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Pastoral visit of the Holy Father Francis to the archdiocese of Milan: encounter with priests and consecrated persons in the Duomo

This morning, shortly before 10.00, the Holy Father Francis met with priests and consecrated persons in the Duomo of Milan.

At the entrance, the Pope was received by the auxiliary bishops, the archpriest, the Metropolitan Chapter, the Milanese Episcopal Council and the bishops of Lombardy.

Then, in the “*Scurolo di San Carlo*” the Holy Father paused to adore the Most Holy Sacrament and to venerate the relics of St. Charles Borromeo.

After greetings from His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Scola, archbishop of Milan, the Pope responded to several questions posed to him.

The following are the Holy Father’s answers.

Holy Father’s answers to questions

Question 1: Don Gabriele Gioia, presbyter

Much of the energy and time of priests are absorbed in continuing the traditional forms of the ministry, but we are aware of the challenges of secularism and the irrelevance of faith within the evolution of Milanese society, which is increasingly plural, multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural society. It happens to us too at times to feel like Peter and the apostles after toiling without catching fish. We ask you: which purifications and priority choices are we called to make so as not to lose the joy of evangelizing and of being the people of God that witnesses His love for every man? Your Holiness, we wish you well and pray for you.

Pope Francis:

Thank you, thank you.

The three questions you have asked were sent to me. This is what is always done. Usually, I answer spontaneously, but this time I thought, during a day with such a dense programme, that it would be better to write something to respond.

I have heard your question, Don Gabriele. I read it beforehand, but while you were speaking, two things came to mind. One is “fishing”. You know that evangelization is not always a synonym for catching fish: it is going out, into the deep, bearing witness ... and then it is the Lord, He “catches the fish”. When, how and where, we do not know. And this is very important. And also starting from this reality, that we are tools, useless tools. Another thing you said, that concern you expressed which is the concern of all of you: not losing the joy of evangelization. Because evangelizing is a joy. The great Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi* – which is the greatest post-Conciliar pastoral document, and which is still relevant today – spoke about this joy: the joy of the Church is evangelizing. And we must ask for the grace not to lose it. He [Paul VI] told us, almost at the end [of the document]: let us conserve this joy of evangelizing, not as sad, bored evangelizers, this is not good; a sad evangelizer is one who is not convinced that Jesus is joy, that Jesus brings us joy, and when He calls you He changes your life and gives you joy, and He sends you in joy, even on the cross, but in joy, to evangelize. Thank you for having underlined these things you said, Gabriele.

And now, the things I thought about this question, at home, so as to say things that are more thought out.

A. One of the first things that comes to mind is the word *challenge*, which you used: “many challenges”, you said. Every historical age, since the first times of Christianity, has been continually exposed to many challenges. Challenges within the ecclesial community, and at the same time in the relationship with the society in which the faith was taking shape. We can recall the episode of Peter in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea (cf. Acts 10:24-35), or the controversy in Antioch and then in Jerusalem on the need or otherwise to circumcise the Gentiles (cf. Acts 15:1-6), and so on. Therefore we must not fear challenges, this must be clear. We must not fear challenges. How often do we hear lamentations: “Ah, these days, there are so many challenges, and we are sad...”. No. Do not be afraid. Challenges must be confronted like oxen, seizing them by the horns. Do not be afraid of challenges. And it is good that they exist, challenges. It is good, because they enable us to grow. They are the sign of a living faith, of a living community that seeks its Lord and keeps its eyes and heart open. We must instead fear a faith without challenges, a faith that considers itself complete, all complete: it does not need other things, all is done. This faith is so watered down that it is useless. We must be afraid of this. And it considers itself complete, as if all had been said and achieved. Challenges help us to ensure that our faith does not become ideological. There are the dangers of ideologies, always. Ideologies grow, they germinate and grow when we believe we have a complete faith, and it becomes ideological. Challenges save us from closed and defined thought and open us up to a broader understanding of what is revealed to us. As the dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* affirmed, “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her” (8b). And in this, challenges help us to open up to the mystery revealed. This is the first thing I take from what you said.

