



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 241215c

Sunday 15.12.2024

Apostolic Journey of the Holy Father Francis to Ajaccio at the conclusion of the Congress “La Religiosité Populaire en Méditerranée (15 December 2024) – The Angelus prayer with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Men and Women, and Seminarians in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption

At 11.20, the Holy Father Francis went to the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Ajaccio to pray the Angelus with the bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and seminarians.

Upon arrival, the Pope was welcomed at the main entrance of the Cathedral by the Bishop of Ajaccio, His Eminence Cardinal François-Xavier Bustillo, O.F.M. Conv., the President of the French Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, and the parish priest. Two children gave him a floral tribute, while a choir sang a hymn in the square in front of the Cathedral.

Two canons gave the Holy Father the cross and holy water for aspersion. Pope Francis then proceeded along the central nave up to the altar.

After the welcome greeting from the President of the French Episcopal Conference, before reciting the Angelus, the Pope delivered his address.

After the blessing, the gift to the Holy Father and the final hymn, and after greeting some people before leaving, Pope Francis transferred by car to the bishopric of Ajaccio where, upon arrival, he was welcomed by the staff of the Bishop’s residence.

The following is the Holy Father Francis’ address before the recitation of the Angelus with the bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and seminarians:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brother Bishops,
Dear religious, priests, deacons, and seminarians,

I am here in this beautiful land of yours only for a day, but I wanted to meet you and spend at least a brief moment together. This gives me a chance, first of all, to say thank you. Thank you for being here, with the gift of your lives. Thank you for your work and your daily efforts. Thank you because you are a sign of God's merciful love and witnesses to the Gospel. I was glad to meet one of you, who is ninety-five years old and seventy years as a priest! He is living out this beautiful vocation. Thank you, brother, for your testimony! Thank you very much!

Saying thank you in Italian, "*grazie*", immediately makes me think of God's *grace*, which is the foundation of the Christian faith and every form of consecration in the Church. In our European context, we face no lack of problems and challenges in passing on the faith. Each day you experience this, and can feel helpless and inadequate. You are few in number, you do not have abundant resources, you do not always work in an atmosphere that is open to receiving the Gospel message. There is a film that comes to mind when I think of those who are willing to accept the Gospel, but not the spokesperson. The film had this line: "Music, yes, but not the musician". Think about the importance of fidelity to the transmission of the Gospel. That will help us. Yet this priestly poverty is itself a blessing! Why? Because it strips us of the pretense that we succeed by our own efforts, and it teaches us to regard the Christian mission as depending not on human abilities but above all on the Lord who always works with the little that we are able to offer him.

Let us never forget that it is about the Lord. *It is not about me, but about God.* Where I am from, if a priest is arrogant and makes himself the centre of attention, we say: "That priest is *yo, me, mí, conmigo, para mí* – I, me, with me, for me". Perhaps this is something that every morning, at sunrise, every priest and every consecrated person should repeat in prayer. Today, as well, my service *is not about me, but about God, the Lord.* And I say this because there is the danger of worldliness, and the danger is called vanity, being a "show-off", focusing on yourself. Vanity or being a "show-off" is an awful vice that has a terrible stench.

The primacy of God's grace does not mean, however, that we can rest on our laurels without assuming our responsibilities. On the contrary, we should always think of ourselves as fellow workers with God's grace (cf. *1 Cor 3:9*). As we walk with the Lord, we should keep thinking about one essential question: How am I living my priesthood, my consecration, my life as a disciple? Am I close to Jesus?

When I did pastoral visits in the diocese, I met with some good priests who worked very, very hard. "Tell me, what do you do in the evenings?" – "I am tired, I eat something and then I go to bed to rest a little and watch television". – "But do you go to the chapel to greet your Boss?" – "Oh, no..." – "And, before you go to sleep, do you say a Hail Mary? At least be polite: come to the chapel and say: 'Goodbye. Thank you, see you tomorrow'". Do not forget the Lord at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the day. He is our Boss. And our Boss works harder than we do! Do not forget that.

I have a question you can ask yourselves. "How do I live out my discipleship?" Keep this in mind and do not underestimate the need for discernment, this looking inside ourselves, lest we get so caught up in the daily grind and the fast pace of our life and activity that we lose our inner equilibrium. For my part, I would like to present you with a double invitation: *care for yourself* and *care for others*.

First, *care for yourself*. The priestly or religious life is not just a "yes" that we say once and for all. There is no living off the Lord! On the contrary, every day we must renew the joy of encountering him; at every moment we need to listen to his voice anew and decide once more to follow him, even when we fall. Rise up, look towards the Lord: "Forgive me, help me to keep going". That is fraternal and filial closeness.

Remember this: our lives find expression in our gift of self, but the more often priests or religious spend themselves in service to God's Kingdom, the more they need also to care for themselves. Priests, sisters or deacons who neglect themselves will also end up neglecting the people entrusted to their care. That is why it takes a little "rule of life" – which the religious already have! – that includes a time set aside daily for prayer and the Eucharist and for dialogue with the Lord, each one according to his or her own spirituality and style. I would

also say: set aside some moments of solitude, have a brother or sister with whom you can freely share what is in your heart – what was once called a spiritual director – develop an interest, not as a way of filling your spare time, but as a way of taking a healthy rest from the burdens of ministry. Ministry can be tiring! We ought to be concerned about those people who are always on the go, always at the centre of attention, and perhaps through overzealousness never settle down, never take a moment for themselves. Brothers and sisters, that is not good. There need to be places to go and times set aside when every priest and every religious can tend to themselves. But not to get a facelift to be more attractive, no! Speak with your Friend, your Lord, and especially with your Mother – do not forget about Our Lady, please! Talk to them about your life and how things are going. Always go to your confessor or some friend who knows you well to talk and let him or her help you discern well. Being a “mushroom priest” is not good!

