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Address of the Holy Father to bishops and priests of Sicily

Today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the bishops and priests of Sicily, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers,

I am happy to meet you. I recall with joy my trip to Piazza Armerina and Palermo: I have not forgotten it. I thank Msgr. Antonino Raspanti for the words he addressed to me on behalf of you all. Keeping in mind the reality he has presented, I would like to share some reflections with you. Another place I have not forgotten, of my journeys, is Agrigento, the first I made, faced with the tragedy of Lampedusa.

The epoch change in which we find ourselves living demands courageous decisions, considered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. This change places great pressure, above all, on social and emotional bonds, as the pandemic has even more clearly shown. The responsible attitude with which it is to be lived, as in other historical phases, is to welcome it with awareness and with a “trusting acceptance of reality, anchored in the wise and living Tradition of the Church, which enables us to put out into the deep *without fear*” (Address to the Symposium “*For a fundamental theology of the priesthood*”, 17 February 2022).

Sicily is not excluded from this change; on the contrary, as has happened in the past, she finds herself at the centre of the historical pathways drawn by continental populations. She has frequently received the passage of these peoples, some as rulers, some as migrants, and by welcoming them, has integrated them into her fabric, developing a culture of her own. I remember when, around forty years ago, I was shown a film on Sicily: “Kaos”, it was called. There were four tales by Pirandello, the great Sicilian. I was struck by that beauty, that culture, that “continental insularity”, let’s call it... But this does not mean that it is a happy island, since the condition of insularity profoundly affects Sicilian society, and ends up highlighting the contradictions we carry within ourselves. It is true that in Sicily we witness behaviour and gestures both of great virtue and of cruel brutality.

Just as, alongside masterpieces of extraordinary artistic beauty, we witness scenes of mortifying neglect. And equally, next to men and women of great culture, many children and young people skip school and remain left out of a dignified human life. Sicilian daily life takes on strong hues, such as the intense colours of the sky and flowers, fields and the sea, which shine in the strength of the sun's radiance. Not by chance, a great deal of blood has been shed at the hand of the violent, but also through the humble and heroic resistance of the saints and the just, servants of the Church and of the State.

The current social situation in Sicily has been in sharp regression for years; a precise sign is the depopulation of the island, due both to the falling birth rate and the massive emigration of young people. Distrust in institutions reaches high levels and the dysfunction of services hinders the performance of daily tasks, as well as the efforts of valid and honest people, who would like to engage and change the system. It is necessary to understand how and in what direction Sicily is experiencing the epoch change and what paths she could take, in order to proclaim, in the fractures and joints of this change, the Gospel of Christ.

Such a task, while entrusted to the entire people of God, demands full, total and exclusive service on the part of us priests and bishops. In the face of this great challenge, the Church is also affected by the general situation with its burdens and transformations, registering a decline in vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, but in particular a growing detachment of young people. Young people are finding it hard to perceive in parishes and ecclesial movements a help in their search for the meaning of life; and they do not always perceive there the clear distancing from old, erroneous and even immoral ways of acting in order to take decisively the path of justice and honesty. I was grieved to receive in my hands some files from the Roman Congregations with judgements on priests and people of the Church. How, how did it come to this path of injustice and dishonesty?

There has been no lack, however, in the past, and there is still no shortage today, of figures of priests and faithful who fully embrace the fate of the Sicilian people: how can we fail to recall Blessed Don Pino Puglisi and Rosario Livatino, but also lesser-known people, women and men who have lived faithfulness to Christ and to the people in every state of life? How can we ignore the silent work, tenacious and loving, of so many priests in the midst of disheartened or unemployed people, in the midst of children or the increasingly lonely elderly? And speaking of priests who are close to the elderly, I received some time ago a letter from one of your priests, who told me how he had accompanied the old parish priest in the last part of his life, up to the final moment. He returned exhausted from work, but the first thing he did was to go to the "old man" and tell him things, make him happy, and then help him to bed, accompanying him until he fell asleep... These are great, important gestures! And this greatness is among you, in your clergy. The priestly figure in the midst of the people is important, because in Sicily, people still look to priests as spiritual and moral guides, people who can also help improve the civil and social life of the island, support the family and be a reference for growing young people. The Sicilian people's expectation of priests is high and demanding.

Faced with the awareness of our weaknesses, we know that Christ's will places us at the heart of this challenge. The key to all is in his call, on which we can lean in order to put out to sea and cast our nets once again. We do not even know ourselves, but if we return to the call, we cannot ignore that Face who has met us and drawn us behind him, even united to him, as our tradition teaches when it affirms that in the liturgy, we even act "*in persona Christi*". We cannot limit this full unity, this identification, to celebration, but rather we must live it fully in every instant of life, recalling the words of the apostle Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2:20*).

