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Opening of the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome with the Holy Father in the Basilica of St. John Lateran

At 18.15 today, the Holy Father Francis left the Vatican by car, destined for the Basilica of St. John Lateran where, at 19.00, he opened the ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, which takes as its theme this year: “Do not leave us alone! Accompanying parents in the education of teenage children”.

Before the opening discourse, at 18.30 in the Hall of the Palazzo dei Canonici, the Pope met several families of immigrants hosted by the parishes and religious institutes of the Diocese of Rome.

The following is the Holy Father’s address to those present:

Holy Father’s Address

As that priest said, “Before speaking, I’ll say a couple of words”

I want to thank Cardinal Vallini for his words and I would like to say something he was not able to say as it is a secret, but the Pope can say it. When, after the election, I was told that I had to go first to the Pauline Chapel and then on the balcony to greet the people, I immediately remembered the name of the Cardinal Vicar: “I am a bishop, there is a vicar general ...”. Immediately. I also found it reassuring. And I called him. And on the other hand, Cardinal Hummes, who was next to me during the scrutiny and said things that helped me. These two accompanied me, and from that moment I said, “On the balcony with my vicar”. There, on the balcony. Since then he has accompanied me, and I want to thank him. He has so many virtues and also a sense of objectivity that has helped me many times, because sometimes I “fly off” and he has brought me back to earth with such charity ... Thank you, Eminence, for your company. But Cardinal Vallini does not retire, because he belongs to six Congregations and will continue to work, and it is better so, for a Neapolitan without work would be a calamity in the diocese ... [laughter and applause] I want to thank him publicly for his Help. Thank you!

And to you all, good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to be able to begin this diocesan Convention, in which you will consider a theme that is important for the life of our families: accompanying parents in the education of their teenage children.

In these days you will reflect on some key issues that correspond in some way to the locations in which our being as families is played out (home, school, social networks, intergenerational relations, the precariousness of life and family isolation)

I would like to share with you some “assumptions” that can help us in this reflection. Often we do not realize it, but the spirit with which we reflect is as important as the content (a good sportsman knows that warming up is as important as the performance that follows). So, this conversation is intended to help us in this way: a “warm-up”, after which it will be up to you to “play in the field”. I will explain in small chapters.

1. In *Romanesco*!

I wanted to refer to the first of these keys to the theme as “in *Romanesco*”: Roman dialect. Not infrequently we fall prey to the temptation to think or reflect in a “general” or “abstract” way. Thinking *about* problems, *about* situations, *about* teenagers ... And so, without realizing it, we fall squarely into nominalism. We would like to embrace everything, but arrive at nothing. Today on this theme I invite you to think “in dialect”. And that is why we need to make a remarkable effort, because we are asked to think about our families in the context of a big city like Rome. With all its wealth, opportunities, variety, and at the same time with all its challenges. Not to close ourselves up and ignore the rest (we are always Italian), but to face the reflection, and even the moments of prayer, with a healthy and stimulating realism. No abstraction, no generalization, no nominalism.

Family life and the education of teenagers in a major metropolis such as this requires a particular focus and we can not take it lightly. Because it is not the same thing to educate or be a family in a small town and a metropolis. I am not saying it is better or worse – it is just different. The complexity of the capital does not permit reductive syntheses, but rather it stimulates us to adopt a multifaceted way of thinking, so that every neighbourhood and area finds echo in the diocese and in this way the diocese can become visible, palpable in every ecclesial community, with its own way of being. Uniformity is a great enemy.

You live the tensions of this great city. In many of my pastoral visits I have been shown some of your daily, concrete experiences: the distance between home and work (in some cases up to two hours to arrive); the lack of close family ties due to the need to relocate to find work or pay the rent; living always by “counting pennies” to reach the end of the month, because living costs are higher (it is easier to get by in the country); the lack of time to get to know the neighbours where we live; the need to leave children by themselves in many cases ... and we could continue in this way to list a great deal of situations that affect the lives of our families. Therefore, carry out your reflection and prayer *do* “in *Romanesco*”, in concrete terms, with all these concrete things, with the clearly-defined faces of families in mind and thinking of how to help each other in educating your children within this reality. The Holy Spirit is the great initiator and generator of processes in our societies and situations. He is the great guide to the dynamics of transformation and salvation. With Him, do not be afraid to “walk” for your neighbourhoods, and to think about how to give an impetus to the accompaniment of parents and teenagers. In concrete terms, that is.

