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Audience with participants in the International Conference for the permanent formation of priests

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Conference for the permanent formation of priests, on the theme: “Fan into flame the gift of God that you possess” (2 *Tim* 1:6). *The beauty of being disciples today: a unique, integral, communitarian and missionary formation*, taking place in Rome from 6 to 10 February 2024.

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters!

I thank you very much for this moment that I can spend with you. Thank you for coming to Rome for the international Conference for the ongoing formation of priests organized by the Dicastery for the Clergy, especially its great leader from Korea, and also by the Dicasteries for Evangelization and for the Eastern Churches. I thank the Prefects of those Dicasteries and all those who worked so hard to prepare for this meeting. For many of you, it was not easy to come to Rome. Before all else, though, I want to express my gratitude for all that you are doing in your dioceses and in your countries, and for the service that you provide, which the survey taken in view of this Conference has highlighted.

In these days, you have the grace of being able to share good practices, to discuss challenges and problems, and to reflect on the future of priestly formation in this period of epochal change, constantly looking ahead and ready to lower your nets ever anew at the Lord’s command (cf. *Lk* 5:4-5; *Jn* 21:6). This entails continuing to seek the means and language to further the work of priestly formation, without ever thinking that we already have all the answers – I worry about those who believe they have all the answers – but instead trusting that we can find them as we keep moving forward. In these days, then, I encourage you to listen to one another, and to let yourselves be inspired by the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to Timothy that has provided the theme for your Conference: “*Fan into flame the gift of God that you possess*” (2 *Tim* 1:6). Revive that gift, rediscover that anointing, rekindle that flame, so that your zeal for the apostolic ministry will not fade.

How can we fan into flame the gift that we have received? Let me point out three paths to take in the process of priestly formation: *the joy of the Gospel*, *a sense of being part of God's people*, and *service as "generative"*.

Firstly, *the joy of the Gospel*. At the heart of the Christian life is the gift of friendship with the Lord, which sets us free from the dreariness of individualism and the risk of a life without meaning, without love and without hope. The joy of the Gospel, the Good News that accompanies us, is precisely this: God loves us with a tender and merciful love. We in turn are called to make this joyful proclamation resound throughout the world by the witness of our lives, so that all may discover the beauty of the saving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the dead (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 36). Let us keep in mind the words of Saint Paul VI: we need to be witnesses before being teachers (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41), witnesses to the love of God, the only thing that truly matters. When someone is unable to be a witness, it is truly sad.

Here we find one of the hallmarks of ongoing formation, not only that of priests but of every Christian. It is also emphasized in the *Ratio Fundamentalis*: only if we are and remain disciples can we become ministers of God and missionaries of his Kingdom. Only by welcoming and preserving the joy of the Gospel, can we bring this joy to others. In the work of ongoing formation, then, let us remember that we are always disciples and wayfarers, and that this is the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to us, thanks to God's grace! On the other hand, we find priests who don't have the capacity for service, maybe due to selfishness, or who have taken the "entrepreneurial" path; they have lost that sense of discipleship and instead feel like masters.

Grace, however, always supposes nature, and this calls for an integral human formation. Indeed, being disciples of the Lord is not about exterior religiosity but about a style of life, and this calls for the cultivation of our human qualities. The opposite of this is the "worldly" priest. When worldliness enters the heart of the priest it ruins everything. I would ask you to devote all your energies and resources to this aspect, namely, attention to human formation. It is the cure for living humanely. An old priest once told me: "when a priest is incapable of playing with children, he has lost". It is interesting; it is a test of our humanity. We need priests who are fully human, who can play with children and look after the elderly, are capable of healthy relationships and mature in confronting the challenges of ministry, so that the consolation of the Gospel may reach the people of God through their humanity transformed by the Spirit of Jesus. Let us never forget the humanizing power of the Gospel! Conversely, a bitter priest, a priest who has bitterness in his heart is an "old bachelor".

A second path involves the cultivation of *a sense of being part of God's people*. We can only be missionary disciples *all together*. We can carry out our priestly ministry well only if we are fully part of the priestly people, from which we ourselves have come. Realizing that we are part of a people – never feeling separated from the journey of the holy faithful people of God – preserves us, sustains us in our efforts, accompanies us in our pastoral concerns and keeps us safe from the risk of growing detached from reality and feeling all-powerful. Let us be attentive to this, because it is also the root of every form of abuse.

To foster this immersion in the reality of people's lives, priestly formation should not be conceived as somehow "set apart". Rather, it should draw upon the contribution of the people of God: priests and lay faithful, men and women, celibates and married couples, the elderly and the young, without neglecting the poor and suffering who have so much to teach us. In the Church, there is reciprocity and constant interplay between the various states of life, vocations, ministries and charisms. We need to have a humble wisdom, in order to learn how to journey together and to make synodality a "style" of Christian and priestly life. Especially today, priests are called to exercise a spirit of synodality. Let us always remember this: walking together. The priest, always together with the people to which he belongs, but also with his Bishop and his brother priests. Let us never neglect priestly fraternity! On this aspect of being united with God's people, Paul warns Timothy: "Remember your mother and grandmother". Remember your roots, your history, the history of your family, and the history of your people. A priest is not born spontaneously; either he is of God's people or he is an aristocrat who ends up neurotic.

Finally, a third path to take is that of *service as "generative"*. Service is the identity card of Christ's ministers. The Master showed this by his entire life, and particularly at the Last Supper, when he washed the feet of the disciples. Seen in this light, formation as service is not simply the transmission of a body of teachings, but also the art of concentrating on others, bringing out all their beauty and all the good that they carry within, shedding

light on their gifts but also on their shadows, their wounds and their desires. Consequently, the formation of priests involves serving them, serving their lives, encouraging their journey, assisting them in discernment, accompanying them in their difficulties and supporting them amid pastoral challenges.

A priest formed in this way will then put himself at the service of the people of God, be close to people and, like Jesus on the cross, willingly shoulder responsibility for all. Brothers and sisters, let us gaze upon the cross. From there, by loving us to the end (cf. *Jn 13:1*), the Lord begot a new people. We too, when we put ourselves at the service of others, when we become fathers and mothers for those entrusted to our care, bring God's life to birth. This is the secret of a "*generative*" pastoral activity. It is not centred on us, but generates daughters and sons to new life in Christ and pours the living water of the Gospel on the soil of human hearts and on the times in which we live.

To all of you, I offer you my good wishes. I would like to return and add to something I said earlier, please do not get tired of being merciful. Always forgive. When people come to confession, they come to ask for forgiveness and not to hear a lecture on theology. Please be merciful. Always forgive, because forgiveness has this grace of embracing, of welcoming. I urge you: always forgive. I offer you my good wishes for your Conference. I leave you, then, with these three key words: the *joy of the Gospel*, which is at the basis of our life, *a sense of being part of a people* that watches over us and sustains us as the faithful holy people of God, and *service as "generative"*, which makes us true fathers and pastors. May Our Lady always accompany you. Our Lady gives to us priests one thing: the grace of tenderness. A tenderness that can be witnessed with those in difficulty, the old, the sick and even the smallest babies. Ask for this grace, and don't be afraid to be tender. Tenderness is strength. Thank you!