Another thing is part of this care: fraternity among yourselves. We should learn to share not only our struggles and challenges, but also our joy and our friendship among ourselves. Your Bishop says something that I like, namely, that it is important to move from the “Book of Lamentations” to the “Book of the Song of Songs”. This is not done often. We prefer the lamentations! And if the poor Bishop forgets his zucchetto one morning, you say, “Oh, look at the Bishop...” Just another excuse to complain about the Bishop. The Bishop, of course, is a sinner like all of us. We are all brothers and sisters! Switch from the “Book of Lamentations” to the “Book of the Song of Songs”. And this is important. One of the Psalms says the same thing: “You have turned my mourning into dancing” (30:11). Let us share our joy at being apostles and disciples of the Lord! Joy must be shared. Otherwise, the place for joy is taken up by vinegar. It is unfortunate when you meet a priest with a bitter heart. It is unfortunate. “What happened?” – “Well, the Bishop does not like me... Because they named that other priest Bishop instead of me... Because... Because...” Complaints. Please, put an end to complaints and envy. Do not turn green with envy. Let us ask the Lord to change our lamentation into dancing, to give us a sense of humour with evangelical simplicity.

Second: *Care for others*. The mission that each of you has received has only one purpose: to bring Christ to others, to bring the consolation of the Gospel to the hearts of our brothers and sisters. Here I would like to recall the time when the apostle Paul was about to return to Corinth. Writing to the community there, he says: “I will most gladly spend and be spent for you” (2 Cor 12:15). Spending ourselves for souls, being spent in offering ourselves in service to those entrusted to us. I am reminded of a young holy priest who recently died of cancer. He lived in a slum with the poorest of the poor. He used to say: “Sometimes I feel like closing the window with bricks, because people come at all hours and if I do not open the door, they knock on the window”. This priest’s heart was open to all, without distinction.

Listen to others, be close to them. This is an invitation for us to discover, in today’s context, the most effective pastoral means of evangelization. Do not be afraid of changing, of reassessing the old methods, of renewing the language of faith and realizing that the mission is not a question of human strategies, but above all a question of faith. Care for others: those who follow Jesus’ teaching, those who have strayed from him, those who need to be set back on the right track or find consolation amid their sufferings. Care for everyone, in formation and above all in encounter. Encounter people where they live and work; that is important.

This is very important to me: please, always forgive. And forgive everything. Forgive everything and always. I would say to priests, do not ask too many questions in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but listen and forgive. A Cardinal – who is a bit conservative, a bit narrow-minded, but he is a great priest – said in a talk to priests: “When people start to stammer [in Confession] because they are ashamed, I say, ‘It’s OK, I understand, move on to something else’. In reality, I have not understood anything, but the Lord has understood”. Please do not torture people in the confessional, asking where, how, when, with whom... Always forgive, always forgive! There is a good Capuchin friar in Buenos Aires whom I made a Cardinal at the age of ninety-six. He always has a long queue of people because he is a good confessor. I used to go to him, too. This confessor once said to me: “Listen, sometimes I get scrupulous about forgiving too much”. – “And what do you do?” – “I go pray and I say: ‘Lord, forgive me, I have forgiven too much’. And then immediately I say: ‘But you were the one who gave me this *bad* example!’” Always forgive. Forgive everything. I also say this to religious: forgive and forget if someone has done you harm, if there are disagreements stemming from ambition in the community... Forgive. The Lord has given us an example: forgive everything and always! I will make a confession: I have been a priest for fifty-five years, the anniversary was the other day. I have never refused absolution, and I really like to hear

confessions. I have always looked for ways to forgive. This is my testimony.

Dear sisters and brothers, I thank you most heartily and I pray that your ministry will be rich in hope and joy. Even at times of weariness and discouragement, never give up. Give your heart to the Lord. Do not forget to cry before the Lord! He will make his presence felt if you care for yourselves and for others. For that is how he fills with consolation those whom he has called and sent forth. Move forward with courage; he will fill you with joy.

Now let us turn in prayer to the Virgin Mary. In this Cathedral named after Our Lady of the Assumption, the faithful invoke her patronage under the title of Mother of Mercy, "*Madunnuccia*". From this island of the Mediterranean, let us lift up to her our plea for peace: peace for all the lands that surround this sea, particularly the Holy Land where Mary gave birth to Jesus. Peace for Palestine, for Israel, for Lebanon, for Syria, and for the whole Middle East! Peace for war-torn Myanmar. And may the Holy Mother of God obtain the peace so greatly desired by the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. They are brothers. "No, Father, they are cousins!" Cousins or brothers, I do not know, but may they try to understand each other! Peace! Brothers, sisters, war is always a defeat. War in religious communities, war in parishes is always a defeat, always! May the Lord give peace to all.

Let us pray for the victims of the cyclone that hit the archipelago of Mayotte just a few hours ago. I am spiritually close to those who have been struck by this tragedy.

Now, all together, let us pray the Angelus.

Angelus Domini...
