



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE PRIESTHOOD

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Dear brothers, good day!

I am grateful to have the opportunity to share with you this reflection on some things that the Lord has gradually helped me to realize over the more than fifty years of my priesthood. In this grateful remembrance, I wish to include all those priests who, by their life and witness, showed me from my earliest years what it means to reflect the face of the Good Shepherd. In thinking about what to share concerning the life of the priest today, I concluded that the best thing is to speak of the witness I have received from so many priests over the years. What I now offer is the fruit of my thoughts about them, and my recognition and appreciation of what it was that distinguished them and gave them singular strength, joy and hope in their pastoral mission.

At the same time, I should also speak of those brother priests whom I have had to accompany because they had lost the flame of their first love and their ministry had become barren, repetitive and almost meaningless. There are different times and situations in the life of every priest. I personally have passed through a variety of times and situations and, in “ruminating” on the movements of the Spirit, I have come to realize that in some of those situations, which included moments of trial, difficulty and desolation, somehow there always remained a sense of peace in my life. I realize we can talk and speculate endlessly on the priesthood, but today I want to share with you this “little album”, so that today’s priests, wherever they find themselves, can experience the peace and fruitfulness that the Spirit desires to bestow. It may be that these reflections are the “swan song” of my own priestly life, but I can assure you that they are the fruit of my own experience. I am speaking about what I have experienced, not any theory.

The times we are living in require us not only to experience change, but to accept it in the realization that ours is a time of epochal change – I have said this many times. If we had any doubts about this, Covid has made it amply evident: indeed, the outbreak of the virus cannot be restricted to a question of medicine and health care; it is much more than a cold.

We can respond in many different ways to the challenge of change. The problem is that while many actions and attitudes can be helpful and good, not all of them have the flavour of the Gospel. Here is the crux of the matter: discerning whether changes and actions have the flavor of the Gospel or not. For example, seeking established ways of doing things, very often anchored in the past, that “guarantee” a sort of protection from risks, sheltering us in the world or a society that no longer exists (if it ever did), as if this determined order could quell the conflicts that history sets before us. That is the crisis of going backwards in order to find shelter.

Another attitude might be that of exaggerated optimism – “Everything will be all right” – moving too far forward without discernment and without taking necessary decisions. This optimism ends up ignoring the pain involved in this transformation and failing to accept the tensions, complexities and ambiguities of the present time, “consecrating” the latest novelty as the ultimate reality and thereby dismissing the wisdom of the years.

Both are a kind of flight. They are the response of the mercenary who sees the wolf coming and runs away: either towards the past or towards the future. Neither can lead to mature solutions. The concrete reality of the present time is where we must stay, there in today’s concrete reality.

I prefer the response born of 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*. At this moment of history, I feel that Jesus is once more inviting us to “put out into the deep” (cf. *Lk 5:4*) trusting that he is the Lord of history and that, with his guidance, we will discern the direction to take. Our salvation is not “aseptic”, the product of a laboratory or a disembodied spiritualism: this is always the temptation of gnosticism, one that is contemporary, that is current. *Discerning the will of God* means learning to view realities with the Lord’s own eyes. It means not evading the realities that our people are experiencing, or anxiously seeking a quick and quiet exit provided by the ideology of the moment or prefabricated answers. Neither of these is capable of dealing with the more difficult and even dark moments of our history. These two paths would lead us to deny “our history as a Church, which is glorious precisely because it is a history of sacrifice, of hopes and daily struggles, of lives spent in service and fidelity to work” (*Evangelii Gaudium, 96*).

These challenges are also affecting the lives of priests; a symptom of this is the vocations crisis experienced by our communities in a number of places. Often, however, this is due to the absence within communities of a contagious apostolic zeal, with the result that they lack enthusiasm and attractiveness: communities, for example, that function and are well-organized yet without enthusiasm, where everything is in place yet without the fire of the Spirit. Where there is life and

fervour, and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations spring up. Even in parishes whose priests are not particularly engaged and joyful, the active and fraternal life of the community can awaken a desire to consecrate one's life entirely to God and to the preaching of the Gospel. This is especially the case if that community prays insistently for vocations and has the courage to propose to its young people a path of special consecration. When we fall into functionalism or pastoral organization – if this becomes the only thing – that does not attract at all. Instead, when the priest or the community has a Christian baptismal fervor, this attracts new vocations.

