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The priest is not an inspector of the flock, but a good Samaritan

Vatican City, 3 June 2016 – On the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this morning Pope Francis celebrated Holy Mass in St. Peter's Square to conclude the Jubilee for Priests (1-3 June), attended by twenty cardinals, fifty bishops, five thousand priests from all over the world and over 250 presbyters from the Roman Curia.

In his homily the Pope invited priests to adopt three ways of acting to conform to Jesus' charity: seeking out, including and rejoicing. He emphasised that priests are not inspectors of the flock or accountants of the Spirit, but rather good Samaritans in search of those in need.

Today's celebration "invites us all to turn to the heart, the deepest root and foundation of every person, the focus of our affective life and, in a word, his or her very core. Today we contemplate two hearts: the Heart of the Good Shepherd and our own heart as priests. The Heart of the Good Shepherd is not only the Heart that shows us mercy, but is itself mercy. There the Father's love shines forth; there I know I am welcomed and understood as I am; there, with all my sins and limitations, I know the certainty that I am chosen and loved. Contemplating that heart, I renew my first love: the memory of that time when the Lord touched my soul and called me to follow Him, the memory of the joy of having cast the nets of our life upon the sea of His word".

The Heart of the Good Shepherd "tells us that His love is limitless; it is never exhausted and it never gives up. There we see His infinite and boundless self-giving; there we find the source of that faithful and meek love which sets free and makes others free; there we constantly discover anew that Jesus loves us "even to the end" (Jn 13:1), without ever being imposing. The Heart of the Good Shepherd reaches out to us, above all to those who are most distant. There the needle of His compass inevitably points, there we see a particular 'weakness' of His love, which desires to embrace all and lose none."

"Contemplating the Heart of Christ, we are faced with the fundamental question of our priestly life: Where is my heart directed? Our ministry is often full of plans, projects and activities: from catechesis to liturgy, to works of charity, to pastoral and administrative commitments. Amid all these, we must still ask ourselves: What is my heart set on, where is it directed, what is the treasure that it seeks? For as Jesus says: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also".

"The great riches of the Heart of Jesus are two", Francis explained; "the Father and ourselves. His days were divided between prayer to the Father and encountering people. Not distance: encounter. So too the heart of Christ's priests knows only two directions: the Lord and His people. The heart of the priest is a heart pierced by the love of the Lord. For this reason, he no longer looks to himself, but is turned towards God and his brothers and sisters. It is no longer 'a fluttering heart', allured by momentary whims, shunning disagreements and seeking petty satisfactions. Rather, it is a heart rooted firmly in the Lord, warmed by the Holy Spirit, open and available to our brothers and sisters. And there he resolves his sins. To help our hearts burn with the charity of Jesus the Good Shepherd, we can train ourselves to do three things suggested to us by today's readings: seek out, include and rejoice."

With reference to the first – seeking out – the Pope cited the prophet Ezekiel, who reminds us that God Himself goes out in search of His sheep. As the Gospel says, He 'goes out in search of the one who is lost', without fear of the risks. Without delaying, He leaves the pasture and His regular workday. He does not put off the search. He does not think: 'I have done enough for today; I'll worry about it tomorrow'. Instead, He immediately sets to it; His heart is anxious until He finds that one lost sheep. Having found it, He forgets His weariness and puts the sheep on His shoulders, fully content. At times you must go out to find it, to speak, to persuade; at other times you must stay in front of the tabernacle, struggling with the Lord for that sheep. Such is a heart that seeks out – a heart that does not set aside times and spaces as private. Woe to pastors who privatise their ministry! It is a heart that is not jealous of its legitimate quiet time and never demands that it be left alone. A shepherd after the heart of God does not protect his own comfort zone; he is not worried about protecting his good name, but rather, without fearing criticism, he is disposed to take risks in seeking to imitate his Lord."

A shepherd after the heart of God "has a heart sufficiently free to set aside his own concerns. He does not live by calculating his gains or how long he has worked: he is not an accountant of the Spirit, but a good Samaritan who seeks out those in need. For the flock he is a shepherd, not an inspector, and he devotes himself to the mission not fifty or sixty percent, but with all he has. In seeking, he finds, and he finds because he takes risks. He does not stop when disappointed and he does not yield to weariness. Indeed, he is stubborn in doing good, anointed with the divine obstinacy that loses sight of no one. Not only does he keep his doors open, but he also goes to seek out those who no longer wish to enter them. Like every good Christian, and as an example for every Christian, he constantly goes out of himself. The epicentre of his heart is outside of himself. He is not drawn by his own 'I', but by the 'Thou' of God and by the 'we' of other men and women."

In relation to inclusion, the Pope reiterated that "Christ loves and knows His sheep. He gives His life for them, and no one is a stranger to Him. His flock is His family and His life. He is not a boss to be feared by His flock, but a shepherd Who walks alongside them and calls them by name. He wants to gather the sheep that are not yet of His fold. So it is also with the priest of Christ. He is anointed for his people, not to choose his own projects but to be close to the real men and women whom God has entrusted to him. No one is excluded from his heart, his prayers or his smile. With a father's loving gaze and heart, he welcomes and includes everyone, and if at times he has to correct, it is to draw people closer. He stands apart from no one, but is always ready to dirty his hands. As a minister of the communion that he celebrates and lives, he does not await greetings and compliments from others, but is the first to reach out, rejecting gossip, judgements and malice. He listens patiently to the problems of his people and accompanies them, sowing God's forgiveness with generous compassion. He does not scold those who wander off or lose their way, but is always ready to bring them back and to resolve difficulties and disagreements. He is a man who knows how to include."

Finally, the Holy Father considered the importance of rejoicing. "God is 'full of joy'. His joy is born of forgiveness, of life risen and renewed, of prodigal children who breathe once more the sweet air of home. The joy of Jesus the Good Shepherd is not a joy for Himself alone, but a joy for others and with others, the true joy of love. This is also the joy of the priest. He is changed by the mercy that he freely gives. In prayer he discovers God's consolation and realises that nothing is more powerful than His love. He thus experiences inner peace, and is happy to be a channel of mercy, to bring men and women closer to the Heart of God. Sadness for him is not the norm, but only a step along the way; harshness is foreign to him, because he is a shepherd after the meek Heart of God."

"Dear priests", he concluded, "in the Eucharistic celebration we rediscover each day our identity as shepherds."

In every Mass, may we truly make our own the words of Christ: 'This is my body, which is given up for you.' This is the meaning of our life; with these words, in a real way we can daily renew the promises we made at our priestly ordination. I thank all of you for saying 'yes' to giving your life in union with Jesus: for in this is found the pure source of our joy."
