractual obligation" on the part of the baptised.

Humility. Since truth and faith, happiness and salvation are not our own possessions, a goal achieved by our own merits, then the Gospel of Christ can be proclaimed with humility. One can never think of serving the Church's mission by employing arrogance as individuals and through bureaucracies, with the pride of one who misunderstands even the gift of the sacraments and the most authentic words of the Christian faith, seeing them as merited rewards. One cannot be humble out of good manners or the desire to appear attractive. We are humble when we follow Christ, who said to his disciples: "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (*Mt* 11:29). Saint Augustine asks why, after the resurrection, Jesus let himself be seen by his disciples and not by those who had crucified him, concluding that Jesus did not want to give the impression of "challenging his killers in some way. For Jesus, it was actually more important to teach humility to his friends, rather than uphold the truth before his enemies" (*Sermon* 284, 6).

To facilitate, not to complicate. Another authentic feature of missionary work is its imitation of the patience of

Jesus, who always showed mercy to others as they continued to grow. A small step forward in the midst of great human limitations can be more pleasing before God than the great strides made by those who go through life without great difficulties. A missionary heart recognizes the real condition of real people, with their own limits, sins and frailties in order to become “weak among the weak” (cf. *1 Cor 9:22*). “Going forth” on mission to reach human peripheries does not mean wandering without direction and meaning, like those frustrated vendors who complain that people are too unsophisticated to be interested in their wares. Sometimes this means slowing our pace in order to lead a person who is still by the wayside. At times this means imitating the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who leaves the doors open and looks out each day awaiting the return of his son (cf. *Lk 15:20*). The Church is not a customs office and anyone who participates in the mission of the Church is called not to impose unnecessary burdens on people already worn out or to require demanding programmes of formation in order to enjoy what the Lord gives easily, or to erect obstacles to the will of Jesus, who prays for each of us and wants to heal and save everyone.

Proximity to life “in progress”. Jesus met his first disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee while they were focused on their work. He did not meet them at a convention, a training workshop, or in the Temple. It has always been the case that the proclamation of Jesus’ salvation reaches people right where they are and just how they are in the midst of their lives in progress. Amid the needs, hopes and problems of everyday life we find the place where one who has acknowledged the love of Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit can offer an account of his or her faith, hope, and charity to those who ask for it. By journeying together with others, alongside everyone. Especially given the times in which we live, this has nothing to do with designing “specialised” training programmes, creating parallel worlds, or constructing “slogans” that merely echo our own thoughts and concerns. I have elsewhere spoken of those in the Church who proclaim loudly that “this is the hour of the laity”, while in the meantime the clock seems to have stopped.

The “sensus fidei” of the People of God. There is one reality in the world that has a kind of “feel” for the Holy Spirit and his workings. It is the People of God, called and loved by Jesus, who for their part continue to seek him amid the difficulties of their lives. The People of God beg for the gift of his Spirit: entrusting their expectation to the simple words of their prayers and never entertaining the presumption of their own self-sufficiency. The holy People of God are gathered together and anointed by the Lord, and in virtue of this anointing are made infallible “*in credendo*”, as the Tradition of the Church teaches. The working of the Holy Spirit equips the faithful People with an “instinct” of faith, the *sensus fidei*, which helps them not to err when believing the things of God, even if they do not know the theological arguments and formulas that define the gifts they experience. The mystery of the pilgrim people, who with their popular piety travel to shrines and entrust themselves to Jesus, Mary and the saints, draws from this and shows that it is connatural to the free and gratuitous initiative of God, apart from our pastoral planning.

A special care for the little ones and the poor. Any missionary impulse, if derived from the Holy Spirit, manifests predilection for the poor and vulnerable as a sign and reflection of the Lord’s own preference for them. Those directly involved with the Church’s missionary initiatives and structures should never justify their lack of concern for the poor with the excuse, widely used in particular ecclesiastical circles, of having to concentrate their energies on certain priorities for the mission. For the Church, a preference for the poor is not optional.

All these demands and approaches are part of the Church’s mission, guided by the Holy Spirit. Normally, in ecclesiastical language and speech, the necessity of the Holy Spirit as the source of the Church’s missionary activity is acknowledged and affirmed. Yet this acknowledgement can at times be reduced to a type of “ceremonial nod” to the Most Holy Trinity, a stock introductory preface to our theological discussions and pastoral plans. There are many situations in the Church where the primacy of grace appears to be no more than a theoretical concept or an abstract formulation. Instead of leaving room for the working of the Holy Spirit, many initiatives and entities connected to the Church end up being concerned only with themselves. Many ecclesiastical establishments, at every level, seem to be swallowed up by the obsession of promoting themselves and their own initiatives, as if that were the objective and goal of their mission.

