



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO ASSISI

MEETING WITH THE CLERGY, CONSECRATED PEOPLE AND MEMBERS OF DIOCESAN PASTORAL COUNCILS

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS

Cathedral of San Rufino, Assisi

Friday, 4 October 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Diocesan Community, Good afternoon!

Thank you for your welcome, priests, men and women religious, laity engaged in pastoral councils! How needed pastoral councils are! A bishop cannot guide a diocese without pastoral councils. A parish priest cannot guide the parish without the parish council. This is fundamental! We are in the Cathedral! Here is the baptismal font where Sts Francis and Clare were baptized; in their day it was located in the Church of Santa Maria. The memory of one's Baptism is important! Baptism is our birth as children of Holy Mother Church. I would like to ask you a question: who among you knows the day you were baptised? So few, so few ... now, here is your homework! Mother, Father, tell me: when was I baptised? It's very important, because it was the day of your birth as a child of God. One Spirit, one Baptism, in a variety of charisms and ministries. What a great gift it is to be the Church, to be a part of the People of God! Together we are the People of God. In harmony, in the communion of gift of harmony in diversity which is the work of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is harmony and creates harmony: it is his gift, and we should be open to receive it.

The Bishop is the guardian of this harmony. The bishop is the guardian of this diversity. That is why Pope Benedict wished that the pastoral activity in the Franciscan papal basilicas be integrated into the diocesan one. For he has to create harmony: it is his task, his duty and his vocation. I am glad that you are advancing nicely on this road, and to the benefit of all, by peacefully working together. I encourage you to continue in this. The pastoral visit that has just ended and the

diocesan synod which you are about to celebrate are intense moments of growth for this Church which God has blessed in a special way. The Church grows, but not through proselytizing: no, no! The Church does not grow through proselytizing. The Church grows through attraction, through the attraction of the witness that each one of us gives to the People of God.

Now, briefly, I would like to highlight several aspects of your life as a Community. I do not wish to tell you something new, but rather to confirm you in those things which are most important, and which mark your journey as a diocese.

1. The first thing is *to listen to God's Word*. This is what the Church is: as the Bishop said, it is the community that listens with faith and love to the Lord who speaks. The pastoral plan that you are living out together insists precisely on this fundamental dimension. It is the Word of God that inspires faith, which nourishes and revitalizes it. And it is the Word of God that touches hearts, converts them to God and to his logic which is so different from our own. It is the Word of God that continually renews our communities...

I think we can all improve a bit in this respect: by becoming better listeners of the Word of God, in order to be less rich on our own words and richer in his words. I think of the priest who has the task of preaching. How can he preach if he has not first opened his heart, not listened in silence to the Word of God? Away with these never ending, boring homilies that no one understands. This is for you! I think of fathers and mothers, who are the primary educators [of their children]: how can they educate them if their consciences have not been enlightened by the Word of God. If their way of thinking and acting is not guided by the Word, what sort of example can they possibly give to their children? This is important, because then mothers and fathers complain: "Oh, this child...". But you, what witness have you given the child? How have you spoken to him? Have you talked with him about the Word of God or about TV news? Fathers and mothers need to be talking about the Word of God! And I think of catechists and of all those who are involved in education: if their hearts have not been warmed by the Word, how can they warm the hearts of others, of children, of youth, of adults? It is not enough just to read the Sacred Scriptures, we need to listen to Jesus who speaks in them: it is Jesus himself who speaks in the Scriptures, it is Jesus who speaks in them. We need to be receiving antennas that are tuned into the Word of God, in order to become broadcasting antennas! One receives and transmits. It is the Spirit of God who makes the Scriptures come alive, who makes us understand them deeply and in accord with their authentic and full meaning! Let us ask ourselves as the Synod draws near: what place does the Word of God have in my life, in my everyday life? Am I tuned into God or into the many buzz words or into myself? This is a question that everyone of us needs to ask him- or herself.

