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## Letter of the Holy Father to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome

The following is the letter sent by the Holy Father Francis to the priests of the diocese of Rome:

### Letter of the Holy Father

Dear brother priests,

I would like to reach out to you with a thought of accompaniment and friendship, which I hope will sustain you as you carry out your ministry, with its load of joys and labours, hopes and disappointments. We need to exchange glances full of care and compassion, learning from Jesus who looked at the apostles this way, not demanding from them a schedule dictated by the criterion of efficiency, but offering care and refreshment. Thus, when the apostles returned from their mission, enthusiastic but tired, the Master said to them: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (*Mk 6:31*).

I think of you, at this time at which there can be, along with the summer activities, also a little rest after the pastoral labours of the past months. And first of all I would like to reiterate my thanks: “Thank you for your witness and for your service. Thank you for the hidden good you do, and for the forgiveness and consolation that you bestow in God’s name. ... Thank you for your ministry, which is often carried out with great effort, with little recognition and is not always understood” (*Homily for Chrism Mass, 6 April 2023*).

Besides, our priestly ministry is not measured by pastoral successes (the Lord himself had fewer and fewer of them as time went by!). At the heart of our life is not even the frenzy of activity, but remaining in the Lord to bear fruit (cf. *Jn 15*). He is our refreshment (cf. *Mt 11:28-29*). And the tenderness that comforts us springs from His mercy, from welcoming the “*magis*” of His grace, which allows us to go ahead in our apostolic work, to bear failures and setbacks, to rejoice with simplicity of heart, to be meek and patient, to always start again and begin again, to reach out to others. Indeed, our necessary “recharging moments” occur not only when we rest physically and spiritually, but also when we open ourselves to fraternal encounter between ourselves: fraternity comforts, it offers spaces for inner freedom and prevents us from feeling alone in the face of the challenges of

the ministry.

It is with this spirit that I write to you. I feel I am journeying with you, and I would like to make you feel that I am close to you in joys and sorrows, in plans and hardships, in bitterness and in pastoral consolations. Above all, I share with you the desire for communion, affective and effective, while I offer my daily prayer that this, our Mother Church of Rome, called to preside in charity, may cultivate the precious gift of communion first and foremost in herself, making it germinate in the various realities and sensibilities of which she is composed. May the Church of Rome be for everyone an example of compassion and hope, with her pastors always, truly always, ready and willing to extend God's forgiveness, as channels of mercy that quench the thirst of today's humanity.

And now, dear brothers, I wonder: in this time of ours, what does the Lord ask of us, where are we led by the Spirit that has anointed us and sent us as apostles of the Gospel? In prayer this comes back to me: that God asks us to go all the way in the fight against *spiritual worldliness*. Father Henri de Lubac, in a few pages of a text that I invite you to read, defined spiritual worldliness as "the greatest danger for the Church - for us, who are the Church - the most perfidious temptation, the one that always resurfaces, insidiously, when the others are vanquished". And he added words that seem to me to hit the nail on the head: "If this spiritual worldliness were to invade the Church and work to corrupt it by undermining its very principle, it would be infinitely more disastrous than any simply moral worldliness" (*Meditation on the Church*, Milan 1965, 470).

They are things I have recalled on other occasions, but I would like to reiterate them, considering them a priority: spiritual worldliness, in fact, is dangerous because it is a way of life that reduces spirituality to an appearance: it leads us to be "traders of the spirit", men clothed in sacred forms that in reality continue to think and act according to the fashions of the world. This happens when we allow ourselves to be fascinated by the seductions of the ephemeral, by mediocrity and habit, by the temptations of power and social influence. And, again, by vainglory and narcissism, by doctrinal intransigence and liturgical aestheticism, forms and ways in which worldliness "hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church", but in reality "consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 93). How can we fail to recognise in all this the updated version of that hypocritical formalism, which Jesus saw in certain religious authorities of the time and which in the course of his public life made him suffer perhaps more than anything else?

