

SIEMPRE ADELANTE “ALWAYS FORWARD”:
The impulse of vocations
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SERRA CLUB’S 75TH INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

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I am very pleased to meet with you today, members of the Serra Club. I feel a strong bond with you because of my personal history and pastoral duties.

When I was a seminarian, in Yucatan, I recall a group of Serra Club members was a strong supporter of the Seminary. They held their meetings in an area of the building intended for this purpose and were always ready to support the Seminary in whatever manner they could, with an ecclesial spirit, which was particularly admirable for its generosity.

Later, as the rector of the same Seminary, it was my turn to undertake two wonderful projects: that of a group of Serra Club families who helped in the vocational campaign of the Seminary and that of a group of young Serrans, who helped the Seminary with new initiatives.

Already as bishop of Papantla, Mexico, I encouraged the development of several youth groups of the Serra Club. Now, as Secretary for Seminaries of the Congregation for the Clergy, I am again pleased to note a significant presence of the Serra Club, which was the first institution to join the Pontifical Society for Priestly Vocations in 1951.

Therefore, I would like to draw upon my own experience and my own musings regarding the charism of the Club, and I would like to look towards the future with you, as always, with our point of departure being contemplation of the Lord who calls us and sends us to carry out a mission.

Vocation and mercy

A vocation finds its deep roots in God's faithfulness. The person of faith has a living, personal, and ongoing experience of how God hears his prayer and responds promptly. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of this when he says: (The Lord) "*will be most gracious to you when you cry out; as soon as he hears he will answer you.*" (Is 30:19).

This message of the loving faithfulness of God was announced by Jesus with words and works. They express the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and constitute the revelation of the workings of God's heart: "*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Mt 9:36).

The certainty of being under the merciful eyes of the Father, the compassion of the Son and the healing action of the Holy Spirit, gives the believer great strength. The disciple of Jesus knows himself to be comforted by the Lord in his way; He is able to face difficulties: "*I can do all things in him who strengthens me*" (Phil. 4:13) and, at the same time, he is motivated to act compassionately towards others, crossing the frontiers of culture, race and religion.

But the mercy of Jesus is dynamic, so that, moved by that compassion, he calls and sends his disciples so that, in turn, they act with mercy in the midst of the world. Thus, it furnishes two significant steps for the vocational apostolate:

♣ The first is the **prayer for vocations**, which springs from the awareness that everything depends upon the mercy of God: "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" (Mt 9:38).

♣ The second step is the **sending of the disciples**: Jesus "*called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.*" (Mt 10:1). "*These twelve Jesus sent out*" (Mt 10:5). It is striking that, from the beginning, the Lord wanted to act with the help of a group of coworkers, who he then called and sent.

Both actions are close enough in time, so that it can be affirmed that the call of Jesus is not possessive. He calls them to be sent, impregnating their life with an admirable balance between communion and mission, between intimacy and self-giving that characterizes the nature of the Church.

The action of Jesus who calls and sends concludes with a beautiful watchword for his disciples: "*You received without pay, give without pay.*" (Mt 10:8). The absolute gratuitousness of God's action, which responds faithfully and without delay to the clamor of his children, is reflected and witnessed in the absolute gratuitousness with which the disciples and missionaries of Jesus give their lives in service to others.

The Serran Charism

If I turn to the contemplation of the merciful Jesus who freely calls and freely sends his disciples, it is because these texts remind me of the humble dedication of so many members of the Serra Club. It is appropriate to highlight, for a moment, that dedication.

♣ I remember Serrans as **witnesses of the faith**, happy people, trusting in the love of God, vibrant members of their parish communities and able to live their daily lives and their professional work according to Gospel values; their personal and professional lives consistent with their Christian faith.

♣ Undoubtedly, Serrans **pray for vocations**. As a seminarian, I was aware that they prayed for my vocation and I am grateful to them for having stayed close to the Seminary and myself over the years with commendable fidelity.

♣ Having collaborated with **various projects** of the Serra Club, I realize that each one in his own way, placed at the service of vocations and of the Seminary the gifts and skills he had received from God. Some carried this out from the point of view of their profession. Others, especially the ladies, did this from their skills in household work. Still others, for example, young people, used their physical strength and their willingness to help in whatever way they could. Watching the way that families, who put all their members at the service of vocations, was exemplary to me.

