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Audience with the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy

At 11.10 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Cardinals,

Dear brothers and sisters,

I address a warm greeting to you all, and express my gratitude for your generous effort in the service of priests and their formation.. I offer heartfelt thanks to Cardinal Beniamino Stella for his words, and for the work he is doing.

I am glad to be able to engage in dialogue with you on the great gift of the ordained ministry, a few months from the promulgation of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis*. This document refers to an *integral formation*, that is, able to include all aspects of life, and in this way it indicates the way to form the missionary disciple. A *fascinating* and at the same time *demanding* road.

Reflecting on these two aspects – the appeal of the call and the taxing demands it involves – I thought in particular of *young priests*, who live the joy of the beginnings of their ministry and, at the same time, are aware of its weight. The heart of a young priest lives between the enthusiasm of the first projects and the anxiety of apostolic burdens, into which he plunges with a certain fear, which is a sign of wisdom. He feels profoundly the joy and the strength of the unction received, but gradually the burden of responsibility, of the many pastoral commitments and expectations of the People of God, start to weigh on his shoulders.

How does a young priest live all of this? What does he carry in his heart? What does he need to ensure that his feet, which run to take the joyful announcement of Gospel, are not paralyzed by the fears and first difficulties? So that he does not have, he does not give in to the temptation to seek refuge in rigidity or in leaving everything and dropping out?

We must admit that, often, the young are judged in a rather superficial way and are too easily labelled as a “liquid” generation, without passions or ideals. Certainly there are young people who are fragile, disorientated, fragmented or infected by the culture of consumerism or individualism. But this should not prevent us from recognizing that the young are capable of putting everything at stake in life and getting involved generously; of focusing on the future and of being, in this way, an antidote to resignation and the loss of hope that mar our society; of being creative and imaginative, courageous in change, magnanimous when it comes to giving themselves for others or for ideals such as solidarity, justice and peace. With all their limits, they are always a resource.

We can ask ourselves, then: in our presbyteries, how do we look at young priests? Let us allow ourselves first of all to be enlightened by the Word of God, Who shows us how the Lord calls to the young, trusts in them, and sends them for the mission.

Although “*the word of the Lord was rare in those days*” (1 Sam 3:1), since the people were perverted and no longer listened to the voice of the Lord, God addresses the young Samuel, a little “altarboy of the temple” who becomes a prophet for the people (cf. 1 Sam 3:1-10). Then, the Lord’s gaze, contrary to all appearances, fell on David, the youngest of Jesse’s sons, and He anoints him as King of Israel (cf. 1 Sam 16:1-13). To Jeremiah, concerned that he is too young for the mission, the Lord offers His paternal reassurance: “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’ [...] for I am with you” (Jer 1:7-8). Even from the Gospels we can learn that the Lord chooses the young, and the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, entrusted to the disciples, is not based on the greatness of human strengths, but rather on willingness to let oneself be guided by the gift of the Spirit.

This is what I would like to say to young priests: you have been chosen, you are dear to the Lord! God looks at you a Father’s tenderness, and after having made your heart love, He will not let your steps falter. In His eyes you are important, and He trusts that you will be up to the mission to which He has called you. How important it is for young priests to find pastors and bishops who encourage them in this respect, and do not simply wait for them because there is a need for exchange and the filling up of empty places!

On this, I would like to add a couple of things off the cuff. *Empty places*: do not fill these places with people who are not called by the Lord, do not take them from anywhere; examine well the vocation of a young person, its authenticity, and whether he comes to seek refuge or because he feels the call of the Lord. Receiving only because you are in need, dear bishops, this is a debt for the Church! A debt. Secondly: do not leave them by themselves. *Closeness*: bishops close to priests. How often have I heard priests complain – I have said this many times, perhaps you have heard – “I called the bishop: he wasn’t there, and the secretary told me he wasn’t there, and I asked for an appointment; ‘He is full up for three months’”... and that priest ends up detached from the bishop. But if you, bishop, know that in the list of calls that your secretary leaves you, a priest has called, and your diary is full, then that same day, in the evening or the day after, but no more, call him back on the telephone and tell him how things are, evaluate things together, whether it is urgent or not... But the important thing is, that priest will feel that he has a father, a father close to him. Closeness. Closeness to the priests. You cannot govern a diocese without closeness, you cannot help nurture and sanctify a priest without the paternal closeness of the bishop.

