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Audience with bishops appointed during the last year

At 11.20 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the bishops appointed during the course of last year and gave the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dearest brothers,

With great joy I welcome you in this moment, almost at the end of your Roman pilgrimage, organised by the Congregations for Bishops and for the Eastern Churches. I thank Cardinal Marc Ouellet and Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, and the dicasteries they preside over respectively, for their generous efforts in organising this event, which now allows me to meet you personally and to consider with you, new Pastors of the Church, the grace and responsibility of the ministry we have received.

Indeed, not by our merit, but by pure divine benevolence we have been entrusted “the ministry … to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (*Acts* 20: 24; cf. *Rm* 15: 16) and “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 *Cor* 3: 8-9). This year, the programme of your days in Rome has tried to penetrate the mystery of the Episcopate through one of its central tasks, that of offering to the “the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (*At* 20 , 28) that *spiritual and pastoral discernment* necessary for it to reach the knowledge and fulfilment of God’s will in which all fullness resides.

Let me therefore share some reflections on this subject that is increasingly important in our times, paradoxically marked by a sense of self-referentiality, which proclaims the end of the time of the masters, while in his solitude the real man continues to call out the need to be helped in facing the dramatic issues that assail him, to be paternally guided in the not always clear path that challenges him, to be initiated in the mystery of his search for life and happiness.

It is precisely through authentic discernment, which Paul presents as one of the gifts of the Spirit (cf. 1 *Cor*

12:10) and St. Thomas Aquinas calls “the superior virtue that judges according to those higher principles” (*Sum Theol.*, II -II, q, 51, a, 4, to 3) that we can respond to this human need today.

The Holy Spirit, protagonist of any authentic discernment

Not long ago, the Church invoked upon you the “*Spiritus Principalis*” or the “*Pneuma hegemonikon*”, the power that the Father gave to the Son and which They transmitted to the holy Apostles, that is, “*the Spirit that supports and guides*”.

One has to be aware that such a great gift, of which with gratitude we are perpetual servants, rests on fragile shoulders. Perhaps for this reason the Church, in her prayer for episcopal consecration, derived such an expression from the *Miserere* (cf. *Ps* 51,14b) in which he who prays, after exposing his failure, implores that Spirit to allow him immediate and spontaneous generosity in obedience to God, so fundamental to those who lead a community.

Only those who are led by God have the title and authority to be proposed as leaders of others. One may teach and grow in discernment only if familiar with this inner teacher who, like a compass, offers the criteria to distinguish, for himself and for others, the times of God and His grace; to acknowledge His passage and the way of His salvation; to indicate concrete means, pleasing to God, to accomplish the good that He predisposes in His mysterious plan of love for each and for all. This wisdom is the practical wisdom of the Cross, which, though it includes reason and prudence, transcends them because it leads to the very source of life that does not die, namely, to “knowing the Father, the only true God, and He Who sent Jesus Christ”(cf. *Jn* 17: 3).

The bishop *cannot take for granted the possession* of a gift of such a high and transcendent gift, as if it were a right acquired, without falling into a ministry devoid of fruitfulness. It is necessary to continually implore it as a primary condition for illuminating any human, existential, psychological, sociological and moral wisdom that may be of use to us in the task of discerning the ways of God for the salvation of those who have been entrusted to us.

Therefore, it is imperative continually to return in prayer to Gabaon (cf. 1 Kings 3: 5-12), to remind the Lord that before him we are perennial “children who do not know how to settle” and to implore "not long days or riches, nor the life of enemies”, but only “discernment in judging among His people”. Without this grace, we will not become good meteorologists of what can be seen “in the appearance of heaven and earth” but rather we will be unable to “evaluate God's time” (cf. *Lk* 12: 54-56).

Discernment, therefore, is born in the heart and mind of the bishop *through his prayer* when he *puts the people and situations entrusted to him into contact with the Divine Word pronounced by the Spirit*. It is in such intimacy that the Pastor matures the inner freedom that makes him firm in his choices and behaviour, both personal and ecclesial. Only in the silence of prayer can one learn the voice of God, perceive the traces of His language, have access to His truth, which is a very different light, that “*is not above intelligence as oil is above water*", but much higher since only “*he who know the Truth knows that light*” (cf. Augustine, *Confessions* VII, 10.16).

Discernment is a gift of the Spirit to the Church, to which she responds with listening

Discernment is the grace of the Spirit to the *holy faithful people of God*, Who constitutes it a prophetic people, endowed with the sense of faith and that spiritual instinct that makes it capable of feeling *cum Ecclesia*. It is a gift received in the midst of the People and is oriented towards its salvation. Since from Baptism the Spirit already dwells in the heart of the faithful, the apostolic faith, bliss, righteousness, and evangelical spirit are not strangers to them.

Therefore, although vested with unavoidable personal responsibility (see the Directory *Apostolorum Successores*, 160-161), the Bishop is called to live his own discernment as a Pastor as a member of the People of God, or in an ever-*ecclesial* dynamic, at the service of the *koinonìa*. The bishop is not the self-sufficient “father

and master", nor is he the frightened and isolated "solitary pastor".

The bishop's discernment is always a *community action*, which does not disregard the richness of the opinion of his priests and deacons, of the People of God and of all those who can offer him a useful contribution, also through concrete and not merely formal contributions. "When one does not consider his brother in any way, and considers oneself superior, then one ends up becoming proud even against God Himself"[1].

In serene dialogue, He is not afraid to share, and even sometimes change, his discernment with others: *with confreres in the episcopate*, to whom he is sacramentally united, and then discernment becomes collegiate; *with his own priests*, for whom he the guarantor of that unity that is not imposed by force, but rather is woven with the patience and wisdom of an artisan; *with the lay faithful*, because they retain the "sense" of the true infallibility of the faith that resides in the Church: they know that God does not diminish in His love and does not deny His promises.

