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SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

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Francis receives the participants in the Convention on vocational pastoral ministry, essential task for pastors and laity

"I confess that I am always a little afraid of using some expressions common in our ecclesial language: 'vocational pastoral' could bring to mind one of the many sectors of ecclesial activity, an office of the Curia, or perhaps even the development of a project. I am not saying that this is not important, but it is much more than this: vocational pastoral ministry is an encounter with the Lord! ... A decisive encounter, that enlightens our existence, that pulls us out of the anguish of our little world and makes us beloved disciples of the Master", said the Holy Father this morning as he received in the Clementine Hall the 250 participants in the international Convention on vocational pastoral ministry promoted by the Congregation for the Clergy, on the theme "Miserando atque eligendo", the motto chosen by Pope Francis at the beginning of his papacy.

"As you know", he said, "I chose this motto in recollection of my younger years when I strongly felt the call of the Lord: it did not come following a conference or as the result of a beautiful theory, but from having experienced Jesus' merciful gaze upon me. So, it is good that you have come here, from many parts of the world, to reflect on this theme, but please, do not let all this finish with a good conference! Vocational pastoral ministry is learning Jesus' style, which passes in the places of everyday life, pauses without haste, and looking to our brothers with mercy, leads them to the encounter with God the Father".

He went on to note that the evangelists often highlight a detail of Jesus' mission: He goes out into the streets and sets out on His journey, encountering "the sorrows and the hopes of the people. It is 'God with us', Who lives in the midst of the homes of His children and is not afraid of mingling in the crowds of our cities, becoming a leaven for newness where the people struggle for a different life. Also in the case of the vocation of Matthew, we find the same detail : first Jesus goes out to preach, then He sees Levi sitting in his tax booth, and finally, He calls to him". The Pope then invited reflection on these three verbs: to go out, to see and to call.

Firstly, to go out: "Vocational pastoral ministry necessitates a Church in movement, capable of broadening its horizons, establishing itself not according to the limits of human calculations and the fear of error, but rather on the wider dimensions of the merciful heart of God. There can be no fruitful harvest of vocations without being bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities. We must learn to leave behind the strictures that render us incapable of communicating the joy of the Gospel, the standardised formulae that often prove anachronistic, and the preconceived analyses

that pigeonhole the life of people according to cold frameworks”.

“I ask this above all of the pastors of the Church, bishops and priests: you are the first to be responsible for Christian and priestly vocations, and this task cannot be relegated to a bureaucratic office. You too have lived an encounter that has changed your life, when another priest ... enabled you to experience the beauty of God’s love. And so you too, going out, listening to the young, can help them to discern ... and guide their steps. It is sad when a priest lives only for himself, shutting himself away in the stronghold of the sacristy or a limited group of faithful. On the contrary, we are called to be pastors in the midst of the people, capable of inspiring a pastoral ministry of encounter and of spending time to welcome and listen to all, especially the young”.

Secondly, to see: “When he walks the streets, Jesus stops and catches the gaze of others, without haste. It is this that makes his call attractive and fascinating. Nowadays, unfortunately, the haste and speed of the stimuli to which we are subjected do not always leave space for that inner silence in which the call of the Lord may resound. At times, the same risk is run in our communities too: pastors and pastoral workers excessively occupied with things to do, who risk falling into an organisational vacuum of activism without stopping to encounter people. The Gospel instead shows us that the vocation begins with a gaze of mercy that falls upon me. ... It was in this way that Jesus looked at Matthew. Finally, this tax collector perceived not a gaze of disdain or judgement, but instead felt that someone looked inside him with love. Jesus challenged the prejudices and labels of the people; He created an open space, in which Matthew was able to receive his own life and start a new journey”.

“This is how I like to think of the style of vocational pastoral ministry. And, if I may, in the same way I imagine the gaze of every pastor: attentive, not hasty, able to stop and to read in depth, to enter into the life of another without making him or her feel threatened or judged. It is a gaze ... able to inspire wonder for the Gospel, to reawaken us from the torpor in which the culture of consumerism and superficiality submerges us and to inspire authentic demands for joy, especially among the young. It is a gaze of discernment, that accompanies people, without taking possession of their conscience or claiming to control the grace of God. Finally, it is an attentive and watchful gaze which is therefore continually called upon to be purified. When dealing with priestly vocations and entry into the seminary, I beg you to discern in truth, to have a shrewd and cautious gaze, without frivolity or superficiality. I say so in particular to my brother bishops: vigilance and prudence. The Church and the world are in need of mature and balanced priests, intrepid and generous pastors, capable of closeness, listening and mercy”.

The third action is to call, which is “the verb proper to Christian vocation. Jesus did not make long speeches, nor did He offer a programme to follow or prefabricated responses. Addressing Matthew, He limited Himself to saying ‘Follow me’. In this way, He inspires in him the appeal of discovering a new objective, opening up his life towards a place that goes beyond the little booth where he is seated. Jesus’ desire to encourage people to journey, to move them from their deadly apathy, breaks the illusion that it is possible to live happily while remaining comfortably seated among one’s own securities”.

“This desire to search, which is typical of the young, is the treasure that the Lord places in our hands and which we must nurture, cultivate and make grow. Let us look at Jesus, Who passes along the shores of our existence, gathering the desire of those who seek the disappointment of a fruitless night’s fishing, the burning thirst of a woman who goes to the well to collect water, or the powerful need to change one’s life. In this way, we too, instead of reducing faith to a book of recipes or a collection of rules to obey, can help the young to ask the right questions, to set out on their voyage and to discover the joy of the Gospel”.

“I am well aware that yours is not an easy task, and at times, despite generous efforts, the results may be scarce and we risk frustration and discouragement. But let us not be wrapped up in our complaints, and continue instead to go out to proclaim the Gospel, the Lord Who stays by our side and gives us the courage to cast the nets even when we are tired and disillusioned”.

At the end of his address, the Holy Father exhorted bishops and priests to persevere in being present, in going forth, in sowing the Word, with a gaze of mercy and “adopting the methods possible, exercising the art of

discernment and giving an impetus, through evangelisation, to the theme of priestly vocations and consecrated life. Do not be afraid of proclaiming the Gospel ... of guiding the life of the young. And do not be timid in proposing to them the way of priestly life, showing primarily through your joyful witness that it is beautiful to follow the Lord and to give Him your life for ever. ... I trust that these days, in which much richness abounds also thanks to the speakers that have participated, may contribute to recalling that pastoral ministry is a fundamental task of the Church, and requires the ministry of pastors and laity. It is an urgent mission that the Lord asks us to fulfil with generosity".
