



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO YOUNG CONSECRATED PERSONS

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Thursday, 17 September 2015*

[Multimedia]

Good morning!

Thank you. The Cardinal Prefect has told me that you consecrated young people number 5,000. I shall begin with the questions that you have formulated and were kind enough to send me.

First of all, I know that among you there are consecrated men and women from Iraq and from Syria. I would like to begin with a thought for our martyrs of Iraq and Syria, our martyrs of today. Perhaps you know many or a few of them.... Several days ago, in the Square, an Iraqi priest approached me and gave me a small cross: it was the cross that the priest whose throat was cut for not denying Jesus Christ had held in his hand. I carry this cross here.... In the light of these testimonies of our martyrs of today — who are more numerous than the martyrs of the first centuries — and also of the martyrs of your lands of Iraq and Syria, I should like to begin our conversation by thanking the Lord: that his Church may make up in her Body what is lacking in Christ's Passion once again today; and by asking for the grace of the smallest everyday martyrdom, of that daily martyrdom, at the service of Jesus and our consecrated life.

And now, ask me your questions and then let us see....

I thank you. I thank Sara, Maria Giacinta and Pierre. I thank all three of you.

Let's begin with Sara, because you have touched upon a very serious problem, which is comfort in consecrated life: "we must do this..., let's be calm..., I keep all the commandments that I have to observe here, the rules..., I observe them...". But that is what St Thérèse of Jesus said about the strict, structured observance that takes away freedom. She was an independent woman, so free that she had to go to the Inquisition. There is a freedom that comes from the Spirit and there is a

freedom that comes from worldliness. The Lord calls you — and he calls us all — to what Pierre called a “prophetic way” of freedom, namely, the freedom that is linked to witness and fidelity. A mother who is strict in raising her children — “it must be done, it must, it must, it must ...” and who does not allow the children to dream, to have dreams and who does not let the children grow, nullifies the creative future of the child. The children will be sterile. Consecrated life too can be barren, when it is not actually prophetic; when one is not allowed to dream. But let us think of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus: closed in a convent, also with a Prioress who was not very easy. Some thought that the Prioress did things to trouble her.... However, that young nun of 16, 17, 18, 20, 21 years, dreamt! She never lost the capacity to dream; she never lost the horizon! To the point that today she is the Patroness of missions; she is the Patroness of the horizons of the Church.

And what St Thérèse called “*almas concertadas*” [the concerted soul] is a danger. It’s a great danger. She was a cloistered nun, but she went through the streets throughout Spain, establishing foundations and convents. And she never lost the capacity for contemplation. Prophecy, the ability to dream is the contrary of rigidity. Those who are rigid cannot dream. We think of those great things that Jesus said to those strict people of his time, to the strict consecrated men of his time, in Chapter 23 of St Matthew. Read it. Those are the rigid ones. And observance must not be rigid. If the observance is rigid it is not observance, it is personal selfishness. It is seeking oneself and feeling oneself to be more just than others. “I thank you, Lord, because I’m not like that sister, like that brother, like that one there.... I thank you, Lord, that my Congregation is really catholic, observant, and not like that Congregation that goes here, there and everywhere...”. This is the talk of the overly strict. But you will find all these things in Chapter 23 of St Matthew. Thérèse calls them “*almas concertadas*”.

And how can we avoid converting to this? Keep the heart always open to what the Lord says to us; and refer to what the Lord says to us, when speaking to the Superior, the spiritual teacher, the Church, the bishop. Openness, an open heart, dialogue, and also dialogue in community. “But Father, we can’t dialogue because we always quarrel when we dialogue...”. But that is okay! Even Peter, Paul, James, in the early times — read the Acts of the Apostles — quarreled vehemently. But then they were so open to the Holy Spirit that they were able to forgive one another. I am about to say a word that is somewhat difficult. I am speaking to you sincerely: one of the sins that I often find in community life, among brothers, among sisters, is the inability to forgive. “Ah, she will pay for this! I will make her pay for it!”. And this is to sully the other! Gossip in a community hinders forgiveness and also leads to being more distant from one another, to distancing oneself from the others. I like to say that gossip is not only a sin — because to gossip is a sin, and go to confession if you do this.... It is a sin! But gossip is also terrorism! Because someone who gossips “drops a bomb” on the reputation of the other and destroys the other, who cannot defend him- or herself, because one always gossips in the dark, not in the light. And darkness is the kingdom of the devil. Light is the Kingdom of Jesus. If you have something against your brother, against your sister, go.... First pray, calm your soul, and then go and say to him, to her: I do not agree with this ... you

have done a bad thing...". However, never, never drop the bomb of gossip. Never, ever! It is the plague of community life! And so a man or woman religious, who has consecrated his or her life to God, becomes a terrorist, because he or she drops a destructive bomb on his or her community.