To this point, I have sought to reiterate criteria and starting points for the missionary activity of the Church that I explained in greater detail in my Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. I have done so because I believe that for the PMS it is beneficial and fruitful – and indeed urgently necessary – to discuss these criteria and

suggestions in this stage of their journey.

THE PMS AT THE PRESENT TIME.

TALENTS TO DEVELOP, TEMPTATIONS AND MALADIES TO AVOID

Where should we look in considering the present and future of the PMS? What are the dead weights that risk burdening the journey?

The identity of the Pontifical Mission Societies has certain hallmarks. In a manner of speaking, some are genetic, whereas others have developed through a lengthy historical process and are often overlooked or taken for granted. Yet these features can safeguard and enhance, above all in the present time, the contribution of this “network” to the universal mission to which the entire Church is called.

- *The Missionary Societies arose spontaneously* from missionary fervour expressed by the faith of the baptised. There has always been a deep relationship between the Missionary Societies and the infallible *sensus fidei in credendo* of the faithful People of God.

- *The Missionary Societies, since their beginning, have moved along two “tracks”,* or better along two parallel channels, that in their simplicity have always been close to the heart of the People of God: those of *prayer* and of *charity* in the form of almsgiving which “saves from death, and purges all sin” (*Tob 12:9*), the “intense love” that “covers a multitude of sins” (*1 Pet 4:8*). The founders of the Mission Societies, beginning with Pauline Jaricot, did not invent the prayers and works to which they entrusted their hopes for the proclamation of the Gospel. They simply drew them from the infinite treasury of those familiar and habitual gestures of the People of God on its pilgrimage through history.

- *The Mission Societies, which arose spontaneously from the life of the People of God,* in their simple and concrete configuration were recognised by the Church of Rome and her Bishops, who in the last century sought to adopt them as a unique expression of their own service to the universal Church. Hence the title “Pontifical” was conferred upon these Societies. From that time on, the PMS have always shown themselves to be an instrument of service in support of the particular Churches in the work of proclaiming the Gospel. In this same way, the Pontifical Mission Societies have readily served the Church as part of the universal ministry exercised by the Pope and by the Church of Rome, which “presides in charity”. In this way, carrying out their work and without becoming embroiled in complex theological disputes, the PMS have countered the claims of those who, also in ecclesiastical circles, wrongly contrast charisms and institutions, reading their relationship through the lens of a fallacious “dialectic of principles”. For in the Church even permanent structural elements, such as the sacraments, the priesthood, and apostolic succession are continuously to be recreated by the Holy Spirit and are not simply realities at the Church’s disposal (cf. Card. J. Ratzinger, *The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements, Address given at the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, Rome, 27-29 May 1998*).

- *The Missionary Societies, since their initial diffusion, have been structured as a widespread network* spread throughout the People of God, wholly anchored and indeed “immanent” in the network of preexisting institutions and realities in the Church’s life, such as dioceses, parishes, and religious communities. The particular vocation of persons engaged in the Missionary Societies has never been lived or perceived as an alternative path, a relationship “external” to the ordinary forms of the life of the particular Churches. The summons to pray and gather resources for the missions has always been exercised as a service to ecclesial communion.

- *The Missionary Societies, which in time became a network spread throughout the world,* mirror in their own configuration the variety of accents, situations, problems, and gifts that characterise the life of the Church in the various parts of the world. This plurality can serve as a safeguard against ideological homogenisation and cultural unilateralism. In this sense, the PMS reflect the mystery of the universality of the Church, in which the incessant work of the Holy Spirit creates harmony from different voices, even as the Bishop of Rome, in his service of charity, exercised also through the Pontifical Mission Societies, safeguards unity in faith.

All the characteristics described above can help the Pontifical Mission Societies to avoid certain pitfalls and pathologies on their journey and that of many other ecclesial institutions. Let me present a few of these.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Self-absorption. Church organisations and agencies, quite apart from the good intentions of their individual members, sometimes end up turning in on themselves, devoting energy and attention primarily to promoting themselves and to advertising their own initiatives. Some seem to be dominated by an obsession to continually redefine their own importance and their own bailiwicks within the Church, under the guise of relaunching their specific mission. In this way, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once said, they can foster the misleading idea that a person is somehow more Christian if he or she is occupied with intra-ecclesial structures, whereas in reality nearly all the baptised are daily living lives of faith, hope, and charity, without ever participating in Church committees or concerned for the latest news about ecclesiastical politics (cf. *Una compagna sempre riformanda*, Speech at the IX Meeting in Rimini, 1 September 1990).

