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Audience with participants in the First International Convention of Rectors and Pastoral Workers of Shrines

From 27 to 29 November, at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, the First International Convention of Rectors and Pastoral Workers of Shrines was held, on the theme *The Shrine: open door for new evangelization*. At the end of the convention, at 11.45 today, in the Sala Regia of the Apostolic Palace, the Pope received in audience the participants in the Convention and gave the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I have been waiting for this moment, which allows me to meet many representatives of the countless Shrines scattered in every region of the world. How much we need the Shrines in the daily journey of the Church! They are the place where our people most willingly gather to express their faith in simplicity, and according to the various traditions that have been learned since childhood. In many ways, our Shrines are irreplaceable because they keep popular piety alive, enriching it with a catechetical formation that sustains and reinforces the faith and at the same time nurtures the testimony of charity. This is very important: keep popular piety alive and do not forget the jewel that is number 48 of *Evangelii nuntiandi*, where Saint Paul VI changed the name from “popular religiosity” to “popular piety”. It is a gem. That is the inspiration of popular piety which, as an Italian bishop once said, “is the immune system of the Church”. It saves us from many things.

I thank Archbishop Rino Fisichella for the words with which he introduced our meeting, and which offer me the opportunity for some considerations.

I think, first of all, of the importance of the hospitality that is to be reserved for pilgrims. We know that increasingly often our Shrines are a destination not of organized groups, but of individual pilgrims or autonomous groups who set out to reach these holy places. It is sad when it happens that, on their arrival, there is no one to give them a word of welcome and to receive them as pilgrims who have made a journey, often long, to reach the

Sanctuary. And worse still is when they find the door closed! It must not happen that more attention is paid to material and financial needs, forgetting that the most important reality is the pilgrims. They are the ones that count. The bread comes later, but first them. We must take care to ensure that each one feels “at home”, like a long awaited family member who has finally arrived.

We must also consider that many people visit the Sanctuary because it belongs to the local tradition; sometimes because its works of art are an attraction; or because it is located in a natural environment of great beauty and charm. These people, when they are welcomed, become more willing to open their hearts and to allow it to be shaped by grace. A climate of friendship is a fertile seed that our Shrines can throw into the soil of the pilgrims, allowing them to rediscover that trust in the Church that sometimes may have been diminished by indifference.

The Sanctuary is above all – the second thing – a place of prayer. Most of our shrines are dedicated to Marian piety. Here the Virgin Mary opens the arms of her maternal love to listen to the prayer of each person and to fulfil it. The feelings that every pilgrim has in the depths of his heart are those that he finds also in the Mother of God. Here she smiles, giving consolation. Here she sheds tears with those who cry. Here she presents to each one the Son of God held tight in her arms as the most precious good that every mother possesses. Here Mary becomes the companion on the path of every person who raises their eyes to her asking for grace, certain it will be granted. The Virgin responds to everyone with the intensity of her gaze, which artists have been able to paint, often guided in turn from above in contemplation.

With regard to prayer in the Shrines, I would like to underline two requirements. First of all, to encourage the prayer of the Church that makes salvation present and efficacious with the celebration of the sacraments. This allows anyone present in the Shrine to feel part of a larger community that from every part of the earth professes the one faith, witnesses the same love and lives the same hope. Many Shrines have arisen precisely because of the request for prayer that the Virgin Mary has addressed to the seer, so that the Church never forgets the words of the Lord Jesus to pray without interruption (cf. *Lk 18: 1*) and to remain always vigilant in awaiting His return (cf. *Mk 14:28*).

Moreover, the Shrines are called to nurture the prayer of the *individual pilgrim in the silence of his heart*. With the words of the heart, with silence, with formulas learned by heart as a child, with gestures of piety ... everyone must be able to be helped to express his personal prayer. Many come to the Shrine because they need to receive a grace, and then return to thank them for having experienced it, often for having received strength and peace in difficulty. This prayer makes the Shrines fruitful places, because the piety of the people is always nourished and grows in the knowledge of God's love.

