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Audience with a Group of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America

At 11.40 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a group of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, at the end of the intensive training seminar held in the Vatican from 24 February to 4 March 2019, on the theme “Social Doctrine of the Church and Political Commitment in Latin America – for a new generation of Latin American Catholics in politics”.

The seminar, organized for the formation of 26 young Catholic leaders from diverse cultures and professions, forms part of a post-Diploma programme in the Social Doctrine of the Church, organized by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL) and by the Latin American Academy of Catholic Leaders, in collaboration with CELAM and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends,

I am grateful for Cardinal Ouellet’s words, and I began this address by calling you “dear friends”, not by a mere rhetorical gesture, but because when thinking of the initiative you have undertaken, I believe it appropriate to recall a line from Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Saint John , in which Jesus says to all: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (*Jn* 15: 15).

And Jesus founds the Church with the air of friendship, as an act of love, as a gesture of compassion for our fragile and limited condition. And by incarnating Himself, Jesus Christ embraces our humanity, embraces our “I”, sometimes selfish, so often fearful, to give us His strength and show us that we are not alone in the path of life, that we have a friend who accompanies us. Thanks to this, every time we say “I” we can say “we”, that is, we are a community with Him. We have a “friend” Who sustains us, Who invites us to propose that same friendship to

all others and to expand the experience of the “Church”.

And this truth has many implications in different spheres, but it is especially important for those who discover that their calling is to be responsible for the promotion of the common good.

Being a Catholic in politics does not mean being a recruit from a group, an organization or a party, but living within a friendship, within a community. If you do not discover the need in your heart to belong to a community of truly ecclesial missionary discipleship, in which you can experience the experience of being loved by God, you run the risk of facing alone the challenges of power, of strategies, of action, and ending up in the best of cases with a good political position but lonely, sad and at risk of being manipulated.

Jesus invites us to be His friends. If we open ourselves to this opportunity our fragility will not diminish. The circumstances in which we live will not change immediately. However, we can look at reality in a new way, we can live with renewed passion the challenges we face in constructing the common good. Let us not forget that entering politics means placing a stake on social friendship.

In Latin America we have a saint who knew these things well. He knew how to live the faith as friendship and commitment to his people to the extent of giving his life for them. He saw many lay people who wanted to change things but who were often led astray by false ideological responses. With his mind and heart set on Jesus, and guided by the Social Doctrine of the Church, Saint Óscar Arnulfo Romero said, and I quote:

“The Church can not be identified with any organization, even with those that identify themselves as and feel Christian. The Church is not the organization, nor is the organization the Church. If the dimensions of faith and the political vocation have developed in a Christian, the tasks of faith and a determined political task can not be simply identified, much less Church and organization can be identified. It can not be affirmed that only within a determined organization can the demand of faith be developed. Not every Christian has a political vocation, nor is the political channel the only one that leads to a task of justice. There are also other ways of translating faith into a work of justice and the common good. The Church or its ecclesial symbols can not be required to become mechanisms of political activity. To be a good politician you do not need to be a Christian, but the Christian involved in political activity has an obligation to confess his faith. And if a conflict between loyalty to their faith and loyalty to the organization arises in this field, the true Christian should prefer his faith and demonstrate that his struggle for justice is for the justice of the Kingdom of God, and not another justice” [1] So said Romero.

These words were pronounced on 6 August 1978 so that the lay faithful could be free and not slaves, so they could rediscover the reasons why it is worth entering politics but with the Gospel as a starting point, overcoming ideologies. Politics is not the mere art of administering power, resources or crises. Politics is not a mere search for efficiency, strategy and organized action. Politics is a vocation to service, a lay diaconate that promotes social friendship for the generation of the common good. Only in this way does politics help the people to become protagonists of their history and thus avoid the so-called “ruling classes” believing that they are the ones who can settle everything. The famous exaggerated liberal adage, all for the people, but nothing with the people. Engaging in politics can not be reduced to techniques and human resources and capacity for dialogue and persuasion; this does not work alone. The politician must be in the midst of his people and collaborate in this way or another to make the sovereign people the protagonist of their history.

In Latin America and all over the world we are currently experiencing a true “change of epoch” [2] – said the Aparecida document – which requires us to renew our languages, symbols and methods. If we continue doing the same thing that was done a few decades ago, we will relapse into the same problems we need to overcome in the social and political terrain. I do not mean here simply to improve some “marketing” strategy but to follow the method that God Himself chose to approach us: Incarnation. Taking on. By assuming all that is human – apart from sin – Jesus Christ announces to us the liberation that our hearts and our peoples long for. And then you, as young Catholics dedicated to various political activities, will be the vanguard in the way of receiving the languages and signs, the concerns and hopes, of the most emblematic sectors of change of the Latin American era. And you will have to look for the paths of the most appropriate political process to favour.

