



CONGREGATIO  
PRO GENTIUM EVANGELIZATIONE

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Dear Brother in the Episcopacy,

I would like to share with you some reflections on the life and ministry of priests, considering the numerous problems that currently weight upon those who exercise the mission of Shepherd in our local Churches.

On Sunday, May 7th, on the occasion of the ordination of 10 new priests for the Diocese of Rome and in his direct and effective manner, Pope Francis stated, "Words without personal example are ineffective. A double life is a serious disease in the Church... [You] were chosen by the Lord Jesus, not to further [your] careers, but to offer [priestly] service."

Never before has the mission entrusted to priests found itself in such a delicate situation as it does today. For this reason, every Bishop should feel a special spiritual paternity toward his priests, a paternity that has its roots in God Himself, "from whom all fatherhood has its origin" (Eph. 3:15). In imitation of God the Father, a Bishop is to give undivided attention to his priests. He is to be a caring father to every priest, helping to round out his rough edges, encouraging him in his trials, correcting his errors, and making his qualities appreciated within the context of a united presbyteral family.

The fatherhood of a Bishop manifests itself, first of all, in the direct knowledge of his priests. Not infrequently does it occur that a Bishop does not even know the names of his priests. This is a cause of much suffering because each name contains a summary of a person's entire life, a life that took its first steps at Baptism. It calls to mind our family of origin, our state of health, our human and affective condition, and the different stages of our ministry. A sensitive and friendly approach is absolutely essential if a Bishop is to call himself a 'father' and a priest is to truly feel like a 'son' and, at the same time, an authentic coworker in the ministry. A Bishop needs to communicate clearly with his priests, the fruit of due concern and reflection, conveyed with respect and decency, and always in search of the primary good: the proclamation of the Gospel to persons and peoples.

Your Excellency, nothing causes the Church – the Body of Christ – to suffer as much as the sins of her Pastors, particularly those who become thieves and exploit the sheep (cf. Jn 10:1), either because they have led the people into error by means of their personal doctrines, or because they have trapped them in the snares of sin and death. Divisions among priests, the lack of respect and collaboration with the Bishop, the absence of due consideration toward the lay faithful, the scarcity of pastoral responsibility and the scandal caused by some, all reduce the effectiveness of pastoral work and cloud the image of the priest as a shepherd of God's flock.

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On this point, I cannot help but ask, what image of the priest emerges in your local Church? Is the priest a mere functionary and dispenser of sacred things or a mere social worker, a priest who seeks to "arrange" a life of comfort for himself or for his family, living a life not at all in harmony with the holiness that a priest's life should manifest? In reality "our being priests is simply a new and radical way of being united to Christ. In its substance, it has been bestowed on us forever in the sacrament. But this new seal imprinted upon our being can become for us a condemnation, if our lives do not develop by entering into the truth of the Sacrament" (Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Chrism Mass*, 2009).

The personal holiness of the priest should be felt by those who are entrusted to his pastoral care, those whom he is to serve in a spirit of self-denial and generosity. His life of prayer will nourish his apostolate from within. There is a serious need for priests who are in love with the Eucharist, from which they draw the profound purpose for their pastoral mission. As Pope Benedict XVI once said, "This [pastoral mission] does not come from man himself, but it has its origins in the sacred" (General Audience, 26 May 2010).

If concrete gestures of attention toward each and every priest characterize the fatherhood of the Bishop, then the ongoing formation of priests is one of the most significant ways to exercise that fatherhood. It constitutes, in fact, an important dimension of priestly life in the current cultural context. As stated in the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, "Ongoing formation must be concrete, that is to say embodying priestly realities and lived in fraternity: annual spiritual exercises, monthly retreats, spiritual direction, common life" (cf. nn. 80-88).

My dear brother in the Episcopacy, as I entrust these reflections to you and kindly ask you to share them with your priests, I am certain that Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles and Mother of Priests, will always gently accompany these your beloved sons on their priestly journey.

I assure you of my profound gratitude and remain

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

*S. Card. Aloisi  
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