



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

With these lines I would like to express my closeness to each one of you and to the Churches in the midst of which the Spirit of God has placed you as Pastors. May this same Spirit, with its creative wisdom, give life to the General Assembly that you are beginning, especially dedicated to life and to the permanent formation of the presbyter.

In this regard, your gathering in Assisi leads one immediately to contemplate the great love and veneration that St Francis fostered for the Hierarchical Holy Mother Church, and in particular for priests, including those whom he recognized as “*pauperculos huius saeculi*” (from *The Testament*).

Among the principal responsibilities that the episcopal ministry entrusts to you is that of confirming, supporting and strengthening these your first collaborators, through whom the motherhood of the Church reaches the entire People of God. How many we have known! How many contributed with their witness to attract us to a consecrated life! How many of them did we learn from and were we molded by! Each one of us gratefully cherishes their names and faces. We saw them expend their lives among the people of our parishes, educating the youth, attentive to families, visiting the sick at home and in hospitals, taking charge of the poor in the awareness that “withdrawing from others to avoid getting soiled is the worst sort of filth” (cf. L. Tolstoy). Free from things and from themselves, they remind all that to lower oneself without holding back is the way for that loftiness that the Gospel calls charity; and that the truest joy is tasted in the fraternity experienced.

Holy priests are forgiven sinners and instruments of forgiveness. Their existence speaks the language of patience and perseverance; they are not spiritual tourists, eternally undecided and dissatisfied, because they know they are in the hands of the One who never fails in His promises and whose Providence is such that nothing can separate them from that belonging. This

awareness grows with the pastoral charity with which they surround the people entrusted to them with care and tenderness, until they know them one by one.

Yes, it is still the time for this type of presbyter: “bridges” for the encounter between God and the world, able sentinels who can transmit a richness otherwise lost.

Such priests cannot be improvised: they are forged by the precious formative work of the seminary, and Ordination consecrates them for ever as men of God and servants of His people. It can happen, however, that time cools the generous dedication of the beginning, and it is then of no use to sew new patches onto an old garment: the identity of the presbyter, precisely because it comes from on High, exacts of him a daily journey of re-appropriation, beginning from what made him a minister of Jesus Christ.

The formation of which we speak is an experience of permanent discipleship, which draws one close to Christ and allows one to be ever more conformed to Him. Therefore, it has no end, for priests never stop being disciples of Jesus, they never stop following Him. Thus, formation understood as discipleship sustains the ordained minister his entire life and regards his entire person and his ministry. Initial and ongoing formation are two aspects of one reality: the path of the disciple priest, in love with his Lord and steadfastly following Him (cf. *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 3 October 2014).

After all, brothers, you know there is no need for clerical priests whose behaviour risks distancing people from the Lord, nor for functionary priests who, while playing a role, seek their consolation far from Him. Only one whose gaze is fixed on what is truly essential can renew his “yes” to the gift received and, in life’s various seasons, does not cease to make a gift of himself; only one who lets himself be conformed to the Good Shepherd finds unity, peace and strength in the obedience of service; only one who breathes on the horizon of presbyterial fraternity is free from a false conscience a conscience which presumes to be the epicentre of everything, the only measure of one’s feeling and action.

I hope you will have days of listening and discussion, which lead to outlining itineraries of permanent formation, capable of combining the spiritual dimension with the cultural, the community dimension with the pastoral: these are the pillars of life formed according to the Gospel, preserved in daily discipline, in prayer, in controlling the senses, in the care of oneself, in humble and prophetic witness; lives that restore to the Church the trust that she first placed in them.

I accompany you with my prayer and my Blessing, which I extend, through the intercession of the Virgin Mother, to all the priests of the Church in Italy and to those who work in the service of their formation; and I thank you for your prayers for me and for my ministry.

From the Vatican, 8 November 2014

FRANCIS

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