



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE BISHOPS ORDAINED OVER THE PAST YEAR

Clementine Hall

Thursday, 14 September

2017 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers,

With great joy I welcome you in this moment, almost at the end of your Roman pilgrimage, organized by the Congregations for Bishops and for the Eastern Churches. I thank Cardinal Marc Ouellet and Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, and the Dicasteries they preside over respectively, for their generous efforts in organizing this event, which now allows me to meet you personally and to consider with you, new Pastors of the Church, the grace and responsibility of the ministry we have received.

Indeed, not by our merit, but by pure divine benevolence we have been entrusted “the ministry ... to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24; cf. Rom 15:16) and “the dispensation of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:8-9). This year, the programme of your days in Rome has sought to understand the mystery of the Episcopate through one of its central tasks, that of offering to “the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made [us] guardians” (Acts 20:28) that *spiritual and pastoral discernment* necessary for it to reach the knowledge and fulfillment of God’s will in which all fullness abides.

Allow me, therefore, to share a few reflections on this subject that is increasingly important in our time, paradoxically marked by a sense of self-referentiality, which proclaims the end of the time of the masters, while, in their solitude, actual men and women continue to cry out the need to be helped in facing the dramatic issues that assail them, to be paternally guided in the obscure path that challenges them, to be initiated in the mystery of their search for life and happiness.

It is precisely through authentic discernment, which Paul presents as one of the gifts of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:10) and Saint Thomas Aquinas calls “the superior virtue that judges according to those higher principles” (*Sum Theol.*, ii-ii, q. 51, a. 4, ad 3) that we can respond to this human

need today.

The Holy Spirit, protagonist of any authentic discernment

Not long ago, the Church invoked upon you the “*Spiritus Principalis*” or the “*Pneuma hegemonikon*”, the power that the Father gave to the Son and which They transmitted to the holy Apostles, that is, “*the Spirit that supports and guides*”.

One must be aware that this great gift, to which with gratitude we are perpetual servants, rests on fragile shoulders. Perhaps for this reason the Church, in her prayer for episcopal consecration, derived this expression from the *Miserere* (cf. Ps 51:14b) in which he who prays, after exposing his failure, implores that Spirit to allow him immediate and spontaneous generosity in obedience to God, so fundamental for those who lead a community.

Only those who are led by God have the title and authority to be proposed as leaders of others. One may teach and cultivate discernment only if familiar with this inner teacher who, like a compass, offers the criteria to distinguish, for himself and for others, the times of God and His grace; to recognize His passing and the way of His salvation; to indicate concrete means, pleasing to God, to accomplish the good that He predisposes in His mysterious plan of love for each and for all. This wisdom is the practical wisdom of the Cross, which, though it includes reason and prudence, transcends them because it leads to the very source of immortal life, namely, to “know the Father, the only true God, and the One who sent Jesus Christ” (cf. Jn 17:3).

The bishop *cannot take for granted the possession* of a gift so lofty and transcendent, as if it were an acquired right, without falling into a ministry devoid of fruitfulness. It is necessary *to continually implore it* as a primary condition to illuminate all human, existential, psychological, sociological and moral wisdom that may be of service to us in the task of discerning the ways of God for the salvation of those who have been entrusted to us.

Therefore, it is imperative to continually return to Gibeon in prayer (cf. 1 Kings 3:5-12), to remind the Lord that before him we are perennial “children who do not know how to settle”, and to implore “not long life or riches or the life of enemies”, but only “discernment in judging among his people”. Without this grace, we will not become good meteorologists of what can be seen “in the appearance of earth and sky” but rather we will be unable to “interpret the time of God” (cf. Lk 12:54-56).

Discernment, therefore, is born in the heart and mind of the bishop *through his prayer*, when he *puts the people and situations entrusted to him into contact with the Divine Word pronounced by the Spirit*. It is in this intimacy that the Pastor matures the interior freedom that makes him steadfast in his choices and conduct, both personal and ecclesial. Only in the silence of prayer can one learn the voice of God, perceive the traces of His language, have access to His truth, which is

a very different light, that “*is not above one’s mind in the same way as oil is above water*”, and much higher since only “he who knows the Truth knows that light” (cf. Augustine, *Confessions* vii, 10:16).

Discernment is a gift of the Spirit to the Church, to which she responds with listening

Discernment is the grace [given] *to the holy faithful People of God* by the Spirit, who constitutes it a prophetic People, endowed with the sense of faith and that spiritual instinct that makes it able to feel *cum Ecclesia*. It is a gift received in the midst of the People and is oriented towards their salvation. Since the Spirit has indeed dwelt in the heart of the faithful since Baptism, the apostolic faith, beatitude, righteousness, and evangelical spirit are not strangers to them.

Therefore, although vested with ineluctable personal responsibility (cf. Directory *Apostolorum Successores*, 160-161), the Bishop is called to experience his own discernment as a Pastor, as a member of the People of God, or in an ever *ecclesial* dynamic, at the service of the *koinonia*. The Bishop is not a self-sufficient “father and master”, nor is he a fearful and isolated “solitary pastor”.

The Bishop’s discernment is always a *community action*, which does not disregard the richness of the opinion of his priests and deacons, of the People of God and of all those who can offer him a useful contribution, also through concrete and not merely formal contributions. “When one does not consider his brother in any way, and considers oneself superior, then one ends up swelling with pride even against God Himself”.^[1]

In peaceful dialogue, he is not afraid to share, and even sometimes modify, his discernment with others: *with confreres in the episcopate*, to whom he is sacramentally joined, and then discernment becomes collegial; *with his priests*, for whom he is the guarantor of that unity that is not imposed by force, but rather is woven with the patience and wisdom of an artisan; *with the lay faithful*, because they retain the “sense” of the true infallibility of the faith that resides in the Church: they know that God does not diminish in His love and does not forsake His promises.

