



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS
TO A GROUP OF RECENTLY APPOINTED BISHOPS
TAKING PART IN A COURSE ORGANIZED
BY THE CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS AND
BY THE CONGREGATION FOR THE EASTERN CHURCHES***

Clementine Hall

Thursday, 19 September 2013

The Psalm says; “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133[132]:1).

I think you have experienced the truth of these words in the days you have spent here in Rome living an experience of brotherhood; a brotherhood that is nurtured by friendship, by getting to know one another, by being together, but that derives in particular from the sacred bonds of communion in the Episcopal College and with the Bishop of Rome. May forming “one body” in this way give direction to you in your daily work and spur you to ask yourselves: how should I live the spirit of collegiality and collaboration in the Episcopate? How can I be a builder of communion and unity in the Church which the Lord has entrusted to me? The bishop is a man of communion, he is a man of unity, “the visible source and foundation of unity, (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I greet you one by one, Latin- and Eastern-rite Bishops. You demonstrate the great wealth and variety of the Church! I also thank Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, for his greeting, on your behalf, and for organizing these days when you have come as pilgrims to the Tomb of Peter to strengthen communion and to pray and reflect on your ministry. With him I greet Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches; Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Archbishop of Manila; and Msgr Lorenzo Baldisseri, an unflagging champion of these events.

“Tend the flock of God that is your charge, 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). May St Peter’s words be engraved on our heart! We are called and constituted Pastors, not pastors by ourselves but by the Lord; and not to serve ourselves, but the flock that has been entrusted to us, and to serve it to the point of laying down our life, like Christ, the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11).

What does tending and having the “permanent and daily care of their sheep” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council *Lumen Gentium*, n. 27) actually mean? Three brief thoughts. Tending means: welcoming magnanimously, walking with the flock, staying with the flock. Welcoming, walking, staying.

1. *To welcome magnanimously.* May your heart be large enough to welcome all the men and women you come across during the day and whom you go and seek out when you go about your parishes and to every community. Ask yourselves from this moment: how will those who knock at my door find it? If they find it open, through your kindness, your availability, they will experience God’s fatherhood and will understand that the Church is a good mother who always welcomes and loves.

2. *To walk with the flock.* To welcome magnanimously, to walk. Welcoming everyone in order to walk with everyone. The bishop journeys *with* and *among* his flock. This means setting out with one’s faithful and with all those who turn to you, sharing in their joys and hopes, their difficulties and sufferings, as brothers and as friends, but especially as fathers who can listen, understand, help and guide. Walking together demands love and ours is a service of love, *amoris officium*, as St Augustine used to say (*In evangelium Johannis tractatus* 123, 5: PL 35, 1967).

a) And as you walk I would like to remember *affection for your priests*. Your priests are your first neighbour; the priest is the bishop’s first neighbour — love your neighbour, but he is your first neighbour — your priests are indispensable collaborators of whom to seek counsel and help and for whom you should care as fathers, brothers and friends. One of your priority tasks is the spiritual care of the presbyterate, but do not forget the human needs of each individual priest, especially in the most delicate and important events in their ministry and their life. The time you spend with your priests is never wasted! Receive them whenever they ask you to. Do not let a telephone call go unanswered. I have heard priests say during the Spiritual Exercises I gave them — I don’t know whether it’s true but I’ve heard it very often in my life — “Well! I called the bishop and his secretary told me that he had no time to receive me!”. It was like this for months and months and months. I don’t know whether it is true, but if a priest telephones the bishop, then that same day or at least the following day the telephone call: “I heard, what would you like? I cannot receive you today but let’s look at the dates together”. Please listen to what the father says. Vice versa, the priest might think: “but he doesn’t care; he is not a father he is an office head!”. Think about this well. This would be a good resolution: reply to a telephone call from a priest, if I can’t

today, at least the following day. And then see when you can meet him. Be constantly close, be in touch with them all the time.

