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MEETING WITH CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND SEMINARIANS

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

National Marian Shrine of "El Quinche", Quito, Ecuador
Wednesday, 8 July 2015

[Multimedia]

Good morning, dear brothers and sisters,

In these days, during these last forty-eight hours I have had with you, I have noticed that there is something peculiar, forgive me, something different about the Ecuadorian people. Everywhere I go, I receive a really joyful, warm and prayerful welcome; everywhere. But here I see real piety in the way, for example, a blessing is sought from the eldest right down to the "wawa", and that it is the first thing you learn to do. There was something quite unique which I also was tempted to ask along with the Bishop of Sucumbios: "What is the recipe of this people?" What is it? I gave this a lot of thought and prayed about it; I asked Jesus several times in prayer: "What is it that is so distinctive about this people? And this morning, praying about it, I was struck by the consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

I think I should offer this to you as a message from Jesus: all this richness that you have, the spiritual richness of piety and great depth, has come about because of the courage you have shown in very difficult moments when the nation was consecrated to the Heart of Christ, that human and divine Heart which loves us so dearly. And I notice it in this sense: divine and human. Yes you are sinners, as am I... but the Lord forgives everything... treasure this! Years later came the consecration to the Heart of Mary. Do not forget: that consecration is a milestone in the history of Ecuador's people. I see that you have received this grace from such a consecration, the grace of piety that makes you unique.

Today I wish to speak to the priests, seminarians, and men and women religious, and offer them some thoughts. I do have some words prepared, but I don't really feel like reading. So I will give that text to the President of the Conference of Religious so that it can be published.

I thought of the Blessed Virgin, I thought of Mary. Two phrases used by Mary, and here my memory fails me as I do not know if she added more: "Let it be done to me"; true, she asked the angel for an explanation of why she had been chosen, but she nevertheless says, "Let it be done to me". And the second phrase, "Do whatever he tells you". Mary did not want to stand out. She was a disciple all her life. She was the first disciple of her son. She was conscious that all she had brought forth was pure gratuitousness on God's part. She was conscious of God's gratuitousness. This is why these words, "let it be done" and "do whatever he tells you" point to the gratuitousness of God. Women and men religious, priests and seminarians, I ask you to retrace your steps back to the time God gratuitously chose you. You did not buy a ticket to enter the seminary, to enter consecrated life. You were not worthy. If some religious brother, priest, seminarian or nun here today thinks that they merited this, raise your hands. It is all gratuitousness. And the entire life of a religious brother and sister, priest and seminarian must walk that path, and here why not add bishops as well. It is the path that leads to gratuitousness, the path we must follow each day: "Lord, today I did this, I did this thing well, I had this difficulty, all this but...all is from you, all is free gift". That is gratuitousness. We are those who receive God's gratuitousness. If we forget this, then slowly we begin to see ourselves as more important: "Look at these works you are doing", or "Look at how they made this man a bishop of such and such a place... how important", or "this man they made a Monsignor", and so on. With this way of thinking we gradually move away from what is fundamental, what Mary never moved away from: God's gratuitousness. Permit me as a brother to offer you some advice: every day, perhaps night time is better, before going to sleep, look at Jesus and say to him: "All you have given me is a free gift", and then go back to what you were doing. As a result, then, when I am asked to move or when there is some difficulty, I do not complain, because everything is free gift, I merit nothing. This is what Mary did.

Saint John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Mater*, which I would recommend you read, absorb and read again, had a rounded way of thinking; he was a teacher, but he was a man of God. For this reason the text has to be read again and again in order to gain the full benefit of its richness. He says, and I do not remember the exact phrase, that when Mary's faithfulness experienced the greatest trial, she might have wanted to say, "And they told me he was going to save Israel! I was cheated!" But she did not say this. She did not allow herself to think like that, because she was the woman who knew that she had received everything freely. So my advice as a brother and a father is this: remember this gratuitousness every evening. "Let it be done; thank you, because everything has been given to me by you".

