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Audience with the participants in the 75 th Convention of “Serra International”

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At 12.30 today, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 75th Convention of “Serra International” on the theme: “*Siempre adelante. The courage of vocation*”, currently underway in Rome from 22 to 25 June 2017.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present at the audience:

Holy Father’s Address

Your Eminence, Your Excellency,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet all of you. From throughout the world you have gathered for this International Convention, which has as its theme: “*Siempre adelante. The courage of vocation*”. In the joy of the Gospel, and with that boldness typical of the Christian mission, you have gathered here to discover anew, at the school of the Master, the meaning of every Christian vocation: to offer our lives as a gift, “anointing” our brothers and sisters with the tenderness and mercy of God. I thank Mr Dante Vannini, the President of Serra International, for his kind words. I would like to reflect on something he said which, I believe, is central to the experience of faith: to be friends.

To be friends to priests, sustaining their vocation and accompanying them in their ministry: with this great gift you enrich the Church! This is, above all else, what a Serran is – a “special friend” whom the Lord has brought into the lives of seminarians and priests.

Today the word “friend” has become a bit overused. In our daily lives, we run into various people whom we call

“friends”, but that is just a word we say. Within virtual communications, “friend” is one of the most frequently found words. Yet we know that superficial knowledge has little to do with that experience of encounter or closeness evoked by the word “friend”.

When Jesus speaks of his “friends”, He points to a hard truth: true friendship involves an encounter that draws me so near to the other person that I give something of my very self. Jesus says to His disciples: “No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (*Jn 15:15*). He thus establishes a new relationship between man and God, one that transcends the law and is grounded in trust and love. At the same time, Jesus frees friendship from sentimentalism and presents it to us as a responsibility that embraces our entire life: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn 15:13*).

We become friends, then, only if our encounter is more than something outward or formal, and becomes instead a way of sharing in the life of another person, an experience of compassion, a relationship that involves giving ourselves for others.

It is good for us to reflect on what friends do. They stand at our side, gently and tenderly, along our journey; they listen to us closely, and can see beyond mere words; they are merciful when faced with our faults; they are non-judgmental. They are able to walk with us, helping us to feel joy in knowing that we are not alone. They do not always indulge us but, precisely because they love us, they honestly tell us when they disagree. They are there to pick us up whenever we fall.

This is also the kind of friendship that you seek to offer to priests. The Serra Club helps foster this beautiful vocation of being laity who are friends to priests. Friends who know how to accompany and sustain them in faith, in fidelity to prayer and apostolic commitment. Friends who share the wonder of a vocation, the courage of a definitive decision, the joy and fatigue of ministry. Friends who can offer priests support and regard their generous efforts and human failings with understanding and tender love. In this way, you are to priests like the home of Bethany, where Jesus entrusted his weariness to Martha and Mary, and, thanks to their care, was able to find rest and refreshment.

There is another phrase that describes you. You chose it for the theme of this convention: *Siempre adelante!* Keep moving forward! Like you, I believe that this is a synonym for the Christian vocation. For the life of every missionary disciple bears the impress of his or her vocation. The voice of the Lord invites his disciples to leave the safety of their homeland and to begin the “holy journey” towards the promised land of encounter with him and with our brothers and sisters. Vocation is an invitation to go forth from ourselves, to rejoice in our relationship with the Lord, and to journey along the ways that he opens up before us.

Of course, we cannot make progress unless we take a risk. We do not advance toward the goal if, as the Gospel says, we are afraid to lose our lives (cf. *Mt 16:25-26*). No ship would ever set out into the deep if it feared leaving the safety of the harbour. So too, Christians cannot enter into the transforming experience of God’s love unless they are open to new possibilities, and not tied to their own plans and cherished ways of doing things. Pastoral structures can fall into this same temptation, being concerned more with self-preservation than with adapting themselves to the service of the Gospel.

On the other hand, when Christians go about their daily lives without fear, they can discover God’s constant surprises. They need but have the courage to dare, not to let fear stifle their creativity, not to be suspicious of new things, but instead to embrace the challenges which the Spirit sets before them, even when this means changing plans and charting a different course.

We can take as our inspiration Saint Junípero, as he made his way, limping, towards San Diego to plant the cross there! I fear those Christians who do not keep walking, but remain enclosed in their own little niche. It is better to go forward limping, and even at times to fall, while always trusting in the mercy of God, than to be “museum Christians” who are afraid of change. Even though they received a charism or vocation, instead of serving the eternal newness of the Gospel, they are caught up in defending themselves and their own roles.

A vocation is a calling received from an Other. It entails letting go of ourselves, setting out and placing ourselves at the service of a greater cause. In humility, we become co-workers in the Lord's vineyard, renouncing every spirit of possession and vainglory. How sad it is to see that at times we, men and women of the Church, do not know how to cede our place. We do not let go of our responsibilities serenely, but find it hard to hand over to others the works that the Lord had entrusted to us!

So you too, *siempre adelante!* With courage, creativity and boldness. Do not be afraid to renew your structures. Do not rest on your laurels, but be ever ready to try new things. As in the Olympic Games, may you always be ready to "pass the torch", above all to future generations, knowing that the flame is lit from on high, precedes our response and exceeds our efforts. Such is the Christian mission: "One sows and another reaps" (*Jn 4:37*).

Dear brothers and sisters, I encourage you to be true friends to seminarians and priests, showing your love for them by promoting vocations and through prayer and pastoral cooperation. Please, keep pressing forward! Forward in hope, forward with your mission, ever looking beyond, opening new horizons, making room for the young and preparing the future. The Church and priestly vocations need you. May Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church and Mother of priests, be with you every step of the way. And I ask you, please, to pray for me!
