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Audience with Seminarians of the dioceses of Calabria

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the seminarians of the dioceses of Calabria, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brother Bishops,

Dear formators and seminarians, good morning!

I thank the Calabrian Episcopal Conference for having desired this pilgrimage to Rome with the seminarians, and I am happy to welcome you. Thank you to Bishop Fortunato Morrone for the words he addressed to me. I greet the rectors, spiritual fathers, and formators, and the bishops, of course: an important task is entrusted to you, that demands the daily effort of accompaniment and discernment; thank you for all the work, at times unseen and at times arduous, that you do for the seminarians! Thank you.

Although your land sometimes makes the headlines by bringing old and new wounds to light, I like to remind you that you are children of the ancient Greek civilization and still hold cultural and spiritual treasures that unite East and West. Homer, in the *Odyssey*, recounts that Ulysses, towards the end of his voyage, landed on a strip of land from which he could admire the beauty of two seas. This brings to mind your land, a gem set between the Tyrrhenian and Ionian seas. And it also shines as a place of spirituality, with important shrines, saints and hermits, as well as the presence of the Greek-Byzantine community. However, this religious heritage would risk remaining only a beautiful past to be admired, if there were not still, on your part, a renewed common commitment to promote evangelization and priestly formation.

I would like to start from a word taken from the Gospel of John: "They stayed with Him" (*Jn* 1:39). It refers to the first disciples who follow Jesus and reminds us that this is the foundation of everything: staying with the Lord and making Him the foundation of our ministry, staying with the Lord and making Him the foundation of our ministry;

otherwise, we will seek ourselves above all, and while engaging in apparently good things, it will be to fill the emptiness we have inside. This is how an illustrious figure of your land, the Servant of God Cassiodorus, prayed: "All things that turn away from the love of your majesty fall to ruin. To love you is to save oneself ... To have lost you is to die" (CASSIODORUS, *De anima*, XVIII). And this is your vocation, to make your way with the Lord, with the Lord's love. And beware of falling into the trap of careerism, which is a scourge: it is one of the worst forms of worldliness we clerics can have, careerism.

However, I would like to dwell on the initial question, that Jesus addresses to the two disciples when he realizes they are following him: "What do you seek?" (v. 38). At times we seek an easy "recipe"; instead, Jesus begins with a question that invites us to look inwardly, to verify the reasons for our journey. And today I would like to ask you the same question.

First and foremost, to the seminarians: *what do you seek?* What is the desire that drove you to come out towards the Lord and to follow him on the path of the priesthood? What are you seeking in the Seminary? And what do you seek in the priesthood? We must ask ourselves this, because sometimes it happens that "behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church", in reality we seek "human glory and personal well-being" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 93). It is very sad when you find priests who are officials, who have forgotten they are pastors of the people, and have turned into State clerics, like those of the French courts, Monsieur Abbé, they were State clerics. It is bad when you lose the priestly sense; perhaps we are looking for priestly ministry as a refuge behind which to hide ourselves, or a role for prestige, instead of wishing to be pastors with the same compassionate and merciful heart of Christ. I ask you with the same words of one of your yearbooks: do you want to be clerical priests who do not know how to knead the clay of suffering humanity, or to be like Jesus, a sign of the tenderness of the Father? Here, let us remember this: the Seminary is *the time to be true with ourselves*, setting aside the masks, the disguise, appearances. And in this process of discernment, let yourselves be worked upon by the Lord, who will make you pastors according to his heart, because masking, disguising, appearing is the opposite, it is proper to functionaries, not to shepherds of the people but of state clerics.

I would also like to address Jesus' question, though, to the brother bishops, you who are in the first line: *what do you seek?* What do you wish for the future of your land, what Church do you dream of? And what figure of priest do you imagine for your people? Because you are responsible for the formation of these young men, with what figure are you forming them? And this discernment is more necessary than ever today, because at the time when a certain Christianity of the past has waned, a new ecclesial season has opened up in front of us, which has demanded and continues to demand reflection also on the figure and ministry of the priest. We can no longer think of him as a solitary pastor, confined within the parish enclosure, or closed groups of pastors; it is necessary to join forces and pool our ideas, our hearts, to address certain pastoral challenges that are now transversal to all the diocesan Churches of a region. I am thinking, for example, of the evangelization of the young; of Christian initiation paths; of popular piety - you have a rich popular piety -, which needs unitary choices inspired by the Gospel; but I am also thinking of the demands of charity and the promotion of a culture of legality. The latter I emphasize: the culture of legality. How are your courts doing? How is the exercise of justice in your diocese?