Control anxiety. Institutions and agencies sometimes set out to help ecclesial communities by employing the gifts generated in them by the Holy Spirit, yet over time they presume to exercise supremacy and control over the very communities they are meant to serve. This attitude is almost always accompanied by the claim that they are exercising the role of “overseers” called to determine the legitimacy of other groups. They end up acting as if the Church was a product of our own calculations, plans, agreements and decisions.

Elitism. An elitist feeling, the unspoken notion of belonging to an aristocracy, takes hold at times among those who are part of groups and organised institutions in the Church: a superior class of specialists who strive to increase their own influence in collusion or in competition with other ecclesiastical elites, and train their members according to secular notions of activism or technical-professional competence, but always with the main goal of promoting their own oligarchic privileges.

Isolation from the people. The elitist temptation in some organisations connected to the Church can be accompanied at times by a sentiment of superiority and of intolerance towards the rest of the baptised, towards the people of God who may attend parishes and visit shrines, but are not “activists” busy in Catholic organisations. The People of God is viewed as an inert mass, always in need of being awakened and mobilised through a “consciousness-raising” consisting in arguments, appeals and teachings. As if the certainty of faith was the consequence of persuasive speech or training methods.

Abstraction. Once they become self-absorbed, institutions and entities connected to the Church lose contact with reality and fall prey to abstraction. They needlessly multiply instances of strategic planning in order to produce projects and guidelines that serve only as means of self-promotion for those who come up with them. They take problems and dissect them in intellectual laboratories where everything has been domesticated and is viewed through the lens of their own ideology. Everything, even references to the faith or verbal appeals to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, once taken outside of their proper context, can thus end up rigidified and unreal.

Functionalism. Self-absorbed and elitist organisations, even within the Church, often end up staking everything on the imitation of secular models of worldly efficiency, like those rooted in competition, whether economic or social. Opting for functionalism gives the illusion of being able to “sort matters out” in a balanced way, keeping things under control, maximising one’s own relevance, and improving the everyday management of existing structures. However, as I already said to you at our 2016 meeting, a Church afraid of entrusting herself to the grace of Christ and focusing on the efficiency of its bureaucracy is already dead, even if structures and programmes that favour the interest of “self-absorbed” clergy or lay people linger for centuries.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

Looking at the present and towards the future, and considering the resources needed for the PMS to overcome the pitfalls of the journey and move forward, I would like to offer a few suggestions as an aid for your discernment. Since you have undertaken your own process of re-evaluation of the PMS, which you would like to

be guided by the thinking of the Pope, I offer for your attention some general criteria and starting points, without entering into details, not least because different situations may require adaptations and modifications.

1) To the best of your ability, and without undue speculation about the future, *preserve or recover the role of the PMS as part of the larger People of God* from which they arose. It would prove beneficial to seek a greater “immersion” in the reality of people’s lives. Following Jesus means emerging from our own problems and concerns. It would be worthwhile to enter into concrete circumstances and conditions, while seeking to reintegrate the capillary effect of actions and contacts of the PMS within the greater network of Church institutions (dioceses, parishes, communities, and groups). By prioritising your specific presence in the People of God, with its bright spots and difficulties, you can better elude the pitfall of abstraction. One must provide answers to real questions and not just formulate and multiply proposals. Perhaps concrete contact with real life situations, and not just discussions in boardrooms or theoretical analyses of our own internal dynamics, will generate useful insights for changing and improving operating procedures and adapting them to different contexts and circumstances.

2) I suggest proceeding in such a way that the essential structure of the PMS remains bound to the *practice of prayer and of gathering resources for mission*, in all its simplicity and practicality. This would clearly demonstrate the relationship of the PMS to the faith of the People of God. With all necessary flexibility and adaptations, this basic design of the PMS should neither be forgotten nor distorted. Asking the Lord to open hearts to the Gospel and asking everyone to tangibly support missionary work: these are simple and practical things that everyone can readily do in this present time when, even amid the scourge of this pandemic, there is a great desire to encounter and remain close to the heart of the Church’s life. So seek new paths, new forms of service, but try not to complicate what in reality is quite simple.