No one in our Shrines should feel like a stranger, especially when he comes to us with the weight of his own sin. And here I would like to make the last consideration: the Sanctuary is a privileged place to experience *mercy* that knows no limits. This is one of the reasons that led me to want the “Door of mercy” also to be in the Shrines during the Extraordinary Jubilee. In fact, when mercy is lived, it becomes a form of real evangelization, because it transforms those who receive mercy into witnesses of mercy. In the first place, the *sacrament of Reconciliation*, which is so often celebrated in the Shrines, needs well-formed, holy, merciful priests who are able to make one savour the true encounter with the forgiving Lord. I hope that especially in the Shrines the figure of the “Missionary of Mercy” will never be lacking – if in some sanctuary it is not present, ask at the dicastery – as a faithful witness of the love of the Father Who extends His arms to all and approaches them happily, for having found again those who had strayed (cf. *Lk 15: 11-32*). Finally, the works of mercy demand to be lived in a particular way in our Shrines, because in them generosity and charity are realized in a natural and spontaneous way as acts of obedience and love to the Lord Jesus and to the Virgin Mary.

Dear brothers and sisters, I ask the Mother of God to support you and accompany you in this great pastoral responsibility entrusted to you. I bless you and I pray for you. And you too, please, do not forget to pray and have others pray for me in your shrines.

And, before finishing, I would like to talk about an experience, an experience of a brother and also mine. The Shrine is a place, so to speak, of encounter not only with the pilgrim, with God, but also of our encounter as

pastors with our people. The liturgy of 2 February tells us that the Lord goes to the Shrine to meet His people, to go out to meet His people, to understand the people of God, without prejudice; the people endowed with that instinct for faith, of that *infallibilitas in credendo* referred to in no. 12 of *Lumen gentium*. This encounter is fundamental. If the pastor who is in the Shrine can not meet the people of God, it is better for the bishop to give him another mission, because he is not suitable for that one; he would suffer greatly and make the people suffer. I remember – and now I come to the anecdote – a professor of literature, a man of great genius. All of his life he was a Jesuit; all of his life he was a professor of literature at a high level.

Then he retired and asked the Provincial: “I am retired, but I would like to do something pastoral in a poor neighbourhood, to have contact with the population, with the people...”. And the Provincial entrusted him with a neighbourhood of very devout people, who went to the Shrines, with this spirit, but very poor, more or less a shantytown. And he had to come once a week to the community of the theology faculty, where I was rector. He spent the whole day with us, in fraternity, then he returned. Thus he maintained his life in the community. And since he was a genius, one day he told me: “You must tell the professor of ecclesiology that he lacks two theories”. “How come?”. “Yes, two theories that he must teach”. “ And what are they?”. “The first: the holy faithful people of God is ontologically Olympic, that is to say that they do what they want; and second: it is metaphysically tedious, that is, it is tiresome”. He understood in the meetings how and why the people of God are tiring. If you are in contact with the people of God, you tire. A pastoral worker who does not get tired leaves me very perplexed! And with regard to the fact that the people are “Olympic”, that is, they do what they want, I remember when I was a master of novices: I went every year – as a provincial with novices – to the Shrine of Salta, in the North of Argentina, to the feasts of the *Señor del Milagro*. Coming out of the Mass – I confessed, during the Mass – there were so many people, and a lady of the people approached another priest with some images of saints: “Father, will be bless them?”, And that priest, a very smart theologian, said: “But madam, have you been to the Mass?” – “Yes” – “And do you know that at Mass there is the sacrifice of Calvary, that Jesus Christ present?” – “Yes, *padrecito*, yes” – “And do you know that all these things are more than blessed?” – “Yes, *padrecito*” – “And do you know that in the final blessing everything is blessed?” – “Yes, *padrecito*”. And at that moment, another priest came out, and the lady said: “Father, will you bless them for me?” And he touched them and blessed them. She got what she wanted: that he touched them. The religious sense of touch. People touch the images, they “touch God”.

Thank you for what you do! And now I will give you my blessing.