B. Secondly, you spoke about a “multi” society: multicultural, multireligious, multiethnic. I believe that the Church, throughout all her history, unbeknownst to us, has much to teach us and help us for a culture of diversity. We must learn. The Holy Spirit is the master of diversity. Let us look at our dioceses, our presbyters, our communities. Look at our religious congregations. So many charisms, so many ways of realizing the experience of believing. The Church is One in a multiform experience. She is one, yes. But in a multiform experience. And this is the richness of the Church. Although one, she is multiform. The Gospel is one in its fourfold form. The Gospel is one, but there are four and they are different, but this diversity is richness. The Gospel is one in its fourfold form. This gives to our communities a richness that shows the action of the Spirit. The ecclesial tradition has a great experience of how to manage the multiple within its history and life. We have seen, and we see, everything: we have seen and we see many riches and many horrors and errors. And here we have a good key to helping us interpret the contemporary world. Without condemning it and without sanctifying it. Recognising the

bright aspects and the dark aspects, as well as helping us to discern the excesses of uniformity or of relativism: two tendencies that seek to cancel the unity of differences and of interdependence. The Church is One in differences. She is one, and those differences unite in that unity. But who makes the difference? The Holy Spirit: He is the master of differences! That great Artist, that great Master of unity in differences is the Holy Spirit. And we must understand this well. And then we will speak about it later on, with regard to discernment: discerning when it is the Spirit Who makes the differences and unity, and when it is not the Spirit that makes difference and division. How often have we confused unity with uniformity? And it is not the same. Or how many times have we confused plurality with pluralism? And it is not the same. Uniformity and pluralism are not good in spirit, they do not come from the Holy Spirit. Plurality and unity instead come from the Holy Spirit. In both cases what we try to do is to reduce tension and eliminate the conflict or the ambivalence we are subject to as human beings. To seek to eliminate one of the poles of tension is to eliminate the way in which God wanted to reveal Himself in the humanity of His Son. All that does not assume human drama can be a very clear and distinct theory but not coherent with the Revelation, and therefore ideological. Faith, to be Christian and not illusory, must be configured within processes: human processes, without being reduced to them. And this too is a major tension. It is the beautiful and demanding task that our Lord has left to us, the “already but not yet” of Salvation. And this is very important: unity in differences. This is a tension, but it is a tension that always makes us grow in the Church.

C. A third thing. There is a choice that as pastors we cannot elude: forming in discernment. Discernment of these things that seem opposed to one another, or that are opposed, to know when a tension or an opposition comes from the Holy Spirit and when it comes from the evil one. And for this, [it is necessary] to form in discernment. As I think I have understood from the question, diversity presents a very tricky scenario. The culture of abundance to which we are subjected offers a range of many possibilities, presenting them all as valid and good. Our young people are exposed to constant “zapping”. They can navigate on two or three screens open simultaneously, they can interact at the same time in different virtual scenarios. Like it or not, this is the world in which they find themselves, and it is our duty as pastors to help them through this world. So, I think it is good to teach them how to discern, so that they have the tools and elements to help them walk the path of life without extinguishing the Holy Spirit that is in them. In a world without choices, or with fewer possibilities, perhaps things seem clearer, I don’t know. Today our faithful, and we ourselves, are exposed to these realities, and for this reason I am convinced that as an ecclesial community we must increase the *habitus* of discernment. And this is a challenge, and requires the grace of discernment, to try to learn to have the habit of discernment. This grace, from the young to adults, everyone. When we are children it is easy for our mother and father to tell us what we have to do, and that’s fine – today I don’t think it is so easy; in my day, yes, but today I don’t know, but anyway it is easier. But gradually as we grow, amid a multitude of voices where seemingly all are right, the discernment of what leads us to the Resurrection, to the Life and not to a culture of death, is crucial. This is why I underline this need. It is a catechetical tool, and also for life. In catechesis, in spiritual guidance, in homilies, we must teach our people, teach our young, teach our children, teach adults discernment. And teach them to ask for the grace of discernment.

On this issue I recommend that part of the Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* entitled “A Mission embodied within human limits” (Nos. 40-45 of *Evangelii Gaudium*. And this is the third point with which I answer you. They are little things that will perhaps help in your reflection on the questions and then on the dialogue between you. Thank you very much.

