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Audience with the Community of the Pontifical Benedict XV Flaminian Regional Seminary of Bologna

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Community of the Pontifical Benedict XV Flaminian Regional Seminary of Bologna, on the occasion of the centenary of its founding:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers in the episcopate and in the priesthood,

Dear seminarians!

I welcome you to the centenary of the foundation of the Pontifical Regional Flaminian Seminary, wanted by Saint Pius X. I greet you all from my heart; I thank Cardinal Matteo Zuppi for his words, and I greet with affection Bishop Luigi Bettazzi, who is almost the same age as the Seminary! This important anniversary represents a happy occasion to reflect on the beauty of the call to the ministerial priesthood, which gives us the gift and the commitment to represent the Good Shepherd in the midst of His people and to live like the Good Shepherd in the midst of His people.

In order to prepare for this mission, Mother Church asks for a serious formative journey, which the seminary environment can offer in the best possible way. In this perspective, I would like to point out three aspects that identify this place and above all time of formation and preparation for the priesthood, which is the seminary. It is a *house of prayer*, a *house of study*, a *house of communion*.

You are called to be evangelizers in your Region, which is also marked by de-Christianization. Those who are more exposed to the cold wind of uncertainty or religious indifference need to find in the person of the priest that strong faith which is like a torch in the night and like a rock to which they can attach themselves. This faith is cultivated above all in the personal relationship, heart to heart, with the person of Jesus Christ. And the Seminary is first of all the *house of prayer* where the Lord still summons "his own" in "a secluded place" (cf. *Lk 9*:

18), to have a strong experience of encounter and listening. In this way, He wishes to prepare them to become “educators of the People of God in the faith”, and to enable them to “proclaim with authority the Word of God”, to “assemble the scattered People” and nourish them with the Sacraments to set them “on the road to salvation” and to preserve them in unity (cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 68).

It is necessary, therefore, to devote adequate effort to spiritual formation. These are the most favourable years for learning to “be with Him”, enjoying with amazement the grace of being His disciples, learning to listen to Him, to contemplate His face... Here the experience of silence and prayer is fundamental: it is there, in remaining in His presence, that the disciple can know the Master, as He is known to him – Saint Paul would say (cf. *1 Cor* 13:12). But the encounter with Jesus in the face and flesh of the poor is also essential. This too is an integral part of the seminarian’s spiritual formation.

The second aspect that identifies the Seminary is that of *study*. Study is part of an itinerary aimed at educating a living faith, a conscious faith, called to become the faith of the pastor. In this journey, study is the privileged instrument of wisdom and scientific knowledge, capable of ensuring solid foundations for the entire building of the formation of future priests. It is also an instrument of shared knowledge. Let me explain myself. The commitment to study, even in seminaries, is clearly personal, but not individual. Sharing lessons and study with fellow seminarians is also a way of becoming part of a presbytery. In fact, without neglecting personal inclinations and talents, on the contrary, valuing them, in the Seminary we study together for a common mission, and this gives a very special “flavor” to the learning of Sacred Scripture, theology, history, law and every discipline. The different personal sensibilities are compared in the common horizon of the calling and mission, thanks to the service of teachers who, in turn, teach within this same ecclesial horizon, free from any self-referentiality. It is good to study in this way, in this environment.

And let us come to the third dimension: the seminary as a *house of communion*. This aspect too is “transversal”, like the other two. It starts from a human basis of openness to others, of a capacity for listening and dialogue, and is called to take the form of priestly communion around the bishop and under his guidance. The priest’s pastoral charity cannot be credible unless it is preceded and accompanied by fraternity, first among seminarians and then among priests. A fraternity increasingly imbued with the apostolic form, and enriched by the characteristics proper to the diocese, that is, by those particular characteristics of the people of God and of the saints, especially the holy priests, of a particular Church.

In this context, the seminary is qualified as a path that educates candidates to evaluate all their actions with reference to Christ and to consider belonging to the one presbytery as a prior dimension of pastoral activity and a witness of communion, indispensable for effectively serving the mystery of the Church and her mission in the world.

Here I would like to stop for a moment to summarize the four “neighbourhoods”, the four attitudes of closeness of diocesan priests. To be close to God in prayer, I said, begins with the seminary. To be close to the bishop, always close to the bishop: without the bishop the Church does not work, without the bishop the priest can be a leader but he will not be a priest. Third form of closeness: being close to the presbytery, among yourselves. This is something that makes me suffer, when I see fragmented presbyteries, where they are against one another, or all courteous but then they speak badly of each other. If there is not a united presbytery... That does not mean that we cannot discuss, no, we discuss, we exchange ideas, but charity is the one that unites. And the fourth closeness: closeness to the people of God. Please do not forget where you came from. Paul said to Timothy: “Remember your mother and grandmother”, that is, your roots; remember that you were taken from the flock and you came because the Lord chose you. You did not come to make an ecclesiastical career, as once was said, in a literary style of other centuries. Proximity to God, closeness to the bishop, closeness to the presbytery, among you, and closeness to the people of God. If one of these is missing, the priest will not work and will slowly slip into the perversion of clericalism or attitudes of rigidity. Where there is clericalism there is corruption, and where there is rigidity, under rigidity, there are serious problems.

Dear seminarians, yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of Mary Immaculate. Mary shines in the Church for her singular vocation, lived following her Son, in humble and courageous obedience to God’s plan. May she who

was always united to Jesus from conception up to His death on the cross, help you discover every day the “treasure” the “precious pearl” that is Christ and His Kingdom, and to become joyful proclaimers of His Gospel. The seminary is also the time in which one welcomes Mary as Mother in one’s home, in one’s life, like the apostle John. May she accompany you.

I thank you for your visit. I bless your journey, with the intercession of Saint Pius X and of the exemplary witnesses that the Archbishop mentioned at the beginning. I pray for you. And you too, please, pray for me. Thank you.