The life of a priest is above all the salvation history of one baptized person. Cardinal Ouellet has spoken of the distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the baptismal priesthood. At times we forget about baptism, and the priest then becomes a functionary, and the danger of functionalism sets in. We should never forget that each particular vocation, including that of Holy Orders, is a completion of baptism. It is always a great temptation to live *a priesthood without baptism* – and there are some priests “without baptism” – in other words, forgetting that our primary vocation is to holiness. To be holy means to conform ourselves to Jesus, letting our hearts thrill with his same sentiments (cf. *Phil 2:15*). Only when we strive to love others as Jesus does, do we make God visible and fulfil our vocation to holiness. Quite rightly, Saint John Paul II reminded us that, “the priest, like every other member of the Church, ought to grow in the awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, [25 March 1992], 26). And when you say to some Bishops or priests that they need to be evangelized, they don't understand. This happens, this is a tragedy nowadays.

Each specific vocation must be submitted to this kind of discernment. Our vocation is before all else a response to the One who loved us first (cf. *1 Jn 4:19*). This is the source of our hope, for even amid crises, the Lord never ceases to love us and to call us. Each of us can testify to this: one day the Lord found us, where we were and as we were, in uncertain circumstances or complex family situations. I like to re-read Ezekiel 16 and at times see myself: the Lord found me there, he found me in that state, and he led me forward. Yet this did not discourage him from using each of us to write the history of salvation. So it was from the beginning – we can think of Peter, Paul and Matthew, just to name a few. Jesus did not choose them because they were perfect, but because he was concretely committed to each of them. In looking at his own humanity, his own history, his own personality, each of us should ask, not if responding to a vocation is agreeable or not, but whether, in conscience, that vocation brings to light within us the potential for Love that we received on the day of our baptism.

In these changing times, many questions have to be faced and many temptations will arise. In these remarks, I will simply speak about what I consider decisive for the life of a priest today. Saint Paul tells us that, “in Christ, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph 2:21*). Growing in a well-ordered way means growing in harmony, and growth in harmony is something only the Holy Spirit can bring about, for as Saint Basil says so beautifully, “He himself is harmony” (*“Ipse harmonia est”*) [Treatise on the Holy Spirit, No. 38]. Every structure,

to keep standing, needs solid foundations. For this reason, I would like to speak of the attitudes that sustain us as priests. You have heard of these attitudes already, but I will repeat them once more. I will refer to those four pillars of our priestly life as “four forms of closeness”, since they imitate God’s own “style”, which is essentially that of closeness (cf. *Deut 4:7*). God defines himself this way to his people: “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as I am to you?”. God’s style is closeness, a special, compassionate and tender closeness. These are three words that define the life of a priest, and of a Christian as well, because they are taken precisely from God’s style: closeness, compassion and tenderness.

I have mentioned these in the past, but today I would like to discuss them more fully because, more than recipes or theories, priests need concrete tools for exercising their ministry, their mission and their daily activity. Saint Paul exhorted Timothy to rekindle the gift of God that he had received through the laying on of his hands: a spirit not of fear, but of strength, love and self-discipline (cf. *2 Tim 1:6-7*). I am convinced that these four pillars, these four “forms of closeness” that I will speak of now can help us in a practical, concrete and hope-filled way to rekindle the gift and the fruitfulness that were once promised to us, to keep that gift alive.

First of all, closeness to God. Four forms of closeness, the first of which is closeness to God.

Closeness to God

First closeness to God, that is, to the Lord of closeness. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” These words occur when John’s Gospel speaks about “remaining”. “Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (*Jn 15:5-7*).

A priest is called above all to cultivate this closeness, this intimacy with God, and from this relationship, he will be able to draw all the strength needed for his ministry. Our relationship with God is, so to speak, what “grafts” us to him and makes us fruitful. Without a meaningful relationship with the Lord, our ministry will prove fruitless. Closeness to Jesus and daily contact with his word, enables us to measure our life against his, learning not to be scandalized by whatever befalls us and protecting ourselves from “stumbling blocks”. Like the Master, you will experience joy, wedding feasts, miracles and healings, multiplications of loaves and repose, moments of praise. But you will also experience ingratitude, rejection, doubt and solitude, to the point of crying out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mt 27:46*).

