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Audience with the Community of the Pontifical Pius XI Regional Seminary of Ancona, Le Marche

The following is the Holy Father's address to the community of the Pontifical Pius XI Regional Seminary of Ancona, Le Marche, whom he received in audience this morning:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers,

I am pleased to welcome your community of the Pontifical Pius XI Regional Seminary of Le Marche. I thank the rector for his words of greeting: he is enthusiastic, this rector! Our meeting takes place in the year dedicated to Saint Joseph, and this leads me to share some thoughts on the vocation inspired by "this extraordinary figure, so close to our own human experience" (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, 8 December 2020), and close also to the calling that God wished to address to us.

I like to imagine the Seminary as the family of Nazareth, where Jesus was welcomed, cared for and formed in view of the mission entrusted to Him by the Father. The Son of God accepted to let Himself be loved and guided by human parents, Mary and Joseph, teaching us all that, without docility, no one can grow and mature. I would like to emphasise this, because we do not talk much about *docility*. To be docile is a gift we must ask for; docility is a virtue not only to be acquired, but to be received. It is important for each of you to always ask yourselves: "Am I docile? Am I rebellious, or do I not care, I do as I please?" No: docility is a constructive attitude of one's vocation and also of one's personality. Without docility, no one can grow and mature. In fact, the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* affirms that the priest is a disciple continually following in the footsteps of the Master and, therefore, His formation is an evolving process, begun in the family, continued in the parish, consolidated in the seminary and lasting throughout life. The figure of Saint Joseph is the finest model by which your formators are called to be inspired in safeguarding and caring for your vocation. To them, therefore, I wish to address my appeal in the first instance.

Dear brothers of the Episcopal Conference of Le Marche, who are primarily responsible for the formation of

these young people; dear rector, spiritual director and all the formators, be for your seminarians what Joseph was for Jesus! May they learn more from your life than from your words, as happened in the house of Nazareth, where Jesus was formed in the school of Joseph's "creative courage". May they learn docility from your obedience; industriousness from your dedication; generosity towards the poor from the testimony of your sobriety and availability; fatherhood from your living and chaste affection. "Joseph is traditionally called a 'most chaste' father. That title is not simply a sign of affection, but the summation of an attitude that is the opposite of possessiveness. Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love. A possessive love ultimately becomes dangerous: it imprisons, constricts and makes for misery" (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*).

And now, dear seminarians, I would like to turn to you, whom the Church asks to follow the example of Jesus who docilely let Himself be educated by Joseph. Even as a boy, He had to experience the fatigue involved in every journey of growth, to ask Himself the great questions of life, to begin to assume His responsibilities and make His own decisions. But He was God, He did not need to, no: He learned, and He truly learned, He did not pretend to learn: no, He learned. He was God, yes, but He was a real man: He went through all the stages of a man's growth. Perhaps we have not reflected enough on the young Jesus, who was engaged in discerning His own vocation, in listening to and trusting in Mary and Joseph, in dialogue with the Father to understand His mission.

For you too, may the Seminary be like the house of Nazareth, where the Son of God learned humanity and closeness from His parents. Do not be satisfied with being adept at using social networks and the media to communicate. Only transformed by the Word of God will you be able to communicate words of life. The world thirsts for priests who can communicate the goodness of the Lord to those who have experienced sin and failure, for priests who are experts in humanity, for pastors who are willing to share the joys and labours of their brothers and sisters, for men who let themselves be marked by the cry of those who suffer. Draw the humanity of Jesus from the Gospel and the Tabernacle, look for it in the lives of the saints and of so many heroes of charity, think of the genuine example of those who passed on the faith to you, your grandparents and your parents. As Paul said to his beloved disciple Timothy: "Remember your mother and your grandmother, your roots". And also read those writers who knew how to look into the human soul; I think, for example of Dostoevsky, who in the miserable events of earthly suffering was able to reveal the beauty of love that saves. But some of you may say: what does Dostoevsky have to do with this? This is for the *litterati*! No, no: it is about growing in humanity. Read the great humanists. A priest can be very disciplined, he may be able to explain theology, philosophy and many things well. But if he is not human, he is of no use. Let him go out and be a professor. But if he is not human he cannot be a priest: he lacks something. Does he lack language? No, he can speak. He lacks the heart; [be experts in humanity!

The Seminary, then, should not distance you from reality, from dangers, and even less from others but, on the contrary, it should bring you closer to God and to your brothers and sisters. Within the walls of the Seminary expand the boundaries of your heart - the expanded heart - extend them to the whole world, become passionate about what "brings you closer", become passionate about what brings you closer, what "opens you up", what "brings you together". Be wary of experiences that lead to sterile intimacy, of "satisfying spiritualisms", which appear to give consolation but instead lead to closure and rigidity. And here I will stop for a while. Rigidity is a bit fashionable today, and rigidity is one of the manifestations of clericalism. Clericalism is a perversion of the priesthood. And rigidity is one of its manifestations. When I find a seminarian or a young priest who is rigid, I say "something bad is happening to him inside". Behind every rigidity there is a serious problem, because rigidity lacks humanity.