You, Sara, also spoke of the instability of our *sequela*. Always, from the beginning of consecrated life to now, there are moments of inconsistency: these are temptations. The first monks of the desert wrote about this and they teach us how to find interior stability, peace. But there will always be temptations, always, always.... The struggle will go on until the end. And returning to St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, she said that one must pray for those who are about to die, because then, in fact, is the moment of greatest instability, in which temptations come forcefully. It is true that culturally we live in a time that is very, very unstable, and also a time that seems to be "a fragment of time": we live in the culture of the provisional. A bishop said to me, a year or two ago, more or less, that a good youth came to him, a good youth, a professional, who wanted to become a priest, but only for 10 years: "then we'll see...". But this happens, it does happen: our culture is temporary. Even in marriages: "Yes, yes, we are getting married! For as long as love lasts. When love is over, bye, bye: you go to your house and I go to mine".

And this culture of the provisional has entered the Church; it has entered religious communities, it has entered the family, marriage.... The culture of the definitive: God sent His Son forever! Not temporarily, to one generation or to one country, but to all. To all and for ever. And this is a criterion of spiritual discernment. Do I follow the culture of the provisional? For example, in order to remain consistent, choose binding commitments.

You, Maria Giacinta, spoke about evangelization. An evangelization, you said, that burns in the heart: the desire to evangelize, where the heart is aflame, with an ardent heart. This is apostolic zeal. Evangelizing is not the same as proselytizing. We are not a soccer club seeking members, fans.... To evangelize is not only to convince; it is to witness that Jesus Christ is alive.

And how does one bear this witness? Through your flesh, with your life. You can study, you can take courses in evangelization, and this is good, but the ability to warm hearts does not come from books; it comes from the heart! If your heart is aflame with love for Jesus Christ, you are a good evangelizer. But if your heart is not on fire and you only pay attention to matters of organization, which are necessary, but secondary.... And here I would like — forgive me if I am a bit feminist — I would like to thank consecrated women for their witness. Not all, since there are a few who are somewhat irrational! Some have this desire to always be on the front line. Why? Because you are mothers, you have this motherhood of the Church that makes you be close. I remember that in Buenos Aires a hospital was left without sisters, because only a few elderly sisters remained and their Congregation was nearing its end ... because all religious institutes are provisional: the Lord chooses one for a time, then he lets it go and creates another; no one is able to continue for ever; it is a grace of God, and some are for that period; let this be clear... these little nuns, the poor dears, were elderly.... And they spoke to me about a Korean congregation: the Sisters of the Holy

Family of Seoul. Through a Korean priest, three Korean Sisters eventually arrived to work in that hospital in Buenos Aires, where Spanish is spoken. And they knew Spanish just as I know Chinese: not at all. On the second day they went to the rooms, to the wards. They went to the wards and, with gestures, with a caress, with a smile.... The sick said: "What lovely sisters! How they work! How good they are!". "But, did they say anything to you?". "No, nothing". It was the witness of an ardent heart. It is the motherhood of nuns. Do not lose this, please! — Because a nun is an icon of Mother Church and of Mother Mary. You truly have this role in the Church: to be an icon of the Church; an icon of Mary; an icon of the tenderness of the Church, of the love of the Church, of the motherhood of the Church and of the motherhood of Our Lady. Do not forget this. Always on the front line, but like this. Moreover, the Church is the Bride of Jesus Christ — I shall stop talking about the nuns — and nuns are the brides of Jesus Christ, and they draw all their strength from there, before the Tabernacle, before the Lord, in prayer with their Spouse, to bear his message.

I must hurry up because there is so much work to do today!

