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Promoting vocations to the priesthood
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The present Conference of the European Vocational Services has been placed between two temporal and ecclesial coordinates, separated by twenty years: The European Convention of 1997 and the next Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops.

The starting point is the document of the Convention of 1997, which confirms and proposes a “seismic shift” with regard to the pastoral care of vocations in Europe. Under the signs of the motherhood of the Church, the harmonious action of all the vocational agents and the personal care of young people. The Convention describes a new pastoral way.

The objective of the next Synod Assembly is the accompaniment and discernment of vocations in a spiritual and communitarian atmosphere where vocations can mature and develop.

I wanted to share with all of you five aspects for your consideration about the promotion of priestly vocations in this context.

1. A specific pastoral care of vocations to the priesthood.

The European Convention on Vocations, in 1997, summarizing an important criterion of pastoral care on vocations, stated: *If at one time vocations promotion referred only or mainly to certain vocations, now it must tend ever more towards the promotion of all vocations, because in the Lord's Church, either we grow together or no-one grows*¹. Such orientation corresponds to the Diocesan Center of Vocations, that is to say, the general organization of pastoral work on vocations.

Nevertheless, always in a second moment, when a young man is in the process of decision about priesthood, the priestly vocation requires a particular care and a careful discernment. Both actions are compatible and complementary. We may call the first one a “general” action and the second, a “specific” one. The first decision toward the priesthood demands another further work, before the admission to the Seminary, which is more detailed and delicate because of the transcendence of priesthood in Church’s life.

This second moment of vocational accompaniment is the responsibility not only of the clergy, but also of all the people of God. The narrative of the Acts of the Apostles describes a whole community involved in the discernment of priestly vocations. In fact, the paragraph of *Optatam Totius* about vocations starts with these words: *The duty of fostering vocations pertains to the whole Christian community, which should exercise it above all by a fully Christian life*².

The last words of this citation give us an important matter of reflection: the main instrument for an adequate service to vocations is a true Christian life. Such witness of life is demanded of the pastors of the Church as well as of each one of the faithful. This is always our best contribution to vocational discernment, because the basis of discernment is the spiritual life.

2. Guaranteeing a complete frame of reference.

The preparatory document for the next Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops affirms: *Many young people do not possess the 'elementary grammar' of existence, they are nomads: they move around without stopping either at the geographical, affective, cultural, or religious level; they are "trying out"!*³

The target of vocational animators is not only to guide a young man to the Seminary, but also to go out to his existential peripheries, where there is a lack of clear references to follow Christ and to find the way of a specific vocation. Sometimes it is about geographical gaps, for example, in the case of most immigrants, who ignored the

¹ *In verbo tuo*, 13.

² Vatican II Council, *Decree Optatam Totius*, 2.

³ *In verbo tuo*, 11.

keys of a new culture and the traditions of a particular Church. Sometimes there is great confusion because of their affective experience; that situation becomes a hard barrier to express love, and specifically a celibate love. Sometimes the difficulties come from the religious sphere, when our candidates have an important necessity of a doctrinal and moral background.

The Church wants to meet this youthful reality, in order to offer to candidates for the Seminary the “grammar” of the following Christ and of vocations in the Church. On the other hand, it is easy to verify that some of our priest have behaviors that denote an evident lack of fundamentals. According to the preparatory document for the next Synod, this is a target of our pastoral work with youth: *Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously*⁴.

I wanted to insist on a particular point: the communitarian sensibility. This is an important part of the novelty of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*. *The vocation to the priesthood is a gift that God gives to the Church and to the world, a path of sanctify oneself and others that should not be followed in an individualistic manner, but must always have as its point of reference a specific portion of the people of God*⁵. This form of individualism is a true impediment to the grace of God and to vocational growth. It works like a raincoat that does not allow the rainwater to wet us. The gift of a priestly vocation comes wrapped in a communitarian environment.

The Christian community protected the priest vocation. This communitarian reference will work throughout the entire priestly life. In the same way that the community is entrusted to a priest, so the priest entrusts himself to the care of a community. The Christian community have a fundamental presence in the birth of a vocation, its maturation and throughout the entire life and ministry of the priest. According to the example of our Lord, we can never do without the community.

3. Youthful spirituality and discernment.

Reinforcing the spirituality of the young Catholics means already taking care of their vocation. Spirituality is the basis of discernment, and discernment is the full expression of spirituality in the ordinary life. In fact, a spiritual person becomes capable of making spiritual choices, both minor and major. Between spirituality and discernment, there is always a continuum and never a rupture.

