

Rome, 7 April 2013

Re.: 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations

To the Rogationists
To the Daughters of Divine Zeal
To the Rogationist Lay Missionaries
To the Laity of the Family of the Rogate

Dearest,

in the joy of Easter we look forward to the upcoming celebration of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which marks its 50th anniversary on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the *Good Shepherd* Sunday. We welcome the Holy Father's message for this event, which has as its theme: "Vocations as a sign of hope founded in faith" in the context of the Year of Faith, and the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council.

We would like to send you this short message, which we share in the sign of the Rogate, and which constitutes the center of our common vocation and mission.

Jesus, the *Good Shepherd*, manifests himself to us in the glory of his resurrection, and shows us the wounds of his passion, while waiting for the response of our faith and our love. He proclaims and gives us peace.

In the icon of the *Good Shepherd*, who carries the lost sheep upon his shoulders, He reminds us that he wanted to carry the weight of our humanity, to atone for our sin, and to bring us back with love in the Father's house.

This calls to mind the passage of the *Rogate*.

"Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, «The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest!»"(Mt 9, 35-38).

Let us contemplate Jesus who suffers of our suffering, who gives himself totally for each of us, and wants to enlighten our minds and heal our wounds. He reveals to us the secret of humanity's salvation: the workers to be implored from the Lord of the harvest.

If we recall the experience lived by our Founder, St. Hannibal Mary Di Francia, we discover how, in such a wonderful way, he retraced the road of the *Good Shepherd*, captivated by his love, he was led to share of his compassion for the dispersed flock, capable of giving himself totally for the salvation of the little ones and the poor of Messina and of all *the towns and villages* that he was able to reach.

He was animated by a great faith in the words of the Lord who has made his life, in prayer, a continual intercession for *good workers*; he felt the urgency to spread this secret of salvation throughout the Church, and in his zeal he gave himself without sparing anything, for the salvation of souls.

We discover in his life a great unity between contemplation and action, between the search for God to be given to his brothers and the embrace of his brothers that leads back to the Lord. We find the evangelical root of his holiness, “God and Neighbor”, which is his banner, the love and the glory of God through the salvation of souls.

The love of God and the salvation of souls introduced him to Avignone Quarter, as he confided to Father Vitale: “I wanted then to become a Jesuit, and I wanted to get away from this city; but if it were now, I would not have felt that desire, due to the immense need of priests in Messina, who would save the souls and who would consume themselves for Jesus Christ. And I feel to sacrifice myself for the souls of my fellow citizens”¹. This is the dominant aspiration of his life. On August 29, 1925, though assailed by numerous tasks and concerns, he published a short treatise of catechesis for highly educated men but are distant from the faith, such as the *Letter to his “friends and gentlemen whom he loves as himself and whose welfare and happiness he wishes and desires as for himself”*.

The compassion for the brothers and sisters is immediately aroused in Father Hannibal by their material needs but, enlightened by faith, he looks after mainly for their eternal salvation.

He sees in the *Rogate* the royal road to achieve this ideal and began to traverse it as a teenager and young man. He made the *Rogate* his plan of life since the beginning of his ministry in Avignone Quarter. He dreamed and worked so that the Church would become a universal and perennial cenacle of prayer for vocations.

Let us recall some significant choices of Father Hannibal toward this ideal. First, the institution of the Sacred Alliance (Rogationist Priestly Alliance) with which in 1897 he asked the bishops and priests to help spiritually the Pious Work which was in grave difficulties. Bishops, superiors of religious orders and congregations, and priests collaborate with the Pious Work and therefore they have known and promoted the prayer for vocations in their pastoral ministry.

Successively, the Pious Union of Evangelical Rogation of the Heart of Jesus (Union of Prayer for Vocations) was established in 1900, which aims to gather everyone in the Church into a universal and perennial cenacle of prayer for vocations.

Father Hannibal also promoted the prayer for vocations particularly with the Supreme Pontiffs. He was received in audience by Pope Pius X on July 11, 1909 when he asked that the verse: «*Ut dignos ac sanctos Operarios in messem tuam mittere digneris, Te rogamus, audi nos*» be added to the Litany of the Saints, the universal prayer of the Church. On several occasions he met or wrote to Benedict XV. At the bottom of the copy of a letter he himself annotated: “*On June 15, 1921 I sent to the Holy Father the Register of Members of the Pious Union of E. R. of Heart of Jesus from Trani (Wednesday, 10 am)*”. In February of the following year, 1922, he wrote to the new Pope, Pius XI. It was on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the institution of the Sacred Alliance, which already had 38 cardinals, 213 archbishops and bishops of, 34

¹ VITALE F., *Il canonico Annibale Maria Di Francia, nella vita e nelle opere*, Messina, 1939, p. 44.

general superiors of religious orders and congregations, 624 clergy, numbers that grew steadily in the following years.

The encyclical letter of Pope Pius XI on the Catholic priesthood echoes the same expressions that we find in the writings of Father Hannibal: “Although the truth should always be held firmly that the number itself should not be the main concern of those who work for the formation of the clergy, however all must strive to multiply the good and ardent workers in the vineyard of the Lord, inasmuch as the moral needs of society are increasing rather than decreasing. And among all the means for such a noble purpose, the easiest and the most effective, as well as the most universally accessible to everyone and hence everyone should use it assiduously, is the prayer, according to the command of Jesus Christ himself: «The harvest is truly plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest» (Mt 9, 37-38). And what prayer could be more pleasing to the most Sacred Heart of the Redeemer? What prayer can hope to be answered more quickly and more thoroughly than this, which is indeed in accordance with the ardent aspirations of the Divine Heart? «Ask, and it shall be given you» (Mt 7, 7); ask for the good and holy priests and the Lord will not deny them to his Church, as he has always granted through the centuries”².