3) The PMS are and must be experienced as an *instrument of service* for the mission of the particular Churches, against the backdrop of the mission of the universal Church. This is the ever-precious contribution that the Societies make to the spread of the Gospel. All of us are called to nurture by means of love and gratitude, as well as by our works, the seeds of divine life that the Spirit of Christ causes to blossom and grow where he wills, even in the deserts. Please, in your prayer ask above all that the Lord make everyone better prepared to recognise the signs of his activity, in order then to reveal them to the whole world. Even this can be helpful: to ask that, in the depths of our own hearts, our prayer to the Holy Spirit may not be reduced to a mere formality in our meetings and homilies. It is not helpful to theorise about super-strategies or mission “core guidelines” as a means of reviving missionary spirit or giving missionary patents to others. If, in some cases, missionary fervour is fading, it is a sign that faith itself is fading. In such cases, the attempt to revive the flame by strategies and speeches will end up only weakening it all the more, causing the desert to expand.

4) The service undertaken by the PMS naturally brings its staff into *contact with countless realities*, situations and events that are part of the great ebb and flow of the life of the Church on every continent. In this contact, we may encounter numerous problems and forms of inertia that can mark ecclesial life, but also the gratuitous gifts of healing and consolation that the Holy Spirit disseminates in daily life, in what might be called the “middle class of holiness”. Rejoice and savour these encounters that you experience thanks to the work of the PMS, and let yourselves be astonished by them. I think of the reports of many miracles that happen to children, who perhaps encounter Jesus thanks to the initiatives proposed by the Holy Childhood. Yours is a labour that can never be reduced to an exclusively bureaucratic-professional scope. When it comes to mission, bureaucracies or functionaries should never exist. Your gratitude can in turn become a gift and witness for all. With the means that you have at your disposal, and quite naturally, you can recount the comforting story of persons and communities in which the miracle of faith gratuitously shines with hope and charity.

5) Gratitude for the wonders worked by the Lord among his chosen ones, the poor and the little ones to whom he reveals those things hidden from the wise (cf. Mt 11:25-26), can make it easier for you too to *avoid the pitfalls of self-absorption* and leave yourselves behind as you follow Jesus. The very notion of a self-centred missionary effort, which spends time contemplating and celebrating its own initiatives, would be absurd. Do not waste time and resources, then, in looking at yourself in a mirror, devising plans centred on internal mechanisms, functionality and the efficiency of your own bureaucracy. Look outside. Do not look at yourselves in the mirror. Break every mirror in the house! The criteria employed in implementing programmes should aim not at

burdening the network of the PMS but at making structures and procedures more flexible. National Directors, for example, should be working to identify potential successors, taking as their sole criterion proposing persons with great missionary zeal, not just members of their own small group.

6) Regarding the *collection of resources* to help the missions, I have already spoken during our past gatherings about the risk of turning the PMS into an NGO, where everything is devoted to locating and appropriating funds. This depends more on the attitude with which things are done than the goals that are achieved. It can certainly be advisable and even appropriate when fundraising to use creativity and even updated methods for seeking funding from potential and worthy sources. However, if in some areas the collection of donations lessens, even because of the waning of Christian memory, the temptation may arise to resolve the problem ourselves by “covering up” the situation and gambling on some better fundraising system developed by groups specialising in large donors. Our pain at the loss of faith and the reduction of resources should not be covered up but rather placed in the hands of the Lord. In any case, asking for offerings for the missions should continue to be directed first and foremost to the larger body of the baptised, also through different ways of taking up the collection for the missions carried out in every country in October on the occasion of World Mission Day. The Church continues to advance thanks to the widow’s mite and the contributions of innumerable people healed and consoled by Jesus, who for this reason, overflowing with gratitude, donate whatever they have.

7) The *use of the donations* received is always to be evaluated with an appropriate *sensus Ecclesiae* regarding the distribution of funds in support of structures and projects capable of advancing the apostolic mission and the preaching of the Gospel in various ways and in diverse parts of the world. Attention should always be paid to the most fundamental necessities of communities while at the same time avoiding a welfare culture, which instead of assisting missionary zeal ends up making hearts lukewarm and feeding phenomena of parasitic dependency, also within the Church. Your contribution should aim at giving concrete answers to objective needs, without squandering resources in initiatives marked by abstraction, self-absorption or generated by clerical narcissism. Do not yield to inferiority complexes or the temptation to imitate those super-functional organisations that collect funds for good causes and then use a good percentage of them to finance their own bureaucracy and to publicise their brand name. Even publicity can at times become a way of promoting one’s own interests by showing how one works for the poor and those in need.