The document of the European Conference of 1997, reminds us: *His presence [of the animator of vocations] is always close to every man and woman, in order to lead all to the discernment of their own identity as believers and as people who have been*

⁴ Preparatory document for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, III, 1.

⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (December 8, 2016), Introduction, 3.

called, to mould and model this identity exactly according to the model of divine love⁶. Now, I wanted to add: The identity of a believer is a discipular and missionary one, which means, with a real foundation on the Word of God and on the sense of belonging to the Church.

In the context of the deep and natural link between spirituality and discernment, we can understand better the orientation of the Assembly of the Synod: *The focus in the case of the synod is on vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one's state in life*⁷.

4. Focusing on selection of vocations to the priesthood.

The preparatory document of the Synod highlights the importance of accompaniment. The closeness of a spiritual director is not a luxury, reserved for scrupulous people, but it is a real necessity for all, especially for those who are seeking the will of God. *Young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others (both adults and peers) and dealing with their feelings and emotions*⁸.

Accompaniment includes everything the person is: ideas, experiences, feelings, moral convictions, desires, religious formation and existential knowledge of vocations... Focusing on selection of priestly vocations does not mean to become rigid guardians of ecclesiastical discipline, but to become educators that enable the appropriate suitability of these vocations.

This is a merciful and delicate mission at the very heart of the Church. By which essential personal traits are formed at the beginning and will remain in time. *The initial selection of candidates in view of their admittance to Seminary must be careful, since seminarians, as they continue their path towards priesthood, not infrequently consider each stage as a consequence and continuance of this first step*⁹. A good root has the possibility of growing and developing, whilst a bad root does not have possibilities.

Pope Francis insists on this point: *Please, one must carefully study the evolution of a vocation! See whether it comes from the Lord, whether the man is healthy, whether the man is well-balanced, whether the man is capable of giving life, of evangelizing, whether the man is capable of forming a family and renouncing this in order to follow Jesus. Today we have so many problems, and in many dioceses, because some bishops*

⁶ *In verbo tuo*, 18.

⁷ *Preparatory document for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, II, 2.

⁸ *Preparatory document for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, I, 2.

⁹ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (December 8, 2016), 189. Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Circular letter *Entre las más delicadas* (November 10, 1997).

made the mistake of taking those who at times have been expelled from other seminaries or religious houses because they need priests. Please! We must consider the good of the People of God¹⁰.

Once again, the target is always the good of the person and the good of the Church.

5. Receiving vocations in a formative community.

The development of the divine seed of vocation depends on the fertility of the land in which it is planted. This is the economy of Salvation. God has wanted to respect men's freedom and he acts always through human mediations. Among these mediations, the Christian community stands out. The particular Church has the responsibility to offer new priestly vocations the right community climate for their growth. I am talking about the Seminary.

However it is also important that there be an ecclesial community which will help each person called to discover his own vocation. The climate of faith, prayer, communion in love, spiritual maturity, courage in proclaiming, of intensity in the spiritual life, all contribute to making the believing community into terrain that is appropriate not only for the flowering of particular vocations, but also for the creation of a vocational culture and a readiness in individuals to receive their personal call¹¹.

Usually the diocesan community provides everything necessary for priestly formation, the material needs and the spiritual ones. But what would happen if the community climate is not the right one? Authentic vocations would lose their vigor and weeds would grow, which would exhaust the earth more and more. Sometimes this is the sad spectacle of our presbyteries.

Talking about the fraternal and paternal rapport between formators and seminarians, the *Ratio fundamentalis* states: *A fraternal relationship cannot just be left to chance, to fortuitous circumstances, but it is rather a conscious choice and an ongoing challenge¹².* Indeed, the human and spiritual climate of the presbytery is building systematically, from the vocational accompaniment, through the Seminary, until reaching the ongoing formation. *Priestly fraternity is the first setting in which ongoing formation takes place¹³.*

Conclusion

We have listened to Fr. Cencini, who has accompanied the European Vocational Ministry during these past 20 years. We are on the threshold of a new synodal assembly. We have already a new *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*. The

¹⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy* (October 3, 2014).

¹¹ *In verbo tuo*, 19.

¹² CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (December 8, 2016), 52.

¹³ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (December 8, 2016), 82.

confluence of these factors presents us with a unique opportunity. How do we take advantage of these gifts of the Lord? I think we can do this on the path of communion. It is not time to maintain distances and ideological struggles, but to collaborate in a very practical and real sense, for the good of the Church. Let us ask Jesus for the grace of a deep conviction and a strong heart, to look beyond the normal difficulties, to build the kingdom of God

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