



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO BISHOPS PARTICIPATING IN THE COURSE PROMOTED
BY THE CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS AND
BY THE CONGREGATION FOR THE EASTERN CHURCHES**

Clementine Hall

Thursday 12 September 2019

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers, Good morning,

I welcome you to this concluding encounter of your pilgrimage to Rome organized by the Congregations for Bishops and for the Oriental Churches. I thank Cardinals Ouellet and Sandri for their efforts in organizing these days.

As new members of the Episcopal Conference, a few minutes ago you descended together to the tomb of Peter, a “trophy” of the Church of Rome. There, you professed the same faith as the Apostle. It is not a theory or a compendium of doctrine, but a person. Jesus. His face brings us close to God’s gaze. Our world, even unwittingly, seeks this divine closeness. He is the mediator. Without this proximity of love, the foundation of reality wavers. The very Church loses her way when she loses the life-giving tenderness of the Good Shepherd. Here you have entrusted your Churches; for them you have repeated with Jesus: “body given up and blood poured out for you”. We do not know any force other than this, the strength of the Good Shepherd, the strength to give life, to draw closer to Love through love. This is our mission: to be, for the Church and for the world, “sacraments” of God’s proximity. I would like to tell you something about closeness that is essential for any minister of God and above all for bishops. *Closeness to God and closeness to his people.*

Closeness to God is the source of the Bishop’s ministry. God loves us. He drew closer than we could have ever imagined; he took on our flesh in order to save us. This proclamation is the heart

of faith. It must precede and inspire our every initiative. We exist to make this closeness palpable. But one cannot communicate closeness to God without experiencing it, without experiencing it every day, without allowing ourselves to be infected by his tenderness. Each day, without sparing time, we should be before Jesus, bringing him people, situations, as ever-open channels between him and our people. With prayer, we made the Lord a citizen of the place where we live. Like Saint Paul, let us feel as tentmakers (cf. Acts 18:3); apostles who allow the Lord to dwell among his people (cf. Jn 1:14).

Without this personal confidence, without this intimacy cultivated in daily prayer, even and above all in times of desolation and bleakness, the nucleus of our episcopal mission splits apart. Without the closeness of the Sower, the toil of scattering seeds without knowing the time of harvest will not seem very satisfying. Without the Sower, it will be difficult to accompany with patient trustfulness the slow pace of the ripening process. Without Jesus, comes the mistrust that He will not fulfil his work. Without him, sooner or later, one slides into the pessimist melancholy of those who say: “everything is going wrong”. It is not nice to hear a bishop say this! Only by being with Jesus can we be spared from the Pelagian presumption that good comes from our goodness. Only by being with Jesus can the profound peace that our brothers and sisters seek in us enter our hearts.

And from closeness to God to *closeness to his people*. Being close to the God of proximity we grow in the awareness that our identity consists in drawing near. It is not an external obligation, but an internal need inherent to the mindset of giving. We say “this is my body, given up for you” at the culmination of the Eucharistic offering, for our people. From here our life springs forth and enables us to become bread broken for the life of the world. Closeness to the people entrusted to us, therefore, is not an opportunistic strategy, but our essential condition. Jesus loves to draw near to his brothers and sisters through us, through our open hands that caress and comfort; our words uttered to anoint the world with the Gospel and not with ourselves; our heart when it bears the distress and joys of our brothers and sisters. Even in our poverty, it is up to us to ensure that no one feels God as distant, that no one uses God as a pretext to build walls, destroy bridges and sow hatred. It is also awful when a bishop tears down bridges, sows hatred or mistrust and acts as a counter-bishop. We are to proclaim with our lives a measure of life different from that of the world, the measure of an immeasurable love, that does not look after its own gain and personal advantage but towards the boundless horizon of God’s mercy.

The Bishop’s closeness is not rhetorical. It is not made of self-referential proclamations but of *real availability*. God surprises us and he often loves to upset our agenda. Prepare yourselves for this without fear. Proximity knows concrete verbs, the ones of the Good Samaritan: *to see*, that is, not looking away, not pretending nothing has happened, not leaving people waiting and not sweeping problems under the rug. Therefore, bringing yourself closer, being in contact with people, dedicating more time to them rather than to your desks, not fearing contact with a reality to be discovered and embraced. And then, *to bind wounds, to assume burdens, to take care of, to expend oneself* (cf. Lk 10:29-37). Each of these verbs of proximity is a milestone in the Bishop’s

journey with his people. Each one requires involvement and getting one's hands dirty. To be close means empathizing with the People of God, sharing in their suffering, not scorning their hopes. Being close to the people means trusting that the grace that God faithfully pours over you and of which we are channels also by means of the crosses we bear, is greater than the mire that we fear. Please do not allow fear of the risks of ministry to prevail, retreating and keeping your distance. May your Churches emblazon your identity because God has joined your destinies by uttering your name alongside theirs.

The measure of closeness is attentiveness to the least, which, indeed, is a proclamation of the Kingdom. Your sobriety will also be so, at a time when in many parts of the world, all is reduced to means in order to satisfy secondary needs that engulf and harden the heart. Making a simple life for oneself means bearing witness that Jesus suffices for us and that the treasure with which we wish to surround ourselves is made instead of those who, in their poverty, remind us of and represent Him: not the abstract poor, statistics and social categories, but real people whose dignity is entrusted to us as their fathers. Fathers of real people; that is paternity, the capacity to see, concreteness, the ability to caress, the ability to weep.

Apparently there are stethoscopes nowadays that are capable of hearing a heart from a metre away. We need Bishops who are capable of hearing the heartbeat of their community and of their priests, even at a distance: to hear the beat. Pastors who are not satisfied simply by formal presence, scheduled meetings and occasional conversation. Pastors come to mind who are so well groomed that they seem to be like distilled water that has no flavour. *Apostles of listening*, who know how to lend an ear even to what is unpleasant to hear. Please do not surround yourselves with lackeys and yes men ... priests who are "social climbers" who always try ... no, please. Do not yearn to be confirmed by those who should be confirmed by you. There are many forms of closeness to your Churches. In particular, I would like to encourage regular pastoral visits: frequent visits, to meet people and Pastors; to make visits according to the example of Our Lady who wasted no time and went in haste to her cousin. The Mother of God shows us that visiting is drawing near to the One who makes us leap with joy; it means bringing the solace of the Lord who does great things among the humble members of his people (cf. Lk 1:39ff.).

Lastly I ask you again to reserve the greatest closeness for your priests. The priest is the closest "neighbour" to the bishop. Love the closest neighbour. I beseech you to embrace them, thank them and reassure them in my name. They too are exposed to the difficulties of a world that, though tired of obscurity, spares no hostility towards the light. They need to be loved, followed, encouraged. God does not want half measures from them, but a complete yes. In shallow waters they become stagnant, but their lives are made for the open seas. Like yours. Therefore take courage dearest brothers! I thank you and I bless you. Please remember to pray every day for me too. Thank you.