8) As for the *poor*, you too *must not forget them*. This was the recommendation at the Council of Jerusalem that the apostles Peter, James and John passed on to Paul, Barnabas and Titus, who came to discuss their mission among the uncircumcised: “Only, we were to be mindful of the poor” (*Gal 2:10*). Following that recommendation, Paul organised collections for the benefit of the brethren of the Church of Jerusalem (cf. *1 Cor 16:1*). The preferential option for the poor and the little ones has always been present since the origins of the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Works of spiritual and corporal charity on their behalf are expressions of a “divine preference” that serves as a constant challenge to the faith of all Christians, who are called to have the same attitude as that of Jesus (cf. *Phil 2:5*).

9) The PMS, in their worldwide network, *reflect the rich variety of the “people with a thousand faces”*, gathered together by the grace of Christ and marked by missionary fervour. That zeal is not always intense and lively in the same way everywhere. Even so, the same urgency of confessing Christ dead and resurrected finds expression in a variety of accents and adapts to diverse contexts. The revelation of the Gospel is not identified with any one culture and when it encounters new cultures that have not yet received the Christian message, a specific cultural form must not be imposed along with the preaching of the Gospel. Today, also in the work of the PMS, there is no need for extra baggage but rather the effort to value differences and relate them to the essentials of the faith we share. Any attempt to standardise the form of our message may obscure the universality of the Christian faith, even promoting clichés and slogans fashionable in certain circles and in particular countries that are culturally and politically dominant. In this regard, the special relationship that unites the PMS to the Pope and to the Church of Rome represents a resource and a support for freedom from fleeting fads, certain unilateral schools of thought or the cultural homogenisation associated with neo-colonialism. These are phenomena that, regrettably, are not absent from ecclesiastical contexts.

10) The PMS *are not an autonomous entity in the Church*, acting in a vacuum. Among their distinctive features always to be cultivated and renewed is the special bond uniting them to the Bishop of the Church of Rome,

which presides in charity. It is comforting to know that this bond manifests itself in a work carried out joyfully, without seeking applause or staking claims. A work that precisely in its gratuitousness is intertwined with service to the Pope, the servant of the servants of God. I would ask that the distinctive sign of your closeness to the Bishop of Rome be precisely this: the sharing of the love of the Church, a reflection of her own love for Christ, experienced and expressed quietly, without pride or a concern for “turf wars”. Daily efforts born of charity and the mystery of gratuitousness, which support countless persons who remain deeply thankful, yet perhaps even unaware of whom to thank, since they may never have heard of the PMS. The mystery of charity, within the Church, works in this way. We continue to advance together, even amid trials, thanks to the gifts and the consolations of the Lord. In the meantime, and at every step, we joyfully acknowledge that all of us are useless servants, beginning with myself.

CONCLUSION

Move forward with enthusiasm! There is much to do on the journey that awaits you. If there are changes to make in procedures, it is good that these point towards unburdening rather than increasing the load, aiming at operational flexibility and not producing more rigid bureaucracies that involve the threat of introversion. An excessive centralisation, rather than helping, can complicate missionary outreach. Even a purely national organisation of initiatives can jeopardise the nature of the PMS network, as well as the exchange of gifts between the Churches and local communities lived as the tangible fruit and sign of charity among brothers and sisters in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

In any event, always demand that every consideration regarding the operational aspect of the PMS be illuminated by the one thing necessary: a spark of true love for the Church as a reflection of love for Christ. Yours is a service rendered to apostolic fervour, namely to that impulse of Christian life which only the Holy Spirit can bring about within the People of God. Think about doing your work well, “as if everything depended on you, while knowing that everything in fact depends on God” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola). As I already mentioned to you in one of our encounters, imitate the ready spirit of Mary. When she visited Elizabeth, Mary did not do so on her own: she went as a servant of the Lord Jesus, whom she carried in her womb. She said nothing about herself, but simply brought her Son and praised God. It was not about her. She went as the servant of the One who is the sole protagonist of missionary activity. Nonetheless, she wasted no time, going in haste and doing what was needed to look after her kinswoman. She teaches us this same readiness, the haste born of fidelity and adoration.

May Our Lady watch over you and the Pontifical Mission Societies, and may her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, bless you. For before ascending to heaven, he promised to be with us always, to the end of time.

Given in Rome, at Saint John Lateran, the 21st of May 2020, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord.

FRANCIS
