



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY

*Consistory Hall
Thursday, 1 June 2017*

[Multimedia]

Your Eminences, Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I extend my cordial greetings to all of you and I thank you for your generous commitment to the service of priests and to their formation. I offer my heartfelt thanks to Cardinal Beniamino Stella for his words and for the great deal of work he is doing.

I am pleased to be having a dialogue with you on the great gift of the ordained ministry, just months since the promulgation of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis*. This document speaks about an *integral formation*, meaning, capable of including all aspects of life; and thus it indicates the path of formation of the missionary disciple; an *alluring*, and at the same time, *demanding* path.

Reflecting on these two aspects — the allure of the call and the exacting commitments involved — I thought of *young priests* in particular, who experience joy at the beginning of their ministry, and with it, also feel its weight. A young priest's heart lives between enthusiasm for initial projects and anxiety over apostolic struggles, into which he immerses himself with a certain reverence, which is a sign of wisdom. He profoundly feels the jubilation and power of the anointing received, but his shoulders gradually become burdened with the weight of responsibility, the numerous pastoral commitments and the expectations of the People of God.

How does a young priest experience this? What does he carry in his heart? What does he need to keep his feet, which run to spread the Good News of the Gospel, from becoming paralyzed, when faced with fear and the first difficulties, to keep from following the temptation to take shelter in rigidness or to leave everything and become one of the "lost"?

One has to admit that young people are often judged in a somewhat superficial way and are too easily labeled as a “liquid” generation, lacking passion and ideals. Certainly, there are young people who are fragile, disoriented, fragmented or infected by the culture of consumerism and individualism. But this should not prevent us from recognizing that young people are capable of “firmly” putting their stakes on life and of generously taking up a challenge; of fixing their gaze on the future and thus, of being an antidote with respect to the resignation and loss of hope that marks our society; of being creative and imaginative, courageous in changing, magnanimous when it comes to dedicating themselves to others or to ideals such as solidarity, justice and peace. With all of their limitations, they are still a resource.

We may ask ourselves then, in our presbyterate, how do we view young priests? Firstly, let us allow ourselves to be enlightened by the Word of God which shows us how the Lord calls young people, trusts them and sends them out on mission.

Whereas, “*the word of the Lord was rare in those days*” (1 Sam 3:1), because the people had become depraved and were no longer listening to the voice of the Lord, God turned to the boy Samuel, a small “altar server of the Temple” who would become prophet of the people (cf. 1 Sam 3:1-10). Then the gaze of the Lord, going beyond any appearances, chose David, the youngest of Jesse’s children, and anointed him King of Israel (cf. Sam 16:1-13). And to Jeremiah, who worried he was too young for the mission, the Lord offered his paternal reassurance: “*Do not say, ‘I am only a youth... for I am with you’*” (Jer 1:7-8). We can also see that the Lord’s choice falls to the little ones in the Gospels. And the mission entrusted to the disciples to proclaim the Gospel was not based on the greatness of human strength, but rather on the willingness to allow oneself to be guided by the gift of the Spirit.

This is what I would like to say to young priests: you are chosen; you are dear to the Lord! God looks upon you with a father’s tenderness and, after having caused your heart to fall in love, he will not allow your steps to falter. You are important in his eyes and he trusts that you will rise to the height of the mission to which he has called you. How important it is for young priests to find parish priests and bishops who encourage them in this perspective, not only because they are waiting for them because they need a replacement or to fill vacancies!

I would like to say two things on this, off the cuff. *Vacancies*: Do not fill these empty posts with people who were not called by the Lord; do not take men from anywhere. Carefully examine a young man’s vocation, its authenticity, and whether he is in search of refuge or because he hears the Lord’s call. To accept someone only because there is a need, dear bishops, is a lien on the Church! A lien. Secondly: Do not leave them on their own. *Closeness*: bishops, be close to priests; bishops, be close to priests. How many times have I heard complaints from priests.... I have said this many times — you may have heard it —: “I telephoned the bishop; he was not in and the secretary told me that he was not there; I asked for an appointment”; “He’s all booked up for three months...”. And that priest is left cut off from the bishop. But if you, bishop, know that the call list your secretary leaves you includes a call from a priest and you have a full agenda, that same day, in the evening or the next day — no longer than that — phone him back and tell him how things

are,

determine together whether it is urgent or not.... But the important thing is that that priest will feel he has a father, a father who is close by. Closeness. Closeness to priests. A diocese cannot be governed without closeness; one cannot help a priest to grow and be sanctified without the paternal closeness of the bishop.