A second thing that I would like to tell you is to take care of your health, but above all, take care not to fall into that illness which can be dangerous, to a lesser or greater degree, for those called freely by the Lord to follow and serve him. Do not fall into *spiritual Alzheimer's*, that is, do not

forget your memories, especially the memory of where you were taken from. The scene comes to mind when the Prophet Samuel is sent to anoint the king of Israel. He goes to Bethlehem, to the home of a man named Jesse who has seven or eight children, I am not sure of the number, and God tells him that among them there is one who will be king. Naturally, Samuel sees them and says, "It must be the eldest one" for he was tall, great in stature, well built, and seemed brave... But the Lord says, "No, it is not him". God's way of seeing is different from the way we see. And so he looks at each of the sons in turn, and says, 'No, not him'." The prophet realizes that he does not know what to do, and so asks the father of the family: "Do you not have any other sons?". Jesse replies, "Yes, there is the youngest son who is tending the sheep". Samuel said, "Send for him", and he came, just a boy, probably seventeen or eighteen years old, and God says to Jesse: "This is the one". He was taken from the back of the flock. And another prophet, when God told him to act as a prophet, replied: "But who am I? One who has been taken out of the remotest part of the sheepfold". The moral is never to forget where you have been brought from. Never forget your roots.

Saint Paul clearly understood the danger of forgetting one's memory. To his beloved son, the bishop Timothy, whom he ordained, Paul offered some pastoral advice; one particular piece touched Timothy's heart: "Do not forget the faith that your grandmother and mother had", that is to say, "Do not forget from where you were taken, do not forget your roots, do not consider yourself to have been promoted". Gratuitousness is a grace that cannot exist side by side with promotion, and when a priest, seminarian, religious brother or sister embarks on a career, and I am not saying a human career is evil, then they become ill with spiritual Alzheimer's and they begin to forget where they were taken from.

Two principles for you who are priests and consecrated persons: every day renew the conviction that everything is a gift, the conviction that your being chosen is gratuitousness – we do not merit it – and every day ask for the grace not to forget your memories, and not to fall into self-importance. It is really sad when we see a priest or consecrated person who used to speak in his or her dialect at home, or in another language like those ancient languages – and how many does Ecuador have – it is so sad when they forget that first language, so sad when they choose not to speak it. What this means is that they have forgotten where they have come from, where they have been taken from. Do not forget this, and ask for the grace to keep your memories alive: these are the two principles I wish to emphasize.

And these two principles, if you live them each day – which entails a daily effort to remember these two principles and to ask for grace – then those two principles, when lived, will bring you life, will help you live with two attitudes. The first is service. God chose me, he took me to himself, but why? In order to serve; and a service which is particular to me and my circumstances. It is not about having my time, having my things, I have this to do, I have to close the office, I have to bless a house, but I am tired, or there is a good soap opera on television; I say this with nuns in mind... No, it is none of these but rather it is service, to serve, to serve and nothing else, and to serve

when we are tired, and to serve when people tire us.

An elderly priest told me that he had been a teacher all his life at colleges and university. He taught literature, the arts. He was a genius. When he retired he asked the Provincial to move him to a poor area, where people come and go, seeking work. In short, good, simple people. Once a week this religious priest went back to his community and spoke to them; he really was quite intelligent. And the community was made up of professors from the theology faculty; he spoke to his brother priests about theology, at their level. But one day he said to one of them, "You who are... Who teaches the course on the Church?" One professor raised his arm and said, "I do". The elderly priest said, "You're missing two arguments". "Which ones?" the professor replied. "The holy, faithful People of God is essentially Olympian, that is to say, it does what it wants, and is ontologically tiring". These words reveal much wisdom because the person who follows the path of service must allow themselves to be tired out, without losing patience in the name of service. No moment belongs to us. I am here to serve, to serve in the things I am called to do, to serve before the Blessed Sacrament, asking for my people, praying for my work, for the people that God has entrusted to my care.

Service, if combined with gratuitousness leads to... those words of Jesus: "What you have received freely, give freely". Please, please, don't put a charge on grace; please, let our pastoral works be free. It is so repulsive when one loses this sense of gratuitousness and is transformed into... yes, a doer of good deeds but one who loses the sense of freely giving.

The second attitude seen in a consecrated man or woman, seen in a priest who lives this gratuitousness and shows the ability to recall the past (those principles which I spoke of earlier, gratuitousness and memory), is joy and pleasure. It is a gift of Jesus, a gift which he gives if we ask for it and if we do not forget those pillars of our priestly or consecrated spiritual, namely the sense of gratuitousness renewed daily and the ability not to forget from where we were taken.

