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Message of the Holy Father signed by Cardinal Secretary of State for the meeting with Seminarians from France

The following is the Message sent on behalf of the Holy Father Francis by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin for the meeting of Seminarians of France in Paris:

Message

I am pleased, dear seminarians of France, to be able to speak to you on the occasion of your meeting, and to convey to you the warm thoughts that His Holiness Pope Francis expresses for you in prayer. He gives thanks for the singular call that the Lord has addressed to you, having chosen you from among so many others, loved you with a privileged love and set you apart; and he also gives thanks for the courageous response that you wish to give to this call. It is indeed a cause for thanksgiving, hope and joy to see that many young people - and not so young people - still dare, with the generosity and boldness of faith, and despite the difficult times facing our Churches and our secularized Western societies, to follow the Lord in his service and that of their brothers and sisters.

This is why I say to you: thank you! Thank you for giving joy and hope to the Church of France, which is waiting for you and needs you. And she needs you so that you can be what the priest should be, what he has always been and what he will always be by divine will: to “share the authority by which Christ builds up, sanctifies and rules his Body” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 2); and this by an ineffable configuration to Christ, the Head of his Church, which places him face to face with the People of God - although he is always part of it - to teach it with authority, guide it with security and effectively transmit grace to it through the celebration of the sacraments (cf. *ibid.* n. 4,5,6). At the highest point, the source and summit of the Church's life and of his personal life, the priest celebrates Mass where, making Christ's sacrifice present, he offers himself in union with Christ on the altar and places there the offering of the whole People of God and of each of the faithful.

I invite you, dear seminarians, to firmly entrench in your souls these fundamental truths, which will form the basis of your life and your very identity. And at the heart of this identity, configured to the Lord Jesus, is celibacy.

Priests are celibate - and they wish to be - simply because Jesus was celibate. The requirement of celibacy is not primarily theological, but mystical: may this be understood by he who is able (cf. *Mt* 19:12). We hear a lot of things about priests today, and the figure of the priest is often distorted in certain circles, relativized, and sometimes considered subordinate. But do not let this frighten you too much: no one has the power to change the nature of the priesthood and no one ever will, even if the ways in which it is exercised must necessarily take account of changes in today's society and the serious vocational crisis we are experiencing.

And one of these societal changes, which is relatively new in France, is that the ecclesial institution, and with it the figure of the priest, is no longer recognized; it has lost its prestige and natural authority in the eyes of the majority of people, and has even unfortunately been tarnished. So we can no longer rely on it to reach out to the people we meet. This is why the only possible way to carry out the new evangelization called for by Pope Francis, so that everyone can have a personal encounter with Christ (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, Introduction, III), is to adopt a pastoral style of closeness, compassion, humility, gratuitousness, patience, gentleness, radical self-giving to others, simplicity and poverty. A priest who knows the "odour of his sheep" (Christ Mass, 28 March 2013) and who walks with them, at their pace. This is how the priest will touch the hearts of his faithful, win their trust and bring them face to face with Christ. This is nothing new, of course; countless holy priests have adopted this style in the past, but today it has become a necessity on pain of not being credible or heard.

In order to live this demanding, and sometimes harsh, priestly perfection, and face the challenges and temptations you will encounter along the way, there is only one solution, dear seminarians: nurture a strong, living and authentic personal relationship with Jesus. Love Jesus more than anything else, let his love be enough for you, and you will emerge victorious from every crisis and every difficulty. For if Jesus is enough for me, I have no need of great consolations in ministry, or of great pastoral success, or of feeling at the centre of extensive relational networks; if Jesus is enough for me, I have no need of disordered affections, or of notoriety, or of having great responsibilities, or of pursuing a career, or of shining in the eyes of the world, or of being better than others; if Jesus is enough for me, I have no need of great material possessions, or of enjoying the seductions of the world, or of security for my future. If, on the other hand, I succumb to any of these temptations or weaknesses, it is because Jesus is not enough for me and that I lack love.

So, dear seminarians, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (*1 Cor* 1:3-9). Your first concern should always be to respond to this call, and to strengthen your union with the One who deigns to make you his friend (cf. *Jn* 15:15). He is faithful and will be your greatest joy. And I can only recommend to you, as your spiritual teacher, Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, on this 150th anniversary of her birth, Doctor in *scientia amoris*, whose admirable doctrine you have the privilege of being able to read in its original language. She who unceasingly "breathed" the Name of Jesus, her "only love" (cf. *C'est la confiance*, no. 8), will guide you along the path of trust that will sustain you every day and let you stand before the gaze of the Lord when he calls you to himself (cf. *ibid*, n. 3).

Pope Francis entrusts you and all the members of your seminary communities to her intercession and to the protection of Our Lady of the Assumption, Patroness of France. He wholeheartedly imparts his Apostolic Blessing to you.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin
Secretary of State to His Holiness
