

Chile. Pope Francis speaks to priest, consecrated men and women and seminarians



MEETING WITH PRIESTS, CONSECRATED MEN AND WOMEN AND SEMINARIANS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Santiago Cathedral - Tuesday, 16. Januar 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good afternoon!

I am happy to be meeting with you. I like the way that Cardinal Ezzati presented you: *Here you are...* consecrated women, consecrated men, priests, permanent deacons and seminarians. *Here you are.* It made me think of the day of our ordination or consecration, when after being presented, each of us said: “*Here I am, Lord, to do your will*”. In this meeting, we want to tell the Lord: “*Here we are*”, and renew our “yes” to him. We want to renew together our response to the call that one day took our hearts by surprise.

I think that it can help us to start with the Gospel passage that we heard, and to share three moments experienced by Peter and the first community: Peter and the community disheartened, Peter and the community shown mercy, and Peter and the community transfigured. I play with this pairing of Peter and the community since the life of apostles always has this twofold dimension, the personal and the communitarian. They go hand-in-hand and we cannot separate them. We are called individually but always as part of a larger group. Where vocation is concerned, there is no such thing as a selfie! Vocation demands that somebody else take your picture, and that is what we are about to do! That is the fact of the matter.

1. *Peter disheartened, the community disheartened*

I have always liked the way the Gospels do not adorn or soften things, or paint them in nice colours. They show us life as it is and not as it should be. The Gospel is not afraid to show us the difficult, and even tense, moments experienced by the disciples.

Let us reconstruct the scene. Jesus had been killed, but some women said he was alive (Lk 24:22-24). Even after the disciples had seen the risen Jesus, the event was so powerful that they would need time to understand it. Luke says that "in their joy, they could not believe". They would need time to understand what had happened. That understanding would come to them at Pentecost with the sending of the Holy Spirit. The encounter with the Risen Lord would require time to find a place in the hearts of his disciples.

The disciples go home. They go back to do what they knew how to do: to fish. Not all of them, but only some of them. Were they divided? Fragmented? We don't know. The Scriptures tell us that those who were there caught nothing. Their nets were empty.

Yet another kind of emptiness unconsciously weighed upon them: dismay and confusion at the death of their Master. He was no more; he had been crucified. But not only was he crucified, but so were they, since Jesus's death raised a whirlwind of conflicts in the hearts of his friends. Peter had denied him; Judas had betrayed him; the others had fled and hid themselves. Only a handful of women and the beloved disciple remained. The rest took off. In a matter of days, everything had fallen apart. *These are the hours of dismay and confusion in the life of the disciple.* There are times "when the tempest of persecutions, tribulations, doubts, and so forth, is raised by cultural and historical events, it is not easy to find the path to follow. Those times have their own temptations: the temptation to debate ideas, to avoid the matter at hand, to be too concerned with our enemies... And I believe that the worst temptation of all is to keep dwelling on our own discouragement".[1] Yes, dwelling on how disheartened we are. So it was with the disciples.

As Cardinal Ezzati told us, "the priesthood and consecrated life in Chile have endured and continue to endure difficult times of significant upheavals and challenges. Side by side with the fidelity of the immense majority, there have sprung up weeds of evil and their aftermath of scandal and desertion".

Times of upheaval. I know the pain resulting from cases of abuse of minors and I am attentive to what you are doing to respond to this great and painful evil. Painful because of the harm and sufferings of the victims and their families, who saw the trust they had placed in the Church's ministers betrayed. Painful too for the suffering of ecclesial communities, but also painful for you, brothers and sisters, who, after working so hard, have seen the harm that has led to suspicion and questioning; in some or many of you this has been a source of doubt, fear or a lack of confidence. I know that at times you have been insulted in the metro or walking on the street, and that by going around in clerical attire in many places you pay a heavy price. For this reason, I suggest that we ask God to grant us the clear-sightedness to call reality by its name, the strength to seek forgiveness and the ability to listen to what he tells us and not dwell on our discouragement.

There is something else I would like to mention. Our societies are changing. Chile today is quite different from what I knew in my youth, when I was at school. New and different cultural expressions are being born which do not fit into our familiar patterns. We have to realize that many times we do not know how to deal with these new situations. Sometimes we dream of the "fleshpots of Egypt" and we forget that the promised land lies ahead of us, not behind us, and that the promise is not about yesterday but about tomorrow. At those times, we can yield to the temptation of becoming closed, isolating ourselves and defending our ways of seeing things, which then turn out as nothing more than fine monologues. We can be tempted to think that everything is wrong, and in place of "good news", the only thing we profess is apathy and disappointment. As a result, we shut our eyes to the pastoral challenges, thinking that the Spirit has nothing to say about them. In this way, we forget that the Gospel is a journey of conversion, not just for "others" but for ourselves as well.