I desire this for you. "Yes, Father, you have spoken to us of a recipe that works for our people... we are like this because of the Sacred Heart". Yes, this is true, but I propose to you another recipe which is on the same lines, existing in the heart of Jesus: the sense of gratuitousness. He did nothing, he humbled himself, he became poor in order to enrich us by his poverty. Pure gift. And the sense of memory... we recall the memories of the marvels that the Lord has done for us in our lives.

May the Lord grant this grace to everyone, may he grant it to all of us who are here, and may he continue – I was going to say *precede us* – blessing this Ecuadorian people whom you must serve and are called to serve; may he continue to bless you with that particular characteristic which I noticed as I arrived here. May the Lord bless you and the Blessed Virgin protect you.

Let us now pray to the Father, who gave us everything freely, and who keeps alive in us the

memory of Jesus. [Our Father...] And May Almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And please, please, I ask you to pray for me because I too am often tempted to forget the gratuitousness with which God chose me, and to forget where I have been taken from. Pray for me.

Prepared address by the Holy Father:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I place at the feet of Our Lady of Quinche the vivid experiences of my visit. I entrust to her heart the elderly and the sick whom I visited in the house of the Sisters of Charity, as well as the other meetings I have had. I entrust all of them to Mary's heart; but at the same time I commend them to the hearts of each you, the priests, men and women religious, and seminarians. As those called to labor in the vineyard of the Lord, may you be protectors of all the experiences, the joys and sorrows of the Ecuadorian people.

I thank Bishop Lazzari, Father Mina and Sister Sandoval for their words, which lead me to share some thoughts on our common concern for God's People.

In the Gospel, the Lord invites us to accept our mission without placing conditions. It is an important message which we must never forget. Here, in this Sanctuary dedicated to Our Lady of the Presentation, it resounds in a special way. Mary is an example of discipleship for us who, like her, have received a vocation. Her trusting response, "Be it done unto me according to your word", reminds us of her words at the wedding feast of Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jn 2:5*). Her example is an invitation to serve as she served.

In the Presentation of the Virgin we find some suggestions for our own call. The child Mary was a gift from God to her parents and to all her people who were looking for liberation. This is something we see over and over again in the Scriptures. God responds to the cry of his people, sending a little child to bring salvation and to restore hope to elderly parents. The word of God tells us that, in the history of Israel, judges, prophets and kings are God's gifts to his people, bringing them his tenderness and mercy. They are signs of God's gratuitousness. It is he who has chosen them, who personally chose them and sent them. Realizing this helps us to move beyond our self-centeredness and to understand that we no longer belong to ourselves, that our vocation calls us to let go of all selfishness, all seeking of material gain or emotional rewards, as the Gospel has told us. We are not hired workers, but servants. We have not come to be served, but to serve, and we do so with complete detachment, without walking stick or bag.

Some traditions about devotion to Our Lady of Quinche relate that Diego de Robles made the image after being commissioned by the indigenous Lumbicí people. Diego did not do this out of

piety, but for economic benefit. Since the Lumbicí were unable to pay him, he brought the image to Oyacachi and exchanged it for cedar planks. But Diego ignored their earnest plea that he also make an altar for the image, until, after falling from his horse and in danger of death, he felt the protection of the Virgin Mary. So he went back to the town and built the foot of the image. All of us have had the experience of a God who brings us to the cross, who calls us in the midst of our faults and failings. May pride and worldliness not make us forget what God has rescued us from! May the Our Lady of Quinche make us leave behind ambition, selfish interests, and excessive concern about ourselves!

The “authority” which the Apostles receive from Jesus is not for their own benefit: our gifts are meant to be used to renew and build up the Church. Do not refuse to share, do not hesitate to give, do not be caught up in your own comforts, but be like a spring which spills over and refreshes others, especially those burdened by sin, disappointment and resentment (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 272).

Something else that Our Lady’s Presentation makes me think of is perseverance. In the evocative iconography associated with this feast, the Child Mary is shown moving away from her parents as she climbs the steps of the Temple. Mary does not look back and, in a clear reference to the evangelical admonition, she moves forward with determination. We, like the disciples in the Gospel, also need to move forward as we bring to all peoples and places the Good News of Jesus. Perseverance in mission is not about going from house to house, looking for a place where we will be more comfortably welcomed. It means casting our lot with Jesus to the end. Some stories of the apparition of Our Lady of Quinche speak of “a woman with a child in her arms” who appeared on several successive evenings to the natives of Oyacachi when they were fleeing from attacks by bears. Mary kept appearing to her children, but they didn’t believe her, they didn’t trust this woman, even though they admired her perseverance in coming each evening at sunset. To persevere even though we are rejected, despite the darkness and growing uncertainty and dangers – this is what we are called to do, in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God’s Holy People walks with us.

