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The Pope meets the clergy of his diocese in the Basilica of St. John Lateran

This morning in the Papal Basilica of St. John Lateran, the cathedral of Rome, the Holy Father met with the clergy of his diocese during the traditional encounter at the beginning of Lent. During the meeting, the Pope read his meditation on “The progress of faith in the life of the priest”, in which he lists a series of guidelines for following the path of continuing formation and maturity in faith, valid for the disciple, the missionary, the seminarian, the priest and the bishop. “Fundamentally it is the virtuous cycle referred to in the Aparecida Document that led to the coining of the phrase ‘missionary disciple’”, he said.

“To live, grow and persevere in faith, we must nurture it with the Word of God”, he continued. “We must ask the Lord to increase it. It is a faith that must work by means of charity, sustained by hope and rooted in the faith of the Church”.

Memory, as the Catechism tells us, is rooted in the faith of our forefathers, and making memory of past graces confers to our faith the solidity of the incarnation; it situates it within a history, the history of the faith of our fathers. We, “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”, look at what they look at, and “look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith”.

Hope is what opens faith to the surprises of God, “Our God is always greater than all that we can think or imagine of Him, than what belongs to Him and His way of acting in history. The opening up of hope brings freshness and vision to our faith”.

Discernment, finally, is what concretises faith, making it work through love, what enables it to give credible witness. Discernment of the opportune moment (kairos), as the Holy Father observed, is “fundamentally rich in memory and hope: recalling with love, it directs its gaze with lucidity at what best guides the Promise. And what guides best is always in relation with the cross. With that dispossession of will, with that inner drama of ‘not as I will but as you will’, that places me in the hands of the Father and ensures that it is He Who guides my life”.

The second part of the Pope’s address focused on the figure of St. Peter, “sifted like wheat” by the Lord, so that with his tested faith he confirmed all of us who though we have not seen Christ, love Him. “The faith of Simon Peter has a special nature: it is a faith that was subject to trials, and with it he had the mission of confirming and

consolidating the faith of his brothers, our faith". Simon Peter's faith has moments of greatness, such as when he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, but these moments are followed almost immediately by others of great error, of extreme fragility and total confusion, such as when he tries to distance Jesus from the cross, when he began to sink in the lake and his three denials of Jesus.

Temptation is always present in the life of Simon Peter. He teaches us, in the first person, how faith progresses through confession and allowing oneself to be tested. "And also showing that sin itself enters into the progress of faith. Peter has committed the worst sin – denying the Lord – and they made him Pope nonetheless. It is important for a priest to know how to position his own temptations and his own sins in the scope of that prayer of Jesus that our faith not fail us, but that it instead mature and serve to strengthen the faith of others entrusted to him.

"What helps in the growth of faith is keeping together one's own sin, the desire for the good of others, the help we receive and what we must give. It does not serve to divide: it has no value to feel perfect when we carry out our ministry and, when we sin, justify ourselves with the fact that we are like all the others. We must unite these things: if we strengthen the faith of others, we do so as sinners. And when we sin, we confess for what we are, priests, underlining that we have a responsibility towards people; we are not like everyone else. These two things unite well if we place the people before us: our sheep, the poorest especially. It is what Jesus does when He asks Simon Peter if he loves Him, saying nothing of the pain or the joy that this love causes him, He makes him look to his brothers in this way: feed my sheep, confirm the faith of your brothers".

"Our elders said to us that faith grows in acts of faith. Simon Peter is the icon of the man whom the Lord Jesus makes accomplish acts of faith in every moment. When Simon Peter understands this 'dynamic' of the Lord, this pedagogy of his, he does not miss the opportunity to discern, in every moment, what act of faith he must do in His Lord. And in this he does not err. When Jesus acts as his master, giving him the name Peter, Simon lets Him do so. His 'let it be thus' is silent, like that of St. Joseph, and will be shown to be real throughout his life. When the Lord praises and humiliates him, Simon Peter does not look at himself, but is careful to learn the lesson of what comes from the Father and what comes from the devil. When the Lord rebukes him because he has aggrandised himself, he lets himself be corrected. When the Lord shows him, playfully, that he must not be dishonest with the tax collectors, he goes to fish with the coin. When the Lord humiliates him and tells him in advance that he will deny Him, he is sincere in saying what he feels, as he will be in bitterly weeping and in letting himself be forgiven".

"There are many different moments in his life, yet a single lesson: that of the Lord Who confirms his faith so that he will confirm that of His people". The Pope concluded, "Let us too ask Peter to confirm us in faith, so that we can confirm that of our brothers".
