

MEETING WITH THE NOVITIATES
OF THE LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONFERENCE

Missionaries of hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer

Dear Novices,

I would like to share some words with you. They come from my heart and are very simple!

1. You are entering the final stretch of the Novitiate. The anxiety is normal, the desire to finish the Novitiate quickly, return to the Units, organize the profession feast, and meet family and friends. It is important not to lose *focus* and to conclude the Novitiate with a golden key. As the book of Ecclesiastes says in chapter 3, "there is a time for everything". *Live intensely the last moments of this experience of God which is the Novitiate, and ask yourselves personally and in community: what does God want of me? What does God want of us?*
2. I remind you of the text that you will surely hear on the day of Profession (Lk 9, 57-62). In Luke's logic, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem (Lk 9, 51) to experience profound self-giving, that is to say, he travels a path of liberation and adherence to the Father. In contrast are the examples of those who are not yet free to adhere radically to the proposal, without "looking back": to follow without thinking of the consequences of the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head; to go first to bury the Father and to say goodbye first to those of his household. In other words, the disciple of Jesus must be free, empty himself, and set out with him. In Alphonsonian language, to practice "*distacco*". Thus, Religious Profession is this ascent with Jesus to Jerusalem to give oneself totally to Him, as an offering to the Father, in favor of the most abandoned.
3. Constitutions 47-49 remind us: "By this Profession, which is intimately rooted in baptismal Consecration and expresses it more fully, Redemptorists, as ministers of the Gospel guided by the Holy Spirit, are associated in a privileged way with the mission of Christ. To fulfill His mission, which essentially involves pastoral charity, Christ "emptied himself and became a slave" (Phil 2:7),

submitting himself to the will of the Father for the work of Redemption, which he accomplished throughout his life. Chosen for the work to which they have been called (cf. Acts 13,2), those gathered are ready to give themselves for life to their vocation and to renounce themselves and all they possess in order to be disciples of Christ and to become all things to all (cf. 1 Cor 9,22)".

4. *Religious Profession is not a status. It is not the gateway to an institution that offers a comfortable life and privileges but to place oneself at the service of the recipients of our mission. It is to consecrate our whole being in the following of the poor, obedient, and compassionate Jesus. He empties himself because of His love for humanity. You will express this publicly. Moreover, the religious community and the faithful, in celebration, welcome you, pray for you and send you out to take up the plow, prepare the soil and sow the Gospel in all hearts and cultures.*
5. "Religious profession calls Redemptorists to a new availability. It requires them to abandon secure and comfortable places and lifestyles for the sake of the mission" (*Statutes of the Conference*, n. 17). This requires the *distacco* which St. Alphonsus so strongly recommended to the members of the Congregation. This attitude enables us, imbued with the Spirit of the Lord, to reach out to the existential peripheries of the world, as Pope Francis asks us to do.
6. Our Consecration is opposed to three realities which, if misused, do great harm to human beings and Consecrated Life: possessing, power and pleasure. *Our possessing* is characterized by our availability to others, following the Son of Man who had nowhere to "lay his head"; *our power*: the mantle of the washing of feet; *our pleasure*: the welcoming of all men and women, especially the abandoned, those whom a society addicted to having, to pleasure and power, has not made possible a place under the sun. This is only possible if the consecrated person cultivates an inner mysticism that gives meaning to Consecration and what he or she does.
7. *Consecration makes us joyful men and women. It is not a passing joy. It is something rooted in our hearts, in our experience of God through a meaningful encounter with Him, in evangelical availability to others, and in feeling deeply being loved by God.* This makes us missionaries of hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer. Pope Francis expresses the joy of consecrated life very well when he says:

"True joy does not come from things, from having, no! It is born from the encounter, from the relationship with others. It is born from feeling accepted, understood, loved, and from accepting, understanding and loving; this is not for the sake of a moment but because the other is a person. Joy is born from the gratuitousness of an encounter. It is to hear: 'You are important to me', not necessarily in words. This is beautiful... furthermore, this is precisely what God makes us understand. In calling you, God says to you: 'You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you'. Jesus says this to each one of us. This is the source of our joy — the joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me. Understanding and feeling this is the secret of our joy. To feel loved by God, to feel that for him we are not numbers but persons, and to feel that it is He who calls us. Becoming a priest, a religious man, or a religious woman, is not, above all, our choice.¹ God calls us and chooses us!