♣ I have, in short, the heartfelt remembrance of a **service** performed with an absolute **spirit of gratuity**, which is the sign of a true apostolate. How often the Serrans spend their own resources in favor of the Church and vocations! Without expecting anything in return and with great readiness they put what they are and what they have into this service.

With this preparation given, we can look at the Statutes of the Serra Club to understand its objectives:

♣ **Encourage and support vocations to the Ministerial Priesthood** in the Catholic Church, as well as a special vocation to the service and support of the priests in their sacred ministry.

♣ Encourage and value **vocations to consecrated life** in the Catholic Church.

♣ To help the members of the Club to recognize and respond, each in their own lives, to God's call to holiness in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

It is worth noting the balance between prayer for vocations and the action, typically by the laity, in helping and sustaining priests. There is also a balance between taking care of one's own vocation as a layman and a member of the Serra Club, and taking care of the vocation of others.

The Serran charism as an ecclesial ministry

There is a significant theological distinction between four types of services and ministries that exist in the Church. Although all have an identical dignity, they are diverse in their quality. Let's briefly approach a classification:

♣ **Spontaneous services.** These are services that any believer carries out impelled by his Christian conscience. They do so spontaneously, and although they are always performed based upon the spirit of communion, they do not require any authorization from the Church. Among these spontaneous services are the works of mercy. The importance of spontaneous services is that they show the dynamism of faith in all circumstances and in all environments. They are a significant factor in establishing credence for the Church because they develop a vital and nourishing action in the midst of the world. All believers are called to perform this type of service, especially the laity.

♣ **Normal services.** These are the works of service performed by a believer in a stable way, within a Christian community, such as a parish, a school or an ecclesial movement. These are people known in the community, such as a catechist, a youth minister, a married couple which organizes meetings with other couples or those preparing for marriage, or the designate who oversees parish works of charity. These are no longer spontaneous actions, but instead planned and organized actions, in which calendars and schedules come into play. In many Christian communities, a sending ceremony has been established, which makes this kind of services quasi-official. The importance of these normal services is that they are carried out by people who directly influence their apostolate, in social and ecclesial worlds, in a stable and committed way.

♣ **Instituted Ministries.** These are the ministries that a Christian officially carries out, having been sent by a community of faith, through a rite of institution. Universally these are the ministries of reader and acolyte, and also of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Episcopal Conferences may institute other ministries according to the needs of their pastoral situations. The instituted ministries have a concentrated character, that is, they are carried out in one area of the Church's mission. Those who exercise them require an "institution" on the part of the Church. Instituted ministers have the mission of coordinating others who exercise spontaneous or habitual services.

♣ **Ordained ministries.** These ministries are transmitted collegially through sacramental ordination. They are the ministry of the deacon, of the priest, and of the bishop. The sacrament of order entails a total and definite consecration of the person to the ministry of the Church. Ordained ministries are universal (for the whole Church) and global (they include all dimensions of mission). In the Latin Church the episcopal and priestly ministries are united to celibacy, which is an expression of this consecration and definiteness. Although all ordained ministries are exercised within a particular Church or diocese, ordination nevertheless regards the Church as a whole.

The classification of services and ministries helps us to understand the theological and pastoral aspects of the secular apostolate, and especially the apostolate of the Serra Club. Obviously, the work of the Serra Club is situated between occasional services and normal services. It is clearly not among the instituted or ordained ministries. This allows a **great creativity and adaptability** to local realities, because these are services very close to the social and pastoral reality. Using this as our key we can return to the objectives of the Serra Club, to ask ourselves:

How are Serrans called to benefit and support seminarians, priests and consecrated persons? If you are in doubt, a well-traveled path is that of **spontaneous gestures and attitudes** that spring forth from a person with a clear Christian identity and a formed conscience. Testimony of life, prayer, sympathy, support, discretion, solicitude, delicacy, service, presence, closeness, solidarity, collaboration ... Each of those present could offer several examples of how, throughout their life, they have put in practice works of spontaneous service, based on the Serran charism, in favor of seminarians and priests, becoming for them a point of reference for the support of their vocation.

Some Serrans are able to perform normal services, either within the structures of vocations ministry or in some professional service to the Seminary. This can also be carried out following the indications made by the Serra Club.