In some sense, the image of the child Mary ascending the steps of the Temple reminds us of the Church, which accompanies and supports every missionary disciple. Mary is with her parents, who handed on to her the memory of the faith and now generously offer her to the Lord so that she can follow in his way. She is part of a community, represented by the “maiden companions” who escort her with lamps alight (cf. *Ps* 44:15); in those companions the Fathers of the Church saw a foreshadowing of all those who, in imitation of Mary, seek wholeheartedly to become friends of God. Finally, she is received by the waiting priests, who remind us that the Church’s pastors must welcome everyone with tender love and help to discern every spirit and every calling.

So let us walk together, helping one another, as we humbly implore the gift of perseverance in God’s service.

The apparition of Our Lady of Quinche was a moment of encounter, of communion, so that this place which from Incan times has been a place where people of various ethnicities have settled. How beautiful it is when the Church perseveres in her efforts to be a house and a school of communion, when we cultivate what I like to call “the culture of encounter”!

The image of Our Lady’s Presentation tells us that, after being blessed by the priests, the child Mary began to dance at the foot of the altar. I think of the joy expressed in the imagery of the wedding feast, of the friend of the bridegroom, of the bride bedecked with her jewels. It is the happiness of all those who have discovered a treasure and left everything behind in order to gain it. To find the Lord, to dwell in his house, to share in his life, commits us to proclaiming his Kingdom and bringing his salvation to all. Crossing the threshold of the Temple means becoming, like Mary, temples of the Lord and setting out to bring the good news to our brothers and sisters. Our Lady, as the first missionary disciple, once she had received the message of the angel, left with haste to a town of Judah to share this incredible joy, which led Saint John the Baptist to leap in his mother’s womb. The one who hears the Lord’s voice “leaps with joy” and becomes for his or her own time a herald of his joy. The joy of evangelization leads the Church to go forth, like Mary.

There are many reasons offered for the translation of the shrine from Oyacachi to this place. There is one which I find particularly convincing: “for many people, this place has always been easier to reach”. That was the idea of the Archbishop of Quito, Fray Luis López de Solís, when he ordered the building of a shrine capable of attracting and embracing everyone. A Church on the move is a Church which is close to people, overcoming obstacles, leaving its own comfort behind and daring to reach out to the peripheries which need the light of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 20).

Let us now turn to the tasks which await us, urged on by the holy people which God has entrusted to our care. Among those tasks, let us not neglect to care for, encourage and guide the popular devotions which are so powerfully felt in this holy place and which are widespread in the countries of Latin America. The faithful express the faith in their own language, and they show their deepest feelings of sadness, uncertainty, joy, failure, and thanksgiving in various devotions: processions, votive lights, flowers, and hymns. All of these are beautiful expressions of their faith in the Lord and their love for his Mother, who is also our Mother.

Here in Quinche, the story of God and man converge in the life of one woman, Mary. They come together in one home, our common home, our sister, mother earth. The traditions of this devotion speak of cedar trees, bears, the crevasse in the rock which here became the first home of the Mother of God. They speak to us of a “yesterday” when birds surrounded this place, and of a “today” of flowers which adorn its surroundings. The origins of this devotion bring us back to a time of simple and “serene harmony with creation”, when one could contemplate “the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence ‘must not be contrived but found, uncovered’” (*Laudato Si’*, 225). God’s presence is revealed in the created world, in his beloved Son, and in the Eucharist which enables each Christian to know him or her self as living members of the Church

and an active participant in her mission (cf. *Aparecida Document*, 264). And it is present in Our Lady of Quinche, who from the first proclamation of the faith until our own day has accompanied the indigenous peoples. To her we entrust our vocation; may she make us a gift to our people; may she grant us perseverance in our commitment and in the joy of going forth to bring the Gospel of her Son Jesus, together with our shepherds, to the fringes, the peripheries of our beloved Ecuador.