Question 2 – Roberto Crespi, permanent deacon

Your Holiness, good morning. I am Roberto, a permanent deacon. The diaconate entered into our clergy 1990, and of whom there are now 143 of us; it is not a large number but it is a significant number. We are men who live their vocation fully; either in marriage or celibacy, but we also live fully in the world of work and of the professions, and therefore bring the clergy into the world of families and the world of work, we bring all those dimensions of beauty and experience but also hardship and at times suffering. So, we ask you: as permanent deacons, what is our role in giving form to the face that Church that is humble, that is selfless, that is blessed, that we feel she is in her heart, and of which often you speak to us? Thank you for your attention, and I assure

you of our prayer, and that of our wives and families.

Pope Francis:

Thank you. You deacons have much to give, much to give. I think of the value of discernment. Within the presbytery, you can be an authoritative voice to show the tension there is between duty and will, the tensions that one lives in family life – you have a mother in law, for example! And also the blessings one lives within family life.

But we must be careful not to see deacons as half priests, half laypeople. This is a danger. At the end they will end up neither one nor the other. No, we must not do this, it is a danger. Looking at them in this way harms us and harms them. This way of considering them takes strength from the charism proper to the diaconate. I want to return to this: the charism proper to the diaconate. And this charism is in the life of the Church. Likewise the image of the deacon as a sort of intermediary between the faithful and pastors is inappropriate. Neither halfway between priests and laypeople, nor halfway between pastors and faithful. There is the danger of clericalism: the deacon who is too clerical. No, no, this is not good. At times I see someone who assists at the liturgy: it almost seems as if he wants to take the place of the priest. Clericalism, beware of clericalism. And another temptation is functionalism: it is a help that the priest has for this or that; a boy to carry out certain tasks and not for other things. No. You have a clear charism in the Church and you must build it.

The diaconate is a specific vocation, a family vocation that requires service. I like it very much when [in the Acts of the Apostles] the first Hellenistic Christians went to the apostles to complain because their widows and orphans were not well cared for, and they had a meeting, that “synod” between apostles and disciples, and they “invented” the deacons to serve. And this is very interesting for us bishops too, because they were all bishops, those who “made” the deacons. And what does this tell us? That deacons were servants. Then they understood that, in that case, it was to assist widows and orphans: but to serve. And to us as bishops: prayer and the proclamation of the Word; and this shows us what the most important charism of a bishop is: to pray. What is the task of a bishop, the first task? Prayer. Second task: proclaiming the Word. But you can see the difference clearly. And for you [deacons]: service. This word is the key to understanding your charism. Service as one of the characteristic gifts of the people of God. The deacon is, so to say, the custodian of service in the Church. Every word must be carefully measured. You are the guardians of service in the Church: service to the Word, service to the Altar, service to the poor. And your mission, the mission of the deacon, and your contribution consist in this: in reminding us all that faith, in its various expressions – community liturgy, personal prayer, the various forms of charity – and in its various states of life – lay, clerical, family – possesses an essential dimension of service. Service to God and to brothers. And how far we have to go in this sense! You are the guardians of service in the Church.

Therein lies the value of the charisms in the Church, which are a memory and a gift for helping all the people of God not to lose the perspective and wealth of God’s action. You are not half priests, half laypeople – this would be to “functionalize” the diaconate – you are the sacrament of service to God and to others. And from this word “service” there derives all the development of your work, of your vocation, of your being within the Church. A vocation that, like all vocations is not only individual, but lived within the family and with the family; within the People of God and with the People of God.

In summary:

- there is no altar service, there is no liturgy that is not open to the poor, and there no service to the poor that does not lead to the liturgy;
- there is no ecclesial vocation that is not of the family.

This helps us to re-evaluate the diaconate as an ecclesial vocation.

Finally, today it seems that everything must be useful to us, as if everything were targeted at the individual: prayer is useful to me, the community is useful to me, charity is useful to me. This is a feature of our culture. You are the gift that the Spirit gives us to show that the right path goes in the opposite direction: in prayer I serve, in the community I serve, with solidarity I serve God and my neighbour. And may God give you the grace to grow in this charism of safeguarding service in the Church. Thank you for what you do.