All this calls for the formation of priests who, while coming from their own contexts, know how to cultivate a common vision of the area and who have a unitary human, spiritual and theological formation. Therefore, I would like to ask you, bishops, to make a clear choice regarding priestly formation: *to guide all human, spiritual and theological energies in a single Seminary*. I say single, there could be two, but to add them up: to be oriented towards unity with all the variables there can be, but there. This does not mean annihilating the seminaries, no: see how you can make this unity. It is not a logistical or a merely numerical choice, but is aimed at maturing together an *ecclesial vision* and a *horizon of priestly life*, instead of dispersing energies by multiplying the places of formation and propping up small bodies with few seminarians. A seminary of four, five, ten, is not a seminary, it does not form seminarians; a seminary of one hundred, so anonymous, does not form seminarians. It takes small communities, even within a large seminary or a seminary of moderate size that are then the reflection of the presbyteral college. It is a discernment that is not easy to make, not easy. But it must be done, and decisions must be made on this. It will not be Rome to tell you what you should do, no: because you have the charism. We have the ideas, the orientations, the advice, but you have the charism, you have the Holy Spirit

for this. If Rome were to begin to make the decisions it would be a blow to the Holy Spirit, who works in the particular Churches.

This process is initiating in many parts of the world, and it is natural that there be some resistance – it is natural – and some difficulty in taking this step. But remember that attachment to our history and to the meaningful places of our tradition must not prevent the newness of the Spirit from tracing paths, especially when the Church's journey requires it. The Lord asks of us an attitude of vigilance, lest it happen to us "as in the days of Noah", when the people, all intent on business as usual, did not realize that the flood was coming (cf. *Lk 17:26-27*). We need open eyes and attentive hearts to grasp the signs of the times and look ahead! I recommend to everyone, not just bishops, to discern what the Holy Spirit wants for your Churches. And this the bishops must do, the decision, but you must all do it to tell the bishops what you feel and how, the ideas... It is the whole body of the diocese that must help the bishop in this discernment. Then he takes responsibility for the decision.

I say this especially to you bishops, who dream of the good of your land and have the formation of future priests at heart: please do not allow yourselves to be paralysed by nostalgia and do not remain prisoners of the provincialism that does so much harm! And you, bishops emeritus, do not fail in silence and prayer to support this process. I say in silence and prayer because, when a pastor has concluded his mandate, his spiritual profile emerges and the way in which he has served the Church: we can see whether he has learnt to take leave "stripping himself ... of the claim of being indispensable" (Apostolic Letter *Learn to take your leave*), or whether he continues to seek spaces and to condition the path of the diocese. He who is emeritus is called to gratefully serve the Church in a manner befitting his status. And it is not easy to take leave, we are all required to make an effort to take leave. I wrote a letter on the subject that began with these words: "Learn to take your leave", without going back to snoop around, learn to take leave and maintain that absent presence, that distant presence in which one knows that the emeritus is there, but prays for the Church, he is close but does not enter the game. It is not easy. It is a grace of the Spirit to learn to take leave.

Dear friends, on today's date, 27 March 1416, your Holy Patron, Francesco di Paola, was born: it is good that you are here precisely on that date! On his death bed he said to his brethren that he had no treasure to leave, and exhorted them: "Love each other and leave everything to charity". This is what Calabria expects of you: that everything is done in charity, in unity, in fraternity. And I would like to say one thing: beware of the courts, because there at times a great deal of corruption is born. Beware... beware. Beware of the courts. And may there also be a change in the courts.

I thank you for your visit. You are a fine community, and I encourage you to be, for your land, a leaven of the Gospel and a living sign of hope. Walk together: and formation in a single seminary or in two or three, but together, not isolated in small groups. This word "together" is the message: you, who are on this path, will see how to walk together; but together not isolated, not as different tribes, no, together, together in the manner you choose. Be brave in this decision, be courageous. One thing that strikes me when here in Rome, especially when I have to go to the airport, is passing those houses of formation that at one time - I'm talking about (the) '60s, '70s perhaps, but before, '60s -, the time when vocations flourished, the great houses of formation, today all empty! It is difficult, find a style of formation that is always alive and that does not depend on externality but on the power of the Holy Spirit and on this make decisions with courage, with courage. The Lord will always accompany you. I repeat: together, in fraternity. And go forward with confidence and joy! May Our Lady accompany you and keep you. Our Lady is a mother, and mothers know what to do, they know, better than we do. I bless you all from my heart. And please do not forget to pray for me, for me, not against me! Thank you.