b) Then *presence in the diocese*. In the homily in the Chrism Mass this year I said that Pastors must have “the odour of sheep”. Be Pastors with the odour of the sheep, present in your people’s midst like Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Your presence is not secondary, it is indispensable. Presence! The people themselves who want to see their bishop walk with them and be near them ask it of you. They need his presence in order to live and breathe! Do not close yourselves in! Go down among your faithful, even into the margins of your dioceses and into all those “peripheries of existence” where there is suffering, loneliness and human degradation. A pastoral presence means walking with the People of God, walking in front of them, showing them the way, showing them the path; walking in their midst, to strengthen them in unity; walking behind them, to make sure no one gets left behind but especially, never to lose the scent of the People of God in order to find new roads. A bishop who lives among his faithful has his ears open to listen to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7), and to the “voice of the sheep”, also through those diocesan institutions whose task it is to advise the bishop, promoting a loyal and constructive dialogue. It is impossible to think of a bishop who did not have these diocesan institutions: a presbyteral council, consultors, a pastoral council, a council for financial matters. This means really being with the people. This pastoral presence will enable you to be thoroughly acquainted with the culture, customs and mores of the area, the wealth of holiness that is present there. Immerse yourselves in your own flock!

c) And here I would like to add: let *your style of service* to the flock be that of humility, I would say even of austerity and essentiality. Please, we pastors are not men with the “psychology of princes” — please — ambitious men who are bridegrooms of this Church while awaiting another which is more beautiful, wealthier. But this is a scandal! If a penitent arrives and says to you: “I am married, I live with my wife, but I am always looking at that woman who is more beautiful than mine: is this a sin, Father?”. The Gospel says: it is a sin of adultery. Is there a “spiritual adultery?”. I don’t know, think about it. Do not wait for another more beautiful, more important or richer. Be careful not to slip into the spirit of careerism! That really is a form of cancer! It is not only with words but also and above all with a practical witness in our life that we are teachers and educators of our people. The proclamation of faith requires us to live out what we teach. Mission and life are inseparable (cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis*, n. 31). This is a question we should ask ourselves every day: do I practise what I preach?

3. *To welcome, to walk*. And the third and last element: *staying with the flock*. I am referring to *stability* which has two precise aspects: “staying” in the diocese and staying in “this” diocese, as I said, without seeking change or promotion. As pastors it is impossible to know your flock really well — walking in front of it, in its midst and behind it, caring for it with your teaching, with the administration of the sacraments and with the testimony of your life — unless you remain in your diocese. In this Trent is very up to date: residence. Ours is a time in which we can travel and move

from one place to another easily, a time when communications are rapid, the epoch of the *internet*. However the old law of residence is not out of fashion! It is necessary for good pastoral government (Directory *Apostolorum Successores* n. 161). Of course, concern for other Churches and for the universal Church can take you from your diocese, but let it be only for the time that is strictly necessary and not a regular practice. You see, residence is not only required for the purpose of good organization, it is not a functional element; it has a theological root! You are bridegrooms of your community, deeply bound to it! I ask you, please remain among your people. Stay, stay.... Steer clear of the scandal of being “airport bishops”! Be welcoming pastors, journeying on with your people, with affection, with mercy, treating them with gentleness and fatherly firmness, with humility and discretion. And may you also be able to see your own limitations and have a large dose of good humour. This is a grace we bishops must ask for. We must all ask for this grace: Lord, give me a sense of humour. Finding the way to laugh at oneself first is part of it. And stay with your flock!

Dear Brothers, on your return to your dioceses please take my greeting to everyone and in particular to your priests, consecrated men and women, seminarians, to all your faithful and to those who are most in need of the Lord’s closeness. The presence here — as Cardinal Ouellet said — of two Syrian bishops impels us once again to ask God together for the gift of peace. Peace for Syria, peace for the Middle East, peace for the world! Please remember to pray for me, I do so for you! I warmly impart my blessing to each and every one of your communities. Many thanks.