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Audience with the participants in the Congress of National Centres for Vocations of the Churches of Europe

At midday today, in the Consistory Hall, Pope Francis received in audience the participants in the Congress of National Centres for Vocations of the Churches of Europe, taking place in Rome from 4 to 7 June in the *Casa San Juan de Avila*.

After handing to those present the address prepared for the occasion, the Pope addressed some extemporaneous remarks to the participants in the meeting.

The following are the Holy Father's address prepared for the event and handed to those present, and his impromptu address:

Prepared address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet all of you taking part in this Congress intended to help implement the Synod of Bishops devoted to young people. I thank you for the work you are doing in your respective areas of service, and for your effort to meet and share your experiences. For my part, I would like to point out a few approaches particularly close to my heart. In my Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, I encouraged young people to “grow in holiness and in commitment to their personal vocation” (No. 3). I likewise encourage you, who work in the so-called “old continent”, to believe that “everything Christ touches becomes young, new and full of life” (cf. *ibid.*, 1).

The three approaches that I would indicate are: *holiness*, as a calling that gives meaning to one's entire life journey; *communion* as the fertile soil for vocations in the Church and *vocation* itself, as a keyword to be preserved and “conjugated” with others – “happiness”, “freedom” and “together” – and finally “declined” as *special consecration*.

Holiness

Talking about vocation always leads to thinking of young people, since “youth is the privileged season for life choices and for responding to God’s call” (*Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People*, 140). True as this is, we must not forget that vocation is a *life-long journey* (cf. *Christus Vivit*, 281). Certainly it has to do with the years of youth in terms of the overall direction we choose to take in response to God’s invitation, but it also has to do with the years of adulthood in terms of its fruitfulness and our discernment of how best to do good (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 287). Our life is meant to bear fruit in charity (cf. *Mt 25:15*), and this entails the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to everyone, each in his or her own way (cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 10-11). Very often we have tended to look upon vocation as a personal adventure, thinking that it is only about “me” and not, above all, about “us”. The fact is that “no one is saved alone”; rather, we become saints together (cf. *ibid.*, 6). The life of each is bound up in the life of others (cf. *Gen 44:30*), and we need to cultivate holiness that belongs to us as a people.

Communion

Pastoral care has to be synodal; it should involve a “journeying together” (cf. *Christus Vivit*, 206). Synodality is the daughter of communion (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 87). It is about living ever more fully our filiation and fraternity, fostering mutual respect, valuing the richness of each individual and believing that the Risen Lord can also work wonders through the pain and frailty that are part of everyone’s life. The Church’s communion will give rise to new vocations. Often in our communities, families and presbyterates, we have thought and acted according to worldly mentalities that have caused division and separation. That is part of today’s culture, and the tormented political history of Europe can serve as a warning and an incentive. Only by acknowledging ourselves truly as communities that are open, alive and inclusive, will we be prepared to face the future. This in fact is what young people are thirsting for.

Vocation

The word “vocation” is not outmoded. We used it again at every phase of the most recent Synod. But it has to be seen in the context of the entire people of God, our preaching and catechesis, and above all our personal encounters with others, for these are the first step in our proclamation of the Gospel (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 128). I know of some communities that have decided to stop using the word “vocation” in their work with the young, because they think that young people get scared by it and may be reluctant to join in their activities. But this is a strategy doomed to failure: striking the word “vocation” from the lexicon of faith is to disfigure that word and to run the risk, sooner or later, of our no longer being understood. What we need are men and women, laity and consecrated people who are passionate, set afire by their encounter with God, redeemed in their humanity, and capable of proclaiming in their lives the happiness born of their vocation.