And you, Pierre, used key words: to follow Jesus more closely; close, closeness; in a prophetic way. I spoke of this, of prophecy, when I answered Sara. And another word that is key in consecrated life is memory. In other words, prophecy, closeness, memory. I have spoken of prophecy. Closeness: closeness among yourselves and with others, closeness with the People of God. A colleague of my father — several colleagues came to Argentina after the Spanish Civil War and they detested priests — once one of them caught a terrible, a terrible infection, with sores, a terrible sickness, and his wife also worked and they had three children. This was brought to the attention of a Congregation, *Les Petites Soeurs de l'Assomption*, the community of sisters founded by Fr Pernet. Their work... in those times, after their prayers, was to visit homes where there were difficulties. They were all nurses and they nursed the sick, they took the children to school, did domestic chores, and then at four o'clock in the afternoon they would go home. One of them, the Superior, went [to the sick man's home], because it was a difficult case. She said: "I'll go". You can imagine what that man said to this sister: the most awful curse words. But she was calm, she did her work, dressed the sores, took the children to school, prepared the food. And then, more than a month later, that man was cured. He was cured. He returned to work. A few days later he and three or four other colleagues who hated priests were leaving work as two nuns were passing by on the street and one of the men swore at them, at the sisters. And this man punched that man and knocked him to the ground and said: "Say whatever you like against priests and God, but do not say a single word against Our Lady and against the Sisters!". Why do you suppose an atheist, a priest-hater, acted like this? Because he had seen the motherhood of the Church, he had seen Our Lady's smile in that patient nun who took care of him, did the domestic chores in the home, took the children to school and fetched them. Do not forget this, sisters: you are the icon of Holy Mother Church and of Holy Mother Mary. Do not forget this, and the Church thanks you for this, it is a beautiful witness. And this is closeness, be close, close to difficulties, to real problems.

And the other key word is memory. I think that James and John never forgot that encounter with Jesus. The same was true for the other Apostles. Peter: "You are Peter"; Nicodemus; Nathaniel.... The first meeting with Jesus. Memory, the memory of one's own vocation. In the dark moments, in moments of temptation, in the difficult moments of our consecrated life, return to the sources, remember and recall the astonishment we felt when the Lord looked at us. The Lord looked at me.... Memory.

And you asked me to share my memory, what that first call was like on 21 September of 1953. But I do not know how it happened. I know that by chance I entered a church. I saw a confessional and I came out different; I came out in another way. Life was changed there. And what fascinated me about Jesus and about the Gospel? I do not know ... his closeness to me: the Lord has never left me on my own, even in bad and dark moments, even in moments of sin.... Because we must also say this: we are all sinners. And we say it in theory but not in practice! I remember mine and I am ashamed. But not even in those moments did the Lord ever leave me on my own. And not only me, but everyone. The Lord never leaves anyone alone.

And I felt this call to become a priest and religious. The priest who heard my confession that day, whom I did not know, was there by chance, because he had leukaemia. He was undergoing treatment and died a year later. And then I was guided by a Salesian, like you; a Salesian who had baptized me. I went to him and he led me to the Jesuits.... Religious ecumenism! But in the worst moments, the memory of the first encounter has helped me so much, because the Lord always encounters us definitively. The Lord is not part of the culture of the provisional; He loves us for ever, he accompanies us for ever.

Thus, closeness to the people, closeness among ourselves; prophesying with our witness, with a heart on fire, with the apostolic zeal that warms the hearts of others, even without words, as those little Korean sisters; and memory, always recall it.

And I shall give you some advice: pick up the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses reminds the people, and remember your own life: "When I was a slave there, how the Lord freed me, and how...". It is beautiful. At the end, almost at the end of the Book, it teaches how one must go and make an offering at the Temple. It says: "My father was an errant Aramaean...". Learn to recount your life before the Lord: "I was a slave, the Lord freed me, and that is why I come to celebrate!". Celebrate: when you remember the wonders that the Lord has done in your life, it makes you want to celebrate, then a smile stretches from ear to ear, one of those beautiful smiles, because the Lord is faithful! Prophecy, memory, closeness, an ardent heart, apostolic zeal, the culture of the definitive, 'no' to the throw-away culture.

And I want to end with two words. One that is the symbol of the worst — I do not know if it is the worst but it is one of the worst attitudes of a religious — to mirror himself, narcissism. Beware of this. We live in a narcissistic culture, and we always have this tendency to mirror ourselves. Say

'no' to narcissism, to looking at oneself. And 'yes' to the contrary, to what strips away all narcissism, 'yes' to adoration. And I think that this is one of the points we must carry forward. We all pray, we give thanks to the Lord, we ask for favours, we praise the Lord.... But I ask you: Do we adore the Lord? Do you, men and women religious, have the capacity to adore the Lord? The prayer of silent adoration: "You are the Lord", is the opposite of that self-reflection of narcissism. Adoration. I want to close with this word. Be women and men of adoration. And pray for me. Thank you.