Question 3 – Mother M. Paola Paganoni, OSC

Holy Father, I am Mother Paola of the Ursulines, and I am here in the name of all the consecrated life present in the Milanese Church, and also for all Lombardy. We thank you for your presence, but above all for the witness of life you offer us. Since Saint Marcellina, sister of Ambrose, consecrated life in the Milanese Church up to the present day has always been a lively and significant presence in this particular Church up to this day, with old and – as you have seen here – new forms. We would like to ask you, Father, how can we today, for the man of today, witnesses of prophecy, as you say, “guardians of wonder”, to bear witness with our poor life, but a life that is obedient, chaste, poor and fraternal? And then, given our few – we seem numerous, but we are elderly – given our limited strengths, for the future, what existential peripheries and which areas should we choose and favour, with renewed awareness of being a minority – a minority in society and a minority also in the Church? Thank you. We assure you of our daily remembrance.

Pope Francis:

Thank you, I like the word “minority”. It is true that it is the charism of the Franciscans, but we too must all be “minor”: it is a spiritual attitude, minority, that is like the seal of the Christian. I like the fact that you used this word. And I will begin from your final word: minority. Usually – although I am not saying this is your case – it is a word accompanied by a feeling: “It seems there are a lot of us, but many of us are elderly, there are few of us...” And what is the underlying feeling? *Resignation*. A bad feeling. Without realizing it, every time we think or see that we are few, or in many cases elderly, we experience the burden, fragility rather than splendour, and our spirit begins to be eroded by resignation. And resignation then leads to sloth ... Remember, if you have time, read what the Fathers of the desert say about sloth: it is something that has plenty of current relevance, today. I think that here there emerges the first action to which we must pay attention: that there are few of us, yes; that we are in a minority, yes; that we are elderly, yes; but resigned, no! There are very fine threads that are recognized only when examining our inner self before the Lord. The cardinal, when he spoke, used two words that I was very struck by. Speaking about mercy, he said that mercy “restores and gives peace”. A good remedy for resignation is this mercy that restores and gives peace. When we fall into the trap of resignation, and we stray from mercy, we must go immediately to someone, to the Lord, and ask for mercy, so that it restores us and gives us peace.

When we are resigned, we live with the imagery of a glorious past that, far from awakening the initial charisma, increasingly leads us into a spiral of existential heaviness. Everything becomes heavy and difficult to lift. And here, this is something that I had not written but I will say, because it is not very nice to say it; excuse me, but it happens, and so I will say it. The buildings start to become heavy to manage, empty, we do not know what to do and we think that by selling them for money, for our old age ... The money we have in the bank starts to weigh on us. And poverty, where does it go? But the Lord is good, and when a religious congregation does not follow the road of the vow of poverty, usually He sends a nasty bursar who makes it all collapse! And this is a grace! I was saying that it all becomes heavy and difficult to bear. And the temptation is to seek out human securities. I spoke about money, which is one of the most human securities we have at hand. So, it is good for all of us to revisit our origins, to make a pilgrimage to the origins, a memory that saves us from any glorious but unreal imagining of the past.

“With the eyes of faith, we can see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness, never forgetting that ‘where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more’ (Romans, 5:20). Our faith is challenged to discern how wine can come from water and how wheat can grow in the midst of weeds” (Apostolic Exhortation

Evangelii Gaudium, 84).

Our founding fathers and mothers did not think they were a multitude, or a great majority. Our founders felt moved by the Holy Spirit in a concrete moment in history to be the joyful presence of the Gospel for their brothers; to renew and build up the Church like leaven in the mass, like the salt and light of the world. I am thinking, I have in mind the phrase of a founder, but many have said the same thing: “Be afraid of the multitude”. That too many should not come, for fear of not forming them well, the fear of not passing on the charism. ... It has been called the “*turba multa*”. No. They simply thought about bearing the Gospel, the charism.