Happiness

Happiness – our being signs of joy – is not something that can be taken for granted. Indeed, it is a burning issue nowadays, when the “goddess of lament” has so many followers and people content themselves with fleeting joys. Real happiness is something far more profound; it remains long after the joy or the enthusiasm of the moment vanish, even during times of hardship, sorrow, discouragement and disappointment. Happiness remains because it is Jesus himself, whose friendship always endures (cf. *Christus Vivit*, 154). As Pope Benedict said: “Ultimately we want only one thing – ‘the blessed life’ – the life that is simply life, simply ‘happiness’” (*Spe Salvi*, 11). Some approaches to youth and vocations ministry confuse the happiness that is Jesus with a purely emotional joy, and speak of vocation as full of light and beauty. This is not healthy, for as soon as one comes into contact with the suffering flesh of humanity – one’s own or that of others – that kind of joy fades. Others suggest that discerning one’s vocation or making progress in the spiritual life is a matter of techniques, of detailed exercises or rules to be followed. Life that God offers us is “an invitation to be part of a love story interwoven with our personal stories” (*Christus Vivit*, 252).

Freedom

It is true that the word “vocation” can frighten young people, because it has often been confused with something that takes away our freedom. God, however, fully respects the freedom of each person (cf. *ibid.*, 113). We need to remember this, especially when our personal or communal methods of accompaniment can lead to forms of dependence or, worse, of domineering. This is quite serious because it hinders young people from maturing in freedom; it keeps them in a kind of infantile state. Vocations are discerned starting with reality, pondering the word of God, one’s own life history and the dreams that can lead to decisions. Then, at a certain point, we come to realize that our own deepest desires coincide with what it is that God wants of us. From our amazement at this, our freedom is drawn to a magnificent decision of love, while our will expands to collect and channel in a single direction all our vital energy.

Together

A vocation – as I have said – is never just “mine”. “True dreams are dreams about ‘us’” (*Vigil with Italian Young People*, 11 August 2018). No one can make a life decision alone; vocation is always for, and with, others. I think that we should reflect more on these “dreams about us”, because they have to do with the vocation of our communities of consecrated life, our presbyterates, our parishes and our ecclesial groups. The Lord never calls us simply as individuals, but always within a community, to share his loving plan, which is plural from the outset because he himself is plural, a Trinity of love. I find it very helpful to think of vocation from this point of view. Especially because it provides a shared missionary outlook, and then because it revives our awareness that, in the Church, nothing is accomplished alone. We are part of a long history directed to the goal of participation by all. Pastoral care for vocations must not be the task merely of a few leaders, but of the entire community: “every form of pastoral care, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation” (*Christus Vivit*, 254).

Vocations to special consecration

“If we are indeed convinced that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life, we can ‘once more cast out the nets’ in the Lord’s name, with complete confidence” (*ibid.*, 274). I would like to reaffirm this certainty of mine by encouraging you to commit even more energy and resources to beginning processes and creating greater spaces for experiences of fraternity that attract (cf. *ibid.*, 38) precisely because they are born of the Gospel.

I think of all those communities of consecrated life that form a great network of charitable works and of mission. I think of the monastic life, in which the roots of Europe are planted; it continues to attract many vocations, particularly among women, and it needs to be preserved, cultivated and helped to express its true identity as a school of prayer and fellowship. I think too of parishes, working on the ground and filled with evangelical potential for our time. And I think of the whole-hearted commitment of countless priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and bishops “who daily devote themselves with integrity and dedication to the service of the young. Their efforts are like a great forest that quietly grows” (*ibid.*, 99).

Do not be afraid to take up the challenge of continuing to proclaim the vocation to consecrated life and to ordained ministry. The Church needs this! And when young people encounter consecrated men and women who are credible, not because they are perfect but because their lives have been changed by an encounter with the Lord, they will have a taste of a different kind of life, and raise the question of their personal vocation. “The Church draws the attention of young people by being rooted in Jesus Christ. Christ is the truth that makes the Church different from any other world group with which we may identify” (*Pre-Synodal Document on Youth*, 11).

Today life everywhere is fragmented and at times wounded; the life of the Church is no less so. Being rooted in Christ is the surest way to let him restore our wholeness. The work of accompanying and forming vocations is a way of sharing in the handiwork of Christ, who came to bring good news to the poor, to bind the wounds of broken hearts, to proclaim freedom to those in bondage and sight to the blind (cf. *Lk* 4:18). Take heart, then! Christ wants us to be alive!

Impromptu address of the Holy Father

Thank you for this visit, thank you to the Cardinal for his words.

I have prepared a reflection, here, which I will hand to the cardinal, and if I may I will speak a little of what comes to my heart.