Closeness to Jesus makes us unafraid of those times – not because we rely on our own strength but because we look to him, cling to him and cry out: “Lord, keep me from falling into temptation! Make me realize that I am experiencing a critical moment in my life and that you are with me, to

test my faith and my love” (C.M. MARTINI, *Perseverance in Trials. Reflections on Job*, Collegetville, 1996). This closeness to God can sometimes take the form of a struggle: a struggle with the Lord, especially in those moments when his absence is most felt in our own lives and in the lives of the persons entrusted to us. A struggle that lasts through the night, and in the midst of which we ask his blessing (cf. *Gen 32:25-7*), which will be a source of life for many. At times this is a struggle. A priest who works here in the Curia – he is young and has a difficult job, keeping track of things, said to me that he returned home tired, but he took a little rest in front of Our Lady with his rosary in hand before going to bed. This Curial official, this Vatican employee, needed that closeness. To be sure, sometimes people in the Curia are much criticized, but I can also say and bear witness that there truly are saints in the Curia.

Many crises in the priesthood originate precisely in a poor life of prayer, a lack of intimacy with the Lord, the reduction of the spiritual life to mere religious practice. I want to point this out even in formation: the spiritual life is one thing, religious practice is another. “How is your spiritual life going?” “Good, good. I make my meditation in the morning, I pray the rosary, I pray the breviary and all the rest. I’m doing everything. No, this is religious practice. But how is your spiritual life going? I can think of important moments of my own life, where closeness to the Lord proved decisive in sustaining me, sustaining me in dark moments. The intimacy born of prayer, the spiritual life, concrete closeness to God through listening to his word, the celebration of the Eucharist, the silence of adoration, entrustment to Mary, the wise accompaniment of a guide and the sacrament of Reconciliation... Without these concrete “forms of closeness”, a priest is merely a weary hireling who has none of the benefits of the Lord’s friends. In my former diocese, I liked to ask priests: “Tell me,” – they told me about all their work – “Tell me, how do you go to bed?” They did not understand. “Yes, yes, at night, how do you go to bed?” “I come home tired, I have a bite to eat and I go to bed, but before bed, a little television.” “Ah, good! But you don’t stop before the Lord, at least to tell him good night?” This is the problem. A lack of closeness. Being tired from work is normal, going to rest and watching television are legitimate, but without the Lord, without this closeness? Praying the rosary, praying the breviary, but without intimacy with the Lord. Feeling no need to say to the Lord, “Goodbye, until tomorrow, many thanks!” These are little acts that reveal the attitude of a priestly soul.

All too often, for example, in the life of priests, prayer is practiced only as a duty; we forget that friendship and love do not come from following rules, but are a fundamental choice of the heart. The priest who prays remains, ultimately, a Christian who has come to appreciate fully the gift received at baptism. A priest who prays is a son who constantly remembers that he is such, and that he has a Father who loves him deeply. A priest who prays is a son who keeps close to the Lord.

None of this is easy, however, unless we are accustomed to find moments of silence throughout our day and to set aside the activism of Martha in order to learn the quiet contemplation of Mary. We find it hard to give up that activism – and very often activism can be an escape – because

once we stop running around, what we immediately feel is not peace but a kind of emptiness; and in order to keep from feeling that, we are unwilling to slow down. Work is a distraction, in order not to enter into desolation. Yet desolation is a little point of encounter with God. Once we accept the desolation that is born of silence, fast from our activities and words, and find the courage to take a sincere look at ourselves, everything takes on a light and peace no longer based on our own strengths and abilities. We need to learn to let the Lord bring his work to fulfilment in each of us and to “prune” all that is unfruitful, barren or unworthy of our calling. Perseverance in prayer is more than simply remaining faithful to its practice: it means not running away in those times when prayer draws us into the desert. The way of the desert is the way that leads to intimacy with God, provided we do not run away or find ways to avoid this encounter. In the desert “I will speak tenderly to her”, says the Lord to his people through the words of the prophet Hosea (*Hos 2:14*). This is something that a priest must ask himself: if he is able to let himself be led into the desert. Spiritual guides who accompany priests have to understand and help them and pose this question: are you able to let yourself be drawn into the desert? Or do you go right away to the oasis of television or something else?

Closeness with God enables the priest to touch the hurt in our hearts, which, if embraced, disarms us even to the point of making possible an encounter. The prayer that, like fire, stirs up our priestly life is the plea of a contrite and humble heart, which, as the Scripture tells us, the Lord does not disdain (cf. *Ps 51:17*). “They call and the Lord hears and rescues them from their distress. The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; those whose spirit is crushed he will save” (*Ps 34:17-18*).

