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The Pope to new bishops: make mercy pastoral

This morning in the Clementine Hall the Holy Father received in audience the participants in the annual course for the formation of new bishops, organised by the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. In his address, Francis invited them first and foremost to make mercy pastoral through their ministry, or rather to make it “accessible, tangible and possible to find”. The Pope divided his reflection into various points, starting by reminding the bishops of “the thrill of being loved in advance”.

“God precedes you in his loving knowledge! He has ‘fished’ for you with the rod of his surprising mercy. ... Moses too thought he was alone in the desert, and discovered instead that he had been traced by and attracted to God, Who entrusted to him his name, not for him, but for all his people. And the cry of pain of His people continues to rise to God; know that this time it is your name that the Father wished to pronounce, so that you pronounce His name to the people”. ... The Apostles too experienced this thrill when, once the ‘reasoning of their hearts’ was unveiled, with some effort they discovered access to the secret way of God, Who resides in the least and conceals Himself from those who are self-sufficient. Do not be ashamed of the times in which you to have been touched by this remoteness from the thoughts of God. On the contrary, abandon the pretence of self-sufficiency, and entrust yourselves like children to He Who reveals His Kingdom to the least. ... May God save you from rendering this thrill fruitless, from taming it and emptying it of its ‘destabilising’ power”.

Speaking of “admirable condescension”, Pope Francis emphasised the beauty of “allowing oneself to be pierced by God’s loving knowledge”, adding that, “It is a consolation to know that He truly knows who we are and is not afraid of our smallness. ... Many people these days mask and conceal themselves. They like to construct personalities and invent profiles. ... They are unable to bear the thrill of knowing that they are known by Someone Who is greater and Who does not despise our littleness, Who is more Holy and does not reproach our weakness, Who is truly good and is not scandalised by our wounds. May it not be so for you: let that thrill run through you, do not remove it or silence it”.

The next point in the Holy Father’s address was “Crossing the threshold of Christ’s heart, the true Door of Mercy”. “Next Sunday, when you pass through the Holy Door of the Jubilee of Mercy, I invite you to live intensely a personal experience of ... total surrender ... of your life to the Pastor of Pastors. Crossing the threshold of Christ, the only Door, join your gaze to His. ... The most precious wealth that you can bring from Rome at the beginning of your episcopal ministry is the awareness of the mercy with which you were gazed upon and

chosen. The sole treasure that I beg you not to neglect is the certainty that you have not been left to your own devices. You are bishops of the Church, participants in a single Episcopate, members of an indivisible College, firmly joined like the humble branches of a vine, without which you can do nothing”.

Francis went on to the central point of his invitation to the bishops: the task of making mercy pastoral. “Mercy must form and inform the pastoral structures of your Churches. ... Do not be afraid of proposing mercy as the essence of what God offers the world. As my venerable and wise predecessor (Benedict XVI) taught, ‘it is mercy that puts an end to evil. In it is expressed God’s special nature – His holiness, the power of truth and love’. It is the way God opposes the forces of darkness ‘with his power, which is totally different and divine’. ... Making mercy pastoral is none other than turning the Churches entrusted to you into houses where holiness, truth and love abide”.

Finally, he gave his brothers in the episcopate three recommendations for making mercy pastoral, first exhorting the bishops to be “capable of appealing and attracting”.

“Make your ministry an icon of Mercy”, he said, “the only force capable of seducing and attracting the heart of man in a permanent way. Even the thief at the last moment let himself be drawn by Him in Whom he found only good. ... A remote and indifferent god can even be ignored, but one does not so easily resist a God Who is so close, and wounded out of love. Goodness, beauty, truth, love – this is what we can offer to this begging world, even if it is in half-broken bowls. However, it is not about attracting to oneself. The world is tired of dishonest charmers. And, I dare say, ‘fashionable’ priests and bishops. People sense this, the people of God have this sense and they refuse and distance themselves when they recognise narcissists, manipulators, defenders of their own causes, leaders of pointless crusades. Rather, seek to follow God, Who already introduces Himself before your arrival. ... God never gives up! Instead we, accustomed to surrender, who often give in, preferring to allow ourselves to be convinced that truly they were able to eliminate him and invent bitter discourses to justify the idleness that blocks us in the immobile sound of vain complaints”.