Spiritual worldliness is a "gentle" temptation and for this reason even more insidious. Indeed, it seeps in, well aware of how to hide behind good appearances, even within "religious" motivations. And, even if we recognise it and banish it from us, sooner or later it presents itself again, disguised in a different fashion. As Jesus says in the Gospel: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (*Lk 11: 24-26*). We need inner vigilance, to safeguard our minds and hearts, to feed in us the purifying flame of the Spirit, because worldly temptations return and "knock" politely: "they are 'elegant demons': they enter smoothly, without our ever being conscious of them" (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 2022).

However, I would like to dwell on an aspect of this worldliness. When it enters the heart of pastors, it takes on a specific form, that of clericalism. Forgive me for repeating it, but as priests I think you understand me, because you too share what you believe in a heartfelt way, in accordance with that good, typically Roman (Romanesque!) trait, whereby sincerity of the lips comes from the heart, and has the flavour of the heart! And I, as an elderly man and from the heart, want to tell you that it worries me when we lapse into forms of clericalism; when, perhaps without realising it, we let people see that we are superior, privileged, placed "above" and therefore separated from the rest of God's holy people. As a good priest once wrote to me, "clericalism is a symptom of a priestly and lay life tempted to live out the role and not the real bond with God and brethren". In short, it denotes a disease that causes us to lose the memory of the Baptism we have received, leaving in the background our belonging to the same Holy People and leading us to live authority in the various forms of power, without realising the duplicity, without humility but with detached and haughty attitudes.

To free ourselves from this temptation, it is good for us to listen to what the prophet Ezekiel says to the shepherds: “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them” (34:3-4). It speaks of “fat” and “wool”, that which nourishes and warms; the risk that the Word places before us is therefore that of nourishing ourselves and our own interests, providing ourselves with a comfortable life.

Certainly, as Saint Augustine affirms, the pastor must also live thanks to the support offered by the milk of his flock; but as the Bishop of Hippo comments: “Let them take from the milk of their sheep, let them receive what is necessary for their needs, but let them not neglect the weakness of the sheep. Let them not seek any benefit for themselves, lest they appear to be preaching the Gospel for the sake of their own need and privation; rather, let them provide the light of the true word for the sake of men’s enlightenment” (*Sermon on pastors*, 46.5). Similarly, Augustine speaks of wool, associating it with honours: the wool, which covers the sheep, can make us think of everything we can adorn ourselves with outwardly, seeking the praise of men, prestige, fame, wealth. The great Latin father writes: “One who gives wool gives honour. These are precisely the two things that pastors, who feed themselves and not the sheep, look for from the people – the benefit of having their wants supplied as well as the favour of honour and praise” (*ibid.*, 46.6). When we are concerned only with milk, we think of our personal gain; when we obsessively seek wool, we think of cultivating our image and increasing our success. And in this way we lose the priestly spirit, the zeal for service, the longing for the care of the people, and we end up reasoning according to worldly foolishness: “What has this to do with me? Let everyone do what he will; my sustenance is safe, and my honor too. I have enough milk and wool, so let each one do as he likes” (*ibid.*, 46.7).

Concern, then, focuses on the “I”: one’s own sustenance, one’s own needs, the praise received for oneself instead of for the glory of God. This happens in the life of those who slip into clericalism: they lose the spirit of *praise* because they have lost the sense of grace, the wonder at the *gratuitousness* with which God loves them, that trustful simplicity of the heart that makes us reach out our hands towards the Lord, awaiting food from Him at the right time (cf. *Pss* 104:27), aware that without Him we can do nothing (cf. *Jn* 15:5). Only when we live in this gratuitousness, can we live the ministry and pastoral relations in the spirit of service, in accordance with Jesus’ words: “You received without pay, give without pay” (*Mt* 10:8).