When one speaks of vocations, many things come to mind, many things to say, that one might think or do, apostolic plans or proposals... But I would like, first of all, to clarify something. that work for vocations, with vocations, must not be, is not proselytism. It is not a question of "looking for new members for the club". No. It must move along the line of growth that Benedict XVI so clearly said: the growth of the Church is by attraction, not by proselytism. Like so. He said it to us [Latin American bishops] too, at Aparecida. It is not about trying to find people, like those nuns that went to the Philippines in the years '90, '91, '92. They had no houses in the Philippines, but they went there and they took the girls there. And I remember that in the Synod of '94 it came out in the newspaper: "Trafficking in novices". The Filipino Episcopal Conference said, "No. First of all, no-one comes here to fish for vocations, it is not good². And the nuns who had the house in the Philippines, may they carry out the first part of formation in the Philippines. In this way that deformation is avoided. I wished to clarify this, because the spirit of proselytism is harmful.

Then, I think – as far as vocations are concerned – of the capacity of the people they help. To help a young man or woman choose the vocation of his or her life, as a layperson, as a priest, religious, is helping to ensure that they find the dialogue with the Lord. That they learn to ask the Lord, "What do you want of me?". This is important, it is not an intellectual conviction, no: the decision for a vocation must be born of the dialogue with the Lord, whatever that vocation may be. The Lord inspires me to go ahead in life in this way, on this road. And this means a good task for you: helping dialogue. It is clear that if you do not engage in dialogue with the Lord, it will be rather difficult to teach others to dialogue on this point. Dialogue with the Lord.

Then, attitudes. Working with the young takes a lot of patience, a lot! A great capacity for listening, because at times the young repeat themselves, they repeat themselves. Patience and capacity for listening. And then, rejuvenation, that is, putting oneself in motion, in movement with them. Today the work with the young, in general, whatever type, is done in movement. When I was young, work with the young was carried out in reflection groups. We met, we reflected on one theme, on another, each person studied the theme first... And we were satisfied, and we carried out some works of mercy, visits to hospitals, to rest homes. But it was more sedentary. Today the young are on the move, and one must work with them in movement, and seek in movement to help them find the vocation of their life. This is tiring... One must tire oneself out! One cannot work for vocations without tiring. It is what life, reality, the Lord, and everyone ask of us.

Then another thing: the language of the Lord. Today I was in a meeting with the COMECE Commission. The president made a comment, he said to me: "I went to Thailand with a group of 30, 40 young people to work on rebuilding in the north, to help those people". "And you, why do you do this?" I asked. And he said to me: "To understand well the language of the young". At times we talk to young people as we are used to talking to adults. For them, very often our language is "Esperanto", it is just as if we were to speak Esperanto, as they do not understand anything. Understanding their language, which is a language poor in communion, because they know a lot about contact but they do not communicate. Teaching them that information technology is good, yes, to have some contacts, but this is not language: this is a "gaseous" language. The true language is communicating. Communicating, speaking. And this is a task like working with filigree, like lace-making, as they say here. It is a task to be carried out step by step. And we need also to understand what it means for a young person always to live "in connection", where the capacity to be "*collected in oneself*" has gone: this is a task for the young. It is not easy, it is not easy, but one cannot go with preconceived ideas or with a purely doctrinal imposition, in the good sense of the word. "You must do this". No. It is necessary to accompany, to guide, and to help so that the encounter with the Lord makes them see what the path of life is. The young are diverse, they are diverse in all places, but they are the same in their restlessness, their thirst for greatness, their desire to do good. They are all the same. There is diversity and there is equality.

Perhaps [it may be useful to you], what it came to me to say, instead of reading the address, which you will have to reflect upon. Thank you for your work! Do not lose hope, and go ahead with joy.

And now that I see this courageous Capuchin from Iceland, let us end with a joke. In the north of that country, in winter it reaches 40 degrees below freezing. And one of the faithful went to buy a refrigerator, and they asked him, "But why are you buying a fridge?" – "To keep my son warm!"

It is midday, let us pray the *Regina Coeli* together.

[*Regina Coeli*]

[Blessing]