Whether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is – our own personal reality and the reality of our communities and societies. The nets – the disciples say – are empty, and we can understand their feelings. They return home with no great tales to tell; they go back empty-handed; they return disheartened.

What became of those strong, enthusiastic and self-assured disciples who felt themselves chosen and had left everything to us follow Jesus (cf. *Mt* 1:16-20)? What became of those disciples who were so sure of themselves that they would go to prison and even give their lives for the Master (cf. *Lk* 22:33), who to defend him would have liked to send fire upon the earth (cf. *Lk* 9:54). For whom they would unsheathe their swords and fight (cf. *Lk* 22:49-51)? What became of that Peter who reproached the Master about how he should live his life and bring about our redemption? Discouragement (cf. *Mk* 8:31-33).

2. Peter shown mercy, the community shown mercy

It is the hour of truth in the life of the first community. It is time for Peter to have to confront a part of himself. The part of him that many times he didn't want to see. He experienced his limitation, his frailty and his sinfulness. Peter, the temperamental, impulsive leader and saviour, self-sufficient and over-confident in himself and in his possibilities, had to acknowledge his weakness and sin. He was a sinner like everyone else, as needy as the others, as frail as anyone else. Peter had failed the one he had promised to protect. It is a crucial moment in Peter's life.

As disciples, as Church, we can have the same experience: there are moments when we have to face not our success but our weakness. Crucial moments in the life of a disciple, but also the times when an apostle is born. Let us allow the text to guide us.

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" (*Jn* 21:15).

After they ate, Jesus takes Peter aside and his only words are a question, a question about love: Do you love me? Jesus neither reproaches nor condemns. The only thing that he wants to do is to save Peter. He wants to save him from the danger of remaining closed in on his sin, constantly dwelling with remorse on his frailty; he wants to save him from the danger of renouncing, because of that frailty, on all the goodness he had known with Jesus. Jesus wants to save him from self-centredness and isolation. He wants to save him from the destructive attitude of becoming a victim or of thinking "what does it matter", which waters down any commitment and ends up in the worst sort of relativism. Jesus wants to set him free from seeing his opponents as enemies and being upset by opposition and criticism. He wants to free him from being downcast and, above all, negative. By his question, Jesus asks Peter to listen to his heart and to learn how to *discern*. Since "it was not God's way to defend the truth at the cost of charity, or charity at the cost of truth, or to smooth things away at the cost of both. Peter has to discern. Jesus wants to avoid turning Peter into someone who hurts others by telling the truth, or is kind to others by telling lies, or simply someone paralyzed by his own uncertainty",[2] as can happen to us in these situations.

&Jesus questioned Peter about love and kept asking until Peter could give him a *realistic response*: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (*Jn* 21:17). In this way, Jesus confirms him in his mission. In this way, he now makes him definitively his apostle.

What is it that confirms Peter as an apostle? What sustains us as apostles? One thing only: that we "received mercy" (*1 Tim* 1:12-16). "For all our sins, our limitations, our failings, for all the many times we have fallen, Jesus has looked upon us and drawn near to us. He has given us his hand and shown us mercy. All of us can think back and remember the many times the Lord looked upon

us, drew near and showed us mercy”.[3] I ask you to keep doing this. We are not here because we are better than others; we are not superheroes who stoop down from the heights to encounter mere mortals. Rather, we are sent as men and women conscious of having been forgiven. That is the source of our joy. We are consecrated, shepherds modelled on Jesus, who suffered died and rose. A consecrated man or woman – and with the word “consecrated” I am referring to all of us here – sees his or her wounds as signs of the resurrection; who sees in the wounds of this world the power of the resurrection; who, like Jesus, does not meet his brothers and sisters with reproach and condemnation.

Jesus Christ does not appear to his disciples without his wounds; those very wounds enabled Thomas to profess his faith. We are not asked to ignore or hide our wounds. A Church with wounds can understand the wounds of today’s world and make them her own, suffering with them, accompanying them and seeking to heal them. A wounded Church does not make herself the centre of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the centre the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ.