8. *The Spirit is upon you!* So you must ask yourselves: to whom are we going? Who are the abandoned, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed of today? What is the year of the Lord's favor you want to proclaim (Lk 4:18-19)? What realities must we denounce? Perhaps out of fear and insecurity, they will say: "Ah, Lord God, I cannot speak; I am only a child" (Jer 1,6). However, the same Lord who touched their hearts and made them leave everything is the same Lord who speaks today: "Do not be afraid [...], for I am with you to save you" (Jer 1:8).
9. The Lord says to Jeremiah and you today: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. This day I have set you over peoples and kingdoms with power to cut off and to destroy, to raze and to tear down, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:9-10). *As Consecrated persons, we must uproot, destroy, devastate and tear down all that causes division that wounds human dignity. We must build bridges of dialogue with the world, society, and the different charisms existing in the Church and outside it. We must plant gardens of fraternity wherever we go and be ambassadors of service, availability and community life, forming one missionary body in Christ, "for we were all baptised in one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Const. 2).*
10. At the end of the Novitiate and after the Religious Profession, the Juniorate begins. This is a new time. The Lord calls each of you, saying: "Leave your country and go to the one I will show you" (Gen 12,1). God calls us and makes

¹ WORDS OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS. Meeting with seminarians, novices and novice mistresses (06/07/2013). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130706_incontro-seminaristi.html. Accessed on: 05.11.2022.

a promise. He is faithful. The time that is coming is for each one to intensify the experience of God, whether through theology or the experience of mission. *Theology is the time to deconstruct the myths of our faith and to perceive how God, throughout history, reveals himself to human beings with all the contradictions and beauty.* Studying theology is to synthesize in simple language for the sake of the people, as was the dream of Alphonsus. Theology must encompass the mysticism of Brother Gerald and the audacity of Clement. *Do not abandon the life of prayer. Theologians who do not pray speak of themselves and not of God;* put your feet in the mud of the physical and existential peripheries; announce the Gospel with joy; deepen the theology of Consecrated Life and give the best of yourselves to the people of God. Also, never forget community life.

11. *In theology, do not forget the vessels you have filled in the Novitiate and, with theological knowledge, transform that water into new wine (cf. Jn 2:1-12). Theological studies should not be seen as a mere obligation for the priesthood but as a grace that helps us reflect on the human being who asks himself about God, a God who becomes incarnate, reveals himself, and materializes in the human being to give him a new life. Theology gives knowledge and flavor to pastoral work. Therefore, take time for pastoral work and always remember this Redemptorist motto: Dies impenderem pro redemptis.*
12. It is essential to prepare oneself well, listen to the people of God, elaborate projects together, encourage people, and offer keys to reading reality through formation. *Not to study and not to be interested in pastoral work is to sin against poverty. It is also important to transform theology into prayer, meditation, and contemplation. From this arises the theological synthesis that always makes people seek the human and the divine and to rest in it. "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (Confessions, I, 1, 1), St. Augustine reminds us.*
13. Suppose theology is an understanding of the human being that searches for mystery. In that case, *this human being presents itself in community life. Strengthen the bonds of friendship among yourselves through study, pastoral work, community life, and dialogue to resolve relational conflicts. We need to learn to manage the gifts and charisms that we possess and that arise in our communities in order to transform them in service of the Gospel. To further intensify the sense of belonging to the Congregation, we must be ready to leave everything and care zealously for our community and the spiritual and material goods that the Congregation possesses in view of the mission. Not to do so is to sin against chastity.*

14. *Be promoters of vocations!* From your Profession and your experience of God and with your confreres, pass on to the young people looking for us and those in formation who are starting out the joy of being Redemptorists. We are joyful because we have found the meaning of our lives.
15. Finally, *do not allow yourselves to be overcome by pessimism, indifference, discouragement, and mediocrity, which weaken and kill the vigor of Consecrated Religious Life. Joy, enthusiasm, hope, and a heart open to listening to the Word of God turn the often challenging routine into a little daily Easter.* These elements will intensify our obedience: courage, do not be discouraged, and perseverance! You are important to the Church, the Congregation, and the People of God.

May God bless this time of Novitiate and give our novices the missionary zeal and enthusiasm to persevere in the Congregation!

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