Finally, I would like to suggest to you a few ideas about the four dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. And these four dimensions go together, and one implements the other: the human dimension, the spiritual dimension, the intellectual dimension and the pastoral dimension. First of all, do not distance yourselves from your humanity, do not leave the complexity of your inner world, your feelings and affections outside the door of the seminary: do not leave them outside; do not shut yourselves away when you are experiencing a moment of crisis or weakness: it is precisely humanity that needs to be spoken of. Open yourselves up sincerely to your formators, resisting all forms of inner falsehood. Those who have the face of Blessed Imelda but who are a disaster inside: no, this is inner falsehood. Do not be an angel, no. Cultivate clean,

joyful, liberating human relationships, full, capable of friendship, capable of feelings, capable of fruitfulness.

Spiritual dimension, spirituality: let prayer not be ritualistic - the rigid end up in ritualism, always; let prayer be an opportunity for a personal encounter with God. And if you get angry with God, do it: because getting angry with Father is a way of communicating love. Don't be afraid: He understands that language, he is father - a personal encounter with God, of dialogue and trust with Him. Be vigilant lest the liturgy and community prayer become a celebration of ourselves. I once went to buy shirts - when I could still go out, but not now - in a church clothes shop. There was a young man, a seminarian or priest, looking for clothes. I looked at him: he was looking at himself in the mirror. And this sentence came to me: this one is celebrating himself, and he will do the same in front of the altar. Please, let every liturgical celebration not be a celebration of ourselves. Enrich your prayers with faces, feel that you are intercessors for the world even now.

Study - the third dimension - will help you to enter with awareness and competence into the complexity of contemporary culture and thought, not to be afraid of it, not to be hostile to it. Do not be afraid. "But, Father, we are living in a time marked by atheistic thinking" - But, you must understand it, you must engage in dialogue and you must proclaim your faith and proclaim Jesus Christ to this world, to this way of thinking. It is there that the wisdom of the Gospel must be incarnated. And the challenge of the mission that awaits you requires, today more than ever, competence and preparation. Today more than ever: you need study, competence, preparation to speak to this world.

And *pastoral formation*, the fourth dimension, drives you to go towards the people with enthusiasm. One becomes a priest to serve the people of God, to take care of the wounds of all, especially the poor. Availability to others: this is the sure proof of the "yes" to God. And no clericalism, as I have already said. Being Jesus' disciples means being free of oneself, and conforming to His same sentiments, to He who came "not to be served but to serve" (cf. *Mk 10: 45*).

The true pastor does not detach himself from the people of God: he is of the people of God, or before them – in front of them, to show the way, or in the middle, to understand them better, or behind, to help those who are too far behind, and also to let the people, the flock, to show by intuition where there are new pastures. The true shepherd must constantly move in these three places: in front, in the middle and behind. Sometimes, I see books or congresses on the priesthood that touch on this, this aspect, that other, that other, that other. It is true, you have to study all this, but if all these aspects are not rooted in your belonging to the holy faithful people of God, they are only academic reflections that are of no use. You are a priest of God's holy faithful people, you are a priest because you have the baptismal priesthood and you cannot deny that.

Lastly, I would like to thank your Pastors - you and your colleagues: thank you - and your diocesan communities for the witness of ecclesial communion, given by the choice of making the most of the interdiocesan and regional institution of the Seminary. And also out of necessity, because a diocese that has four seminarians cannot have a seminary with four or five or six seminarians: it needs the community. At a time in history when we are witnessing - both outside and inside the Church – "parochial" closures, your experience of communion is also a fine example for other dioceses which, by sharing a common formation project, will be helped to find trainers and teachers suited to the great challenge of vocational accompaniment.

And one last thing. In these four dimensions - intellectual, pastoral, communitarian and spiritual - you will have professors, formators, spiritual directors and you must speak with them. But look for the old priests in your dioceses, those who have the wisdom of good wine, those who, through their witness, will teach you how to solve pastoral problems, those who, as parish priests, knew the names of everyone, of each one of their faithful, even the name of the dogs: one of them told me this. But how could you - I said - know the names of four parishes? "No, yes, you can", he told me humbly. But did you get to know everyone? "Yes, I knew everyone's name, even the dogs' names". How good! A priest so close, and also so close to the tabernacle: he looked at everyone with faith and patience in Jesus. Old priests who have carried so many people's problems on their shoulders and helped everyone to live more or less well. Talk to these priests, who are the treasure of the Church. So many of them are sometimes forgotten or in a retirement home: go and see them. They are a treasure.

May Saint Joseph accompany you and may Our Lady keep you. I bless you and you, please, pray for me, because this work is not at all easy! Thank you.