2. The second aspect is *walking*. It is one of my favourite words when I think about a Christian and about the Church. However, it has a special meaning for you: you are about to enter into the diocesan Synod. To hold a "synod" means to walk together. I think this is truly the most wonderful experience we can have: to belong to a people walking, journeying through history together with

their Lord who walks among us! We are not alone, we do not walk alone. We are part of the one flock of Christ that walks together.

Here I think once more of you priests, and let me place myself in your company. What could be more beautiful for us than walking with our people? It is beautiful! When I think of the parish priests who knew the names of their parishioners, who went to visit them; even as one of them told me: "I know the name of each family's dog". They even knew the dog's name! How nice it was! What could be more beautiful than this? I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes behind and sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind : in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too, too far behind, to keep them united. There is another reason too: because the people have a "nose"! The people scent out, discover, new ways to walk, it has the "*sensus fidei*," as theologians call it. What could be more beautiful than this? During the Synod, it will be very important to consider what the Holy Spirit is saying to the laity, to the People of God, to everyone.

But the most important thing is to walk together by working together, by helping one another, by asking forgiveness, by acknowledging one's mistakes and asking for forgiveness, and also by accepting the apologies of others by forgiving — how important this is! Sometimes I think of married people who separate after many years. "Oh ... no, we didn't understand each other, we drifted apart". Perhaps at times they didn't know how to ask for forgiveness at the right time. Perhaps at times they did not know how to forgive. And I always give this advice to newly weds: "Argue as much as you like. If the plates fly, let them! But never end the day without making peace! Never!" And if married people learn to say: "excuse me, I was tired", or even a little gesture, this is peace. Then carry on with life the next day. This is a beautiful secret, and it prevents these painful separations. It is important to walk in unity, without running ahead, without nostalgia for the past. And while you walk you talk, you get to know one another, you tell one other about yourself, you grow as a family. Here let us ask ourselves: how do we walk? How does our diocese walk? Does it together? And what am I doing so that it may truly walk in unity? I do not wish to enter into a discussion here about gossip, but you know that gossip always divides.

3. Therefore: to listen, to walk, and the third aspect is missionary: *to proclaim even to the outskirts*. I also borrowed this from you, from your pastoral plan. The Bishop spoke recently about it. However, I wish to emphasize it, because it is something I also experienced a great deal when I was in Buenos Aires: the importance of going out to meet the other in the outskirts, which are places, but which are primarily people living in particular situations in life. This was true in my former diocese, that of Buenos Aires. The outskirts which hurt me a great deal was to find children in middle class families who didn't know how to make the Sign of the Cross. But you see, this is an outskirts! And I ask you, here in this diocese, are there children who do not know how to make the Sign of the Cross? Think about it. These are true outskirts of existence where God is absent.

In one sense, the outskirts of this diocese, for example, are the areas of the diocese that risk being left on the margins, beyond the street lights. But they are also people and human realities that are marginalized and despised. They are people who perhaps live physically close to the “centre” but who spiritually are very far away.

Do not be afraid to go out and meet these people and situations. Do not allow yourselves to be impeded by prejudice, by habit, by an intellectual or pastoral rigidity, by the famous “we've always done it this way!”. However, we can only go to the outskirts if we carry the Word of God in our hearts and if we walk with the Church, like St Francis. Otherwise, we take ourselves, not the Word of God, and this isn't good, it doesn't help anyone! We are not the ones who save the world: it is the Lord himself who saves it!

There you are, dear friends. I haven't given you any new recipes. I don't have any, and don't believe anyone who says he does: they don't exist. However, I did find several beautiful and important aspects of the journey of your Church that should be developed, and I want to confirm you in these. Listen to the Word, walk together as brothers and sisters, proclaim the Gospel to the outskirts! May the Lord bless you, may Our Lady protect you, and may St Francis help you all to experience the joy of being disciples of the Lord! Thank you.