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Message of the Holy Father to participants in the International Conference “Vocational ministry and consecrated life: prospects and hopes” (Rome, 1-3 December 2017)

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the International Conference “Vocational ministry and consecrated life: prospects and hopes”, promoted by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, taking place in Rome at the Pontifical “Regina Apostolorum” Athenaeum from 1 to 3 December 2017.

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I greet the participants in this International Congress promoted by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life on “Vocational ministry and consecrated life: prospects and hopes”. I thank the Congregation for the initiative of this event that is intended as this dicastery’s contribution to the next Synod of Bishops, which will examine the theme: “Young people, the faith and vocational discernment”. And as through this message, I greet all of you who have come to Rome to participate in this meeting, I assure you also of my prayer to the *Lord of the Harvest* so that this Congress may help all consecrated persons to give a generous response to their own vocation and, at the same time, help them all to intensify the pastoral vocation among families and young people so that those who are called to follow Christ in the consecrated life or in other vocations within the People of God can find the suitable channels to accept that call and respond generously to it.

First of all, I wish to express some *convictions about vocational ministry*. And the first is this: to speak of vocational ministry is to affirm that all pastoral action of the Church is oriented, by its very nature, to vocational discernment, inasmuch as its ultimate goal is to help the believer to discover the concrete way to carry out the project of life to which God calls him.

Vocational service must be seen as the soul of all evangelization and of all the Church’s pastoral ministry.

Faithful to this principle, I do not hesitate to affirm that the vocational ministry cannot be reduced to activities that are closed up in themselves. This could turn into proselytism, and could also lead to “the temptation to practice lax and unwise recruitment” (John Paul II, *Exhortation Vita consecrata*, 64). The vocational ministry, however, must be placed in close relation with evangelization, education in the faith, so that vocational ministry is a true itinerary of faith and leads to a personal encounter with Christ, and with ordinary pastoral work, in special with the pastoral care of the family, in such a way that the parents assume, with joy and responsibility, their mission to be the first vocational animators of their children, freeing themselves and freeing their children from the inner barrier of selfish, calculating perspectives or of power, which often occur in the bosom of families, even those practicing the faith.

This entails cementing the vocational proposal, also the vocational proposal to consecrated life, in the context of a solid ecclesiology and an adequate theology of consecrated life, which conveniently proposes and values all the vocations within the People of God.

A second conviction is that vocational ministry finds its most appropriate “humus” in youth pastoral ministry. Youth ministry and pastoral ministry must go hand in hand. Vocational ministry is supported, emerges and develops in youth ministry. For its part, youth ministry, in order to be dynamic, complete, effective and truly formative, must be open to the vocational dimension. This means that the vocational dimension of youth ministry is not something that should be raised only at the end of the whole process or to a group that is particularly sensitive to a specific vocational call, but must be constantly raised throughout the process of evangelization and education in the faith of adolescents and young people.

A third conviction is that prayer must occupy a very important place in vocational ministry. The Lord says clearly: “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest” (*Mt 9: 38*). Prayer is the first and indispensable service we can offer to the cause of vocations. Since the vocation is always a gift from God, the vocational call and the response to that vocation can only resonate and be felt in prayer, without this being understood as an easy recourse to disengage from working for the evangelization of young people, so that they may be open to the Lord’s call. To pray for vocations presupposes, first of all, praying and working for fidelity to one’s vocation; creating environments where it is possible to listen to the Lord’s call; undertaking the journey to announce the “Gospel of the vocation”, to promote it and to provoke it. Whoever really prays for vocations, works tirelessly to create a vocational culture.

These convictions lead me to consider some *challenges* I consider important. A first challenge is that of trust. Trust in the young and trust in the Lord. Confidence in young people, because there are many young people who, while they belong to the “selfie” generation or to this culture that seems “gaseous” rather than “fluid”, seek full meaning in their lives, even though they do not always look for it where can find it. This is where we consecrated people have an important role: to stay awake so as to awaken young people, to be centred in the Lord so that we can help the young to focus on Him. Very often young people expect from us an explicit proclamation of the “Gospel of vocation”, a courageous proposal, evangelically demanding and at the same time deeply human, without rebates and without rigidities. On the other hand, trust in the Lord, sure that He continues to awaken in the People of God various vocations for the service of the Kingdom. We must overcome the easy temptation that leads us to think that in some environments it is no longer possible to generate vocations. For God “nothing is impossible” (*Lk 1: 37*). Each segment of history is God’s time, even ours, because His Spirit blows where He wants, as He wants and when He wants (cf *Jn 3: 8*). Any station can be a “*kairos*” to gather the harvest (*Jn 4: 35-38*).