As history teaches, the great Pastors, in defending the true faith, were able to dialogue with this deposit present in the heart and in the conscience of the faithful and, not rarely, were sustained by them. Without this exchange “the faith of the most educated will terminate in indifference, and that of the most humble in superstition”.^[2]

Therefore, I invite you to cultivate an attitude of listening, growing in the freedom of relinquishing one’s own point of view (when it is shown to be partial and insufficient), to assume that of God. Without letting oneself be conditioned by the eyes of others, make efforts to get to know, with your own eyes, the places and the people, the spiritual and cultural “tradition” of the diocese entrusted to you, so as to respectfully join the remembrance of its witness to Christ and to interpret its concrete present in the light of the Gospel, outside of which there is no future for the Church.

The mission that awaits you is not to bring your own ideas and projects, nor solutions that are abstractly designed by those who consider the Church their own home garden, but humbly, *without attention-seeking or narcissism*, to offer your concrete witness of union with God, serving the Gospel that should be cultivated and helped to grow in that specific situation.

Discerning therefore means *humility and obedience*. Humility with regard to one's own projects. Obedience to the Gospel, the ultimate criterion; to the Magisterium, which safeguards it; to the norms of the universal Church, which serve it; and to the concrete situation of the people, for whom we want nothing other than to draw from the treasure of the Church what is most fruitful for their salvation today (cf. Mt 13:52).

Discernment is a remedy to the immobilism of "it has always been so" or "let us take time". It is a creative process that is not limited to applying schemas. It is an antidote to rigidity, because the same solutions are not valid everywhere. It is always the perennial today of the Risen One who demands that we not resign ourselves to the repetition of the past, and have the courage to ask ourselves whether the proposals of the past are still evangelically valid. Do not let yourselves be imprisoned by the nostalgia of having only one response to apply in all cases. This would perhaps quell our performance anxiety, but it would leave us relegated to the margins and to "withered" lives that need to be watered by the grace in our safekeeping (cf. Mk 3:1-6; Ezek 37:4).

I recommend a special sensitivity to *the culture and religiosity of the people*. They are not something to be tolerated, or mere tools to manoeuvre, or a "Cinderella" to keep hidden because they are unworthy of access to the noble salon of the concepts and superior reasoning of the faith. Indeed, it is necessary to care for and dialogue with them, because apart from constituting the bedrock of the people's self-understanding, they are a true subject of evangelization, which your discernment cannot overlook. Such a charism, given to the community of believers, cannot but be recognized, called upon and engaged in the ordinary path of discernment made by Pastors.

Remember that God was already present in your dioceses when you arrived and will still be there when you are gone. And, in the end, we will all be measured not on an accounting of our works but on the cultivation of God's work in the heart of the flock that we watch over in the name of the "Shepherd and Guardian of our souls" (cf. 1 Pt 2:25).

Called to grow in discernment

We must strive to grow in incarnate and inclusive discernment, which dialogues with the consciences of the faithful which are to be formed and not replaced (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 37) in a patient and courageous process of accompaniment, so as to mature the capacity of each one — the faithful, families, priests, communities, and societies —, all called to advance in the freedom to choose and accomplish the good that God wills. Indeed, the activity of discernment is not reserved to the wise, the perspicacious and the perfect. Rather, God often resists the proud and reveals

himself to the humble (cf. Mt 11:25).

The Pastor knows that God is the *way* and trusts in His company; he knows and never doubts His *truth*, nor despairs of His promise of *life*. But the Pastor acquires these certainties in the humble darkness of faith. To convey them to the flock, therefore, is not to announce obvious proclamations but to introduce — by supporting and guiding the possible steps to be taken — the experience of God Who saves.

Therefore, authentic discernment, although definitive at each step, is always an open and necessary process that can be completed and enriched. It is not to be reduced to the repetition of formulas which, “like lofty clouds bring little rain” to actual men and women, are often immersed in a reality that cannot be reduced to black and white. The Shepherd is called to make available to the flock the grace of the Spirit, who knows how to pierce the folds of reality and to take account of its nuances to reveal what God wishes to achieve at each moment. I think particularly of young people, families, priests, those who have the responsibility for leading society. From your lips, may they seek and find the steadfast witness to this lofty Word, which is “the lamp to our feet and light to our path” (cf. Ps 119[118]:105).

An essential condition for progressing in discernment is to *educate ourselves in the patience of God and his times*, which are never our own. He does not “bid fire upon the infidels” (cf. Lk 9:53-54), nor does he permit zealots to “pull the weeds from the field” that they see growing there (cf. Mt 13:27-29). It is up to us every day to welcome from God the hope that preserves us from all abstraction, because it enables us to discover the hidden grace in the present without losing sight of the forbearance of his design of love that transcends us.

Dear brothers, I beg you to *keep scrupulously before your eyes Jesus and the mission* that was not his own but his Father’s (cf. Jn 7: 16), and to offer to the people — confused and lost today, just as they were yesterday — what he was able to give: the chance to encounter God personally, to choose his Way and to progress in his love.

Keep your gaze particularly fixed on him today, the Feast of the Holy Cross, a permanent place of God’s discernment in our favour, contemplating the depth of his incarnation and learning from it the criterion of all authentic discernment (cf. 1 Jn 4:1).

May the Virgin, who keeps her gaze fixed steadfastly on her Son, protect and bless you and your particular Churches.

[1] Dorotheus of Gaza, *Communione con Dio e con gli uomini*, Edizioni Qiqajon, 2014, 101-102.

[2] Cf. John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1991, 123.