



The Holy See

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PRAYER MEETING WITH PRIESTS, DEACONS, CONSECRATED PERSONS AND SEMINARIANS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

Cathedral "Notre Dame du Congo" (Kinshasa)

Wednesday, 2 February 2023

[Multimedia]

Dear brother priests, deacons and seminarians,

Dear consecrated men and women, good evening and happy feast day!

I am happy to be with you today, on the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, a day when we pray in a special way for consecrated life. Like Simeon, we all await the light of the Lord to brighten the darkness of our lives. Even more, we all desire to have the same experience that Simeon had in the Temple of Jerusalem: to hold Jesus in our arms. To hold him in our arms, so that we can contemplate him and hold him close to our hearts. When we place Jesus at the centre of our lives, our outlook changes, and despite all our efforts and difficulties, we feel enveloped by his light, comforted by his Spirit, encouraged by his word and sustained by his love.

As I say this, I think of Cardinal Ambongo's words of welcome, for which I thank him. He pointed out the "enormous challenges" faced by those who live out their commitment to the priesthood and consecrated life in this land marked by "difficult and often dangerous conditions" and by great suffering. Yet, as he noted, there is also great joy in the service of the Gospel, and vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life are plentiful. This is due to the abundance of God's grace,

which works precisely in weakness (cf. *2 Cor* 12:9), and which makes you, together with the lay faithful, capable of generating hope in the often painful situations in which your people live.

This certitude of ours, even in the midst of difficulties, is a gift born of God's faithfulness. Through the prophet Isaiah, he says: "I will make a highway in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (43:19). I thought I would offer you some reflections starting with those very words of Isaiah: God opens new paths in the midst of our deserts, and we, as ordained ministers and consecrated persons, are called to be a sign of this promise and to help bring it to fulfilment in the history of God's holy People. Yet concretely, what have we been called to do, if not to serve the people as witnesses of God's love? Isaiah helps us to understand how.

Through the words of the prophet, the Lord speaks to his people at a time of tragedy, for the Israelites had been deported to Babylon and reduced to slavery. Moved to compassion, God seeks to console them. Indeed, this section of Isaiah is called "the Book of Consolation", because the Lord addresses words of hope and promises of salvation to his people. First, he recalls the bond of love binding him to his people: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (43:1-2). The Lord reveals himself as the God of compassion, and he assures us that he will never abandon us. He will always be at our side, a refuge and strength in difficulties. God is compassionate. God's three names, his three features are mercy, compassion and tenderness, for they indicate the closeness of God: a close, compassionate and tender God.

Dear priests and deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians: through you, the Lord also wants to anoint his people today with the balm of consolation and hope. You are called to echo this promise of God, to remind others that he made us and we belong to him, and to encourage and accompany the community's journey in faith towards the One who always walks at our side. God does not allow the waters to overwhelm us, nor the fire to consume us. Let us realize that we have been called to proclaim this message in the midst of people's suffering. That is what it means to be *servants of the people*: to be priests, sisters and missionaries who have known the joy of a liberating encounter with Jesus and now offer it to others. Let us never forget that the priesthood and consecrated life become arid if we start to think that people are there to serve us, rather than ourselves being here to serve them. Ours is not a profession, or social position, or a means of providing for our families at home. Rather, it is a mission to act as signs of Christ's presence, his unconditional love, his reconciliation and forgiveness, and his compassionate concern for the needs of the poor. We have been called to offer our lives for our brothers and sisters, and to bring them Jesus, the one who alone heals the wounds of every heart.

If we experience our vocation in this way, we will always have challenges to face and temptations to overcome. I would like to focus briefly on three of these: *spiritual mediocrity*, *worldly comfort*, and *superficiality*.

First of all, *we need to overcome spiritual mediocrity*. How? The Presentation of the Lord, which in the Christian East is called the “feast of the encounter”, reminds us that the priority in our life must be our encounter with the Lord, especially in personal prayer, because our relationship with him is the basis of everything we do. Never forget that the secret of everything is prayer, since the ministry and the apostolate are not primarily our own work and do not depend solely on human means. You are going to tell me: yes, true enough, but commitments, pastoral priorities, apostolic labours, fatigue and so on risk leaving us with little time and energy for prayer. That is why I would like to share a few pieces of advice. First of all, let us remain faithful to certain liturgical rhythms of prayer that mark the day, from the Mass to the breviary. The daily celebration of the Eucharist is the beating heart of priestly and religious life. The Liturgy of the Hours allows us to pray with the Church and with regularity: may we never neglect it! Then too, let us not neglect Confession. We always need to be forgiven, so as then to bestow mercy upon others.

Now, a second piece of advice. As we all know, we cannot limit ourselves to the rote recitation of prayers, but must set aside a time of intense prayer each day, to remain “heart-to-heart” with the Lord. It may be a prolonged time of adoration, in meditation on the word, or with the Holy Rosary, but a time of closeness to the One whom we love above all else. In addition, even in the midst of activity, we can always resort to the prayer of the heart, to short “aspirations” – which are a real treasure – words of praise, thanksgiving and invocation, to be repeated to the Lord wherever we find ourselves. Prayer takes the focus off ourselves, it opens us up to God, and it puts us back on our feet because it puts us in his hands. It creates in us the space to be able to experience God’s closeness, so that his word becomes familiar to us and, through us, to all those whom we meet. Without prayer, we will not get very far. Finally, to overcome spiritual mediocrity, let us never tire of invoking Our Lady, our Mother, learning from her to contemplate and to follow Jesus.

