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The Pope to episcopal vicars and delegates for Consecrated Life: deepen the value of reciprocity

This morning in the Clementine Hall the Holy Father received the participants in the International Congress for Episcopal Vicars and Delegates for Consecrated Life currently being held in the Pontifical University Antonianum, from 28 to 30 October. He began by conveying through those present his appreciation for the attention bishops pay to consecrated life in its different expressions, and went on to propose three themes for reflection to the vicars and delegates, called to help their bishop in all that relates to consecrated life: Consecrated life in the particular Church, the erection of new Institutes and mutual relations between pastors and consecrated persons.

“Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church”, said the Pope with regard to the first theme, and citing his Apostolic Letter of 2014 to consecrated men and women on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life. “It is a principle that must not be forgotten by Pastors nor by consecrated people. Indeed, consecrated life expresses emblematically and with an entirely special power ‘the contribution of a charismatic gift to the baptismal priesthood and to the ministerial priesthood’, and ‘as such, is located within the charismatic dimension of the Church’. It is the task of bishops to receive it ‘with joy and gratitude’, expressing benevolence, paternity and attentive love”, he reiterated, with reference to the letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith last May.

Consecrated life is a “spiritual capital which contributes to the good of the whole body of Christ, and not only religious families”, he emphasised. “For this reason, I have asked and again today ask of all Pastors and you, vicars and delegates for Consecrated Life, to welcome it cordially and with joy, as a reality that is ‘at the heart of the Church, a decisive element of her mission’, inasmuch as it belongs absolutely to the life and holiness of the Church’. I therefore encourage Pastors, and you with them, to express special care in promoting the different charisms, both old and new, in your Churches; to be close to consecrated persons, with tenderness and love, and to teach the People of God the value of consecrated life”.

Francis remind the consecrated that “autonomy and exemption cannot be confused with isolation or independence. Today, more than ever, it is necessary to live the just autonomy and exemption, in the Institutes that are endowed with this, in close relationship with integration, so that the charismatic freedom and Catholicity of consecrated life are expressed also in the context of the particular Church. This would not fully respond to what Jesus desired for His Church, if it were deprived of consecrated life, which forms part of her essential

structure, just like the laity or the ordained ministry. It is for this reason that, in the light of Vatican Council II, we speak today of the co-essentiality of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, which flow from the single Spirit of God and nurture the life of the Church and her missionary action. All these gifts are destined to contribute, in different ways, to the edification of the Church, in harmonious and complementary relation to one another. Pastors are called to respect, without manipulating, the multidimensionality that constitutes the Church and through which the Church is manifest. Consecrated persons, for their part, must remember that they are not a closed patrimony but rather a facet integrated into the body of Christ, attracted towards the centre, which is Christ".

The second theme of reflection was the erection of new institutes of consecrated life, and here the Pope indicated that both before and after the Vatican Council II, different institutes of consecrated life emerged. "The Spirit never ceases to breathe where and when He wishes. As it is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to discern and recognise the authenticity of the charismatic gifts and to erect institutes of consecrated life in the diocese, he is unable to do this without serene and appropriate discernment. This latter, besides the criteria provided in the apostolic letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, must take account of the originality of the charism, its prophetic dimension, its insertion in the life of the particular Church, its affective and effective communion with this and with the universal Church, and commitment to evangelisation, also in its social dimension. Likewise he must confirm that the founder or foundress has demonstrated proven ecclesial maturity, with a life that does not contradict the action of the Holy Spirit, inspirer of charisms, and that such charisms can be adequately harmonised in the ecclesial communion. Finally, I recall the obligation always to consult in advance the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, as recently provided for in the clarification to canon 579".

"At the time of erecting a new Institute, we cannot think only of its usefulness to the particular Church. The bishops, their vicars and delegates, as well as the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, cannot be simplistic when exercising this grave responsibility. Pastors must consider that in erecting a new Institute they are certainly exercising a right proper to them, but at the same time they are assuming a responsibility on behalf of the universal Church, in that such an Institute will be destined to grow and to exit from the confines of the diocese in which it was born. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider with prudence the duty to provide a suitable formation for candidates. Since this is a delicate decision, it is right for bishops to receive help from those who have experience of consecrated life, and you are among these, dear brothers".

The third point considered by the Pope regarded the mutual relations between pastors and consecrated persons, in which episcopal vicars and delegates play an important role. "I know that this theme will be studied during the current Congress", said the Holy Father, adding that it is currently an object of specific study by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for Bishops, of whom he has requested a revision of the document *Mutuae relationes*. "In the Synod of 1994 a revision of the Instruction *Mutuae relationes* was requested: we are a little late!"

"Beyond updating the rules that govern the mutual relations between bishops and all the forms of consecrated life, male and female, it is a question of deepening the value of reciprocity between pastors and consecrated persons. There exist no mutual relations in which some command and others submit, out of fear or convenience. There are instead mutual relations where there are dialogue, respectful listening, mutual hospitality, encounter and understanding, the shared search for truth, and the desire for fraternal collaboration for the good of the Church, which is the 'home of communion'. All this is the responsibility of both pastors and consecrated persons. We are all called, in this sense, to be 'pontiffs', builders of bridges. Our time requires communion in respect for diversity. Let us not be afraid of the diversity that comes from the Spirit".

Finally, the Holy Father asked those present to pay special attention to contemplative sisters. "As I affirmed in my recent apostolic constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere*, this form of *sequela Christi*, rooted in the silence of the cloisters, represents in the Church and for the Church 'her praying heart, a storehouse of grace and apostolic fruitfulness', that produces a 'rich harvest of grace and mercy' and a 'variety of holiness'. The Church, including the particular Church, is in need of these beacons who guide her to a safe haven, these 'torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time", these "sentinels of the morning, heralding the dawn'. Accompany them with fraternal affection, treating them always as adult women, respecting their specific

competences, without undue interference. Accompany them by offering them help in all that refers to the essential elements of their life, as they are presented in the aforementioned apostolic constitution, and taking heed of the Instruction to be issued by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life. Focusing all one's attention on one element, important as it may be, as in the case of the cloister or autonomy, may lead to a vital imbalance that would have sad consequences for the lives of these sisters".

"Dear brothers", he concluded, "love consecrated life and, to this end, seek a profound knowledge of it. Construct mutual relations starting from the ecclesiology of communion, from the principle of co-essentiality, from the just autonomy that is due to consecrated persons. Please greet on my behalf your bishops and all the consecrated persons in your diocese. I assure you of my prayer, and please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you".