Opening of the General Chapter of the Sisters of Notre Dame

St. Lamberti, Coesfeld, Oct. 1, 2022

Dear Sisters of Notre Dame!

"Go and do likewise." (Gospel, Lk 10) There we have Jesus' instruction manual for every situation, precisely also for your General Chapter. During the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI asked the members of monastic orders to contribute their specific impulse for the renewal of religious life. They were, after all, specialists of God, "specialisti di Dio." Promptly came the response from the Trappist Thomas Merton: "We are not specialists, for anything! We have all indiscriminately fallen among the robbers, and we help each other to pick ourselves up so that the Good Samaritan will see us when he passes by: Jesus Christ, who will take care of us. Merton captured it: Specialists of God we are not! We have landed in the ditch: this is what the residence of God looks like. We fail to reach our lofty goals, overestimate and overtax ourselves, sometimes feel powerless and empty for lack of success. We hope to be strengthened, healed and encouraged by the Spirit of God. Nothing is asked of us but humanity, discovering talents, developing abilities, giving and asking for trust, seeking connection with others who want to do the same. If we love Jesus, in practice we will always be a "Samaritan Church": every need touches us, we feel compassion, we do not condemn, rather we offer protection and help to remove thorns of annoyance, to turn fears into hope. We seek peace among ourselves, we gratefully accept the diversity among us as enriching, we look at ourselves and at our fellow human beings with the gaze with which God looks at us, and we make ourselves available with our strengths and weaknesses.

The Samaritan was able to "slip into" the skin of another, to see and feel things as the other sees and feels them. And he knew deep down that he himself could have suffered what happened to the poor person on the roadside.

God reveals himself in passing, and people can experience surprising things, for example in the mysterious visit of those three men to Abraham and Sarah. (1st reading) For the faith of Israel, it was the beginning of a history that is forever under the promise of this present stranger: I go with you, I am there for you.

Dear Sisters, with sensitivity and with an alert spirit you begin your General Chapter as a globally active community. You bring along your spirituality in the colors of your homeland and represent your sisters who live in Germany, Tanzania, the United States, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Uganda, Italy, China, Brazil, the Philippines, England, Kenya, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, India, Peru, Papua New Guinea and Sweden. During these weeks, you will take each other's perspective and, following the recommendation of the Apostle Paul (2nd reading), rejoice in the truth in kindness and openness, and let the rich gifts of the Spirit among you engage you. You will support each other and perhaps also put up with some things. Religious life is not an "assisted believing": it always requires the mobilization of all forces, the encouragement to grow in personal responsibility and to rejoice in one another.

You want to listen to one another and in doing so experience what the Spirit is saying to your communities. The German language can give us a hint - in this sequence and in this dynamic: hear, listen, belong, obey. (In German all these words all go back to the same root) Nothing else is meant by this than to connect in love, to accept one another with trust and commitment. The goal is not perfection, but the realization of the gifts of the Spirit, which we accept, pass on, and with which we move forward. True life means constant change. Nowhere is there stagnation, because the risen Christ brings the interruption of smooth processes: Behold, I make all things new!

Those who set out move; and when we move, we do not stay where we are, nor do we simply remain as we are. "Process" comes from the Latin word procedere - "to advance, to proceed, to go ahead." We can proceed against each other, put each other on trial, preferably in short order and in the absence of the accused. We know this, also from home. But we can also go forward together, engage in a process that moves us forward, that succeeds. St. Benedict, a process-oriented Christian, writes in his Rule, "As we advance in the monastic way of life and in faith, the heart widens." Faith and religious life are a process - not simply a forward or upward progress, but definitely a journey. This journey also and first leads inward; because God dwells in us, we come into relationship with him by coming into relationship with ourselves. And because God dwells in the midst of our communities, we make our way to him when we enter into relationship with one another. We walk a path onto which we have been called, which we seek and walk together under the guidance of the Gospel - in the colorful diversity of communities. On this journey, the ever-present breath of life of God accompanies us. We try to understand and move through our present situation in its light. Often we do not know what awaits us. But because we believe that the Lord awaits us, we have a future - according to his will, not according to our ideas. We are always “in the making” in the deep awareness that there are no divisions, because the love of Christ unites us. And if you ever feel tired and listless and do not see how the developments are taking you forward, you may assume that these are symptoms that the Holy Spirit has "boostered" you. Then allow yourself distance, rest and relaxation!

From the poet-priest Andreas Knapp come lines that he calls “Directions for a Pilgrim Journey”:

*pilgrimage directions*

*leave maps and gps at home*

*learn to ask and trust*

*keep moving ahead*

*wandering do not live on big feet*

*but from hand to mouth*

*do not break your walking stick*

*over your erred wanderings*

*do not carry too heavy on yourself*

*from destination to destination the journey becomes more essential for you*

*but let your wanderlust remain your faithful pilgrim guide*

*until home*

Homily

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Gerleve