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Audience with the Community of the Archepiscopal Seminary of Naples

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the community of the Archepiscopal Seminary of Naples on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of its inauguration.

The following is the address prepared by the Pope for the occasion, which was handed out to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Thank you for coming here this morning, and for having wished for this meeting on the ninetieth anniversary of the inauguration of the “Alessio Ascalesi” Seminary. I greet the Archbishop Domenico Battaglia, and the brother bishops, the rector, the educators and the spiritual fathers, thanking all of you for your precious service. I joyfully greet those who, in different ways, contribute to your formation: the head and the dean of the faculty, the religious sisters and also the married couples, whose presence is an important sign, reminding us of the complementarity between the sacred Order and the Sacrament of marriage: in priestly formation, we need the contribute of those who have chosen the way of marriage. Thank you for what you do! And thank you also to the psychological consultants, and the administrative and service staff.

I affectionately address you, seminarians. I feel I must express my gratitude to you for having responded to the Lord’s call and for your readiness to serve His Church; and I must encourage you every day to cultivate the beauty of faith, with enthusiasm and commitment, dedicating your lives to the ceaseless work of the Holy Spirit, who helps you to take on the form of Christ. Let us remember this: that formation never ends, it lasts a lifetime, and that if you stop, you do not stay where you were, but go backwards. Just thinking about this continuous inner work that is priestly formation and the anniversary of your Seminary, the image of the *building site* comes to mind.

The Church is first and foremost a building site whose work is always ongoing. That is, she is always on the

move, open to the novelty of the Spirit, defeating the temptation to preserve herself and her own interests. The principal task of the “Church site” is to journey in the company of the Risen Crucified One, bringing the beauty of His Gospel to men and women.

This is essential. It is what the synodal path is teaching us; it is what listening to the Spirit and the men of our time asks of us, without compromise; but it is also what is required of us: to be servants – this means ministers – who know how to adopt a style of pastoral discernment in every situation, knowing that all of us, priests and laity, are on the path towards fullness, and that we are all workers on a building site. We cannot offer monolithic, preconceived answers to today’s complex reality, but we must invest our energies by proclaiming the essential, which is God’s mercy, and manifesting it through closeness, paternity, meekness, refining the art of discernment.

For this reason, the *journey of formation for the priesthood* is a worksite. We must never make the mistake of feeling that we have already arrived, of considering ourselves ready to face challenges. Priestly formation is a worksite in which each one of you is called to put himself at stake in truth, to let God build up His work over the course of the years. Therefore, do not be afraid to let the Lord act in your life; as on a worksite, the Spirit will come first to demolish those aspects, those convictions, that style and even those incoherent ideas about faith and the ministry that will prevent you from growing according to the Gospel; then the same Spirit, after having swept away the inner falsehoods, will give you a new heart, build up your life in accordance with Jesus’ style, and make you become new creatures and missionary disciples. He will mature your enthusiasm through the cross, as it was for the Apostles. But do not be afraid of this: it can certainly be tiring work, but if you remain docile and true, disposed to the action of the Spirit without stiffening and defending yourselves, you will discover the Lord’s tenderness within your fragilities and in the pure joy of service. In this building site of your formation, dig deep, “practising the truth” within you with sincerity, cultivating the inner life, meditating on the Word, exploring in study the questions of our time and the theological and pastoral issues. And permit me to recommend something: work on emotional and human maturity. Without this, you will go nowhere!

Finally, the very *structure of the Seminary* is like a large building site. And I am obviously not referring to the building. A process is underway in priestly formation that entails new questions and new acquisitions: the itineraries of formation are undergoing many transformations, listening to the challenges that await priestly ministry and require commitment, passion and healthy creativity from everyone. New pastoral and missionary experiences are under experimentation, with the intention of promoting gradual integration in future ministerial life; interruptions in the itinerary are being envisaged to foster individual maturation. It is good to welcome and examine these novelties, living them as opportunities for grace and service, perceiving God’s presence in them.

We have just begun the Lenten path which, as I have had the opportunity to say, is a “time ... of decisions, small and large, that are countercurrent... to rethink [our] lifestyles” (*Message for Lent 2024*). May your community also travel this road of conversion and renewal. How? By letting yourselves be won over with renewed wonder at God’s love, the foundation of the vocation that is welcomed and rediscovered in particular in adoration and contact with the Word; rediscovering with joy the taste for sobriety and avoiding waste; learning a style of life that will serve you in order to be priests capable of giving yourselves to others and being attentive to the poorest, not letting yourselves be deceived by the cult of image and appearance, but nurturing the inner life; caring for justice and creation, current and burning issues in your land, which awaits courageous words and prophetic signs from the Church in this regard; living in peace and harmony, overcoming divisions and learning to live in fraternity with humility. And fraternity is, especially today, one of the greatest testimonies we can offer the world.

May the “work in progress” of your building site be accompanied by the intercession of the saints: by your Patron Saint Januarius, whose presence and blood continues to infuse the lands you inhabit; by Saint Vincent Romano, a parish priest who was formed in your seminary, a model of apostolic zeal and missionary spirit; and by Blessed Mariano Arciero, who was its spiritual father, and whose liturgical memorial we celebrate today. I wish you all the best on your journey, and I accompany you with prayer. You too, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