Secondly, the Pope urged the bishops to be capable of initiating those entrusted to them. “All that is great requires a path for entry. Especially divine Mercy, which is inexhaustible!”, he exclaimed. “Once seized by Mercy, this demands an introductory route, a path, a road, an initiation. It is enough to look at the Church, the Mother in generating for God and teacher for initiating those she generates so that they understand the truth fully. It is enough to contemplate the richness of her Sacraments, a wellspring always to be revisited, even in our pastoral ministry, which must seek to be only the maternal task of the Church to nurture those who are born of God and through Her. God’s mercy is the sole reality that allows man not to be lost definitively. ... In her, man may always be sure not to slip into the abyss in which he finds himself without origin or destiny, meaning or aim. ... Please, I ask you to have no other perspective from which to look upon your faithful other than that of their uniqueness; leave no stone unturned in order to reach them, and spare no effort in recovering them”.

“Be bishops capable of initiating your Churches in this abyss of love. Today we ask for too much fruit from trees that have not been sufficiently cultivated. The sense of initiation has been lost, and yet the truly essential things in life may be reached solely through initiation. Think of the educational crisis, the transmission of both content and values, emotional illiteracy, vocational paths, discernment in families, the search for peace: all these require initiation and journeys guided with perseverance, patience and constancy, the signs that distinguish the good shepherd from the hireling”.

“I urge you to cherish your intimacy with God, wellspring of the possession and giving of the self, of the freedom to leave and to return. Being pastors able to return home with your flock, inspiring that healthy intimacy that allows them to approach, creating that trust that permits them to say, ‘Explain to us’. This is not any explanation, but the secret of the Kingdom. In addition to this explanation, like that of Jesus to His disciples, the Pope asked the bishops to take special care of “the structures of initiation of your Churches, especially the seminaries. Do not allow yourselves to be tempted by numbers, by the quantity of vocations. Seek instead the quality of the discipleship”.

His final recommendation for making mercy pastoral was that the bishops be “capable of accompanying”. “And

here”, the Holy Father observed, “I am obliged to take you back to that road to Jericho to contemplate the heart of the Samaritan ... touched by mercy before the nameless man who had fallen into the hands of brigands. First he let himself be lacerated by the vision of the wounded man, half dead, and then there is the impressive sequence of verbs that you all know. ... Verbs in which mercy is conjugated. Making mercy pastoral is precisely this: conjugating it in verbs, making it palpable and functional. Men are in need of mercy. ... They are fascinated by its capacity to stop, when all others pass by; to stoop when a certain rheumatism of the soul prevents us from doing so; to touch wounded flesh when the prevailing preference is for the aseptic”.

“I would like to focus on one of the verbs conjugated by the Samaritan. He accompanies to the inn the man he has encountered by chance; he takes charge of the man’s fate. He takes care of his recovery and his future. What he had already done was not enough. ... Be bishops with a heart wounded by a mercy like this, tireless in the humble task of accompanying the man that God, ‘by chance’, has placed in your way. Wherever you go, remember that the road to Jericho is not far away. ... Accompany first, and with patient care, your clergy. I beg you to convey to your priests the Pope’s embrace and appreciation for their industrious generosity. ... I also beg you to act with great prudence and responsibility in welcoming candidates or incardinating priests in your local Churches. Remember that from the very beginning the relationship between a local Church and her priests is inseparable, and a vagrant clergy in transit from one place to another is never accepted”.

“Reserve special accompaniment for all families, rejoicing with their generous love and encouraging the immense good they bestow in this world. Be watchful, above all, of those that are most wounded. Do not pass over their fragility. ... Place before their eyes the joy of authentic love and the grace with which God elevates it to participation in His Love. Many need to rediscover it, others have never known it, others wait to redeem it, and there are not a few who have to bear the burden of having irredeemably lost it. Please, accompany them in discernment and with empathy”.

At the end of his audience, the Pope prayed with the new bishops and blessed them with all his heart “as a pastor, father and brother”, recalling that “Christ is the face of God that is never obscured”.
