



The Holy See

OPENING OF THE 69th GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

*Synod Hall
Monday, 16 May 2016*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers,

I am especially pleased to open with you this Assembly on the theme which you have set as the guideline for the work — *The renewal of the clergy* — with the intention to support on-going formation in the various stages of life.

Pentecost, which was just celebrated, sets your target in the right light. The Holy Spirit indeed remains the protagonist of the Church's history: it is the Spirit who lives in fullness in the Person of Jesus and introduces us to the mystery of the living God; it is the Spirit who inspired the generous response of the Virgin Mother and of the Saints; it is the Spirit who works through believers and peacemakers, and encourages the generous availability and evangelizing joy of many priests. Without the Holy Spirit — as we know — there is no possibility of a good life, nor of reform. Let us pray and commit ourselves to safeguarding his strength, so as to enable “the world of our time ... to receive the Good News ... from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor” (Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 80).

This evening I do not want to offer you a formal reflection on the figure of the priest. Let try, rather, to overturn the perspective and set ourselves to listening, in contemplation.

Let us approach, almost on tip-toe, some of the many parish priests who expend themselves for our communities; let us allow one aspect of theirs to pass before the eyes of our heart and ask ourselves simply: *what is it about him that makes life full of zest? For whom and for what does he*

dedicate his service? What is the definitive reason for his self-giving?

I hope that these questions may rest silently within you, in peaceful prayer, in honest and fraternal dialogue. The answers that emerge will also help you to identify the constructive proposals on which to invest with courage.

1. *What then, gives zest to the life of "our" priest?* The cultural context is very different from the one in which he took his first steps in the ministry. In Italy too, many traditions, attitudes and the outlook on life have been undermined by a profound change of the times.

We, who often find ourselves deploring this age with a bitter and accusatory tone, must also perceive its harshness: in our ministry, how many people do we meet who are distressed because of the lack of reference points to turn to! How many wounded relationships! In a world in which each person thinks of himself as the measure of all, there is no longer room for a brother.

In this context, the life of our presbyter becomes eloquent, because it is diverse, different. Like Moses, he is one who has approached the fire and has allowed the flames to consume his ambitions of a career and power. He has also made a pyre of the temptation to interpret himself as a "devout follower", who takes refuge in a religious intimacy which has very little spirituality.

Our priest is barefoot with respect to a land that he continues to believe and consider holy. He is not scandalized by the frailties that shake the human soul: aware that he is himself a healed paralytic, he is far removed from the coldness of the rigorist, as he is from the superficiality of those who easily comply. He accepts responsibility for others, feeling he is part of and responsible for their destiny.

With the oil of hope and consolation, he becomes neighbour to each person, careful to share in their abandonment and suffering. Having given up self-determination, he has no agenda to protect, but each morning consigns his time to the Lord so as to be free to meet and and be approached by people. In this way, our priest is neither a bureaucrat nor an anonymous institutional official; he is not consecrated for an administrative role, nor is he motivated by criteria of efficiency.

He knows that Love is everything. He does not seek earthly assurances or honorary titles, which lead one to trust in man; in the ministry per se he asks for nothing that goes beyond actual need, nor is he preoccupied to create bonds with the people who are entrusted to him. His simple and essential lifestyle, always available, presents him as credible in people's eyes and brings him close to the humble, in a pastoral charity which creates freedom and solidarity. A servant of life, he walks with the heart and pace of the poor; he is enriched by being with them. He is a man of peace and reconciliation, a sign and instrument of God's tenderness, careful to spread goodness with the same fervour with which others look after their own interests.

The secret of our priest — as you well know! — lies in that burning bush that brands his existence, conquers it and conforms it to that of Jesus Christ, the definitive Truth of his life. It is the relationship with Him that protects him, rendering him foreign to the spiritual worldliness that corrupts, as well as to any compromise and pettiness. It is friendship with his Lord that leads him to face the daily reality with the trust of one who believes that man's limitations are not so for God.

2. It thus becomes more urgent to also address the other questions from which we began. *For whom does our priest dedicate his service?* The question should perhaps be clarified. In fact, even before asking ourselves about the beneficiaries of his service, we must recognize that the presbyter is such insofar as he feels himself a part of the Church, of an actual community in whose journey he shares. The faithful People of God are the womb from which he is drawn, the family he is engaged with, the house he is invited to. This common belonging, which flows from Baptism, is the breath which frees one from an isolating and imprisoning self-referentiality: "When your boat begins to take root in an immovable pier" — Don Hélder Câmara would say — "weigh anchor!". Set sail! First of all, not because you *have* a mission to fulfil, but because structurally you *are* a missionary: in the encounter with Jesus you have experienced the fullness of life and, therefore, you want with all your heart that others may recognize themselves in Him and may treasure his friendship, be nourished by his word and celebrate Him in the community.

Someone who lives for the Gospel, thereby enters into a virtuous sharing: the pastor is converted and confirmed by the simple faith of the holy People of God, with whom he works and in whose heart he lives. This belonging is the salt of the priest's life; it enables his distinctive mark to be communion, lived with lay people in relationships that appreciate the participation of each person. In this age lacking in social friendship, our first task is that of building community; the attitude of relating is, thus, a decisive criterion in vocational discernment.

Likewise, it is vital for a priest to be in the Upper Room of the presbyterate. This experience — when it is not experienced on an occasional basis, nor instrumentalized cooperation — frees one from narcissism and clerical jealousy; it increases esteem, support and mutual benevolence; it fosters not only a sacramental or juridical communion but a fraternal and practical one. In the walking together of priests, different in age and sensitivity, an astonishing and mesmerizing fragrance of prophecy spreads. Communion is truly one of the names of Mercy.

Our reflection on the renewal of the clergy also returns to the chapter regarding the management of structures and resources: in a Gospel perspective, avoid burdening yourselves with a conservative pastoral ministry, which blocks the the openness to the perennial newness of the Spirit. Keep only what may be helpful for the experience of faith and charity for the People of God.

3. Lastly, we are asked *what is the definitive reason for our presbyter's self-giving*. How much sadness is spread by those who in life always go halfway, with a foot raised! They calculate, weigh options, risk nothing due to fear of losing.... They are the most unhappy people! Our priest,

instead, with his limitations, is one who plays the game to the very end: in the concrete conditions in which life and the ministry have placed him, he freely offers himself with humility and joy. Even when no one seems to notice it. Even when he perceives that, in human terms, perhaps no one will thank him enough for his immeasurable self-giving.

But — he knows — he could not do otherwise: he loves the earth, which he recognizes is visited each morning by God's presence. He is a man of the Paschal Mystery, his gaze turned to the Kingdom, toward which he feels human history is walking, despite the delays, the shadows and contradictions. The Kingdom — the view that Jesus has of man — is his joy, the horizon that allows him to see the rest as relative, attenuating worries and anxiety, to remain free from illusions and pessimism; to safeguard peace in his heart and to spread it with his deeds, his words, his demeanour.

Thus outlined, dear brothers, is *the threefold belonging that constitutes us: belonging to the Lord, to the Church, to the Kingdom*. This treasure in clay vessels should be safeguarded and promoted! Perceive this responsibility deeply, take it on with patience and availability of time, of hands and of heart.

I pray with you to the Blessed Virgin, that her intercession may keep you welcoming and faithful. Together with your priests may you complete the course, the service that has been entrusted to you and with which you participate in the mystery of Mother Church.

Thank you.