2. *Connected*

Along with the previous issues, I would like to focus on another important aspect. The current situation is gradually increasing in the life of us all, and especially in our families, the experience of feeling “uprooted”. We talk about a “liquid society”, and it is true, but today I would like, in this context, to present to you the growing phenomenon of the *uprooted society*. That is, people, families, that are gradually losing their bonds, that vital fabric that is so important for feeling that we belong to each other, that we participate with others in a common project. It is the experience of knowing that we “belong” to others (in the most noble sense of the term). It is important to take into account this climate of rootlessness, because it gradually enters into our outlook and

especially into the lives of our children. A culture of rootlessness, an uprooted family is a family without history, without memory: indeed, without roots. And when there are no roots, you can end up being dragged along by any wind. That is why one of the first things we need to think of as parents, as families, and as pastors, are the scenarios where to put down roots, where to generate bonds, find roots, where to grow that vital network that allows us to feel that we are “at home”. Today, social networks seem to offer us this “network” space, connecting with others, and they make even our children feel part of a group. But the problem they involve, as a result of their “virtual” nature, is that they leave us “up in the air” – I said “liquid society” but we can say “gaseous society” – and therefore very “volatile”: a “volatile society”. There is no worse alienation for a person than feeling that he has no roots, that he does not belong to anyone. This principle is very important in accompanying teenagers.

Very often we demand from our children an excessive level of formation in some fields that we consider important for their future. We make them study a lot of things because so that they can make the most of themselves. But we do not give as much importance to knowing their land, their roots. We deprive them of the knowledge of the heritage and the saints that have generated us. I know you have a laboratory dedicated to intergenerational dialogue, and to space for grandparents. I know it can be repetitive, but I feel that this is something the Holy Spirit presses in my heart: for our young people to have visions, to be “dreamers”, so that they can face the future with boldness and courage, they must listen to the prophetic dreams of their own Fathers (cf. *Joel 2: 28*). If we want our children to be formed and prepared for tomorrow, it is not just by learning languages, for instance, that they will succeed. They need to connect, to know their roots. Only in this way will they be able to fly high; otherwise they will be distracted by the “visions” of others. I keep coming back to this; perhaps I am obsessed, maybe, but ... parents have to make room for their children to talk to their grandparents. Very often their Grandpa or Grandma are in rest homes and they do not go to visit them ... They must talk. Even “leapfrogging”, parents, taking the roots of the grandparents. Grandparents have this quality of transmitting history, faith, and belonging. And they do it with the wisdom of those who are on the threshold, ready to leave. I return, as I have said, sometimes, to the passage from *Joel, 2: 28*: “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams”. And you are the bridge. Today, we do not let grandparents dream, we discard them. This culture discards grandparents because their grandparents do not produce: this is a “culture of waste”. But grandparents can dream only when they meet with a new life, then they dream, they talk ... But think of Simeon, think of the chattering Saint Anna’s going here and there saying, “That’s it! That’s it!” And this is good, it’s good. It is grandparents who dream and give children the sense of belonging they need. I would like there to be awareness of this in this intergenerational laboratory. Find the concrete story of grandparents. And do not set them aside. I do not know if I have said this before, but there comes to my mind a story that one of my two grandmothers told me as a child. Once there was a widowed grandfather in a family: he lived in a family, but he was getting old and when he ate, some of the soup fell onto him, or he would dribble and get dirty. And the father decided to make him eat alone in the kitchen, “so we can invite friends round...”. And so it was. A few days later, he returned from work and found the child playing with a hammer, nails, woods ... “But what are you making?” – “A table.” – “A table, why?” – “A table for eating.” – “Why, why?” – “So that when you grow older, you can eat alone, there”. This child had understood intuitively where his roots were”.

3 *In movement*

Educating teenagers on the move. Adolescence is a transient phase in life, not only for your children, but for all the family – it is the entire family that is in a phase of transition. You know this well and you live this; and as such, in its entirety, we must face it. It is a bridge-phase, and for this reason teenagers are neither here nor there, they are journeying, they are in transit. They are not children (and do not wish to be treated as such), nor are they adults (yet they wanted to be treated as if they were, especially at the level of privileges). They live this tension, first in themselves and then with those around them^[1]. They always seek confrontation, they question, they argue about everything, they seek answers; and at times they do not listen to the answers and ask another question before their parents can give them an answer. ... They pass through various states of mind, and families along with them. However, allow me to say that it is a valuable time in the life of your children. A difficult time, yes. A time of change and instability, yes. A phase that presents great risks, without doubt. But, above all, it is a time of growth for them and for all the family. Adolescence is not a pathology and cannot be faced as if it were. A son who experiences his adolescence (however difficult it may be for the parents) is a son with a future and with hope. I am often worried by the current tendency to prematurely medicalize our young people. It seems that everything can be resolved by medicalizing, or controlling everything with the slogan “make the most of

time”, and so our young people’s diaries are worse than those of high-level managers.

