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The Pope receives participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life

At 11.50 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, on the theme: “Fidelity and perseverance: intertwined responsibilities”.

After greetings from the prefect, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, the Pope addressed the following words to those present:

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is for me a cause for joy to be able to receive you today, as you are gathered in the plenary session to reflect on the theme of faithfulness and abandonment. I greet the Cardinal Prefect and thank him for his words of presentation; and I greet you all, expressing my gratitude for your work in the service of the consecrated life of the Church.

The theme you have chosen is important. We can say that at this moment faithfulness is put to the test; the statistics you have examined show this. We are facing a “haemorrhage” that weakens consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us. It is true that some leave as an act of coherence, because they recognise after serious discernment that they never had this vocation; however, others, with the passage of time, have less fidelity, very often many years after their perpetual vows. What has happened?

As you have noted, there are many factors that condition faithfulness in this, a change of era and not merely an era of change, in which it becomes difficult to take on serious and definitive commitments. A bishop told me, some time ago, that a good boy with a university degree who worked in the parish came to him and said, “I want to become a priest, but for ten years”. The culture of the temporary.

The first factor that does not help maintain faithfulness is the social and cultural context in which we move. We live immersed in the so-called culture of fragmentation, of the temporary, which leads us to live in an “à la carte”

way, as slaves to fashion. This culture introduces the need always to have “side doors” open onto other possibilities, feeds consumerism and forgets the beauty of the simple and austere life, very often causing a great existential emptiness. There has also been the spread of a strong practical relativism, according to which everything is judged in relation to a self-realisation that is at times far removed from the values of the Gospel. We live in a society in which economic rules substitute moral ones, dictate the laws and impose systems of reference at the expense of the values of life; a society where the dictatorship of money and profit advocates a vision of existence in which those who are not productive are discarded. In this situation, it is clear that one must first let oneself be evangelised in order to engage in evangelisation.

To this factor of the socio-cultural context, others must be added. One of these is the world of youth, a world that is complex yet at the same time rich and challenging. Not negative, but complex, yes, rich and challenging. There is no lack of young people who are very generous, united and committed at religious and social level; young people who seek a true spiritual life; young people who hunger for something different to what the world offers them. There are marvellous young people, and not just a few. But there are also young people who are victims of the logic of worldliness, which may be summarised as follows: the search for success at any price, easy money and easy pleasure. This logic also seduces many young people. Our task cannot be other than that of staying close to them to spread to them the joy of the Gospel and of belonging to Christ. This culture must be evangelised if we do not want young people to succumb.

A third conditioning factor comes from within consecrated life itself, where alongside much holiness – there is much holiness in consecrated life! – there is no lack of situations of counter-testimony that make faithfulness difficult. Such situations, among others, are: routine, weariness, the burden of managing structures, internal divisions, the search for power, or “climbers”, a worldly way of governing institutes, a service of authority that sometimes becomes authoritarianism and sometimes “laissez-faire”. If consecrated life is to maintain its prophetic mission and its appeal, continuing to be a school of faithfulness for those near and far, it must keep its freshness and the novelty of the centrality Jesus, maintain the attraction of spirituality and the strength of mission, show the beauty of following Christ, and radiate hope and joy. Hope and joy. This shows us how a community fares, what it has inside. Is there hope, is there joy? Good. But when there is less hope and there is no joy, things are bad.

An aspect that must be cared for in a particular way is fraternal life in the community. This must be nurtured through prayer in the community, prayerful reading of the Word, active participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, fraternal dialogue and sincere communication between all members, fraternal correction, mercy towards the brother or sister who sins, and the sharing of responsibilities. All this must be accompanied by an eloquent and joyful witness of simple life alongside the poor and by a mission that favours the existential peripheries. The renewal of fraternal life is essential for the result of vocational pastoral care, being able to say “Come and you will see” (cf. John, 1:39), and for the perseverance of brothers and sisters, both young and less young. Because, when a brother or a sister does not find support for consecrated life within the community, he or she will seek it elsewhere, with all that this entails.

The vocation, like faith itself, is a treasure that we carry in vessels of clay (cf. Cor. 4:7); therefore, we must safeguard it, as we safeguard the most precious things, so that no-one robs us of this treasure, and so it does not lose its beauty over time. This care is a task for every one of us who is called to follow Christ more closely with faith, hope and charity, cultivated every day in prayer and strengthened by a good theological and spiritual formation, which defends against the fashions and culture of the ephemeral and enables us to journey steadfast in faith. On this basis it is possible to practice the evangelical counsels and to have the same sentiments as Christ. The vocation is a gift that we have received from the Lord, Who looked upon us and loved us (cf. Mark, 10:21), calling us to follow Him in consecrated life, and is at the same time a responsibility for those who have received this gift. With the Lord’s grace, each one of us is called to take on responsibly, in the first person, the task of one’s own human, spiritual and intellectual growth, and at the same time, to keep alive the flame of the vocation. This means that we in turn must keep our gaze fixed on the Lord, always being careful to journey according to the logic of the Gospel, and not to give in to the criteria of worldliness. Very often great infidelities are born of minor deviations and distractions. In this case too it is important to take on board St. Paul’s exhortation: “the hour has come for you to wake from sleep” (Romans, 13:11).

Speaking of faithfulness and abandonment, we must accord great importance to accompaniment. And I would like to underline this. Consecrated life must invest in preparing guides who are qualified for this ministry. And I say consecrated life, because the charism of spiritual accompaniment, let us say spiritual direction, is a “lay” charism. Priests have it too, but it is a lay charism. Very often I have found sisters who said to me, “Father, do you know a priest I can turn to?” “But, tell me, in your community isn’t there a wise woman, a woman of God?” “Yes, there is that old lady who … but …” “Go to her!”. Take care of the members of your congregation. In the previous Plenary you noted this need, as is shown also in your recent document “New wine in new wineskins”. You can never overstate this need. It is difficult to remain faithful when walking alone, or walking with the guidance of brothers and sisters who are not capable of listening carefully and patiently, or who do not have adequate experience of consecrated life. We need brothers and sisters who are experts in the ways of God, to be able to do what Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus: to accompany them on the journey of life and at the moment of disorientation, and to rekindle faith and hope in them through the Word and the Eucharist (cf. Luke, 24: 13-35). This is the delicate and demanding task of a guide. Numerous vocations are lost due to a lack of valid guidance. All consecrated persons, young or less so, are in need of adequate help for the human, spiritual and vocational moment we are experiencing. Although we must avoid any form of accompaniment that creates dependencies. This is important: spiritual accompaniment must not create dependencies. Although we must avoid any kind of accompaniment that creates dependencies, that protects, controls or infantilises, we cannot resign ourselves to journeying alone; there is a need for close, frequent and fully adult accompaniment. All this will help ensure the continuous discernment that leads to discovering God’s will, to finding in everything what most pleases the Lord, as St. Ignatius would say, or – with the words of St. Francis of Assisi, “always to want what pleases Him”. Discernment requires, on the part of the guide or the person accompanied, a fine spiritual sensibility, to be able to place oneself before the other *sine proprio*, with complete detachment from prejudices and personal or group interests. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that discernment is not simply a question of choosing between good or bad, but between good and better, between what is good and what leads to identification with Christ. And I would continue to speak, but we will finish here.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you again and invoke upon you and your service as members and collaborators of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life the continual help of the Holy Spirit, and bless you wholeheartedly. Thank you.