



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 160617c

Friday 17.06.2016

The Pope at the Rome diocesan congress: every family must be treated with respect and care, there must be no pastoral ministry of ghettos, and let the elderly dream again

Vatican City, 17 June 2016 – Yesterday afternoon in the Basilica of St. John Lateran the Pope Francis opened the diocesan congress of Rome, on the theme "The Joy of Love, the journey of families in Rome in the light of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*". Its work, in the form of five thematic workshops in the 36 prefectures of the Roman diocese, will terminate this afternoon. The Holy Father structured his reflection on the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* – which inspired the congress – in three points: the life of each person and the life of every family must be treated with great respect and care; no to a pastoral ministry of or for ghettos; and the elderly must be granted space so they can dream again.

At the beginning of his address, of which we offer an extensive summary, Pope Francis reiterated some of the key ideas from the Synodal journey to enable a better understanding of the spirit of the Exhortation, also using three biblical images: "Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3.5), "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke, 18.11), and "Your old men shall dream dreams" (Joel, 2.28).

"Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground", This was God's invitation to Moses before the burning bush. The terrain to cover, the topics to address in the Synod were in need of a specific attitude. ... We had before us the concrete faces of so many families. ... This giving of a face to topics exacted (and exacts) an atmosphere of respect capable of helping us to listen to what God is saying to us in our situations. ... A respect charged with honest concerns and questions that looked to the care of the lives we are called to guide. Giving a face to themes ... protects us from ideologising the faith through well-structured systems which nonetheless ignore grace. And this can only be done in an atmosphere of faith. It is faith that pushes us tirelessly to seek God's presence in the changes of history."

"God came to meet us in that context, His Word came to us not as a sequence of abstract texts, but as a fellow traveller. ... This reminds us that our families, the families in our parishes with their faces, their stories, with all their complications 'are not a problem but an opportunity' – an opportunity that challenges us to awaken a missionary creativity capable of embracing all the concrete situations. ... Not only those that come to or are in the parishes, but to be able to reach the families of our districts. This meeting challenges us not to consider anything or anyone as lost... nor to abandon anyone because he is not up to the level of what is required of him.

This demands that we move on from statements of principle to enter ... Roman neighbourhoods and, as artisans, to model God's dream in this reality, something that only persons of faith can do, those that do not close the way to the Spirit's action."

"The second biblical image relates to the Pharisee, when he prayed saying to the Lord: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector'. One of the temptations to which we are continually exposed is to have a separatist logic. We think we gain in identity and security every time we differentiate ourselves and isolate ourselves from others, especially from those who are living in a different situation. Identity is not made in separation, but rather in belonging, in belonging to the Lord. ... We cannot analyse, reflect and even less so pray about the reality as if we were on different banks or paths, as if we were outside of history. We all need to convert ... and to say, together with the tax collector: My God, be merciful to me, a sinner! From this starting point, we are included in the same 'group' and we put ourselves before the Lord in an attitude of humility and of listening."

"To look at our families with the delicacy with which God looks at them helps us to put our consciences in the same direction. The emphasis on mercy puts us before the reality in a realistic way, not, however, with just any realism but with God's realism. Our analyses are important and necessary and they will help us to have a healthy realism. But nothing is comparable to evangelical realism, which does not halt at the description of situations, of problems, – even less of sin – but always goes beyond and succeeds, seeing behind every face, every story and every situation, an opportunity, a possibility. Evangelical realism is committed to the other, to others and does not make ideals ... an obstacle to encountering others in the situations in which they find themselves. It is not about not proposing the evangelical ideal; on the contrary, it invites us to live it within history, with all that it entails. This does not mean not being clear in terms of doctrine, but to avoid forming judgements and attitudes that do not take into account the complexity of life. Evangelical realism gets its hands dirty, because it knows that 'wheat and weeds' grow together, and the best wheat – in this life – will always be mixed with some weeds. I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the good that the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, ... a Church capable of treating the weak 'with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements. The Gospel itself tells us not to judge or condemn'."

"Old men shall dream dreams' was one of Joel's prophecies for the time of the Spirit. Old men shall dream dreams and young men shall see visions. ... In this prophecy we contemplate an irrevocable reality: in the dreams of our old men there is often the possibility that our young men have new visions, have a future again, a tomorrow, a hope. ... They are two realities that go hand in hand, that need one another and are connected. ... As a society, we have deprived our elderly of their voice; we have deprived them of their space; we have deprived them of the opportunity to tell us about their life, their stories and their experiences. We have set them aside and thus we have lost the richness of their wisdom. By discarding them, we discarded the possibility of having contact with the secret that enabled them to go forward. We are deprived of the testimony of marriages that have not only lasted through time, but which also keep in their heart gratitude for all that they have lived through."

"This lack of models, of testimonies, this lack of grandparents, of parents able to recount their dreams does not enable the young generations to 'have visions'. It does not enable them to make plans, given that the future generates insecurity, mistrust and fear. Only the testimony of our parents, to see that it was possible to struggle for something that was worthwhile, will help them to raise their eyes. How can we pretend that young people live the challenge of the family, of marriage as a gift, if they continually hear from us that it is a burden?"

"Three images: The life of every person, the life of every family must be treated with much respect and much care, especially when we reflect on these things. Let us beware of putting in the field a pastoral plan of ghettos and for ghettos. Let us give space to the elderly so that they can dream again."

"Three images that remind us how 'the faith does not take us out of the world but inserts us more profoundly in it'. Not like those perfect and immaculate ones who think they know it all, but as persons who have known the love that God has for us. And in this confidence, with this certainty, with much humility and respect, let us

approach all of our brothers to live the joy of love in the family. With this trust we give up the 'niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead ... enter into the reality of other people's lives and ... know the power of tenderness'. This demands that we develop a family pastoral ministry capable of welcoming, accompanying, discerning and integrating. A pastoral ministry that enables and makes possible the necessary scaffolding so that the life entrusted to us finds the support it needs to develop according to God's dream."
