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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 160517b

Tuesday 17.05.2016

The Pope to Italian bishops: profile of a priest who is credible to his people

Vatican City, 17 May 2016 – What makes the life of a priest interesting? For whom and for what does he serve? What is the ultimate reason for his self-giving? These were the questions posed by the Pope to the bishops of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), whom he met yesterday afternoon on the occasion of its 69th assembly, inaugurated yesterday in the Vatican and scheduled to conclude on Thursday, 19 May.

The theme of the assembly is "The renewal of the clergy", and Francis affirmed at the beginning of his discourse that he did not intend to offer the prelates a systematic review of the figure of the priest, but rather to invite them to draw closer, "on tiptoe", to any of the parish priests in their communities to observe how they live and serve, in a cultural context that is likely very different to that in which he took the first steps in his ministry, as in Italy, as elsewhere, many traditions and view of life have undergone profound change.

"We, who often deplore this time with a bitter and accusatory tone, must also be aware of how tough it is: in our ministry, we encounter so many people who suffer as a result of a lack of references to look to. How many wounded relationships there are!" said the Pope. "In this context, the life of our priest becomes eloquent as it is different, alternative. Like Moses, he is one who approaches the fire and lets his ambitions of a career and power be consumed by the flames. He makes a bonfire of the temptation to see himself as a 'devotee', who seeks refuge in religious intimacy that has little spiritual content. ... He is not scandalised by the frailties that stir the human spirit: aware that he too is a healed paralytic, he is distant from the coldness of the overly rigorous, and from the superficiality of those who offer cheap condescension. He accepts, instead, to take responsibility for the other, feeling that he participates in and is responsible for his destiny. With the oil of hope and consolation, he makes himself the neighbour of each person, sharing in his ... suffering. ... He has no agenda to defend, but instead each morning consigns his time to the Lord so that he can be met by the people and to go out to meet them. Therefore, our priest is not a bureaucrat or the anonymous functionary of an institution, nor is he an employee; he is not motivated by criteria of efficiency."

The priest knows that "love is everything. He does not seek earthly assurances or honorific titles ... in his ministry he asks nothing for himself beyond his real needs, nor does he attempt to bind to him the people entrusted to him. His simple and essential style of life and his availability present him as credible in the eyes of the people and bring him closer to the humble, in a pastoral charity that makes him free and fraternal. He is a servant of life, who journeys with the heart and the steps of the poor; their presence enriches him. He is a man

of peace and reconciliation, a sign and an instrument of God's tenderness, careful to spread goodness with the same passion with which others take care of their own interests. The secret of our priest ... is in that burning bush that has branded with fire his existence, conquering it and conforming it to that of Jesus Christ, the definitive truth of his life. It is the relationship with Him that safeguards him, keeping him apart from the spiritual worldliness that corrupts, and from any form of compromise or meanness."

After outlining the profile of the priest, the Holy Father went on to speak about those to whom he serves, specifying first of all that "the priest is to be considered as such to the extent that he feels he participates in the life of the Church, of a concrete community with whom he shares his journey. The faithful people of God remains the source from which he originates, the family with whom he is linked, the home to which he is sent. This common belonging, that springs from Baptism, is the breath that frees from the self-referentiality that isolates and imprisons. 'When your boat starts to take root in the immobility of the dock, set sail for the open sea', said the bishop Hélder Câmara. ... And most 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 desire with all your being for others to recognise themselves in Him."

He who lives for the Gospel thus enters into "a virtuous sharing: the pastor is converted and confirmed in 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 life for the presbyter; it ensures that his distinctive feature is communion, lived with the laity in relationships able to value the participation of each person. In this time, in which social friendship is scarce, our first task is that of building communities." Likewise, for the priest it is fundamental to "rediscover himself in the Cenacle of the presbytery. This experience ... free of narcissism and clerical jealousies, enables mutual esteem, support and goodwill to grow; it favours a communion that is not merely sacramental or juridical, but fraternal and concrete. ... Communion is truly one of the names of Mercy."

The Pope went on to observe that the reflection on the renewal of the religious community that is taking place in the CEI also includes the chapter dedicated to the management of structures and assets, and in this regard he affirmed that "with an evangelical view, avoid weighing yourself down in a pastoral of conservation, that obstructs openness to the perennial newness of the Spirit. Keep only that which may serve for the experience of faith and the charity of God's people."

Francis concluded by asking what is the ultimate reason for self-giving in priestly life, noting that it is very sad to see those who spend their life in half-measures, "with one foot raised! They calculate, weigh up, and risk nothing for fear of losing out. ... They are the unhappiest of all. Instead our presbyter, with his limits, is one who plays to the end: in the concrete conditions in which his life and ministry have placed him, he offers himself gratuitously, with humility and joy, even when no-one seems to realise this. Even when he intuits that, in human terms, perhaps no-one will thank him enough for his boundless self-giving. But he could not do otherwise: he loves the earth, that he acknowledges every morning to be visited by God's presence. He is a man of Easter, who looks to the Kingdom, towards which he is aware that human history journeys, despite its delays, obscurities and contradictions. The Kingdom – the vision Jesus has of man – is his joy, the horizon that allows him to relativise the rest, to dissolve his worries and anxieties, to stay free from illusions and pessimism; to safeguard peace in his heart and to disseminate it by his gestures, his words, and his attitudes."

"Here I have outlined the triple belonging that constitutes us", the Pope concluded: "belonging to the Lord, to the Church, and to the Kingdom. This treasure in earthen vessels must be protected and promoted. Be thoroughly aware of this responsibility, and take good care of it with patience and willingly offering your time, hands and heart."