Another important challenge is *lucidity*. It is necessary to have a clear outlook and, at the same time, an outlook of faith on the world, and in particular on the world of young people. It is essential to know well our society and the current generation of young people in such a way that, seeking the opportune means to announce the Good News, we can also announce the “Gospel of vocation”. Otherwise we would be giving answers to questions that nobody is asking.

A final challenge I would like to indicate is *conviction*. To suggest to a young person today to “come and follow me” (*Jn 1: 39*) requires evangelical audacity; the conviction that the following of Christ, also in the consecrated

life, is worthwhile, and that the total gift of oneself to the cause of the Gospel is something beautiful that can give meaning to a whole life. Only in this way will pastoral vocation be a narration of what one lives and of what makes one's life meaningful. And only then will vocational ministry be a convincing proposal. The young man, like all our contemporaries, no longer believes teachers so much, but rather wants to see witnesses of Christ (see Paul VI, Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41).

If we want the vocational proposal to follow Christ to touch the heart of young people, and for them to be attracted to Christ and by the *sequela Christi* proper to consecrated life, the vocational ministry must be:

Differentiated, in such a way that it responds to the questions that each young person poses, and offers to each one of them what is necessary to fulfil abundantly his desire to seek (*Jn 10: 10*). We must not forget that the Lord calls everyone by his name, with his history; He offers to and demands of each one a personal and non-transferable journey in his vocational response.

Narrative. The young person wants to see the model to follow, Jesus Christ, "narrated" in the concrete life of a consecrated person. The pastoral of "contagion", of "come and see", is the only truly evangelical vocational ministry, without the taste of proselytism. "Young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others" (Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment*, Preparatory Document, 2017, 2). Only a proposal of incarnated faith and vocation has the possibility of entering into the life of a young person.

Ecclesial. A proposal of faith or vocation to young people has to be made within the ecclesial framework of Vatican Council II. This is the "compass for the Church of the 21st century" (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, 43) and for the consecrated life of our times. This ecclesial framework demands commitment and participation in the life of the Church from young people, as actors and not as mere spectators. They must also feel that they are partakers of the consecrated life: their activities, their spirituality, their charism, their fraternal life, their way of living the following of Christ.

Evangelical, and as such, committed and responsible. The proposal of faith, as the vocational proposal to consecrated life, must start from the centre of all pastoral ministry: Jesus Christ, as He is presented to us in the Gospel. This cannot be evaded, nor can it be a personal outlet or purely social commitment. The "pastoral show" or "pastoral hobbies" are far from being a pastoral vocation. The demands of the Gospel must be placed before the young person. The Gospel is demanding and must be lived radically and with sincerity. The young person must be placed in a situation in which he accepts responsibly the consequences of his own faith and the following of Christ. In this type of vocational ministry, it is not a question of recruiting social agents, but true disciples of Jesus with the new commandment of the Lord as a slogan and with the code of the beatitudes as a way of life.

Accompanied. One thing is clear in youth ministry: it is necessary to accompany young people, walk with them, listen to them, provoke them, move them so that they go beyond their comfort zone, awaken desire, interpret what they are living, take them to Jesus, always favouring the liberty to respond to the call of the Lord freely and responsibly (cf Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly, *Young people, the faith and vocational discernment*, Preparatory document, 2017, III, 1). It is necessary to create an atmosphere of trust, to make young people feel that they are loved as they are and for what they are. The text of the disciples of Emmaus can be a good example of accompaniment (cf *Lk 24: 13-35*). The personal relationship with young people on behalf of the consecrated is indispensable.

Persevering. With young people you have to persevere, sow and wait patiently for the seed to grow and one day to bear fruit. The mission of the youth pastoral agent requires that he is well aware that his job is to plant, whereas another will grow and others will reap the fruits.

Youthful. We can not treat young people as if they were not young. Our youth ministry must strike the following notes: dynamic, participative, cheerful, hopeful, risky, confident. And always filled with God, which is what a

young man needs most to fill his just yearning for fulfilment; filled with Jesus, which is the only path they have to travel, the only truth to which they are called to adhere, the only life for which it is worth giving everything (*Jn* 1.35).

Dear participants in this Congress: two things appear true to me in the topic of vocational ministry and consecrated life. The first is that there are no magical answers, and the second is that consecrated life, like the Church as a whole, is being called to carry out a true “pastoral conversion”, not only of language, but also of lifestyle, if wants to connect with young people and propose a path of faith and offer a vocational proposal.

Let no one rob us of the joy of following Jesus Christ and the courage to propose it to others as a way, truth and life (*Jn* 14: 6). Let us conquer our fears! It is time for young people to dream and the elderly to prophesy (*Jl* 2,28). Let us arise now! “Hands to work”! (*Ez* 10.4). The young await us. It’s time to move!

Vatican, 25 November 25, 2017

FRANCIS