Therefore I insist: adolescence is not a pathology that must be combated. It forms part of normal growth, natural in the life of our young people. Where there is life there is movement, where there is movement there are changes, searches, uncertainty, there is hope, joy and even anguish and desolation. Let us place our discernments within the framework of predictable vital processes, There exist margins that it is necessary to know so as not to be alarmed, nor to be negligent, but to know how to accompany and help grow. It is not all indifferent, but neither does everything have the same level of importance. Therefore, it is necessary to discern which battles are to be fought, and which not. In this, it is necessary to listen to couples with experience, and while they can never give us a recipe, they can help us with their testimonies to get to know this or that margin or range of behaviour.

Our boys and girls seek to be and want to feel, logically, that they are agents in their lives. They do not like to be commanded or to respond to “orders” that come from the adult world (following the rules of the game of their “accomplices”). They seek that complicit independence that makes them feel as if they decide for themselves. And here we must pay attention to aunts and uncles, especially those who do not have children or are unmarried. I learned my first swear words, from a bachelor uncle [laughter]. Aunts and uncles, so as to gain the admiration of their nieces and nephews, very often are not helpful. There was the uncle who secretly gave us cigarettes ... Things of that type. And now ... I would not say that they are bad, but we must be careful. In this search for autonomy that boys and girls want to have, we find a good opportunity, especially for schools, parishes and ecclesial movements. Stimulating activities that test them, that make them feel they are protagonists. They need this, let’s help them! They look for that “vertigo” that makes them feel alive. So, let us give it to them! Let us stimulate all that which helps them transform their dreams into plans, and that can reveal that all the potential they have is a bridge, a passage towards a vocation (in the broadest sense of the word). Let us propose broad aims to them, great challenges, and let us help them achieve them, to reach their targets. Let us not leave them alone. So, challenge them more than they challenge us. Let us not allow that “vertigo” to reach them from others, those which only put their lives at risk; let us give this to them. But the right vertigo, which satisfies that desire to move, to go ahead. We see in many parishes that they have this capacity of “taking in hand” teenagers: “For these three days of the holiday let’s go to the mountains, let’s do something; or let’s go and paint that school in a poor neighbourhood, that is in need”. Make them the agents of something.

This requires us to find educators capable of committing themselves to the growth of young people. It requires educators driven by the love and passion of making the Spirit of Jesus grow in them, of showing them that being Christians demands courage, and that is a good thing. To educate today’s teenagers we can not continue to use a purely scholastic educational model, made up only of ideas. No. It is necessary to follow the pace of their growth. It is important to help them gain self-esteem, to believe they can really succeed in what they try to do. On the move, always.

4. *Integrated education*

This process requires the simultaneous and integrated development of the different languages that constitute us as people. That means teaching our young people to integrate everything that they are and do. We could call it a socio-integrated literacy, that is, an education based on the intellect (the head), the affections (the heart) and action (the hands). This will offer our children the opportunity for harmonious growth at not only a personal but also a social level. It is urgent that we create places where social fragmentation is not the norm. To this end, it is necessary to teach oneself to think what you feel and do, to feel what you think and do, to do what you think and feel. That is, to integrate the three languages. A dynamism of capacities placed at the service of the person and of society. This will help to make our young people feel like active protagonists in their growth processes and will also lead them to feel that they are called upon to participate in building the community.

They want to be protagonists: let us give them the space to be protagonists, guiding them – of course – and giving them the tools to develop this growth. This is why I feel that the harmonious integration of the various forms of knowledge, of the mind, heart and hands, will help them build their personality. Often we think that education is knowledge and along the way we leave emotional illiterates and young people with many unfinished

projects because they have not found someone who teaches them how to “do”. We have focused on the education of the brain, neglecting the heart and the hands. And this is also a form of social fragmentation.