I am always happy when I meet young priests because I see the youthfulness of the Church in them. Therefore, thinking about the new *Ratio* which speaks of the priest as a missionary disciple in permanent formation (cf. n. 3), I would like to emphasize, above all for young priests, several important aspects: *to pray tirelessly, to be always on the move and to share with the heart.*

To pray tirelessly, because we can only be “fishers of men” if we first recognize that we were “caught” by the tenderness of the Lord. Our vocation began when, after giving up the terrain of our individualism and our own personal projects, we set forth on the “holy journey”, consigning ourselves to that Love which sought us in the night and to that Voice which set our heart beating. Thus, like the fishermen of Galilee, we have left our nets to grasp those that the Teacher has given us. If we do not continue to remain closely bound to him, our fishing cannot be successful. Pray always, I implore you!

During the years of formation, the hours of our days were divided in such a way as to leave the time necessary for prayer. Later, it is not possible to have everything arranged in this way — life is another thing — everything is organized from the moment that one is immersed in the sometimes pressing rhythm of pastoral commitments. Nevertheless, the very things we acquired during the time at the Seminary — experiencing harmony amid prayer, work and rest — are a precious resource when facing the apostolic struggle. Each day, we need to stop, listen to the Word of God, and pause before the Tabernacle. “I try, but ... I fall asleep before the Tabernacle”. Go ahead and fall asleep because it pleases the Lord; but stay there, before him. And also take care to listen to our body, which is a good doctor and warns us when fatigue has exceeded our limitations. Prayer, the relationship with God, and care of the spiritual life enliven the ministry, and the ministry, so to speak, gives shape to the spiritual life: because the priest sanctifies himself and others in the concrete exercise of the ministry, in particular by preaching and celebrating the Sacraments.

Secondly, *be always on the move*, because a priest never “arrives”. He is always a disciple, a pilgrim on the way of the Gospel and of life, facing the threshold of the mystery of God and on the holy ground of the people entrusted to him. He will never feel satisfied nor be able to extinguish the healthy restlessness that leads him to extend his hands to the Lord, to allow himself to be formed and fulfilled. Therefore, always keep up to date and remain open to the surprises of God! In this openness to what is new, young priests can be creative in evangelization, making discerning use of the new means of communication, where they may encounter people’s faces, stories and questions, developing social and interpersonal skills and a greater capacity to proclaim the faith.

Likewise, they can “network” with other priests and prevent the gnawing of self-centredness from hindering the regenerative experience of priestly communion. In fact, in every aspect of priestly life, it is important to progress in faith, love and pastoral charity, without becoming rigid in one’s convictions or being stuck in one’s own frame of mind.

And lastly, *share with the heart*, because priestly life is not a bureaucratic office nor a series of religious or liturgical procedures to fulfil. We have spoken at length of the “bureaucratic priest” who is a “state cleric” and not a pastor of the people. Being a priest is putting oneself on the line for the Lord and for brothers and sisters, bearing in one’s very flesh the joys and the anguish of the people, spending time and lending an ear to heal the wounds of others, and offering the Father’s tenderness to everyone. Beginning with the memory of their personal experiences — when they were at the oratory, nurturing dreams and friendships enlivened by young love for the Lord —, new priests have the great opportunity to experience this sharing with young people and teens. It means being among them — here too, closeness — not only as a friend among others, but as one who, with the heart, knows how to share their life, listen to their questions and participate in a practical way in the various vicissitudes of their life. Young people do not need a professional of the sacred or a hero who answers their questions from above and from the outside. They are more attracted by those who know how to become sincerely involved in their life, supporting them with respect and listening to them with love. It means having a heart that is full of passion and compassion, above all, towards young people.

To pray tirelessly, to be always on the move and to share with the heart means to live the priestly life by gazing heavenward and thinking big. It is not an easy task, but we can put our trust completely in the Lord because he always precedes us on the journey! May Mary Most Holy, who prayed tirelessly, who walked behind her son and shared his life up to the foot of the Cross, guide us and intercede for us. Please, pray for me!