The second challenge is *to overcome the temptation of worldly comfort*, of the easy life, in which we more or less arrange everything and stand back, seeking our own comfort, dragged along without enthusiasm. In this way, we lose the very heart of our mission, which is to put our ego behind us and to set out towards our brothers and sisters, practising, in the name of God, “the art of closeness”. Often, in situations of poverty and suffering, there is a great risk of worldliness: the desire to take advantage of our position in order to satisfy our own needs and comforts. It is very sad when we turn in on ourselves and become *cold bureaucrats of the spirit*. Instead of serving the Gospel, we then become concerned with managing finances and pursuing some profitable business for ourselves. Brothers and sisters, it is scandalous when this happens in the life of a priest or religious, for they should instead be models of sobriety and inner freedom. How beautiful it is, on the other hand, to be transparent in our intentions and free from compromise with money, joyfully embracing evangelical poverty and working side by side with the poor! And how beautiful it is to be radiant in living celibacy as a sign of complete availability to the kingdom of God! May it not be the case that the very vices we want to uproot in others, and in society as a whole, end up taking root in us. Please, let us beware of worldly comfort.

Finally, the third challenge is to *overcome the temptation to superficiality*. The People of God are waiting to hear and find consolation in the word of the Lord. Consequently, they need priests and religious who are educated, well trained and passionate about the Gospel. A gift has been placed in our hands, and it would be presumptuous for us to think we can carry out the mission to which God has called us without working on ourselves every day and without an adequate spiritual and theological formation. People do not need “sacred functionaries”, possessed of academic degrees but detached from ordinary men and women. Certainly, we are obliged to enter into the heart of the Christian mystery, to deepen our understanding of the Church’s teaching, and to study and meditate on God’s word. At the same time, though, we have to remain open to the problems of our time and the increasingly complex questions of our age, in order to understand people’s lives and needs, and to realize how best to take them by the hand and accompany them. It follows that the formation of clergy is not an optional extra. I say this to seminarians, but it applies to everyone. Formation has to be ongoing; it has to continue throughout our lives. It is called ongoing formation: a continuous formation, for life.

These challenges have to be faced if we want *to serve people as witnesses of God’s love*, since service is effective only if it comes through *witness*. Never forget this word: *witness*. After proclaiming words of consolation, the Lord says through Isaiah: “Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? You are my witnesses” (43:9, 10). Witnesses. To be good priests, deacons and consecrated persons, words and intentions are not enough: your very lives must speak louder than your words. Dear brothers and sisters, as I look at you, I give thanks to God, because you are signs of the presence of Jesus, who walks in the streets of this country, who touches people’s lives and binds their wounds. Yet there is a need for more young people who can say “yes” to the Lord, for more priests and religious who can radiate his beauty by their lives.

In your testimonies, you reminded me how difficult it is to carry out your mission in a land rich in natural beauty and resources, but wounded by exploitation, corruption, violence and injustice. Yet you also spoke of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and how Jesus walks in our streets and, especially through his Church, stops and cares for the wounds of those who are oppressed. Brothers and sisters, the ministry to which you are called is precisely this: to offer closeness and consolation, like a light that keeps shining amid the encircling gloom. Let us learn from the Lord, who is always close. And to be brothers and sisters to all, especially to one another: witnesses of fraternity, never at war; witnesses of peace, learning how to live with differences between various cultures and ethnic backgrounds. For, as Pope Benedict XVI noted, in speaking to the priests of Africa, “your witness to living together in peace, over ethnic and racial lines, can touch hearts” (*Africae Munus*, 108).

As an old proverb states: “The wind does not shatter whatever is able to bend.” Sadly, the history of many peoples of this continent has had to bend before the force of suffering and violence. If there is one desire in everyone’s heart, it is that of never again having to do so, never again

having to bow down before the arrogance of the powerful, or having to submit to the yoke of injustice. Yet we can understand the proverb primarily in a positive sense: there is a kind of bending that is not synonymous with weakness or cowardice but with strength. Bending can thus be a sign of the ability to be flexible, to overcome rigidity, and to cultivate a docile spirit that refuses to yield to bitterness and resentment. It is a sign of the ability to change and not remain entrenched in one's own ideas and positions. If we bow before God in humility, he makes us become like himself, agents of mercy. If we remain docile in God's hands, he shapes us to become a people of reconciliation, capable of openness and dialogue, acceptance and forgiveness, who make rivers of peace flow through the arid plains of violence. Hence, when the stormy winds of conflict and division blow, we are not broken, for we are filled with the love of God. May you always be docile to the God of mercy, never shattered by the winds of division.

Sisters and brothers, I thank you from my heart for who you are and what you do; I thank you for your witness to the Church and to the world. Do not be discouraged, because we need you! You are precious and important. I say this in the name of the whole Church. May you always be channels of the Lord's consoling presence, joyous witnesses of the Gospel, prophets of peace amid the storms of violence, disciples of love, ever ready to care for the wounds of the poor and suffering. I thank you again, brothers and sisters; thank you for your service and for your pastoral zeal. I bless you and carry you in my heart. And I ask you, please, do not forget to pray for me! Thank you!