A priest needs to have a heart sufficiently “enlarged” to expand and embrace the pain of the people entrusted to his care while, at the same time, like a sentinel, being able to proclaim the dawning of God’s grace revealed in that very pain. Embracing, accepting and showing his own impoverishment in closeness to the Lord is the best means to learn gradually how to embrace the neediness and pain that he encounters daily in his ministry, and thus to be conformed ever more closely to the heart of Christ. That, in turn, will prepare the priest for another kind of closeness: closeness to the people of God. In closeness to God, the priest grows in closeness to his people; and conversely, in closeness to his people, he experiences closeness to his Lord. And this closeness to God – this gets my attention – is the first task of Bishops, for when the Apostles “invented” deacons, Peter explained their role and said: “But we” – the Bishops – “will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (cf. *Acts 6:4*). In other words, the first task of a Bishop is to pray; and a priest must take this up as well: to pray.

In the words of Saint John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn 3:30*). Intimacy with God makes all this possible, for in prayer we realize that we are great in his eyes, and so, for priests close to the Lord, it is easy to become small in the eyes of the world. There, in that closeness, we no longer fear to be configured to the crucified Jesus, as is demanded of us in the Rite of Priestly Ordination. This is very beautiful yet we often forget it.

Let us turn now to the second form of closeness, which will be briefer than the first.

Closeness to the Bishop

This second form of closeness has long been interpreted in a one-sided way. As Church, all too often, even today, our view of obedience is far from the sense of the Gospel. Obedience is not a disciplinary attribute but the deepest sign of the bonds uniting us in communion. To obey, in this case obeying the Bishop, means to learn how to listen, to remember that no one “owns” God’s will, which must be understood only through discernment. Obedience is thus attentive listening to the will of God, which is discerned precisely in a bond, a relationship with others. Such an attitude of attentive listening makes us come to realize that none of us is the beginning and the end of life, but that each of us must necessarily interact with others. The “internal logic” of closeness – in this case with the Bishop, but with others too – enables us to conquer all temptations to closedmindedness, self-justification and living our lives as “bachelors”. When priests close themselves off, they end up as “bachelors”, with all the quirks of “bachelors” and this is not good. Instead, this closeness invites us to listen to others, in order to find the way that leads to truth and life.

The Bishop is not a school superintendent or supervisor; he is a father and must show this closeness. The Bishop must try to behave this way because otherwise he pushes his priests away, or he comes near only to the ambitious ones. The Bishop, whoever he may be, remains for each priest and for every particular Church a bond that helps discern the will of God. Yet we should not forget that the Bishop himself can be a means for this discernment only if he is himself attentive to the lives of his priests and of the holy people of God entrusted to his care. As I wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart that makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives” (No. [171](#)).

Not by chance does evil, in order to destroy the fruitfulness of the Church’s work, seek to undermine the bonds that establish and preserve us in unity. To defend the bonds of a priest with his particular Church, with the Institute to which he belongs, and with his Bishop, makes priestly life trustworthy and sure. To defend the bonds. Obedience is the fundamental decision to accept what is asked of us, and to do so as a concrete sign of that universal sacrament of salvation which is the Church. Obedience can also be discussion, attentive listening, and in some cases tension, but not a rupture. This necessarily demands that priests pray for their bishops and feel free to express their opinions with respect, courage and sincerity. It likewise demands that bishops demonstrate humility, an ability to listen, to be self-critical, and to let themselves be helped. If we

can preserve this bond, we will advance securely on our way.

I think this is enough about closeness to the Bishop.

Closeness to other priests

The third form of closeness. Closeness to God, closeness to the Bishop and closeness to other priests. It is precisely on the basis of communion with the Bishop that a third form of closeness emerges, the closeness of fraternity. Jesus is present wherever there are brothers and sisters who love one another: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). Fraternity, like obedience, cannot be a moral imposition from without. Fraternity means choosing deliberately to pursue holiness together with others, and not by oneself. As an African proverb, which you know well, says: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others”. Sometimes it seems that the Church is slow, and that is true. Yet I like to think of it as the slowness of those who have chosen to walk in fraternity. Also accompanying those who are least, but always in fraternity.