I think that one of the reasons we are stalled, and which takes away our joy, is this aspect. Our congregations were not born to be the mass, but rather a little salt and a little leaven, that would have given its contribution so that the mass could rise; so that the People of God would have that “condiment” that was missing. For many years we were tempted to believe, and many of us grew with the idea that religious families had to occupy spaces rather than initiate processes, and this is a temptation. We must initiate processes, not occupy spaces. I am afraid of statistics, because they deceive, very often. They tell us the truth from one side, but then illusion enters and leads us to deception. Occupying spaces rather than initiating processes: we were tempted by this because we thought that since there were many of us, conflict could prevail over unity; that ideas (or our inability to change) were more important than reality; or that the part (our small part or vision of the world) was superior to the ecclesial whole (cf. *ibid.*, 222-237). It is a temptation. But I have never seen a pizza chef who to make a pizza takes half a kilo of yeast and a hundred grams of flour, no. It is the opposite. A little leaven to make the flour grow.

Today reality challenges us, today reality invites us again to be a little leaven, a little salt. Yesterday evening, in the *Osservatore Romano*, that comes out in the evening but with today’s date, there is a farewell from the last two Little Sisters of Jesus in Afghanistan, among the Muslims, because there were no more sisters and so they, by now elderly, had to return. They spoke Afghan. They were beloved by all: Muslims, Catholics, Christians ... Why? Because they were witnesses. Why? Because they were consecrated to God the Father by all. And I thought, I said to the Lord, while I read this – look for this, today, in the *Osservatore Romano*, which will make us think about what you asked about – “But Jesus, why do You leave those people like this?” And there came to mind the Korean people, who at the beginning had three or four Christian missionaries, at the beginning, and then for two centuries the message was borne by laypeople only. The ways of the Lord as He wants them to be. But it is good for us to make an act of trust: it is He Who leads history. It is true. We do everything to grow, to be strong. ... But no resignation. Initiate processes. Today reality challenges us – I repeat, reality invites us again to be a little leaven, a little salt. Can you think of a meal with a lot of salt? No-one would eat it. Today, the reality – for many factors that we cannot stop to analyze now – calls us to initiate processes rather than occupy spaces, to struggle for unity rather than cling to past conflicts, to listen to reality, to open ourselves to the “mass”, to the holy faithful People of God, to the ecclesial whole. Open ourselves to the ecclesial whole.

A blessed minority, that is once more invited to leaven, to rise in harmony with what the Holy Spirit inspired in the heart of your founders, and in your hearts. This is what is needed today.

I will go on to one last thing. I would not dare say to you to which existential peripheries you must address your mission, because normally the Spirit inspired charisms for the peripheries, to go to places and corners that are usually abandoned. I don’t believe that the Pope can tell you: concern yourselves with this or that. What the Pope must tell you is this: there are few of you, but the few of you there are, go to the peripheries, go to the boundaries and encounter the Lord there, to renew the mission of origins, to the Galilee of the first encounter, return to the Galilee of the first encounter! And this will be good for all of us, it will make us grow and will make us a multitude. It brings to mind the confusion of our Father Abraham: they made him look at the sky: “Count the stars!” – but he could not – “so shall your offspring be”. And then: “Your only son” – the only one, the other had already gone, but this one had the promise – “offer him ... on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you”. From that multitude of stars, to sacrificing his only son: the logic of God cannot be understood. One only obeys. And this is the road you must take. Choose the peripheries, reawaken processes, ignite the spent and weakened hope of a society that has become insensible to the pain of others. In our fragility as congregations we can make ourselves more attentive to the many forms of frailty that surround us, and transform them into a space of blessing. It will be the moment that the Lord will tell you, “Stop, there is a ram here. Do not sacrifice your only

son". Go and take the "anointment" of Christ, go forth. I am not sending you away! I merely say, go forth and bear the mission of Christ, your charism.

And do not forget that whenever "Jesus [is] in the midst of His people, they encounter joy. For this alone will bring back our joy and hope, this alone will save us from living in a survival mentality". Please, no, this is resignation! Do not just survive, never! "Only this will make our lives fruitful and keep our hearts alive: putting Jesus where He belongs, in the midst of His people" (Homily at the Mass for the Presentation of the Lord, 21st World Day of Consecrated Life, 2 February 2017). And this is your task. Thank you, Mother, thank you.

And now, let us pray together. I will give you my blessing and I ask you, please, to pray for me as I need to be sustained by the prayer of the people of God, of consecrated persons and priests. Many thanks.
