



The Holy See

PROFESSION OF FAITH WITH THE BISHOPS OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

Vatican Basilica
Thursday, 23 May 2013

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Address of the Holy Father after the initial greeting by Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, President of the Italian Episcopal Conference:

I am grateful, Your Eminence, for your greeting and my compliments too on the work of this Assembly. Many thanks to you all. I am sure you have worked hard, because you have so many duties. Firstly: the Church in Italy — all of you — dialogue with the cultural, social and political institutions, which is one of your tasks and is far from easy. Your work is also to build up the regional conferences, so that they may be the voice of each region, so different; and this is beautiful. As regards the complex task of somewhat reducing the number of dioceses, I know that there is a Commission for this. It is not easy, but there is a Commission. Persevere in brotherhood, may the Episcopal Conference carry ahead this dialogue, as I said, with the cultural, social and political institutions. It is your duty. Go ahead!

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

The biblical Readings we have heard make us think. They have made me think deeply. I have conceived of a sort of meditation for us bishops, first for me, a bishop like you, and I share it with you.

It is important — and I am particularly glad — that our first meeting should take place here, on the site that guards not only Peter's tomb but also the living memory of his witness of faith, his service to the Truth, and his gift of himself to the point of martyrdom for the Gospel and for the Church.

This evening this Altar of the Confessio thus becomes for us the Sea of Tiberias, on whose shores we listen once again to the marvellous conversation between Jesus and Peter with the question addressed to the Apostle, but which must also resonate in our own hearts, as Bishops.

“Do you love me?”. “Are you my friend?” (cf. Jn 21, 15ff.).

The question is addressed to a man who, despite his solemn declarations, let himself be gripped by fear and so had denied.

“Do you love me?”; “Are you my friend?”.

The question is addressed to me and to each one of us, to all of us: if we take care not to respond too hastily and superficially it impels us to look within ourselves, to re-enter ourselves.

“Do you love me?”; “Are you my friend?”.

The One who scrutinizes hearts (cf. Rom 8:27), makes himself a beggar of love and questions us on the one truly essential issue, a premiss and condition for feeding his sheep, his lambs, his Church. May every ministry be based on this intimacy with the Lord; living from him is the measure of our ecclesial service which is expressed in the readiness to obey, to humble ourselves, as we heard in the Letter to the Philippians, and for the total gift of self (cf. 2:6-11).

Moreover, the consequence of loving the Lord is giving everything — truly everything, even our life — for him. This is what must distinguish our pastoral ministry; it is the litmus test that tells us how deeply we have embraced the gift received in responding to Jesus' call, and how closely bound we are to the individuals and communities that have been entrusted to our care. We are not the expression of a structure or of an organizational need: even with the service of our authority we are called to be a sign of the presence and action of the Risen Lord; thus to build up the community in brotherly love.

Not that this should be taken for granted: even the greatest love, in fact, when it is not constantly nourished, weakens and fades away. Not for nothing did the Apostle Paul recommend: “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own Son's blood” (cf. Acts 20:28).

A lack of vigilance — as we know — makes the Pastor tepid; it makes him absentminded, forgetful and even impatient. It tantalizes him with the prospect of a career, the enticement of money and

with compromises with a mundane spirit; it makes him lazy, turning him into an official, a state functionary concerned with himself, with organization and structures, rather than with the true good of the People of God. Then one runs the risk of denying the Lord as did the Apostle Peter, even if he formally presents him and speaks in his name; one obscures the holiness of the hierarchical Mother Church making her less fruitful.

Who are we, Brothers, before God? What are our trials? We have so many; each one of us has his own. What is God saying to us through them? What are we relying on in order to surmount them?

Just as it did Peter, Jesus' insistent and heartfelt question can leave us pained and more aware of the weakness of our freedom, threatened as it is by thousands of interior and exterior forms of conditioning that all too often give rise to bewilderment, frustration, and even disbelief.

These are not of course the sentiments and attitudes that the Lord wants to inspire; rather, the Enemy, the Devil, takes advantage of them to isolate us in bitterness, complaint and despair.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, does not humiliate or abandon people to remorse. Through him the tenderness of the Father, who consoles and revitalizes, speaks; it is he who brings us from the disintegration of shame — because shame truly breaks us up — to the fabric of trust; he restores courage, re-entrusts responsibility, and sends us out on mission.

Peter, purified in the crucible of forgiveness could say humbly, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (Jn 21:17). I am sure that we can all say this with heartfelt feeling. And Peter, purified, urges us in his First Letter to tend “the flock of God... not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2-3).

Yes, being Pastors means believing every day in the grace and strength that come to us from the Lord despite our weakness, and wholly assuming the responsibility for walking *before* the flock, relieved of the burdens that obstruct healthy apostolic promptness, hesitant leadership, so as to make our voice recognizable both to those who have embraced the faith and to those who “are not [yet] of this fold” (Jn 10:16). We are called to make our own the dream of God, whose house knows no exclusion of people or peoples, as Isaiah prophetically foretold in the First Reading (cf. Is 2:2-5).

For this reason being Pastors also means being prepared to walk *among* and *behind* the flock; being capable of listening to the silent tale of those who are suffering and of sustaining the steps of those who fear they may not make it; attentive to raising, to reassuring and to instilling hope. Our faith emerges strengthened from sharing with the lowly. Let us therefore set aside every form of arrogance, to bend down to all whom the Lord has entrusted to our care. Among them let us

keep a special, very special, place for our priests. Especially for them may our heart, our hand and our door stay open in every circumstance. They are the first faithful that we bishops have: our priests. Let us love them! Let us love them with all our heart! They are our sons and our brothers!

Dear brothers, the profession of faith we are now renewing together is not a formal act. Rather, it means renewing our response to the “Follow me” with which John’s Gospel ends (21:19). It leads to living our life in accordance with God’s plan, committing our whole self to the Lord Jesus. The discernment that knows and takes on the thoughts, expectations and needs of the people of our time stems from this.

In this spirit, I warmly thank each one of you for your service, for your love for the Church.

And the Mother is here! I place you, and myself, under the mantle of Mary, Our Lady.

Mother of silence, who watches over the mystery of God,
Save us from the idolatry of the present time, to which those who forget are condemned.
Purify the eyes of Pastors with the eye-wash of memory:
Take us back to the freshness of the origins, for a prayerful, penitent Church.

Mother of the beauty that blossoms from faithfulness to daily work,
Lift us from the torpor of laziness, pettiness, and defeatism.
Clothe Pastors in the compassion that unifies, that makes whole; let us discover the joy of a
humble, brotherly, serving Church.

Mother of tenderness who envelops us in patience and mercy,
Help us burn away the sadness, impatience and rigidity of those who do not know what it means
to belong.
Intercede with your Son to obtain that our hands, our feet, our hearts be agile: let us build the
Church with the Truth of love.
Mother, we shall be the People of God, pilgrims bound for the Kingdom. Amen.