The signs of fraternity are those of love. Saint Paul, in the First Letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 13), has left us a clear “roadmap” of love and, in a certain sense, has pointed out the goal of fraternity. Before all else, to learn *patience*, the ability to feel responsible for others, to bear their burdens, to suffer in some way with them. The opposite of patience is indifference, the distance we create with others, so as not to get involved in their lives. Many priests experience the drama of solitude, of loneliness. We can feel undeserving of patience or consideration. Indeed, it can appear that from others we can expect only judgment, not goodness or kindness. Others seem unable to rejoice in the good things happening in our lives, or we ourselves seem unable to rejoice when we see good things happening in the lives of others. This inability to rejoice in the good of others – and I want to emphasize this – is *envy* which is very present in our circles; it is an obstacle to the pedagogy of love, not merely a sin to be confessed. Sin is the end result, it comes from an attitude of envy. Envy is very present in priestly communities. God’s word tells us that it is a destructive attitude: through the envy of the devil, sin entered the world (cf. Wis 2:24). Envy is the door for destruction. We have to speak clearly about this: envy exists in our presbyterates. It is not that everyone is envious, no, but the temptation to envy is there at hand. We need to be attentive, for from envy comes gossip.

In order to feel part of the community or “group”, there is no need to put on masks to make ourselves more attractive to others. We have no need, in other words, to be *boastful*, much less *to be inflated* or, worse yet, to be arrogant or rude, *lacking respect* for our neighbor. There are also clerical forms of bullying. If there is one thing a priest can boast about, it is the Lord’s mercy. For conscious of his own sinfulness, weakness and limitations, he knows from experience that where sin abounds, love abounds all the more (cf. Rom 5:20). This is the first and most reassuring message that he brings. A priest who keeps this in mind is not, and cannot be, envious.

Fraternal love *does not insist on its own way*, or yield to *anger* or resentment, as if my brother or neighbour had somehow cheated me of something. When I encounter the meanness of others, I choose *not to harbour a grudge*, to make that my sole basis of judgment, even perhaps to the point of *rejoicing over evil* in the case of those who have caused me suffering. True love *rejoices in the truth* and considers it a grave sin to offend truth and the dignity of our brothers and sisters through slander, detraction and gossip. These originate in envy, to the point even of slander in order to get a position. And this is very sad. When we ask for information in order to appoint someone a Bishop, many times we receive information poisoned by envy. This is a sickness of our presbyterates. Many of you are formators in seminaries; you should bear this in mind.

We should never, on the other hand, allow fraternal love to be considered utopian, much less a trite phrase useful for awakening warm feelings or stilling disagreements. No! All of us know how difficult it can be to live in community, or in a presbyterate – a saint once said that community life was his penance – yet how difficult it is to live alongside those we have chosen to call our brothers and sisters. Fraternal love, provided we do not make it saccharine, redefine it or diminish it, is the “great prophecy” that we are called to embody in today’s throwaway society. I like to think of fraternal love as a “gymnasium of the spirit”, where we daily take stock of our progress and check the temperature of our spiritual life. Today the prophecy of fraternity has not faded, but it does need heralds, men and women who, while conscious of their own limitations and challenges, let themselves be touched, challenged and moved by the words of the Lord: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

Fraternal love, for priests, cannot be restricted to a small group, but finds expression in pastoral charity (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 23), which inspires us to live that love concretely as mission. We can say that we love only if we learn to express love in the way that Saint Paul describes. Only the one who seeks to love remains secure. Those who live with the syndrome of Cain, convinced that they are incapable of loving others because they themselves feel unloved and unappreciated, end up living always as restless wanderers, never feeling quite at home, and precisely for this reason all the more exposed to evil: hurting themselves and hurting others. This is why love among priests has the role of safeguarding, of safeguarding each other mutually.

I would also add that when priestly fraternity, closeness among priests, thrives and bonds of true friendship exist, it likewise becomes possible to experience with greater serenity the life of celibacy. Celibacy is a gift that the Latin Church preserves, yet it is a gift that, to be lived as a means of sanctification, calls for healthy relationships, relationships of true esteem and true goodness that are deeply rooted in Christ. Without friends and without prayer, celibacy can become an unbearable burden and a counter-witness to the very beauty of the priesthood.

We come now to the fourth and last form of closeness, closeness to the holy People of God. We would do well to read *Lumen Gentium*, number 8 and number 12.

Closeness to people

I have often emphasized how our relationship with the holy People of God is for each of us not a duty but a grace: “Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 272). For this reason, the proper place of every priest is in the midst of people, in close relationship to others. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, I stressed that “to be evangelizers of souls, we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his faithful people. We realize once more that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people. Jesus wants to make use of priests to draw closer to the holy faithful People of God. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without the sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity” (No. 268). Priestly identity cannot be understood without this belonging to the holy faithful People of God.

I am convinced that, for a renewed understanding of the identity of the priesthood, it is important nowadays to be closely involved in people’s real lives, to live alongside them, without escape routes. “Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people” (*ibid.*, 270). “A people” is not a logical category, no; it is a mythic category. To understand this we must approach it as we approach a mythic category.

