

Pope's Address to International Conference on Vocational Pastoral Care

Below is a ZENIT-provided working translation of Pope Francis' address to an International Conference on Vocational Pastoral Care, on 21 October, 2016



Lord Cardinals,

Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,

Brothers and Sisters,

I receive you with joy at the end of your congress, organized by the Congregation for the Clergy, and I thank Cardinal Beniamino Stella for the courteous words he addressed to me on behalf of all.

I confess to you that I am always a bit afraid to use some common expressions of our ecclesial language: "vocational pastoral <care>" might make one think of the many sectors of ecclesial action, a Curia office or, perhaps, the elaboration of a plan. I do not say that this isn't important, but there is much more: vocational pastoral <care> is an encounter with the Lord! When we receive Christ we live a decisive encounter, which sheds light on our existence, removes us from the anguish of our small world and makes us become disciples enamoured of the Master.

It is no accident that you chose as the title of your Congress "Miserando atque eligendo," word of Bede the Venerable (cf. Om. 21: CCL 122, 149); Liturgia Horarum, 21 Sept., Officium lectionis, lectio II). You know – I have said it other times – that I chose this motto recalling the youthful years in which I felt the Lord's strong call: it did not happen after a conference or because of a good theory, but because of having experienced Jesus' merciful gaze upon me. It was like this, I tell you the truth. Therefore, it is good that you came here, from many parts of the world, to reflect on this subject but, please, may it not all end with just a beautiful congress! Vocational pastoral care is to learn Jesus' style, which happens in places of daily life, pauses without hurry and, looks at brothers with mercy, leading them to the encounter with God the Father.

The evangelists often evidence a particular of Jesus' mission: He goes out on the streets and sets off (cf. Luke 9:51), "He entered cities and villages" <(cf. Luke 9:35)> and goes to meet the sufferings and the hopes of the people. He is a "God with us," who lives amid the homes of His children and is not

afraid to mix in the crowds of our cities, becoming ferment of novelty where the people struggle for a different life. We find the same detail also in the case of Matthew's vocation: first Jesus goes out to preach again, then He sees Levi seated on the tax bench and, finally, He calls him (cf. Luke 5:27). We can pause on these three verbs, which indicate the dynamism of all vocational pastoral <care>: go out, see, call.

First of all: go out. Vocational pastoral <care> needs a Church in movement, able to widen her borders, measuring them not on the narrowness of human calculations or the fear of making a mistake, but on the wide measure of God's merciful heart. There cannot be a fruitful sowing of vocations if we simply remain closed in the "complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way," without "bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33). We must learn to go out of our rigidities, which make us incapable of communicating the joy of the Gospel, of the standard formulas that are often anachronistic, of the preconceived analyses that box people's life in cold schemes. We must come out of all this.

I ask it especially of Pastors of the Church, of Bishops and priests: you are the principal responsible ones for Christian and priestly vocations, and this task cannot be relegated to a bureaucratic office. You also lived an encounter that changed your life, when another priest – a parish priest, a confessor, a spiritual director – made you experience the beauty of the love of God. And so you also: going out, listening to young people — patience is needed! –, can help them to discern the movements of their heart and guide their steps. It is sad when a priest lives only for himself, shutting himself in the safe fortress of the Rectory, of the sacristy, or of the narrow group of the "very faithful." We are called, on the contrary, to be Pastors in the midst of the people, capable of leading a pastoral of encounter and of spending time to receive and listen to all, especially young people.

Second: to see, to go out, to see. When He passes on the streets, Jesus pauses, and His look crosses that of the other, without haste. It is this that makes His call attractive and fascinating. Today, unfortunately, the speed and velocity of the stimulations to which we are subjected do not always leave room for the interior silence in which the Lord's call resounds. Sometimes, it is possible to run this risk even in our communities: Pastors and pastoral agents prey of speed, excessively concerned with things to do, which risk falling into an empty organizational activism, without being able to pause to meet people. Instead, the Gospel makes us see that a vocation begins with a look of mercy that paused on me. It is that term "miserando," which expresses at the same time the embrace of the eyes and the heart. It is thus that Jesus looked at Matthew. Finally, this "publican" did not perceive a look on himself of contempt or judgment, but he felt looked at within with love. Jesus challenged people's prejudices and etiquette. He created an open space, in which Matthew was able to look at his life again and begin a new path.

This is how I like to think of the style of vocational pastoral care. And, allow me, I imagine in the same way the look of every Pastor: attentive, not hasty, capable of pausing and of reading in depth, of entering in the other's life without ever making him feel threatened or judged. The Pastor's look is one capable of arousing amazement at the Gospel, of awakening from the torpor in which the culture of consumerism and superficiality immerses us and of arousing genuine questions of happiness, especially in young people. It is a look of discernment, which accompanies individuals, without either taking possession of their conscience or pretending to control God's grace. In fine, it is an attentive

and vigilant look and, therefore, called continually to be purified. And when it is a question of priestly vocations and of entering the Seminary, I beg you to carry out discernment in truth, of having a shrewd and cautious look, without lightness or superficiality. I say it in particular to Brother Bishops: vigilance and prudence. The Church and the world need mature and balanced priests, intrepid and generous Pastors, capable of closeness, of listening and of mercy.

Go out, see and, the third action <is> call. It is the typical verb of the Christian vocation. Jesus does not make long speeches, He does not give a program to which to adhere, He does not engage in proselytism or give pre-packaged answers. Turning to Matthew, He limits Himself to say: "Follow me!" Thus He arouses in him the fascination of discovering a new goal, opening his life to a "place" that goes beyond the small bench where he is seated. Jesus' desire is to get people to set off, to move them from a lethal sedentariness, to break the illusion that one can live happily remaining comfortably seated among one's securities.

This desire to search, which often dwells in the youngest, is the treasure that the Lord puts in our hands and that we must look after, cultivate and have sprout. We look at Jesus, who passes along the banks of existence, gathering the desire of one who seeks, the disappointment of a night of fishing that did not go well. The burning thirst of a woman who goes to the well and draws water, or the strong need to change one's life. So, we too, instead of reducing the faith to a book of recipes or to a whole of norms to be observed, can help young people to pose the right questions to themselves; to set off and to discover the joy of the Gospel.

I know well that your task is not an easy one and that, sometimes, despite a generous commitment, the results can be scarce and we risk frustration and discouragement. However, if we do not close ourselves in complaint and continue to "go out" to proclaim the Gospel, the Lord stays besides us and gives us the courage to throw out the nets even when we are tired and disappointed for not having caught anything.

To Bishops and priests especially, I would like to say: persevere in making yourselves close, in closeness – that synkatabasis of the Father and the Son with us –; persevere in going out, in sowing the Word, with looks of mercy. Vocational pastoral <care> is entrusted to your pastoral action, to your discernment and to your prayer. Take care to promote it adopting possible methods, exercising the art of discernment and giving impulse, through evangelization, to the subject of priestly vocations and consecrated life. Do not be afraid to proclaim the Gospel, to encounter, to direct the life of young people. And do not be timid in proposing to them the way of priestly life, showing, first of all with your joyful witness, how good it is to follow the Lord and to give Him your life forever. And, as foundation of this work, always remember to entrust yourselves to the Lord, imploring Him for new labourers for His harvest and supporting prayer initiatives to support vocations.

I hope that these days – in which so much richness has circulated, thanks also to the Relators that took part – will contribute to recall that vocational pastoral care is a fundamental task in the Church and calls into question the ministry of Pastors and of the laity. It is an urgent mission that the Lord asks us to carry out with generosity. I assure you of my prayer and you, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