Which are the most emblematic or significant sectors in the change of Latin American era? In my opinion, there are three, and you should have heard them because this Carriquiri here, I copied it to him. In my opinion there are three through which it is possible to reactivate the social energies of our region so that it is faithful to its identity and, at the same time, that it may build a plan for the future: *women*, *young people* and the *poorest*.

First, *women*. Last year the Pontifical Commission for Latin America dedicated a plenary session precisely to women as a pillar in the building of the Church and society. [3] In addition, the bishops of CELAM in Bogotá in 2017 reminded them that "hope in Latin America has a female face". [4] Secondly, *young people*, because they inhabit that dissatisfaction and rebelliousness necessary to promote true change, not merely cosmetic. Jesus Christ, eternally young, is present in their sensitivity, in their countenance and in their concerns. And third, the *poorest* and most *marginalized*. Because in her preferential option for them, the Church manifests her fidelity as Christ's spouse no less than on the field of orthodoxy. [5]

Women, young people and the poor are, for various reasons, the locus of privileged encounter with the new emerging cultural sensitivity and with Jesus Christ. They are protagonists of the epoch change o and subjects of true hope. Their presence, their joys and, in particular, their suffering, are a powerful wake-up call for those who are responsible for public life. In the response to their needs and demands, the true construction of the common good is played out to a large extent. They constitute a test of the authenticity of Catholic commitment in politics. If we do not want to get lost in a sea of empty words, let us always look at the faces of women, young people and the poor. Let us look at them as subjects of change and not as mere objects for assistance. The call of their eyes will help us to correct our aims and to rediscover an "inculturated" way of acting in our different contexts. To take on in a concrete way all these issues means being concrete, and in politics when one deviates from the practical, one also deviates from political leadership.

A new presence of Catholics in politics is necessary in Latin America. A "new presence" that not only implies new faces in the electoral campaigns but, principally, new methods that allow alternatives to be forged that are simultaneously critical and constructive. Alternatives that always look for possible good, even if modest. Flexible options, but with a clear Christian social identity. And for this, it is necessary to value anew our people and the popular movements that express their vitality, their history and their most authentic struggles. Engaging in politics inspired by the Gospel *from the people in movement* becomes a powerful way to clean up our fragile democracies and to open space for reinventing new representation of popular origin.

Catholics know well that "in concrete situations, and taking into account the solidarity that each one lives, it is necessary to recognize a legitimate variety of possible options. The same Christian faith can lead to different commitments" [6] Therefore, I invite you to live your faith with *great freedom*. Without believing that there is a single form of political commitment for Catholics. A Catholic party. Perhaps this was a first intuition in the awakening of the social doctrine of the Church that over the years was adjusted to what must really be the vocation of the politician today in society, that is, Christian. The Catholic party is no longer there. In politics it is better to have polyphony in politics inspired by the same faith and built with multiple sounds and instruments, than a boring monochord melody apparently correct but homogenizing and neutralizing – and also static. No, that is not good.

I am glad that the Academy of Catholic Leaders was born in and has expanded throughout several Latin American countries. I am glad that you are simultaneously seeking faithfulness to the Gospel, pluralism in partisan terms and communion with your Pastors.

In a few years' time, in 2031, we will celebrate the Fifth Centenary of the Guadalupan event and, in 2033, the second millennium of the Redemption. It is God's will that from now on you may all work in spreading the social doctrine of the Church in order to arrive at the celebration of these dates with real practical lay fruits of missionary discipleship. I like to repeat that we always have to beware of cultural colonization, no, ideological colonization: there are economic ones because societies have a "colony" dimension; that is, of being open to colonization. And so we must defend ourselves. And in that respect I permit myself an intuition. You may have to adjust and correct it or not, but it is an intuition that I leave to you, but if you do not wish to err on the path for Latin America, the word is "fusion". Latin America was born *mestizo*, will remain *mestizo*, will only grow *mestizo*,

and this will be her destiny.

Saint Juan Diego, a poor and excluded indigenous boy, was indeed the small and humble instrument that Saint María of Guadalupe chose for a great mission that would give origin to the multiform face of the great Latin American nation. Let us entrust ourselves to his intercession so that when the forces are lacking in the struggle for our people, we may remember that it is precisely in weakness that the strength of God can do its best work (cf. *2 Cor* 12: 9). And may the *Morenita del Tepeyac* never forget our beloved “Patria Grande”, that is Latin America, a Great Homeland in gestation; may she never forget our families and those who suffer the most. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

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[1] Saint Óscar Arnulfo Romero, *Homily*, 6 August 1978.
[2] Cf. Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, *Aparecida*, 44.
[3] Cf. Pontifical Commission for Latin America, *La mujer pilar de la edificiación de la Iglesia y de la sociedad en América Latina*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City 2018.
[4] Francis, *Address to the Administrative Board of CELAM*, 7 September 2017.
[5] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 49.
[6] Saint Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens,* 50.