In the Vatican, when the guards leave, I receive them one by one, those who are leaving. The other day I received six of them. One by one. “What are you doing, what are you going to do?” I thank them for their service. And one said to me, “I am going to be a carpenter. I would like to be a woodworker, but I will be a carpenter. Because my dad taught me so many things about this, and my grandfather too”. The desire to “do”: this boy was well educated in the language of doing; and the heart is good too, because he thought of his father and grandfather: a good heart. Learning “how to do it” ... This impressed me.

5. *Yes to adolescence, no to competition*

As a final element, it is important to reflect on an environmental dynamic that affects us all. It is interesting to observe how boys and girls want to be “grown up”, and grown-ups want to be or have become teenagers.

We can not ignore this culture, since it is in the air that we all breathe. Today there is a kind of competition between parents and children: different from that of other ages, where normally there was comparison between each other. Today we have gone from comparison to competition, which are two different things. They are two different dynamics of the spirit. Our young people today find a lot of competition and few people to compare themselves to. The adult world has welcomed “eternal youth” as a paradigm and model for success. It seems that growing up, getting older, maturing, is a bad thing. It is synonymous with a life that is frustrated or exhausted. Today it seems that everything must be masked or disguised. As if the very fact of living did not have meaning. Appearances, not growing old, making oneself up ... It makes me sad to see those who dye their hair.

How sad it is that someone wants to give a facelift to their heart! Nowadays, the word “lifting” is used more than the word “heart”! How painful it is when someone wants to erase the “wrinkles” of so many encounters, so many joys and sorrows! I remember when the great Anna Magnani was recommended a facelift, she said, “No, please don’t retouch me wrinkles, it cost me all my life to earn them”, they are precious!

In a sense, this is one of the most unexpected threats in the education of our teenagers: excluding them from their growth processes because adults take up their place. And we find so many “teen parents”, many of them. Adults who do not want to be adults and want to play at being teenagers forever. This “marginalization” can increase the natural tendency for young people to isolate themselves or to curb their growth processes for a lack of comparison. There is competition but no comparison.

6. *Spiritual “appetite”*

I would not conclude without this aspect that can be a key topic that runs through all the workshops you will hold: it is transversal. It is the theme of austerity. We live in a very strong context of consumerism ... And by linking consumerism with what I have just said: after food, medicines and clothing that are essential to life, the most costly expenses are beauty products, cosmetics. This is statistics! Cosmetics. It’s sad to say that. And cosmetics, which used to be for women, are now the same in both sexes. After basic expenses, the first is cosmetics; and then, mascots [pets]: their food, vet bills ... These are statistics. But this is another topic, that of pets, which I will not touch now: we will think ahead of this. But let’s go back to the theme of austerity. We live, I said, in a context of strong consumerism; it seems that we are driven to consume, in the sense that the important thing is always consuming. At one time, people who had this problem were said to be addicted to spending. Today is no longer said: we are all caught up in this rush of consumerism. Therefore, it is urgent to recover such important and undervalued spiritual principle: austerity. We have entered the habit of consumption and are driven to believe that we are valued to the extent that we are able to produce and consume, as much as we are able. Educating in austerity is an incomparable richness. It awakens ingenuity and creativity, generates possibilities for imagination and especially opens us up to teamwork, in solidarity. Open to others. There exists a kind of “spiritual appetite”. That attitude of greedy people who, instead of eating, devour everything around them (they seem to ingest when they are eating).

I think it is good for us to educate ourselves better, as families, in this “appetite” and make room for austerity as a way of meeting each other, building bridges, opening spaces, growing with others. This can only be done by those who can be austere; otherwise it is simple “greed”.

In *Amoris Laetitia* I told you: “The life of a family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realize that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union. Life together should not diminish but increase their contentment; every new step along the way can help couples find new ways to happiness” (No. 232). It seems to me to be important to experience the education of children from this perspective, as a calling from the Lord, as a family, to make this passage a passage of growth, to learn to savour better the life he bestows upon us.

This is what I wanted to tell you on this theme.

[*Words of thanks from Cardinal Vallin*]

[Blessing]

Thank you very much! Work well. I wish you the best. And keep going ahead!

[1] “youth has a long future before it and a short past behind it: on the first day of one's life one has nothing at all to remember, and can only look forward. They are easily cheated, owing to the sanguine disposition just mentioned. Their hot tempers and hopeful dispositions make them more courageous than older men are; the hot temper prevents fear, and the hopeful disposition creates confidence; we cannot feel fear so long as we are feeling angry, and any expectation of good makes us confident. They are shy”.