But there is one more objective of the Club, which has to do with the path of sanctity and the vocation of each Serran. To illustrate this point, I would like to cite Mr. Dante Vannini, International President of the Serra Club, who spoke at the recent International Congress of Vocation Ministry convened by the Congregation for the Clergy on October 20. He said:

The lay person must, above all, be willing to make a commitment to discover one's personal vocation and mission, listening promptly and readily to the Word of God and of the Church; He must pray, frequent the Sacraments, meditate on the Word of God and put the gifts and talents received into the service of his own faith, in the various social and historical situations in which he is called to take part. Such a program, of formation of the laity, is, in itself, a true and authentic vocational program.

These are words that spring from the experience of years involved in the mission of the Serra Club and highlight the spirit with which the apostolate is carried out: that of the witness **of one's faith and of a life of holiness**. Without this, the activity would be left empty and without foundation. With this, any action that takes place in favor of vocations, even if it seems humble, anonymous and spontaneous, has a deeper meaning.

The renewal of charisms

A charism is a **gift of the Holy Spirit given for the good of the Church**. Its essential characteristic is dynamism, that is to say, that element that ensures that it is always in movement. Jesus, in the Gospel, beautifully describes the Holy Spirit as movement. He says: *"The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."* (Jn 3:8). A spiritual gift is not rigid, nor defined forever, nor does it need excessive legal structures to function. Above all, it is free, agile, in a word, dynamic. But the evangelist goes on to say: *That happens to everyone born of the Spirit*. So this flexibility and dynamism becomes a criterion for judging the authenticity of the experience of the charism.

A first perspective to examine is the **origin of the charism**.

Consider for a moment other institutions, for example, the Missionaries of Charity of St. Teresa of Calcutta. These sisters, as an institution and as individuals, live embedded in realities of extreme poverty and marginalization. But they, as an institution, must consider that the conditions of the recipients of their mission change rapidly. Therefore, they must always remain aware of new manifestations of exclusion and abandonment, because the Holy Spirit will undoubtedly push them there. It is essential that they not lose contact with the poorest of the poor, because this is the "voice" of the Holy Spirit who has given rise to the charism. Discernment that corresponds to the Institution does not suffice and it demands that the sisters remain attentive to respond to needs. Each religious must vibrate deeply with the needs of the poorest, because this behavior shows that the voice of the Spirit resonates within.

It is interesting to observe the behavior of some religious congregations, who become "pilgrims" in their eagerness to connect with the realities that originally summoned them. For example, we might think of a congregation dedicated to the poor, moving within the city to new transitional areas, which arise continuously, without clinging to possessions or activities carried out in the past. This mobility bears witness to a clear charismatic and institutional identity.

We can also reflect on the charisms from the point of **the recipients**.

No charism is put into practice in the ether, but is realized within a wider Christian community, which is called a Particular Church. Various institutions, animated by the Holy Spirit, carry a gift of God that, in some way, configures and completes the Particular Church. Thus, those who carry this charism have the grave responsibility of enriching the diocesan community with the spiritual gift they have received. If this is true, a deep link is established with the diocese, which corresponds to the organ of a living body. The different charisms are like the hands, the eyes, or the nerves of the diocese, to the degree that the diocese would lack an important part if this or that charism were taken away.

The consequence is clear. Charisms must be adapted and reinterpreted based on diocesan realities, responding to concrete needs and circumstances, which are not the same in the various places where the institution is present. Consequently, whoever is a bearer of a charism has a responsibility to offer it fresh and renewed for the good of the particular Church. Therefore, it is not necessary to fear that the charism may develop in a different way in each local reality, because the gifts of the Holy Spirit possess this multiform flexibility. Such development will be a sign of the authenticity of the charism.

The renewal of the Serran charism

Let us now synthesize what has been said to try to put in place some guidelines for the renewal of the International Serra Club.

The **first guideline** is twofold, and refers to **origin**. It encompasses mercy, which is the origin of all actions in favor of vocations and, on the other hand, as the Statutes of the Club remind us, of the reality of seminarians, priests and consecrated persons.

♣ The merciful glance.

We said that Jesus called his disciples and asked them to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into their fields. The teaching of the Church on the subject is very insistent in indicating that prayer is the soul of vocation ministry.

If we want to discover a deeper perspective, we can keep in mind the person of Jesus in the text of Matt. 9:36: *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* Every Serran should feel this compassion in heart and mind. His gaze must extend to the multitudes, he must gauge his tiredness and helplessness, and he must desire, with all his heart, that pastors arise to work in the harvest of the Lord. Here is the first term of conversion and, therefore, renewal of the Serra Club.

