

Readings from the feast day of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus:

Is 66: 10-14c; Mt: 18: 1-5

Dear Sisters of Notre Dame,
dear sisters and brothers from the parish here in Coesfeld, who have come to this solemn Eucharist this morning.

Just now we have experienced in a very illustrative way the value of God's word for your community. In a solemn procession we have greeted the Word of God, we have danced in front of it as David did in front of the Ark of the Covenant, and then we have listened to it.

At the beginning of your General Chapter, dear sisters, you clearly want to show: All that we reflect on in these days and weeks has its origin in the Gospel of Jesus, in the living Word of God. In the letter of James we read, *"Humbly welcome the Word that has been planted in you"* (James 1: 21). I would like to hand it over to you. Welcome the Word that has been planted in your hearts. It is the origin of the personal call of each of you and the origin of the call and mission of your congregation. If you live out of this Word that has been planted in your hearts, you will find how your community is called to live today. Thus, you live with the confidence which the prophet Isaiah expresses in the following way, *"For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before they watered the earth, fertilizing it and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do"* (Isaiah 55: 10-11). This means very concretely that it is effective and fruitful even if you experience that your community is aging. How many of you have to experience that your institutions in which you have served us have been handed over to others.

But the Word of God is not bound to retirement age. The Word of God bears its fruit and we can see it in your internationality or – as I would like to express it – in the catholicity of your community, which is expressed through different languages today. Its effectiveness has already become visible because this Word is not just a sound or an accumulation of letters which then become a language, but it is God in His son Jesus Christ. In the Word that has become flesh, that has come into this world and has dwelt among us, and that expresses in all aspects of life that it is proclaiming God, even in the shape of the crucified under whom your foundresses started the history of your community here in Coesfeld. By standing under this cross, praying in front of Him and starting the General Chapter in front of Him, you clearly show how much you live out of this Word, incarnating it in our time, incarnating it through your life and through your community.

Dear sisters, dear brothers, this is what is most important in the church of our time, that we receive from the Word of God what we are asked to do as Christians and as religious today. In the course of centuries the tasks may change but the fundamental impetus remains the same: To serve the world, rooted in this word! When Jesus says in the gospel today, *"Anyone who welcomes one little child like this in my name welcomes me"* (Mt: 18: 5). Dear sisters, how many children have you welcomed!? How many people – young people-, children have you served! The word that Jesus says to us today has born many fruits in the services that your community has offered – even in our diocese. So I would like to thank you with my

whole heart for your engagement that I am privileged to experience again and again in different encounters when visiting your houses, your schools or former schools.

Today, dear sisters and brothers, the beginning of the general chapter coincides with the feast of St. Thérèse or rather with the Therese who is also called Therese of the Infant and the Holy Face. To interpret this life of a woman religious the Church has chosen the two texts which we have just heard. The joy of God's people about the renewal of the city of Jerusalem makes the prophet say, *"So that you may be suckled and satisfied from her consoling breast, so that you may drink deep with delight from her generous nipple"* (Is: 66, 11). That is a beautiful, female but also intimate image. Drink deeply, dear sisters, in these days from what the church, our mother, the bride of Christ, has to offer us. It is nothing else but the Word of God. That is why you are called "Sisters of Notre Dame". You see in Mary the original image of the church and in her you experience what it means to receive the Word of God, to offer Him your own body, your own life, to breast-feed Him in order to incarnate this Word in our world and to bring it to all people. That is why Mary is given to the church as her mother. It is not without reason that Pope John Paul II calls Mary the "Eucharistic woman". What else happens in the Eucharist than what has happened in Mary! We receive the Word of God, we welcome it in our body – in our flesh, and we carry it into the world. That is why the Eucharist remains the source from which you receive your life and live it. Drink deeply!

However, as it is shown by St. Therese, this requires the attitude of a child. The danger – even in a general chapter – can be to ask: How can we manage things? How can we do it today? Primarily, we must not ask: How can we do it? but: What do we receive? A child magnificently trusts that the parents will handle all things well. It trusts and receives its life through the love of the parents. Saint Therese has clearly shown that when she talks about the so-called "little way", not desire to be great before God, not be someone who can manage. That is why she received the power to persevere during the darkest hours of her life, because she could not let go Jesus. This simple woman experiences what she expresses herself in the following way, *"My belief in God is more difficult and darker than in any atheist."* She could not feel God any longer. But she remained faithful! Here the attitude of a child was stronger than the powers of darkness no longer being able to believe. She trusted: He is there! Behind the dark wall, he will reveal himself.

Therefore we can apply the core of her teaching to each of us. She once writes that she has tried to find out, *"What is my mission?"* She would love to be everything that has to be done in the church. But she cannot. Then she discovers the word of the apostle Paul in the 13th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians that love is above all we do. She then says, *"Now I have found my mission. My vocation is love. In the heart of the church, I would like to be love. Then I will be everything."*

How could you have realized your mission in the past years and decades without living out of this word, without love, be it in hospitals, in schools or in other institutions. In the heart of the church you have realized this, dear sisters. When you make this the core of your mission today, then you are in the center, then you are with Him who is now looking at us from his cross: In this world, his vocation is love. And in the heart of the church, we can be love. Then we will be all for today and for tomorrow. In this sense, I will pray for your general chapter and for your future.

