



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO RECTORS OF THE MAJOR AND PREPARATORY SEMINARIES OF FRANCE**

*Consistory Hall  
Saturday, 25 January 2025*

**[Multimedia]**

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*Dear rectors,*

I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of your jubilee pilgrimage, during which you have gathered to reflect on priestly formation. This is a journey of discernment in which you perform an essential role. You are like the elderly priest Eli, who says to the young Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:9). You are the reassuring presence, the compass for the young people entrusted to your care.

Saint Paul VI affirmed that “contemporary man listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*General Audience*, 2 October 1974). This certainly applies to formators in the seminaries. Their coherent witness of Christian life comes from within an *educational community*, whose members are, in the seminary, the bishop, the priests and religious, teachers and staff. However, this community extends to wherever the seminarian is sent: to the parishes, movements, families. Community formation is therefore unitary – communitarian but unitary – touching all the dimensions of the person and guiding towards the mission.

In order for the seminary to be able to give this testimony and become a space favourable to the growth of the future priest, it is important to care for the quality and authenticity of the human relations that are lived there, similar to those of a family, with features of paternity and fraternity. Only in this atmosphere can mutual trust be established, indispensable for good discernment. The seminarian will then be able to be himself, without fear of being judged arbitrarily; to be authentic

in his relationships with others; to collaborate fully in his own formation so as to discover, accompanied by formators, the Lord's will for his life, and to respond freely.

The candidates who present themselves to the seminary are, today more than ever, very diverse. Some are very young, others have long life experience; some have a faith that has been rooted for a long time, and a mature faith, whereas for others it is very recent; they come from diverse social and family contexts, from different cultures; above all, they have received the calling from within the many spiritual movements that the Church knows today. Many of them come from the movements. It is certainly a great challenge to propose human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation to such a diversified community. Your task is not easy. This is why attention to the journey that each one of them takes, as well as personal accompaniment, are indispensable, now more than ever. This is why it is important for the formation teams to accept this diversity, to be able to welcome it and accompany it. *Do not be afraid of diversity!* Do not be afraid! It is a gift! Education in acceptance of the other, as he or she is, will be the guarantee, for the future, of a fraternal priesthood, united in the essentials.

The aim of the seminary is clear: "to form missionary disciples 'enamoured' of the Master, shepherds 'with the odour of the sheep', who live in their midst in order to serve them and bring them God's mercy" (RFIS, 3). This presupposes a certain number of criteria, on which it is impossible to compromise, for conferring ordination. The seminary, however, should not try to form clones who all think the same way – this will not do – who all think in the same way, with the same tastes and options. The grace of the sacrament takes root in everything that enriches the unique personality of each person, a personality that must be respected, to produce fruit of various flavours, whose very variety of the People of God needs.

And among the points to which it is most important to pay attention, I would simply like to highlight three. The first is taking care that the candidate forms a true inner freedom. *Do not be afraid of this freedom!* The challenges that will present themselves to him during the course of his life demand that he knows, enlightened by faith and moved by charity, how to judge and decide with his own mind, at times going against the grain or running risks, without conforming to pre-packaged answers, or ideological preconceptions, or the prevailing thought of the time. May they mature their thought, and mature their heart, and mature their hands. The three things that must go together, coherently: what one thinks, what one feels and what one does. The three languages: that of the mind, the heart, and the hands. May there be consistency between them.

The second point relates to the maturation of the candidate in a balanced humanity capable of human relationships. The priest must be inclined towards tenderness, closeness and compassion. These are the three attributes of God: tenderness, closeness and compassion. God is close, He is tender, He is compassionate. A seminarian who is not capable of this will not do. It is important. There is no need to insist on the danger represented by characters that are too weak or inflexible, or by disorders of an emotional nature. Besides, the perfect man does not exist, and the Church is

made up of fragile members and sinners who can always hope to make progress; your discernment on this point must be as prudent as it is patient, enlightened by hope. *Do not be afraid of the weaknesses and limits of your seminarians!* Do not condemn them too hastily, and know how to accompany them. What used to be called the martyrdom of patience: accompany them.

The third point is the decisive orientation to the priestly vocation to mission. The priest is for the mission. A priest who is the *monsieur abbé* is not for the mission. This will not do. The priest is always for the mission. Although, of course, being a priest entails personal fulfilment, one does not become one for oneself, but for the People of God, to enable them to know and love Christ. The starting point of this dynamic can only be found in an ever deeper love, and an impassioned love for Jesus, nurtured by a serious formation in the interior life and the study of the Word of God. It is difficult to imagine a priestly vocation that does not have a strong oblation dimension, of gratuitousness and detachment from self, of sincere humility. Only Jesus fills His priest with joy. Now, it is not rare that, along the way, some gradually end up “serving themselves”. Beware, especially with money. My grandmother always used to say, “The devil enters by the pockets”. Please, poverty is a very beautiful thing. Serving others. And beware of careerism. Beware. Beware of worldliness, jealousy, vanity... Love for God and for the Church are then nothing more than a pretext for self-aggrandizement. It is bad. When you find an ecclesiastic who seems to be a peacock more than a man of the Church, it is ugly. Let love for God and for the Church not be a pretext: may it be true.

Dear rectors, thank you for your visit and for the service you offer the Church. Your task is not easy, but I encourage you to persevere with confidence and hope, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the protection of the Virgin Mary. I therefore bless you and your communities. Please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!

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