Compassion immediately links us to God, whose most essential element is mercy. He who is three times holy is merciful. Let us strive for his mercy and, as the recent jubilee reminded us, to be merciful as the Father, is without a doubt a way of sanctification. What a privilege and joy! To be able to reproduce from the humility of our lives the merciful gaze of Jesus, source of all vocation. And from the depth of a spiritual life marked by love, carry out the works that are convenient and are in performance with the brothers and sisters of the Club.

As you can see, the renewal of the Serran charism demands a spiritual dynamism ... a wind that moves ... that cannot be controlled ... a fire that burns ... a torrent of water that floods all aspects of life. This is especially important when it comes to lay people, because the lay faithful carry out their discipleship and missionary life immersed in temporal

realities, in contexts such as family, profession and business. Mercy is a gift that spills over and transforms all of that complex reality, putting into play the creative force of God's love.

◆ **Priestly and consecrated vocations.**

At the origin of the Serra Club are the recipients of our mission: priestly vocations, aid to priests and consecrated persons. It is important that in the Church there are lay faithful who have this sensitivity, which springs spontaneously from the Christian life itself. *Pastores dabo vobis* says: “*Vocation, in a certain sense, defines the very being of the Church, even before her activity. In the Church's very name, ecclesia, we find its deep vocational aspect, for the Church is a "convocation," an assembly of those who have been called.*” (PDV, 35).

In this assembly of those called, who enjoy the same dignity, priestly vocation has special relevance, because in the election and formation of the ministers the future of the whole community is at play. “*The priestly vocation is a gift from God. It is undoubtedly a great good for the person who is its first recipient. But it is also a gift to the Church as a whole, a benefit to her life and mission. The Church, therefore, is called to safeguard this gift, to esteem it and love it.*” (PDV, 41)

Safeguarding, esteeming, and living priestly vocations has a profound meaning for every Christian. It is a sensitivity that should be present in every believer and Christian family. Such an appreciation of vocations is a very important part of the culture of vocations. The Serrans, singled out from their origin and in their Statutes for this purpose, thus become a prophecy for the whole Church and particularly in the secular environments in which they interact daily.

With the two elements mentioned: mercy and consecrated vocations, the framework of spiritual renewal of the Serra Club is established. Let all its members make a living and personal experience of mercy, and moved by charity, which is the love of God, guard, esteem and love priestly and consecrated vocations: A whole path laid out for spiritual life and holiness!

The **second guideline refers to the recipients** and is also twofold. It includes a universal vision of vocations, which includes attitudes and actions that all Serrans must cultivate and, as a counterpart, the most varied aspects that the service of the Club can have, considering the reality of dioceses and parishes.

The same paragraph of *Pastores dabo vobis* gives the step towards vocational activity: The Church “*is responsible for the birth and development of priestly vocations. Consequently, the pastoral work of promoting vocations has as its active agents, as its protagonists, the ecclesial community as such, in its various expressions: from the universal Church to the particular church and, by analogy, from the particular church to each of its parishes and to every part of the People of God.*” (PDV, 41).

♣ **Actions and attitudes of Serrans.**

A **universal outlook** must be considered in the renewal of the Serran. This is the role of the International Council that has convened this Congress. It is always helpful to draw lines of institutional renewal that can make the members of the Club vibrant in different latitudes, nationalities and cultures. At this moment I would like to highlight some actions and attitudes that, from my own pastoral experience, I dare to suggest at a general level:

From the point of view of **chronological age**. Aging is an objective fact that is imperative to face. The renewal of the Serran charism necessarily treats the “convocation” of younger people who, logically, have different sensitivities. We can discuss two concrete models: **middle-age couples**, whose children are actively considering their vocational choice. In their quality as parents of a family, they can form their children as a family vocation ministry and seminary. I also think of **young people** who participate in faith-based groups, who have even considered the call of God, and can collaborate from this experience in vocations ministry and priestly formation, always with a view towards *supporting and sustaining* vocations. You should not be afraid of this generational change. We must look to the new generations with love and trust, placing their future in the hands of God. On certain occasions there will be a collaboration between the old Serra Club and these new groups; At other times, as Moses did, the mission will be to encourage these new generations from afar, sustaining them with spiritual support, even at the cost of dying. But I consider the choice for a renewal according to chronological age to be fundamental.

