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Audience with the participants in the Congress organised by the Congregation for the Clergy

At 12.15 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Convention on the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, organised by the Congregation for the Clergy (Rome, 4-7 October 2017).

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Eminent Cardinals,
Dear brother bishops and priests,
Brothers and sisters,

Welcome at the end of the International Convention on *Ratio Fundamentalis*, organised by the Congregation for the Clergy, and I thank the Cardinal Prefect for the kind words he addressed to me.

The theme of priestly formation is decisive to the mission of the Church: the renewal of faith and the future of vocations are possible only if we have well-formed priests.

However, what I would like to say to you first of all is this: priestly formation depends firstly on the action of God in our life, and not on our activity. It is a work that requires the courage of letting ourselves be formed by the Lord, to transform our heart and our life. This calls to mind the biblical image of clay in the hands of the potter (cf. *Jeremiah*, 18: 1-10) and the episode in which the Lord says to the prophet Jeremiah: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words" (v.2). The prophet goes and, observing the potter who works the clay, he understands the mystery of God's merciful love. He discovers that Israel is

conserved in the loving hands of God Who, like a patient potter, takes care of His creature, places the clay on the wheel, models it, forms it and, in that way, *gives it shape*. If He realises that the vase has not turned out well, then the God of mercy once more puts the clay into the mass and, with the tenderness of the Father, begins to mould it again.

This image helps us understand that formation is not resolved by cultural review or the odd sporadic local initiative. God is the patient and merciful artisan of our priestly formation and, as is written in the *Ratio*, this work lasts a lifetime. Every day we discover – with Saint Paul – that we carry “this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 *Cor* 4: 7), and when we detach ourselves from our comfortable habits, from the rigidity of our mindsets and the presumption that we have already arrived, and have the courage of placing ourselves in the Lord’s presence, then He can resume His work on us, He forms us and transforms us.

We must say it firmly: if one does not allow oneself to be formed by the Lord every day, he becomes a spent priest, who drags himself through his ministry out of inertia, with neither enthusiasm for the Gospel nor passion for the people of God. Instead, the priest who day by day entrusts himself to the wise hands of the Potter, with a capital “V”, conserves over time the enthusiasm of the heart, welcomes with joy the freshness of the Gospel, and speaks with words able to touch the life of the people; and his hands, anointed by the bishop on the day of his ordination, are capable in turn of anointing the wounds, the expectations and the hopes of the People of God.

And let us now come to a second important aspect: each one of us as priests is called to collaborate with the divine Potter! We are not merely clay, but also the Potter’s helpers, collaborators in His grace. In priestly formation, both initial and permanent – they are both important! – we can recognise at least three protagonists, whom we also find in the “potter’s workshop”.

The first refers to ourselves. In the *Ratio* it is written: “it is the priest himself who is principally and primarily responsible for his own ongoing formation” (no. 82). Just so! We allow God to mould us and assume the “mind ... which was also in Jesus Christ” (*Phil*, 2: 5), only when we do not close ourselves up in the pretence of being a work that has already been completed, and let ourselves be led by the Lord, becoming His disciples more each day. To be the protagonist of his own formation, the seminarian or the priest must say “yes” or “no”: more than the noise of human ambitions, he will prefer silence and prayer; more than trust in his own works, he will know how to surrender himself to the hand of the potter and to His provident creativity; more than by pre-established mindsets, he will let himself be guided by a healthy restlessness of the heart, so as to direct his own incompleteness towards the joy of the encounter with God and with his brothers. Rather than isolation, he will seek out the friendship of brothers in the priesthood and with his own people, knowing that his vocation is born from an encounter of love: with Jesus, and with the People of God.

The second protagonist is *formators and bishops*. The vocation is born, grows and develops in the Church. In this way, the hands of the Lord that model this clay pot work through the care of those who, in the Church, are called upon to be the first formators of priestly life: the rector, the spiritual director, the educators, those who are engaged in the permanent formation of the clergy and, above all, the bishop, whom the *Ratio* justly defines as “primarily responsible for admission to the seminary and formation for the priesthood” (no. 128).

If a formator or a bishop does not “go down into the potter’s workshop” and does not collaborate in the work of God, we will not be able to have well-formed priests!

This demands special care for vocations to the priesthood, a closeness filled with tenderness and responsibility towards the life of priests, a capacity for exercising the art of discernment as a privileged tool for all the priestly path. And – I would like to say above all to bishops – work together! Be broad-hearted and comprehensive so that your action may cross the boundaries of the diocese and enter into connection with the work of other brother bishops. It is necessary to dialogue more on the formation of priests, to overcome parochialism, to make shared decisions, initiate good formative paths together and prepare from far-away formators who are capable of such an important task. Care about priestly formation: the Church needs priests who are capable of announcing the Gospel with enthusiasm and wisdom, of igniting hope where the ashes have covered the embers of life, and of

generating faith in the deserts of history.

Finally, the *People of God*. Let us never forget this: the people, with the labour of their situations; with their questions and their needs, are the great wheel that forms the clay of our priesthood. When we go out among the People of God, we let ourselves be formed by their expectations; touching their wounds, we realise that the Lord transforms our life. If a portion of the people is entrusted to the pastor, it is also true that the priest is entrusted to the people. And, despite resistance and misunderstanding, if we walk in the midst of the people and devote ourselves to them with generosity, we will realise that they are capable of surprising gestures of attention and of tenderness towards their priests. It is a true school of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation. Indeed, the priest must stay between Jesus and the people: with the Lord, on the Mount, he renews every day the memory of his calling; with the people, in the valley, without ever being afraid of the risks and without rigidity in judgment, he offers himself like bread that nourishes and water that slakes thirst, "passing and blessing" those he encounters on the way and offering them the anointment of the Gospel.

In this way the priest is formed: fleeing from both a fleshless spirituality and a worldly effort without God.

Dear priests, the question that must form within us, when we go down into the potter's workshop, is this: *What priest do I want to be?* A drawing-room priest, calm and orderly, or a missionary disciple whose heart burns for the Master and for the People of God? One who grows comfortable in his own wellbeing or a disciple who walks? One who is lukewarm who prefers a quiet life, or a prophet who reawakens the desire for God in the heart of man?

May the Virgin Mary, whom today we venerate as Our Lady of the Rosary, help us to walk with joy in apostolic service and make our heart similar to hers: humble and obedient, like clay in the hands of the potter. I bless you and, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