As history teaches, the great Pastors, in defending the true faith, have been able to converse with such a store present in the heart and in the awareness of the faithful and, not rarely, have been supported by them. Without this exchange "the faith of the most educated can degenerate into indifference and that of the most humble into superstition"[2].

Therefore, I invite you to cultivate an attitude of listening, growing in the freedom of renouncing one's own point of view (when it is shown to be partial and insufficient), to assume that of God. Without letting oneself be conditioned by the eyes of others, make efforts to get to know with your own eyes the places and the people, the spiritual and cultural "tradition" of the diocese entrusted to you, to respectfully enter into the memory of its testimony of Christ and to interpret its concrete present in the light of the Gospel outside which there is no future for the Church.

The mission that awaits you is not to bring your own ideas and projects, nor solutions that are abstractly designed by those who consider the Church a home garden but humbly, *without attention-seeking or narcissism*, to offer your concrete witness of union with God, serving the Gospel that should be cultivated and helped to grow in that specific situation.

Discerning therefore means *humility and obedience*. Humility with regard to one's own projects. Obedience to the Gospel, the ultimate criterion; to the Magisterium, which conserves it; to the norms of the universal Church, which serve it; and to the concrete situation of people, for whom we want nothing other than to draw from the treasure of the Church what is most fruitful for their salvation today (cf. *Mt* 13: 52).

Discernment is a remedy for the immobility of "it has always been so" or "let us take time". It is a creative process that does not just apply schemas. It is an antidote against rigidity, because the same solutions are not valid everywhere. It is always the perennial today of the Risen Lord that demands that we do not resign ourselves to the repetition of the past, and have the courage to ask ourselves whether the proposals of yesterday are still evangelically valid. Do not let yourselves be imprisoned by the nostalgia of having only one answer to apply in all cases. This would perhaps calm our anxiety regarding performance, but would leave us relegated to the margins and to "barren" lives that need to be watered by the grace we conserve (cf. *Mk* 3: 1-6; *Ezek* 37: 4).

I recommend a special delicacy with the *culture and religiosity of the people*. They are not something to tolerate, or mere tools to manoeuvre, or a "Ccinderella" to keep hidden because they are unworthy of access to the noble salon of the concepts and higher reasons for faith. Indeed, it is necessary to care for and engage in dialogue with them, because besides constituting the backbone of the people's self-comprehension, they are a true subject of evangelisation, which your discernment cannot ignore. Such a charism, given to the community of believers, cannot but be recognised, called upon and involved in the ordinary path of discernment made by the Pastors.

Remember that God was already present in your dioceses when you arrived and will still be there when you are

gone. And, in the end, we will all be measured not by counting our works but on the growth of God's work in the heart of the flock that we keep in the name of the “Pastor and keeper of our souls” (cf. 1 *Pt* 2:25).

Called to grow in discernment

We must strive to grow in incarnate and inclusive discernment, which dialogues with the consciousness of the faithful which is to be formed and not substituted (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 37) in a patient and courageous process of accompaniment, so as to mature the capacity of each one – the faithful, families, priests, communities, and societies – of all those called to advance in the freedom to choose and accomplish the good God wants. Indeed, the activity of discernment is not reserved to the wise, the perspicacious and the perfect. Rather, God often resists the haughty and shows himself to the humble (cf. *Mt* 11:25).

The Pastor knows that God is the way and trusts His company; knows and never doubts His *truth*, nor despairs of His promise of *life*. But of these certainties, the Pastor is seized by the humble darkness of faith. To send them to the flock is therefore make obvious proclamations, but to introduce to the experience of God Who saves by sustaining and guiding the possible steps to be accomplished.

Therefore, true discernment, though definitive in every step, is an always open and necessary process that can be completed and enriched. It cannot be reduced to the repetition of formulas that “like high clouds send little rain” to the real man, often immersed in an reality that cannot be reduced to black or white. The Shepherd is called to make available to the flock the grace of the Spirit, Who knows how to penetrate the folds of the real and to take account of its nuances to reveal what God wants to achieve at all times. I particularly think of young people, families, priests, those who have the responsibility for leading society. In your lips, may they seek and find the steadfast witness of this Word, which is “the lamp for the steps and light for the way” (cf. *Ps* 118,105).

An essential condition for progressing in discernment is to *educate ourselves in the patience of God and His times*, which are never ours. He does not “rain fire on the infidels” (cf. Lk 9: 53-54), nor does He permit the zealots to “rip out of the field the darnel” they see growing there (cf. *Mt* 13: 27-29). It is up to us every day to welcome from God the hope that preserves us from all abstraction, because it enables us to discover the hidden grace in the present without losing sight of the longanimity of His design of love that surpasses us.

Dear brothers,

I beg you to *keep scrupulously before your eyes Jesus and the mission* that was not His but of His Father (cf. *Jn* 7: 16), and to offer to the people – confused and lost today, just as they were yesterday – what He was able to give: the chance to encounter God personally, to choose His way and to progress in His love.

Keep your gaze today fixed on Him today, Feast of the Holy Cross, a permanent place of God’s discernment in our favour, contemplating the depth of His incarnation and learning from it the criterion of every authentic discernment (cf. 1 *Jn* 4: 1).

May the Virgin, who keeps her gaze firmly on her Son, keep and bless you and your particular Churches.

[1] Dorotheus of Gaza, *Communion with God and with men*, Edizioni Qiqajon, 2014, 101-102.

[2] John Henry Newman, *On consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1991, 123.