Closeness to the People of God, a closeness that, enriched by those three other forms of closeness, invites and indeed demands that we imitate the Lord’s own “style”. That style is one of closeness, compassion and tenderness, in which we act not as judges, but as Good Samaritans who acknowledge the wounds of our people, their silent sufferings, the self-denial and sacrifices made by so many fathers and mothers to support their families. Who acknowledge, too, the effects of violence, corruption and indifference that, in their wake, seek to stifle all hope. A style of closeness that allows us to pour balm upon wounds and to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord (cf. *Is* 61:2). It is imperative to remember that the People of God are hoping to find *shepherds* in the style of Jesus. Not “clerical functionaries” or “professionals of the sacred” – let’s recall that period in France, the time of the Curé of Ars: he was a curate, but there was also “monsieur l’abbé”, a clerical functionary. Today, too, people are asking us to be shepherds of the people and not “professionals of the sacred”, shepherds filled with compassion and concern. Men of courage, ready to draw near to those in pain and lend a helping hand. Contemplative men, whose closeness to people enables them to proclaim before the wounds of our world the power of the

Resurrection even now at work.

One of the distinctive marks of this, our society of “networks”, is people’s growing sense of being “orphaned”, a current phenomenon. Though connected to everybody and everything, we lack the feeling of belonging, which is something more than mere connectivity. The closeness of a pastor makes it possible to gather a community and foster the growth of that sense of belonging. For we belong to God’s holy and faithful people, which is called to be a sign of the breaking of the kingdom of heaven into the here and now of history. If their shepherd strays or withdraws, the sheep will scatter and be at the mercy of any and every wolf.

This sense of belonging will in turn prove an antidote to the distortion of vocation that happens whenever we forget that the priestly life is owed to others – to the Lord and to the persons he has entrusted to us. Forgetting this is at the root of clericalism – what Cardinal Ouellet spoke of – and its consequences. Clericalism is a distortion, as is one of its signs, rigidity. Clericalism is a distortion because it is based not on closeness but on distance. This is strange: not closeness, but the opposite. When I think of clericalism, I also think of the clericalization of the laity: the creation of a small élite around the priest who end up betraying their own essential mission (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 44), the mission of the laity. Many lay persons are clericalized: “I belong to that association, we are there in the parish...”. The lay clericalized “elect” is a great temptation. Let us remember that “my mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my priestly being without destroying my very self. *I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 273).

I would like to relate this closeness to the people of God with closeness to God, since the prayer of a shepherd is nurtured and becomes incarnate in the heart of God’s people. When he prays, a pastor bears the marks of the sorrows and joys of his people, which he presents in silence to the Lord, to be anointed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such is the hope of every shepherd who trustingly and tirelessly works so that the Lord may bless his people.

Saint Ignatius teaches that “it is not knowing much but realizing and relishing things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul” (*Spiritual Exercises*, Annotations, 2, 4). Bishops and priests would do well to ask, “How am I practicing these forms of closeness? How am I living these four aspects that intersect and shape my priestly heart, enabling me to deal with the tensions and imbalances that we experience daily?” Those four forms of closeness are good training for “playing on an open field”, where the priest is called to be present without fear or rigidity, without reducing or impoverishing his mission.

A priestly heart knows about closeness, because his primary form of closeness is with the Lord.

May Christ visit his priests in their prayer, in their Bishop, in their brother priests and in their people. May he upset our routine, disrupt our lives and disquiet us – as at the time of our first love – and lead us to employ all our talents and abilities to ensure that our people may have life and life in abundance (cf. *Jn* 10:10). The forms of closeness that the Lord demands – closeness with God, closeness with the Bishop, closeness among us priests and closeness with the holy faithful People of God – are not an added burden: they are a gift that he gives to keep our vocation alive and fruitful. If we are tempted to get caught up in interminable speeches, discussions about the theology of the priesthood or theories about what the priesthood should be, the Lord for his part simply looks upon us with tenderness and compassion. He shows priests the signposts that point the way to appreciating and rekindling their missionary zeal: closeness that is compassionate and tender, closeness to God, to the Bishop, to brother priests and to the people entrusted to their care. A closeness in the “style” of God himself, who is ever close to us, with compassion and tender love.

Thank you for your closeness and patience, thank you, thank you very much! I wish all of you well in your work. I am going to the library because I have many appointments this morning. Please pray for me and I will pray for you. I wish you all good work!