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The Pope to seminarians: the identity of the presbytery is rooted in belonging to the Lord, Church and Kingdom

This morning in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace the Holy Father received in audience the community of the Pius XI Pontifical Regional Seminary of Puglia, accompanied by the bishops of this Italian region. The Pope addressed some extemporaneous remarks to the seminarians and handed them the text reproduced below.

“I meet you with joy and I greet all of you who form the community of the Pontifical Regional Seminary, accompanied by the bishops of the region. I thank the rector for his courteous words, and in a special way I greet you, dear seminarians who, thanks be to God, are many in number.

I wish to return briefly to what I said during the Assembly of Italian bishops last spring, on the identity and ministry of presbyters. On that occasion I described the ministry of a presbyter in terms of his triple belonging: to the Lord, to the Church, and to the Kingdom. Such belonging, naturally, is not sudden; nor is it born after ordination if first – indeed, in the seminary years – it is not cultivated, safeguarded, nurtured with care and a sense of responsibility. This is why today I would like to make the most of your visit to return to this reflection, which I think is important also for young seminarians who are preparing to become priests.

First of all, the idea of feeling part of a whole is inherent in the word ‘belonging’. Only if we feel that we are part of Christ, of the Church and of the Kingdom, will we make good progress during the seminary years. To grasp all of this it is necessary to look up, to stop thinking ‘I am the only thing in my life’. The first obstacle to overcome is therefore narcissism. It is the most dangerous temptation. Not everything starts and finishes with me, I can and I must look beyond myself, so as to be aware of the beauty and the depth of the mystery that surrounds me, of the life that exceeds me, of the faith in God that supports everything and every person, including myself. How can I be aware of Christ if I look only at myself? How can I succeed in tasting the beauty of the Church, if my sole preoccupation is to save myself, to emerge unscathed from every circumstance? How can I be excited by the adventure of building the Kingdom of God if every enthusiasm is curbed by the fear of losing something of myself? In this liturgical time of Advent, which makes the Lord’s invitation to vigilance resonate, we are invited to watch for the real risk of being narcissists, because without this vigilance no vocational journey is truly possible.

Then, belonging also means knowing how to enter into a relationship. It is necessary to prepare yourselves to be first and foremost men of relations. With Christ, with the brothers with whom we share the ministry and faith, with all the people we meet in our life. And to know how to live relationships well, we enter the seminary! One cannot think about journeying towards priesthood without taking this decision in one's heart: I want to be a man of relations. May this be the first concern of these years, the first formative aim. I can truly confirm, as the years gradually pass by and ordination approaches, if I progress in this dimension, if my capacity for relations is growing, it is maturing. The construction of the community, which one day we must guide as priests, begins in everyday life in the seminary, both among you and with the people you meet on your path. Do not feel that you are different to your peers; do not consider yourselves better than other young people; learn to be with all people, and do not be afraid to get your hands dirty. If tomorrow you will be priests who live in the midst of the holy people of God, today start by being young people who know how to be with everyone, who know how to learn something from every person they meet, with humility and intelligence. And may the basis of all relations be your relationship with Christ: as you get to know Him, as you listen to Him, as you join to Him in trust and in love, make His love your own; put this in your relations with others, become 'channels' of His love through your relational maturity. The place where the relationship with Christ grows is prayer, and the most mature fruit of prayer is always charity.

Finally, belonging must be compared with its opposite, which is exclusion, rejection. He who grows in belonging in Christ and discovers in Him a gaze turned to all: how can he have the style of life of a man who excludes? Begin from your communal life in the seminary: is there someone who is excluded? Who is left at the margins? Your belonging to Christ demands that you go towards him, that you bring him to the centre, that you help him too feel part of the community. Gradually, as you grow in your sense of belonging to the Church and taste the beauty of fraternity, you will learn how to ask yourselves to make the effort of forgiveness, in both small and great things. If nothing in life excludes us from the merciful gaze of the Lord, why then should our gaze exclude?

I know yours is a great seminary, visited by the grace of the Lord with many vocations. This abundance is also a responsibility. It is necessary to pay attention to the quality of the formative path; numbers are not enough. Therefore, that you may always journey in a good quality of formation, I assure you of my prayer, and I thank you for your visit. And you too, please, do not forget to pray for me".
