

«Remain in my love»

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Readings: 1 Jn 4: 11-16; Jn 15: 9-17.

You are gathered here from many nations for this 5th international congress of seminarians promoted by the Focolare Movement. I greet all of you, seminarians, youth oriented to the priesthood, priests, educators and directors of the Movement.

“There is a way...” this is the title of your congress. Thus we have before our eyes the stupendous way to the priesthood and of the priesthood. It is a personal and direct collaboration with the Lord for the salvation of men and women, to enrich humanity with the greatest good.

The subtitle, or the second part of the title – “the challenge of relationships” – is the specific topic your congress will address. “The challenge of relationships”: this is a great reality of Christianity, which characterizes in an altogether special way the identity of the presbyter. In fact, “the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood cannot be defined” – affirms John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992) – “except through this multiple and rich interconnection of relationships which arise from the Blessed Trinity and are prolonged in the communion of the Church, as a sign and instrument of Christ, of communion with God and of the unity of all humanity” (*Pdv* n. 12).

Today’s readings eloquently speak to us about this “interconnection of relationships” that sink their roots into the unfathomable mystery of God and from there go out to the Church to reach the farthest ends of the world and to renew the face of the earth: relationships characterized by love.

1. The seminary: a time for falling in love, for friendship with Christ

“We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love (1Jn 4:16), exclaims St. John with wonder in today’s first reading.

“*We have come to believe in God’s love*” – wrote Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas est* (25 December 2005) – “in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (n. 1)

In this perspective, Benedict XVI had significant words to say to seminarians gathered in Cologne in 2005 for the World Youth Day (19 August 2005): "You are seminarians, that is to say, young people devoting an intense period of your lives to seeking Christ and spending time with him in preparation for your important mission in the Church. This is what a seminary is: More than a place, it is a significant time in the life of a follower of Jesus. ... The seminarian experiences the beauty of that call in a moment of grace which could be defined as "falling in love." His soul is filled with amazement, which makes him ask in prayer: "Lord, why me?" But love knows no "why"; it is a free gift to which one responds with the gift of self."

This is the decisive experience to live in the seminary, the first and most important relationship to place as the foundation of everything. "The better you know Jesus the more his mystery attracts you. The more you discover him, the more you are moved to seek him." "The secret of holiness is friendship with Christ and faithful obedience to his will. Saint Ambrose said: 'Christ is everything for us'; and Saint Benedict warned against putting anything before the love of Christ. May Christ be everything for you," said Benedict XVI to the seminarians in Cologne.

2. The ministerial priesthood: a radically communitarian endeavor

But friendship with Christ, the discovery of God as Love, cannot but have immediate consequences: "*If God so loved us, we also must love one another,*" we heard in the first reading. And in the Gospel Jesus exhorts his followers: "*Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love.... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.*" This is the way Jesus himself joins "remaining in his love" and "loving others."

The documents of the Church speak of the seminary as "a community built on deep friendship and charity so that it can be considered a true family living in joy... a community that relives the experience of the group of Twelve who were united to Jesus." (Pdv 60).

To aim at achieving this goal is nothing other than an anticipation of the reality of the presbytery gathered around the Bishop which is the essential dimension of priestly life. The ordained ministry, in fact, "has a radical 'communitarian form' and can only be carried out as 'a collective work'." (Pdv 17).

"The presbyterate – affirms *Pastores dabo vobis* – thus appears as a true family, as a fraternity whose ties do not arise from flesh and blood but from the grace of holy orders. This grace takes up and elevates the human and psychological bonds of affection and friendship, as well as the spiritual bonds which exist between priests. It is a grace that grows ever greater and finds expression in the most varied forms of mutual assistance, spiritual and material as well" (Pdv 74)

3. The challenge of the third millennium: "To make the Church the home and school of communion"

But the "challenge of relationships" goes beyond: to all the community of the faithful, in the midst of which the priests are called to live as "brothers among brothers" (Pdv 74), and ultimately to all humanity.

In the apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), John Paul II reminds us of Jesus' words: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35) (n 42), and he draws this conclusion for the journey of the People of God: "To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings. For this reason – he continues – "we need to *promote a spirituality of communion*, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up" (n. 43).

Drawing from his great human and spiritual experience, John Paul III explained: "A spirituality of communion... means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are a part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings.... A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister... but also as a "gift for me." A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens' (*Gal 6:2*) and resisting the selfish

4. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"

But there is a further radical challenge in relationships which Jesus expresses in these words: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

I learned, and it made me very happy, that yesterday you heard about a young priest from Transylvania who gave his life to save a boy in the waters of the Danube.

"In accordance with St. Paul's words to the Christians at Philippi, the priest should have 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus,' emptying himself of his own 'self,' so as to discover, in a charity which is obedient, chaste and poor, the royal road of union with God and unity with his brothers and sisters (cf. *Phil. 2:5*)" (Pdv 30).

“Do you love me more than these?”, the risen Lord asked Peter. “Do you love me more?” (see Jn 21: 15-19), is the decisive question that Jesus addresses to each one of us, to each priest. It is to this “greater love” that you are called.

You have come here in this hall, which at one time was the summer audience hall of the Pope, to draw from a spirituality that the Church has recognized as one of God’s gifts to humanity today, a spirituality that makes you go to the very roots of love. “It is through the passion on the cross and through the cry of abandonment that Jesus united people with God and with one another,” said Chiara Lubich to seminarians right here ten years ago. “It’s a matter of spending our life for the whole world! ... All the sufferings of the world are ours, because we are Christians, we are followers of Christ.” This is the way that the title of your Congress refers to, and my wish is that you follow it with determination and generosity.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the appeal that Benedict XVI addressed to the seminarians in 2005 in Cologne in his already quoted discourse: “Remember always the words of Jesus: “Abide in my love” (John 15:9). If you abide in Christ, you will bear much fruit. You have not chosen him, he has chosen you (see John 15:16). This is the secret of your vocation and your mission!”

In any case, to truly live our priesthood and to be effective in carrying out our mission, we need to fill our hearts with an authentic love, nourished every day with prayer, which unites us to our Great Teacher, Christ.