We need to look precisely to Jesus, to the compassion with which He sees our wounded humanity, to the gratuitousness with which He offered His life for us on the cross. Here is the daily antidote to worldliness and to clericalism: to look at the crucified Jesus, to fix our eyes every day on He who emptied Himself and humbled Himself unto death (cf. *Phil* 2:7-8). He accepted humiliation to raise us up from our falls and to free us from the power of evil. In this way, looking at Jesus’ wounds, looking at Him humbled, we learn that we are called to offer ourselves, to make ourselves broken bread for the hungry, to share the journey with the weary and oppressed. This is the priestly spirit: making ourselves servants of the People of God and not masters, washing the feet of our brethren and not trampling them underfoot.

Let us therefore remain vigilant against clericalism. May the Apostle Peter, who, as tradition reminds us, even at the moment of death humbled himself upside down in order to be equal to his Lord, help us to stay away from it. May the Apostle Paul, who, because of Christ the Lord, considered all the gains of life and the world to be refuse (cf. *Phil* 3:8), preserve us from it.

Clericalism, we know, can affect everyone, even the laity and pastoral workers: indeed, one can assume a “clerical spirit” in carrying out ministries and charisms, living one’s own calling in an elitist way, wrapped up in one’s own group and erecting walls against the outside, developing possessive bonds with regard to roles in the community, cultivating arrogant and boastful attitudes towards others. And the symptoms are indeed the loss of the spirit of praise and joyful gratuitousness, while the devil creeps in by nurturing complaining, negativity and chronic dissatisfaction with what is wrong, irony becoming cynicism. But, in this way, we let ourselves be absorbed by the climate of criticism and anger that we breathe around us, instead of being those who, with evangelical simplicity and meekness, with kindness and respect, help our brothers and sisters emerge from the quicksand of impatience.

In all this, in our frailties and inadequacies, as well as in today's crisis of faith, let us not be discouraged! De Lubac concluded by stating that the Church, "even today, despite all our obscurities [...] is, like the Virgin, the Sacrament of Jesus Christ. No infidelity of ours can prevent her from being 'the Church of God', 'the handmaid of the Lord'" (*Meditation on the Church*, cit., 472).

Brothers, this is the hope that sustains our steps, lightens our burdens, and gives new impetus to our ministry. Let us roll up our sleeves and bend our knees (you who can!): let us pray to the Spirit for one another, let us ask him to help us not to fall, in our personal lives as well as in pastoral action, into that religious appearance full of many things but empty of God, so as not to be functionaries of the sacred, but passionate proclaimers of the Gospel, not "clerics of state", but pastors of the people. We need personal and pastoral conversion. As Father Congar said, it is not a matter of bringing back good observance or reforming external ceremonies, but rather of returning to the sources of the Gospel, of discovering fresh energies to overcome habits, of injecting a new spirit into the old ecclesial institutions, so that we do not end up being a Church "rich in its authority and security, but little apostolic and mediocresly evangelical" (*Vera e falsa riforma della Chiesa*, Milan 1972, 146).

Thank you for the welcome you will give to these words of mine, meditating on them in prayer and before Jesus in daily adoration; I can tell you that they have come to me from my heart and from the affection I have for you. Let us move forward with enthusiasm and courage: let us work together, among priests and with our lay brothers and sisters, initiating synodal forms and paths, which will help us to strip ourselves of our worldly and "clerical" certainties in order to humbly seek pastoral paths inspired by the Spirit, so that the Lord's consolation may truly reach everyone. Before the image of *Salus Populi Romani* I prayed for you. I asked Our Lady to guard and protect you, to dry your secretly-shed tears, to rekindle in you the joy of ministry and to make you every day pastors in love with Jesus, ready to give their lives without measure for love of Him. Thank you for what you do and for what you are. I bless you and accompany you in prayer. And, please, do not forget to pray for me.

Fraternally,

*Lisbon, 5 August 2023, Memorial of the Dedication of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.*

FRANCIS

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