



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE PLENARY OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 3 October 2014*

*Dear Cardinals,
Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,
Brothers and Sisters,*

I address to each of you a warm greeting and my sincere thanks for sharing the Holy See's concern for ordained ministers and their pastoral work. I thank Cardinal Beniamino Stella for the words with which he introduced this meeting. What I would like to tell you concerns three subjects, which correspond to the goals and activity of this Dicastery: vocation, formation, evangelization.

Returning to the image in the Gospel of Matthew, I like comparing the vocation to the ordained ministry to the "treasure hidden in a field" (13:44). It is truly a treasure that God places from the beginning in the hearts of some men; those whom He has chosen and called to follow him in this special state of life. This treasure, which needs to be discovered and brought to light, is not meant to "enrich" just someone. The one called to the ministry is not the "master" of his vocation, but the administrator of a gift that God has entrusted to him for the good of all people, rather, of all men and women, including those who have distanced themselves from religious practice or do not profess faith in Christ. At the same time, the whole of the Christian community is the guardian of the treasure of these vocations, destined for his service, and it must be ever more conscious of the duty to promote them, welcome them and accompany them with affection.

God never ceases to call some to follow and serve Him in the ordained ministry. We too, however, must do our part, through formation, which is the response of man, of the Church to God's gift, that gift that God gives through vocations. It means guarding and fostering vocations, that they may bear ripe fruit. They are "diamonds in the rough" ready to be carefully polished with respect for the

conscience of the candidates and with patience, so that they may shine among the People of God. Formation is therefore not a unilateral act by which someone transmits theological or spiritual notions. Jesus did not say to those he called: “come, let me explain”, “follow me, I will teach you”: no! The formation offered by Christ to his disciples came rather as a “come, and follow me”, “do as I do”, and this is the method that today too, the Church wants to adopt for her ministers. The formation of which we speak is a discipular experience which draws one to Christ and conforms one ever more to Him.

Precisely for this reason, it cannot be a limited task, because priests never stop being disciples of Jesus, who follow Him. Sometimes we proceed with celerity, at other times our step is hesitant, we stop and we may even fall, but always staying on the path. Therefore, formation understood as discipleship accompanies the ordained minister his entire life and regards his person as a whole, intellectually, humanly and spiritually. Initial and on-going formation are distinct because each requires different methods and timing, but they are two halves of one reality, the life of a disciple cleric, in love with his Lord and steadfastly following him.

Such path of discovery and evaluation of a vocation has a precise purpose: evangelization. Every vocation is missionary and the mission of ordained ministers is evangelization, in all its forms. It starts in the first place with “being”, in order to then be translated into “doing”. Priests are united in a sacramental brotherhood, therefore, the first form of evangelization is the witness of brotherhood and of communion among themselves and with their bishop. From such a communion can arise a powerful missionary zeal — which frees ordained ministers from the comfortable temptation of being over anxious about the opinion of others and of their own well being, than inspired by pastoral love — in order to proclaim the Gospel, to the remotest peripheries.

In this mission of evangelization, priests are called to grow in the awareness of being pastors, sent to stand in the midst of their flock, to render the Lord present through the Eucharist and to dispense his mercy. This is what it means to “be” priests, it is not just limited to what priests “do”; they are free from all spiritual worldliness, conscious that their life is first and foremost about evangelizing even before their work.

How beautiful it is to see priests joyous in their vocation, with a deep serenity, that sustains them even in moments of fatigue and pain! And this never comes about without prayer, prayer from the heart, from that dialogue with the Lord... who is the heart, so to speak, of priestly life. We need priests, there is a lack of vocations. The Lord calls, but it is not enough. And we bishops are tempted to take the young men who present themselves without discernment. This is bad for the Church!

Please, one must carefully study the evolution of a vocation! See whether it comes from the Lord, whether the man is healthy, whether the man is well-balanced, whether the man is capable of giving life, of evangelizing, whether the man is capable of forming a family and renouncing this in

order to follow Jesus. Today we have so many problems, and in many dioceses, because some bishops made the mistake of taking those who at times have been expelled from other seminaries or religious houses because they need priests. Please! We must consider the good of the People of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, the themes that you have been discussing in these days of Assembly are of great importance. A vocation cared for by means of on-going, in communion, will become a powerful instrument of evangelization, at the service of the People of God. May the Lord enlighten you in your reflections, may my blessing also go with you. And please, I ask you to pray for me and for my service to the Church. Thank you.