



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO BISHOPS PARTICIPATING IN THE COURSE PROMOTED
BY THE CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS**

Consistory Hall

Thursday, 13 September

2018[\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers, Good morning!

I welcome you with joy today at the end of your pilgrimage as new Bishops at the spiritual wellspring of this ancient and ever new *Rome of Peter and Paul*. In embracing you as new Shepherds of the Church, still perhaps experiencing the wonder of being called to this mission which is never in proportion and in conformity with our strengths, I would like *to take you aside*, you and each of your Churches; I would like to approach you with the touch of Christ, the Gospel of God which *warms the heart, reopens our ears and loosens the tongue* to the joy that neither fails nor wanes because it is never purchased nor deserved; indeed it is pure grace!

In the perspective of the joy of the Gospel, you have attempted to read the mystery of your identity newly received as a gift from God. You have chosen the right perspective to enter the episcopal ministry, for which we can boast no credit and in which there are no titles of property or acquired rights. We found our life's treasure almost "by chance", and we are thus called to sell everything in order to safeguard the field in which this treasure trove lies (cf. Mt 13:44). It is necessary to take this precious gift in hand every day, *searching for light in his light* (cf. Ps 35:10), allowing his face to transfigure us .

I am speaking to you here about your most urgent task as Shepherds: that of sanctity. Just as the Church's prayer was expressed in you, you were *elected by the Father who knows the secrets in our hearts, to serve him night and day, in order to make him favourable to your People* (cf. Roman Missal, Prayer of Ordination of Bishops).

You are not the fruit of a merely human scrutiny, but of a choice from on high. Therefore, what is

being asked of you is not an intermittent dedication, an occasional fidelity, a selective obedience, no; you are called to consume yourselves *night and day*.

To remain vigilant even when the light disappears or when God himself is concealed in darkness, when the temptation to withdraw insinuates itself and the evil one, who is always lurking, subtly suggests that, by now, the dawn will no longer come. In that very moment, *prostrate yourself with your face to the ground* (cf. Gen 17:3) again, in order to listen to God, who speaks and renews his promise which was never rescinded. And then remain faithful even when, in the heat of the day, the strength of perseverance wanes and the results from the toil no longer depend on the resources we have.

And all this is not to feed some narcissistic pretense of being essential, but to make the Father favourable to your People. God already favours mankind. His divine being that could also have existed *without us*, is revealed *for us* in his Son Jesus. In him is the offer of God's fatherhood which is never resigned. In him we know the divine heart that no one and nothing can give up for lost. This is the message which the faithful have the right to find on your lips, in your hearts and in your lives.

At the beginning of your ministry, I pray that you will place God at the centre: He is the One who asks for everything but offers a full life in exchange. Not a watered down and mediocre life, devoid of meaning because it is filled with loneliness and pride, but rather, the life which gushes forth from his company which never disappoints, from the humble strength of the Cross of his Son, from the serene safety of victorious love that abides there.

Do not allow yourselves to be tempted by accounts of catastrophes or prophecies of disasters because what truly matters is to *persevere*, preventing *love from growing cold* (cf. Mt 24:12) and to *keep your head high and lifted* towards the Lord (cf. Lk 21:28) because the Church is not ours. She is God's! He was here before us and he will be here after us! The destiny of the Church, of the *small flock* is victoriously hidden in the Cross of the Son of God. Our names are sculpted in his heart — sculpted in his heart! Our fate is in his hands. Thus do not spend the best of your energies counting failures and throwing back bitterness, allowing your hearts to become smaller and your horizons to contract. May Christ be your joy. May the Gospel be your nourishment. Keep your gaze firmly and only on the Lord Jesus and, growing accustomed to his light, may you know how to search for it tirelessly even where it is refracted through humble brilliance.

There, in the families of your communities where, in steadfast patience and in anonymous generosity, the gift of life is cradled and nourished.

There, where hearts are inhabited by the fragile but indestructible certainty that truth prevails, that loving is not futile, that forgiveness has the power to change and to reconcile, that unity always overcomes division, that the courage to disregard oneself for the good of others is more rewarding

than the intangible primacy of the 'I'.

There, where many consecrated people and ministers of God, in silent self dedication, persevere oblivious to the fact that good often makes no sound; it is neither a topic for blogs, nor front page news. They continue to believe and to courageously preach the Gospel of grace and mercy to men and women who thirst for reasons to live, to hope and to love. They have no fear before the wounds of Christ's flesh, always inflicted by sin and often by the children of the Church.