If, then, in the sentiment of the people of Sicily, bitterness and disappointment prevail on account of the distance that separates her from the richest and most evolved areas of the country and of Europe; if many people, especially the young, aspire to go away in order to find richer and more comfortable standards of living, while those who remain carry within them feelings of frustration; then there is all the more reason why we pastors are called to *embrace fully the life of this people*. Let us not forget the prophets of Israel, who remained faithful to the people because of God's faithfulness to the covenant, and followed them into exile. Just as the wise and pious sustained the faithful people in the diaspora. Staying beside people, being close to them: this is what we are required to live, out of God's faithfulness: out of love for him we stand by to the very end, to the extreme consequences, when circumstances of justice, reconciliation, honesty and forgiveness lead to them. Closeness, compassion and tenderness: this is God's style and it is also the pastor's style.

The Lord himself said, "Tell me, which nation has its gods as close to them as I am to you?" Closeness, which is compassionate, forgives everything, it is tender. It embraces, it caresses.

In the current time, wearisome for the people of God in Sicily, priests draw this form of life daily from the Eucharist. I said, speaking with you in Palermo four years ago: "The words of the Institution outline our priestly identity: they remind us that the priest is a man of the gift, of the gift of self, every day, without leave and without rest. Because ours, dear priests, is not a profession, but a donation; not an occupation, which may serve to pursue a career, but rather a mission" (*Address to the clergy, religious and seminarians*, 15 September 2018). And please, beware of careerism: it is a mistaken road that disappoints in the end, it disappoints in the end. And it leaves you alone, lost.

And then the great Marian devotion of Sicily, consecrated to Mary Immaculate, inspires you; this is why together, bishops and priests, you have made a habit of celebrating a Marian Priestly Day: continue with this. The first value that is underlined with this practice is that of unity, truly crucial in the face of individualism and fragmentation, if not the division that threatens us all. Unity, the gift of the Paschal sacrifice of Jesus, is strengthened with the method of synodality, which you too have adopted through the formative courses based on the theme "With a synodal step". In the various initiatives for the regional formation of the clergy, you have made a beautiful proposal to carry out exercises of synodality, enlivening priestly fraternity and paternity, of "walking together" reciprocally narrating human and spiritual experiences, with gratitude and wonder at the steps taken with the help of the Spirit. A pathway that demands openness to the surprises of God in our life and in the existential junctures of our communities, with the awareness that through humble and sincere listening, we can live a discernment that reaches the heart and alters us inwardly.

The other value is that of entrustment to Mary, woman of tenderness and consolation, patience and compassion. Between the priest and the heavenly Mother, a dialogue unfolds day after day that comforts and heals every wound, that above all alleviates the highs and lows of daily life that he encounters. In this simple dialogue, made up of gazes and humble words such as those of the Rosary, the priest discovers how the pearl of the virginity of Mary, totally devoted to God, makes her a tender mother to all. Thus, he too, almost unbeknownst to him, sees the fruitfulness of celibacy, at times tiring to pursue, but precious and rich in its transparency.

I would not like to end without mentioning something that worries me, worries me quite a lot. I wonder: the reform that the Council has initiated, how is it going among you? Popular piety is a great wealth and we must safeguard it, accompany it so that it is not lost. We must also educate it. On this matter, read no. 48 of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, which has full relevance, what Saint Paul VI told us about popular piety: free it from all superstitious gestures and take the substance it has within. But the liturgy, how does it go? And there I don't know, because I don't go to Mass in Sicily and I don't know how Sicilian priests preach, whether they preach as was suggested in *Evangelii gaudium* or whether they preach in such a way that people go out for a cigarette and then come back... Those sermons in which they talk about everything and nothing. Keep in mind that after eight minutes the attention wanes, and people want substance. A thought, a feeling and an image, and they carry that throughout the week. But how do they celebrate? I don't go to Mass there, but I have seen pictures. I speak clearly. But dear friends, there is still the lace, the coins... but where are we? Sixty years after the Council! Some updating even in liturgical art, in liturgical "fashion"! Yes, sometimes bringing some of grandma's lace is fine, but only sometimes. It is to pay homage to the grandmother, no? You understand, don't you? You understand. It is nice to pay homage to the grandmother, but it is better to celebrate the mother, the holy mother Church, and how the mother Church wants to be celebrated. And do not let insularity impede the true liturgical reform that the Council sent forth. And do not remain quietists.

Dear brothers, I thank you so much for your visit. I bless you and bless your communities. Please do not forget to pray for me, for I need it.

Another thing... I say this not only for Sicily, this is universal: one of the things that destroy ecclesial life, both in the diocese and the parish, is gossip, the gossip that goes together with ambition. I will give you a text written by an apostolic nuncio on gossip: he calls it the "abused word". We aren't able to get rid of gossip, even after a meeting: hello, we greet each other, and it begins: "Have you heard what he said, and him, and him...". Gossip

is a plague that destroys the Church, destroys communities, destroys belonging, destroys the personality. And I like the image on the cover – you will see it because I will give one to each of you – there is the sign of the finger, which is the sign of identity, and one who removes it, because with gossip one removes identity, one removes belonging: this is what gossip does, with us.

I am sorry if I preach these things that sound like something for the First Communion, but they are essential things: don't forget them!

Now I will give you the blessing.
