Vatican

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Pope Francis accepts a book from Sister Mary Norbert Loushin during an audience with the Canons Regular of Prémontré, commonly known as the Norbertines, at the Vatican Sept. 22, 2022. A religious community must make sure its economic activity serves its mission, fulfills its charism and never becomes an end in itself, the pope told members of the order. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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A religious community must make sure its economic activity serves its mission, fulfills its charism and never becomes an end in itself, Pope Francis told members of the Norbertine order.

Abbeys and monasteries also must focus on environmental impact, sustainability and social justice as part of their key concerns as well, he told them Sept. 22 during an audience at the Vatican.

"After all, it is part of your tradition to take into account the environment and the people who inhabit it with you. This creates the conditions for effective pastoral care and credible proclamation of the Gospel," he said.

"Economic and social choices are not separate from mission," he added.

The order, formally known as the Canons Regular of Prémontré, celebrated the 900th anniversary of its foundation by St. Norbert last year, making it one of the oldest Catholic religious orders in the world. St. Norbert chose the rule of St. Augustine as a guide for the new community with an emphasis on a life of austerity, poverty, prayer, community and action serving the needs of the church.

In his address to the Norbertines, the pope said that every abbey and monastery must take into account the social, economic and cultural aspects of their presence and activity in different parts of the world.

The economic activity of each religious community is meant to help support its members, their formation and apostolate, and, for many places, it helps preserve and maintain their cultural and architectural heritage, he added.

"Economic activity serves the mission and fulfillment of the charism: It is never an end in itself, but oriented toward a spiritual purpose," he said.

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It must never contradict the purpose it serves, he said, which means "that when choosing ways of making money, one must ask: What is the impact on the people of the area? What will be the consequences for the poor, for our guests, for visitors?"

"Are our economic choices an expression of evangelical simplicity or are we entrepreneurs? Do they foster hospitality and fraternal life?" he asked.

Religious orders and dioceses must remember that when "economic activity takes over, one forgets the people and forgets what Jesus said: that one cannot serve two masters," that is, God and money, the pope said. "Be careful. The devil usually enters through the pockets."

The idolatry of money "takes us away from the true vocation. Therefore, we always must ask these questions about the consequences" of money-making initiatives for others, even on how it may be perceived, he said.

"We also need to ask what are the consequences for the environment," he said.

"Sustainability is a key criterion, as is social justice," the pope said. As employers, abbeys and monasteries "may consider hiring people who have difficulty finding work or partner with an agency specializing in social inclusion employment."

Taking into account the environment, being open to sharing the religious community's cultural assets, gardens and natural areas, and being attentive to the people in the area, all help promote "effective pastoral care and credible proclamation of the Gospel," he said.