The knowledge that we are wounded sets us free. Yes, it sets us free from becoming self-referential and thinking ourselves superior. It sets us free from the promethean tendency of “those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style of the past”.[4]

In Jesus, our wounds are risen. They inspire solidarity; they help us to tear down the walls that enclose us in elitism and they impel us to build bridges and to encounter all those yearning for that merciful love which Christ alone can give. “How often we dream up vast apostolic projects, meticulously planned, just like defeated generals! But this is 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, tiring as it may be, for all work is ‘the sweat of our brow’”.[5] I am concerned when I see communities more worried about their image, about occupying spaces, about appearances and publicity, than about going out to touch the suffering of our faithful people.

How searching and insightful were the words of warning issued by one Chilean saint: “All those methods will fail that are imposed by uniformity, that try to bring us to God by making us forget about our brothers and sisters, that make us close our eyes to the universe rather than teaching us to open them and raise all things to the Creator of all, that make us selfish and close us in on ourselves”.[6]

God’s people neither expect nor need us to be superheroes. They expect pastors, consecrated men and women, who know what it is to be compassionate, who can give a helping hand, who can spend time with those who have fallen and, like Jesus, help them to break out of that endless remorse that poisons the soul.

3. Peter transfigured, the community transfigured

Jesus asks Peter to discern, and events in Peter’s life then begin to come together, like the prophetic gesture of the washing of feet. Peter, who resisted having his feet washed, now begins to understand that true greatness comes from being lowly and a servant.[7]

What a good teacher our Lord is! The prophetic gesture of Jesus points to the prophetic Church that, washed of her sin, is unafraid to go out to serve a wounded humanity.

Peter experienced in his flesh the wound of sin, but also of his own limitations and weaknesses. Yet he learned from Jesus that his wounds could be a path of resurrection. To know both Peter disheartened and Peter transfigured is an invitation to pass from being a Church of the unhappy and disheartened to a Church that serves all those people who are unhappy and disheartened in

our midst. A Church capable of serving her Lord in those who are hungry, imprisoned, thirsting, homeless, naked and infirm... (*Mt 25:35*). A service that has nothing to do with a welfare mentality or an attitude of paternalism, but rather with the conversion of hearts. The problem is not feeding the poor, or clothing the naked or visiting the sick, but rather recognizing that the poor, the naked, the sick, prisoners and the homeless have the dignity to sit at our table, to feel “at home” among us, to feel part of a family. This is the sign that the kingdom of heaven is in our midst. This is the sign of a Church wounded by sin, shown mercy by the Lord, and made prophetic by his call.

To renew prophecy is to renew our commitment not to expect an ideal world, an ideal community, or an ideal disciple in order to be able to live and evangelize, but rather to make it possible for every disheartened person to encounter Jesus. One does not love ideal situations or ideal communities; one loves persons.

The frank, sorrowful and prayerful recognition of our limitations, far from distancing us from our Lord, enables us to return to Jesus in the knowledge that “with his newness, he is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old... Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world”.[8] How good it is for all of us to let Jesus renew our hearts.

When this meeting began, I told you that we came to renew our “yes”, with enthusiasm, with passion. We want to renew our “yes”, but as a realistic “yes”, sustained by the gaze of Jesus. When you return to your homes, I ask you to draw up in your hearts a sort of spiritual testament, along the lines of Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez and his beautiful prayer that begins:

“The Church that I love is the holy Church of each day... Yours, mine, the holy Church of each day...

“Jesus Christ, the Gospel, the bread, the Eucharist, the humble Body of Christ of each day. With the faces of the poor, the faces of men and women who sing, who struggle, who suffer. The holy Church of each day.”

I ask you: What sort of Church is it that you love? Do you love this wounded Church that encounters life in the wounds of Jesus?

Thank you for this meeting. Thank you for the chance to say “yes” once more with you. May Our Lady of Mount Carmel cover you with her mantle. And please, do not forget to pray for me.

[1] Jorge M. Bergoglio, *Las Cartas de la tribulación*, 9, ed. Diego de Torres, Buenos Aires, 1987.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Video Message to CELAM for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy on the American Continent, 27 August 2016.

[4] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 94.

[5] Ibid., 96.

[6] SAINT ALBERTO HURTADO, *Address to the Young People of Catholic Action*, 1943.

[7] “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (*Mk* 9:35).

[8]Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 11.

Source: Vatican.va