From the point of view of the **activities to develop**. You know well that each member of the Club has worked tirelessly for vocations, using their own particular capabilities and preparation. Some have been offering attentiveness and small works of service; Others, from their professional expertise; Others being able to use the powers which they achieved because of their offices in business or politics. Not everyone has done the same. It is therefore appropriate to allow new generations also to be put in practice their charism in unique or new ways, according to their economic condition, their professional preparation and their perceptions. This shows a broad horizon of creativity. An important part of the national and international conventions of the Club would be to listen with satisfaction to the testimonies of creativity in action in favor of vocations. Whenever we have opened this door with generosity, we have been favorably surprised by the results.

Finally, from the point of view of **communication**. Today we realize that access to social networks is not a matter of age. Children and young people certainly have more ability to do this. But, there are many grandparents who, motivated by the love of their grandchildren, have learned to use “*WhatsApp*” and “*Twitter*.” It is not necessary to wait for the slow mechanism of the international conventions, to learn of innovations that the spirit circulates in the Serra Club. The idea that *the Spirit blows where he wants, and you do not know where He comes from, or where He goes*, can be effectively applied to the

subject of communication. Do not be afraid to lose control and to allow a smooth, pleasant and enthusiastic communication of the innovative techniques which develop in the Club.

♣ **Concentration within the particular Church.** If we return once more to the previous paragraph of *Pastores dabo vobis*, it contains, at the end, an invitation to plan the pastoral care of vocations in more concrete areas: “*from the universal Church to the particular church and, by analogy, from the particular church to each of its parishes and to every part of the People of God.*” (PDV, 41). The renewal of the Serra Club is necessarily due to its deep and generous attachment to the local sphere, that is, to a diocese and even to the parishes. Some guidelines can be pointed out in this regard:

The **vocational and formative reality** of the diocese. Promoting the Serra Club will be different in a diocese with a Seminary versus one without. Activities will be profoundly different, as is the organization of the diocese. The shortage of vocations may be a reality, or the lack of economic resources for training seminarians. The renewal of the Serra Club must go through a realistic and at the same time an affectionate analysis of the diocesan reality, so that the Spirit can lead the Serran to render services that are really necessary in the particular Church. It is not a question of repeating patterns of the past, much less of importing models from other places, but of responding generously to the needs that arise in each place.

The **state of vocational culture.** The development of a vocational culture is very different in the various particular Churches. The ideal of *guarding, loving and esteeming the gift of priestly vocation* is sometimes very distant for the people of God and even more for society. In this case, it will be necessary to begin humbly, perhaps to confront prejudices, to make known, to bear witness ... that is to say, favoring other, more humble actions that will help, little by little, so that the particular Church manages to strengthen its vocational culture. You probably have to start with the very members of the Club and their families, or help, to this end, in the parishes where they participate every Sunday. It is useful to well remember that vocational culture is fragile, easily lost and that it is necessary to continually promote it.

The practice of **programming and evaluation.** An institution renews and changes as it plans and evaluates. Planning is vitally necessary for a group endeavoring to deal with a new situation, trying to confront a new reality from within. There is, thus, a link between openness to the vocational reality of the diocese, planning and the dynamism of the Spirit. The Spirit moves when actions are planned, even in very diverse ways, depending on the circumstances, but they show that the Serra Club is alive and offers a true evangelizing service. On the other hand, the discipline of evaluation helps us not to absolutize successes, but to proceed always with great humility, saying, as good workers of the Gospel: “*We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.*” (Lk 17:10). This Gospel verse is interesting because of its balance, while recognizing the “*uselessness*” of servants, it also recognizes the enormous dignity of those who, in fact, have done “*what they should*

do". Thus, a true re-creation of the charism concentrated in an action carried out with humility and truth.

Vocational impetus

The title of this Convention, *Siempre Adelante*, "Always Forward", has a deep meaning as a renewal of the charism of the Serra Club. It is not a question of raising the fallen banner, as it would be in the context of military heroism, but dedicating all of our means given by the Holy Spirit to animate, vivify, transform and renew each Club in the concrete reality of a particular Church.

The subtitle is also interesting: "the impulse of vocations." It reminds us that the source, the vital energy, the motor of the renewal of the Serra Club is the call to the sanctity that has been received by each of its members and is stimulated by membership in the Club.

I can only wish that all those present experience the gentle breeze of the presence of God and the discreet and effective encouragement of the movement of the Holy Spirit. I also must express the gratitude of many priests and consecrated persons who, since our adolescence and youth, have felt supported by the Serrans, who encourage us to always go forward with a new vocational impulse.