Włodimir (Włodzimierz) Ledóchowski, the superior general of the Jesuits, delivered this address to Pope Pius XII as part of a celebration in Rome’s Hall of Benediction to mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Jesus. Also present were people selected to represent the Society “in miniature,” individuals from the Jesuits’ various works, including “our crown and glory, the devoted alumni of our colleges and universities.”

Holy Father: Prostrate at Your feet, I beg Your Holiness with all my heart graciously to accept, in the name of the entire Society of Jesus, the expression of our overflowing and filial gratitude for having deigned to admit to your venerable Presence, on the occasion of the Fourth Centenary of our Order, the Fathers and Brothers residing in Rome and its vicinity, as also these groups representing the principal works which the Society directs and promotes. In truth, we feel that our whole Society is represented here in miniature: Superiors and subjects, professors and students, missionaries and writers. Scholastics and Coadjutor Brothers and Novices; universities, colleges and residences; the Institute of Religious Culture, the Apostolate of the Spiritual Exercises with its League of Perseverance, the Apostleship of Prayer, the Sodality of Our Lady, the Student Mission League, and, our crown and our glory, the devoted alumni of our colleges and universities. Our Brethren in distant parts are also surely here in spirit, united with us at the feet of the Vicar of Christ, to renew together with us the profession of our unconditional obedience and devotion to the Supreme Head of the Church.

If, owing to the present condition of the world, we could not find our way to celebrate here in Rome and in many other places the festival of our centenary with that solemn splendor which it assumed in other countries, especially in Spain and the Americas, nevertheless, our celebration here in Rome, simple though it has been, advances now beyond all others to the very first place, because of this audience which Your Holiness has so affectionately granted to us. For all of us this meeting in our Father’s House, no less than the beautiful letter which You wrote us, will forever remain the most cherished and abiding remembrance of this our Four Hundredth Anniversary.

As a slight token of our filial devotion and gratitude, we humbly place at the feet of Your Holiness this spiritual bouquet, an offering from ourselves and from the members of the various activities which we direct. Even this spiritual bouquet, however, has felt the pressure of the difficult times which have made communications with our various provinces either impossible or so slow that this spiritual offering includes scarcely a fourth part of the prayers and good works offered for the intentions which are cherished in the apostolic heart of Your Holiness.

We beg Your Holiness graciously to accept also this small reliquary which contains the relics of our Saints, a symbol of our own dearest aspirations. This will say to Your Holiness that we, too, despite all
our shortcomings, long to imitate our Fathers and Brothers, who now enjoy the bliss of Heaven, and to follow them along the path which they have so clearly marked out for us.

In Your memorable discourse of December 24, 1940, Your Holiness brought out clearly that present circumstances impose “gigantic demands” on the apostolate, especially since there lies before us the task of healing the deep festering sores, spiritual and social, that are the sad heritage of every war. In this tremendous undertaking, we, too, as far as our weak forces will permit, wish to do our part at the mere word of Your Holiness, and we stand ready for any task no matter how perilous it may be, as did also, in similar trying days of the past, our first Fathers, among whom we rejoice to number Saint Peter Canisius whose feast we celebrate today.

They were but a mere handful; today our members number many thousands. Yet we fully realize that what really counts is the spirit, not the numbers: that spirit which, even with insignificant instruments, produces great things. Therefore, we come humbly to beg Your Holiness to be pleased to strengthen us with Your Blessing, so that the spirit of our first Fathers may be kept living and vigorous in us, as we work for the greater glory of God and the eternal salvation of souls. And may Your Holiness be pleased to extend this blessing to our whole Society, now terribly harassed and afflicted in so many parts of the world, and to extend it also to all souls entrusted to our care in our colleges, in our ministries, and in the various works directed by us and represented here today, which in every part of the world, with the full approbation of the Holy See, and under the guidance of the Most Reverend Bishops, are striving to defend and extend more and more the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, Our Lord—the high purpose for which the glorious Predecessor of Your Holiness, Paul III, four centuries ago approved the Society of Jesus, and to which we, strengthened by Your Apostolic Blessing, dedicate for the future, all our energy and every breath of our lives.

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