I am well aware that our time is rampant with loneliness and neglect, overflowing with individualism, with growing indifference to the fate of others. Millions of men and women, children and young people are lost in a reality which has obscured points of reference; they are destabilized by the anguish of belonging to nothing. Their fate does not question the conscience of all and often, unfortunately, those who have the greatest responsibility, culpably step aside. But we are not permitted to ignore the flesh of Christ, which was entrusted to us not only in the Sacrament which we break, but also in the People we have inherited.

His wounds belong to us too. It is our duty to touch them, not to make manifestos of even understandable anger, but to make them places in which the Bride of Christ can learn how disfigured she can become when the Bridegroom's features fade from her face. But she also learns whence to set out again in humble and scrupulous fidelity to her Lord's voice. Only He can guarantee that men do not merely find *wild grapes* in the branches of his vineyard (cf. Is 5:4), but also the good wine (cf. Jn 2:10), the one from the true vine, without which *we can do nothing* (cf. Jn 15:5).

This is the Church's aim: to distribute throughout the world this new wine which is Christ. Nothing can divert us from this mission. We are in constant need of *new wineskins* (cf. Mk 2:22), and all that we do is never enough to make them worthy of the new wine which they are called to contain and to pour. But it is precisely for this reason that the containers need to know that without the new wine they will be cold *earthenware jars*, capable of remembering the absence but not of offering fullness. Please, may nothing divert you from this aim: to offer fullness!

May your sanctity not be the fruit of isolation, but rather may it blossom and bear fruit in the living body of the Church entrusted to you by the Lord, just as he entrusted his own Mother to his beloved disciple, at the foot of the Cross. Welcome her as a bride to love, a virgin to protect, a mother to make fruitful. May your heart not incline toward other loves; be vigilant that the terrain of your Churches be fertile for the seed of the Word and never *ravaged by the boars* (cf. Ps 80[79]:13).

How will you be able to do this? By remembering that we are not the origin of our "portion of sanctity", rather it is always God. It is a *tiny* sanctity, which is nourished by surrendering into his hands like a weaned child who does not need to ask for any proof of maternal closeness (cf. Ps

131[130]:2). It is a sanctity that is conscious that you can offer nothing more effective, greater, more precious, more necessary to the world than the fatherhood that is within you. In meeting you, may each person at least touch the beauty of God, the security of his company and the fullness of his closeness. It is a sanctity that grows as we discover that God cannot be *tamed*, does not need fences to defend his freedom and does not contaminate himself as he draws near. On the contrary, he sanctifies what he touches.

There is no need for an accounting of our virtues, nor for a program of asceticism, a training ground for personal effort or a diet renewed from one Monday to the next, as if sanctity were merely the fruit of will. The source of sanctity is the grace of drawing closer to the joy of the Gospel and allowing this to invade our life in such a way that one can no longer live otherwise.

Before we existed, God was here and he loved us. Sanctity is to touch this flesh of God which precedes us. It is getting in touch with his kindness. Look at the shepherds who were called in the Bethlehem night: they found in that Child, the goodness of God! It is a joy which no one can rob them of. Look at the people who observed Calvary from afar: they returned home beating their chests because they had seen the bleeding body of the Word of God. The vision of God's flesh burrows into the heart and prepares the place where divine fullness slowly makes a home.

Therefore, I urge you not to be ashamed of the flesh of your Churches. Enter into dialogue with their questions. I ask you to pay special attention to the clergy and to seminaries. We cannot respond to the challenges we have in their regard without updating our processes of selection, accompaniment and evaluation. But our responses will have no future if they fail to reach the spiritual chasm — which, in many cases, has given way to scandalous weaknesses — if they do not reveal the existential emptiness they have nurtured, if they do not reveal why God has been rendered so mute, so silent, so removed from a certain way of life, as if he were not there.

And here, each of us must humbly go deep within ourselves and ask ourselves what we can do to render more holy the face of the Church we govern in the name of the Supreme Shepherd. It does not help to just point the finger at others, to create scapegoats, to tear off one's vestments, to reveal the weakness of others as the *sons who lived at home like servants* love to do (cf Lk 15:29-30). Here it is necessary to work together and in communion, certain, however that authentic sanctity is what God carries out within us when, docile to his Spirit, we return to the simple joy of the Gospel, so that his beatitude may become flesh for others, in our choices and in our lives.

I therefore, invite you to go forward joyfully and not embittered, serene and not distressed, comforted and not abandoned — seek comfort in the Lord — preserving the heart of *lambs who, although surrounded by wolves, know that they will overcome because they rely on the shepherd's help* (cf. Saint John Chrysostom, Hom. 33,1: pg 57, 389).

May Mary, who carries us without judging us, be the shining star that guides your journey.

I thank Cardinal Marc Ouellet and Cardinal Leonardo Sandri and their respective Congregations for the generous work they have done, and I impart my Apostolic Blessing upon each of you and on the Churches you have been called to serve. Thank you!

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