I always rejoice when I meet young priests, because I see in them the youthfulness of the Church. Therefore, thinking of the new *Ratio*, which speaks of the priest as a missionary disciple in permanent formation (cf. 3). I wish to underline, especially for young priests, some important attitudes: *pray tirelessly, journey always, and share with the heart*.

Pray tirelessly. Because we can be “fishers of men” only if we first acknowledge that we have been “fished” by the tenderness of the Lord. Our vocation began when, having abandoned the land of our individualism and our

personal plans, we set out on the “holy journey”, delivering ourselves to that Love that sought us in the night and that Voice that stirred our hearts. So, like the fishermen of Galilee, we cast our nets to catch what the Master gave to us. If we do not remain closely linked to Him, we will never have a successful catch. Always pray, remember this!

During the years of formation, our days are structured so as to leave the time necessary for prayer; afterwards, one cannot have everything so ordered – life is different – or organized, from the moment that we are immersed in the pace, often urgent, of pastoral commitments. However, it is precisely what we acquired in our time in the seminary – living the harmony between prayer, work and rest – that represents a precious resource for facing apostolic hardships. Every day we need to stop, listen the Word of God, and pause in front of the Tabernacle. “I try to but ... I fall asleep in front of the Tabernacle”. Go ahead and fall asleep, the Lord likes this, but stay there, in front of Him”. And to take care to listen also to our body, which is a good doctor, and warns us when our tiredness has exceeded the limits. Prayer, the relationship with God, and care for spiritual life inspire the ministry, and the ministry, so to speak, gives body to spiritual life: because the priest sanctifies himself and others in the concrete exercise of his ministry, especially through preaching and celebrating the Sacraments.

Second: *journey always*, because a priest has never “arrived”. Always remain a disciple, a pilgrim on the roads of the Gospel and of life, looking out over the threshold of the mystery of God and on the holy land of the people entrusted to him. He will never feel satisfied, nor will he be able to extinguish the healthy restlessness that makes him extend his hand to the Lord to let himself be formed and filled. Therefore, always keep yourselves up to date and stay open to God’s surprises! In this openness to the new, young priests can be creative in evangelization, frequenting with discernment the new places of communication, where they encounter the faces, histories and questions of the people, developing the capacity for sociality, relationships and the announcement of the faith. In the same way, they can stay in the “network” of other priests and avoid the risk that the seeds of self-centredness bridle the regenerative experience of priestly communion. Indeed, in every sphere of priestly life it is important to progress in faith, in love and in pastoral charity, without hardening in your own acquisitions or becoming closed in your own mental frameworks.

Finally, *share with the heart*, because priestly life is not a bureaucratic office, nor is it a series of religious practices or liturgies to get through. We have spoken at length about the “bureaucrat priest”, who is a “state cleric”, and not a pastor of the people. Being a priest means putting your life into play for the Lord and for your brothers, bearing in one’s own flesh the joys and sorrows of the People, spending time to listen and heal the wounds of others, and offering to all the tenderness of the Father. Starting from the memory of their personal experience – when they were at the oratory, cultivating dreams and friendships inspired by the youthful love of the Lord – new priests have the great opportunity of living this experience of sharing with the young and children. It means staying in their midst – closeness here too! – not only as a friend among others, but as one who knows how to share their life with the heart, listening to their questions and participating in a concrete way in the various vicissitudes of their life. The young do not need a professional of the sacred, or a hero who, from on high and from the outside, responds to their questions; they are attracted, rather, by one who is involved sincerely in their life, accompanying them with respect and listening to them with love. It means having a heart full of passion and compassion, especially towards the young.

Pray tirelessly, journey always, and share with the heart mean living the priestly life looking on high and thinking on a large scale. It is not an easy task, but you can place all your trust in the Lord because He always precedes us on the way! Mary Most Holy, who prayed tirelessly, walked behind her Son and shared in His life, even below the cross, guide us and intercede for us. Please, pray for me!