Six years later, on November 4, 1941, Pius XII established the Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations, with the task of promoting the prayer for vocations. On August 1, 1959 John XXIII began in Italy the National Day for ecclesiastical vocations.

The Second Vatican Council has been particularly sensitive to the issue of prayer for vocations and vocation ministry, and has given precious information to the Church. This journey came to a milestone with the establishment of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations by Pope Paul VI with the letter dated January 23, 1964. It is a significant fact that the title of that Day, submitted for approval to the Pope as World Day of Vocations, was defined by him as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. It was the echo of the prophetic voice of Father Hannibal. In fact, “while the Council was in session, the Servant of God, Paul VI, instituted this day of worldwide prayer to God the Father, asking him to continue to send workers for his Church (cf. Mt 9,38)”³.

We believe that Father Hannibal from Heaven has rejoiced especially for this event, which is the fulfillment of his ardent desire that the prayer for vocations would reach the whole Church. We are likewise confident that Father Hannibal continues to intercede so that the prayer for vocations would indeed become, in the Church, unceasing and universal.

The Family of the Rogate, in its different components, has welcomed the World Day of Prayer for Vocations as the *Rogationist Day* par excellence. We strive to live it intensely, to sensitize the local Church in which we are inserted, so that it would be prepared and celebrated in the best way.

We must have the zeal and inventive spirit of Father Hannibal in order to promote appropriate initiatives that will lead to prayer through information and catechesis on the serious problem of vocations.

² Ad Catholici sacerdotii, 12.20.1935.

³ From the Message for the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

For our part, we cannot consider that the necessity of spreading the prayer for vocations in the Church is no longer needed believing that such sensitivity has already belong to the local Churches and all the faithful.

It is true that even today the alarming shortage of consecrated vocations and ministries is still felt in many local Churches. Not only that, we also need to promote the vocation and mission of the lay faithful. Besides, the prayer for vocations means at the same time, praying for the perseverance and sanctification of those who are called; it is praying so that an attentive pastoral care for vocations, a consistent service of animation and vocation promotion would develop in the Church; it is praying for all vocations and so that each one would rediscover his own life as a vocation received from God. We believe in a Church where, by the grace of God and the outpouring of the Spirit, there is and is promoted the diversity and complementarity of the charisms and ministries.

Moreover, each of us, as sons and daughters of Father Hannibal, we are called to consider the prayer for vocations, within the context of the Gospel passage of the *Rogate*, contemplating and following Jesus who has compassion for the harassed and helpless crowds, like sheep without a shepherd, and who gives himself with zeal for their salvation. Our mission is fueled by a spirituality, in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, which is characterized in charity, zeal, sacrifice, meekness and humility.

The Family of the Rogate has had great encouragements from the Pope in these recent years. Let us recall the exhortation addressed to us by Pope John Paul II: “This mission (of the *Rogate*) is more than ever actual at the beginning of the third millennium, and it requires good and zealous apostles, of which you must and want to be the first. Properly, therefore, you intend to rediscover and relaunch your charism by carefully analyzing the needs of the Church and of the world in the light of the perennial teaching of Jesus on the fundamental importance of prayer”⁴.

Let us accomplish our mission of living and spreading the Rogate, looking forward with the right choices in the different contexts in which we are inserted, utilizing in the best possible way the modern channels of social communication. Then, in our General Chapters, we have been exhorted to continue to promote the Union of Prayer for Vocations and Priestly Union of Prayer for Vocations, established by our Founder, Fr. Hannibal M. Di Francia. For such mission it will be more than ever necessary that we work together, as members of the Family of the Rogate, in great harmony and fraternal collaboration.

Dearest, about a year ago we started the campaign to obtain from the Holy Father the proclamation of Saint Hannibal M. Di Francia as “Patron of Vocations” so that he could be invoked as intercessor of those who are discerning their vocations, of the operators in Vocation Ministry and all the faithful who pray for vocations.

Adhesions from cardinals, bishops, superiors of Religious Orders and Institutes, and numerous lay people are continuously arriving. Many, for example, fully agree that this title is suited to Father Hannibal (like the Rector Major of the Salesians and Cardinal Renato Martino). These are encouraging adhesions which express satisfaction,

⁴ John Paul II, 06.26.204.

because the proposal can “promote the vocation ministry and implore from God for new and holy vocations of which there is an urgent need” (Cardinal Agostino Vallini).

Some of those who adhere to our initiative accompany their adhesion form with expressions of appreciation and satisfaction; someone assures us of having “signed willingly because he is intimately convinced that the granting of grace will be a great gift by the Pope, not only to the beloved Congregation of the Rogationists, but to the universal Church” (Cardinal José José Sariva Martins).

We urge you to continue to promote new adhesions in the hope that we can reach the desired proclamation, and in the awareness that in any way it spreads the knowledge of our Father Founder and of the Rogate.

Let us look forward to the celebration of the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, with renewed enthusiasm and spiritual fervor, with our active participation in the local Churches in which we operate. This important annual event requires from us “a strong commitment to placing the importance of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life ever more at the centre of the spirituality, prayer and pastoral action of the faithful”⁵.

We ask our holy Founder that he implore for each of us his “zeal” or the “obsession” for the Rogate, so that we can follow him in the new way of holiness traced in his life by the Holy Spirit. In the confident shared responsibility, let us implore that we become, every day, true missionary disciples of Jesus Christ, as demanded from us by the Rogate. Founded in prayer and fraternal life, in the contexts where we live and work, let us give witness, as poor and with the poor, the love and loyalty to our specific vocation and consecration.

With these sentiments, while imploring this grace from the Divine Superiors, we greet you with affection in the light of Easter.

⁵ From the Message for the 50th World Day of Prayer for Vocations.