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Audience with participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the second Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I welcome you all, participants in this second Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, and I thank Cardinal Farrell for his kind words.

I thank you for the work accomplished in these years and for the commitment with which you work in all the areas of your competence. These relate to the daily life of many people: families, the young, the elderly, associations of the faithful and, more generally, the laypeople who live in the world, with their joys and hardships. You are a “popular” Dicastery, I would say, and this is beautiful! Remember: never lose this characteristic of closeness to the women and men of our time. Closeness, I emphasize that.

In these days you have gathered to reflect together on the theme: *Laypeople and the ministeriality of the synodal Church*.

When we talk about *ministries*, in general, we think immediately of the “instituted” ministries: reader, acolyte, catechist – which are well known and which have been reflected on a great deal. These ministries are characterized by a public intervention of the Church – a specific act of institution – and a certain visibility. They are connected with ordained ministry, because they involve various forms of participation in the task that is proper to them, even if it does not demand the sacrament of Ordination.

However, the instituted ministries do not represent the full extent of the ministeriality of the Church, which is broader and, ever since the first Christian communities, regards all the faithful (cf. Apostolic Letter issued *Motu proprio Antiquum ministerium*, 2). Unfortunately, little is said about it, yet you have rightly dedicated your Plenary Assembly to it.

First of all, we can ask ourselves: what is the origin of ministeriality in the Church?

We may identify two fundamental answers.

The first is: *Baptism*. Indeed, the common priesthood of all the faithful has its root in it and is in turn expressed in the ministries. Lay ministeriality is not based on the sacrament of Ordination, but on Baptism, for the fact that all the baptized – laypeople, the celibate, married couples, priests, religious – are *Christofideles*, believers in Christ, his disciples, and are therefore required to take part in the mission He entrusted to the Church, also through the assumption of determined ministries.

The second answer is: *the gifts of the Holy Spirit*. The ministeriality of the faithful, and of laypeople in particular, stems from the charism that the Holy Spirit distributes within the People of God for its edification (cf. *ibid.*): first a charism appears, inspired by the Spirit; then, the Church acknowledges this charism as a useful service to the community; finally, in a third moment, it is introduced and a specific ministry spreads.

And it is then even clearer why the ministeriality of the Church cannot be reduced merely to instituted ministries, but rather embraces a far vaster field. Besides, today too, as in the original communities, faced with particular pastoral needs, without resorting to the institution of ministries, pastors can entrust certain supplementary functions to laypeople, that is, temporary services, as in the case of the proclamation of the Word of the distribution of the Eucharist.

In addition, besides the instituted ministries, supplementary services, and other regularly entrusted offices, the laity can carry out a range of tasks, which express their participation in the prophetic and regal function of Christ: not only within the Church, but also in the environments where they are integrated. There are some who are supplementary, but there are others that come from the baptismal origin of the laity.

I think, first and foremost, of the demands linked to old and new forms of poverty, as well as migrants, who urgently require action of welcome and solidarity. In these areas of charity, many services can arise that take the form of genuine ministries. It is a broad space of commitment for those who wish to live in a practical way, in relation to others, the closeness of Jesus that they have often experienced first-hand. The ministry thus becomes not only a simple social commitment, but also something beautiful and personal, a true Christian witness.

I then think of the family, on which I know you have reflected together during this Plenary Assembly, examining some challenges of family pastoral care, including situations of matrimonial crisis, problems of separated and divorced people and those who live in a new union or have remarried. In the *Christofideles laici* it is affirmed that there are ministries that have their sacramental foundation in Marriage and not only in Baptism and Confirmation (no. 23). In *Familiaris consortio* the educational mission of the family is spoken of as a ministry of evangelization, which makes it a place of genuine Christian initiation (cf. no. 39). And already in *Evangelii nuntiandi* it is recalled that the missionary nature intrinsic to the vocation of marriage is also expressed outside the family itself, when this becomes “the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood of which it forms part” (cf. no. 71). I will pause a minute here, because I have quoted from *Evangelii nuntiandi*. This exhortation of Saint Paul VI is valid today, it is current. Please: pick it up again, reread it, it is very topical. With so many things, when one finds them again (one says): “Ah look, the farsighted Montini”. You can see there, that farsightedness of the great saint who led the Church.

I have cited some examples of lay ministries, to which many others could be added, acknowledged in various ways by the ecclesial authorities as expressions of the ministeriality of the Church in a broad sense.

One thing we must remember, though: these ministries, services, offices, must never become self-referential. I get angry when I see lay ministers who – pardon the expression – are “puffed up” by this ministry. This is ministerial, but it is not Christian. They are pagan ministers, full of themselves, aren’t they? Beware of this: they must never become self-referential. Service is one-directional, it is not a round trip: that will never do. Their purpose transcends them, and it is that which brings “Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors” (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 102). This is the mission entrusted above all to the laity, whose action cannot be limited to “tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society” (*ibid.*). At times you see laypeople and they seem to be default priests. Please: clean up this problem.

Looking, then at the various types of ministeriality we have listed, it is useful to ask a final question: what do they have in common?

Two things: *mission* and *service*. Indeed, all ministries are an expression of the sole mission of the Church, and they are all forms of service to others. In particular, I like to emphasize that at the root of the term *ministry* there is the word *minus*, which means “minor”. And Jesus said so: those who command should make themselves the smallest, otherwise they do not know how to command. It is a small detail, but of great importance. Those who follow Jesus are not afraid to make themselves “inferior”, “minor”, to place themselves at the service of others. Indeed, Jesus himself taught us: “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (*Mk* 10: 43-44). Here lies the true motivation that must inspire any of faithful who assume an ecclesial task, any commitment to Christian witness in the reality where he or she lives: the willingness to serve the brethren, and in them, to serve Christ. Only in this way may all the baptized be able to discover the meaning of their own life, joyfully experiencing being “a mission on this earth” (*ibid.*, 273), that is, being called, in different ways and forms, to “bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (*ibid.*), and letting themselves be accompanied.

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you again for the work you carry out in the service of the Holy faithful People of God. May Our Lady accompany you and obtain for you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I bless you from my heart, and please, I ask you to pray for me. Thank you.
