

PROMOTE THE VOCATIONS, INSTANT PRESBYTERAL PRIORITY

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Introduction:

I friendly greet organizers and participants of this European Vocations Congress. Thank you for the invitation to participate. I will try to offer you my contribution to the theme assigned to me.

My reflexion will be developed in four consecutive steps. I'll first describe some mental and vital attitudes among the priests in their mission to promote the various vocations. In a second time, I will clarify the ecclesiological reasons which are the basis of such a mission. Then, I will list some options and the Evangelical and pastoral tasks necessary to achieve the mission. Finally, I will try to draw a number of practical consequences from the presented theological and pastoral criteria and from the experience acquired so far.

I come from a country that is suffering a hard winter concerning vocations. It will be impossible during my intervention to escape the influence of this worrying situation. Perhaps this is not the case in all countries and churches represented here. I warmly welcome such good news. In any case, "the Pastoral Ministry of vocations is (always) the most difficult and delicate Ministry" ("New Vocations for a New Europe" No. 6)

I am aware that the concept of vocation exceeds that of the priestly and religious vocation. Indeed, marital and secular vocations also are genuine, valid and necessary. But I'll confine to the vocations of special consecration. They seem to me today the ones needing the higher support.

I. - OUTLINES ON THE ' POSITION IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY OF VOCATIONS.

The shortage of priestly and religious vocations causes generally a state of deep concern among the priests. Because of it, some are convinced of its essential need for the future of the Church and dedicate to them more actively than before. Others, aware of the enormous social and cultural difficulties against appearance of such vocations, confidently lay the future of their parish and diocesan communities in the hands of the Lord of the Church and History. Many, faced with the situation, choose to promote and train laic vocations. There also in our presbyteries those who argue that engaging today in encouraging vocations to priesthood or religious life makes evidence of a voluntarism lacking lucidity and show a huge commitment to outdated patterns of the past. Discouragement and nostalgia became fairly widespread.

Difficulties in promoting vocations are conducive to the emergence of mental reservations or vital resistances that need to be described. These misgivings and resistances translate and are reflected in the way to present our vocations' proposal to the young people. Such attitudes are neither general nor even perhaps the most frequent. But they are neither exceptional nor irrelevant.

1. Mental Reserves

a) Some priests believe that, honestly, such a vocation proposal cannot be made to anyone before the age of youth. They consider that disposition towards priesthood very early shown by some young people has no valid meaning and becomes even suspicious. They believe that vocation proposal offered at a lower age is an unfair conditioning for still weak psyche. They forget that one thing is to make a proposal soon enough and another is the decision that can be delayed. They tend to ignore that social conditionings impeding the emergence of vocation concern among younger generations are extremely powerful today.

b) There are many who think almost spontaneously, but with very doubtful theological discipline, that both children and teenagers are "secular under gestation." Therefore education, testimonies and rules of behavior that we offer them are exclusively oriented to secular life. But children and adolescents are hardly laic in gestation but rather "Christians in gestation", open in principle to a range of different vocations.

c) An excessively definite concept about young people capable for priesthood or religious life can be, and sometimes is, too narrow framework. Much of the actual candidates do not properly fit this concept. Actual vocations are as they are and not as we would like them to be. Rigid patterns can obstruct the pastoral ministry of vocations.

d) For quite a number of priests, the current alarm about the decline in vocations is unjustified or, at least, disproportionate. They even ask if this is rather a grace than a disgrace since we are then obliged to transfer to laics the responsibilities corresponding to their own vocation. But they do not adequately value the fact that the priests belong to the structure of the Church and constitute a structuring foundation of Christian communities. Therefore, they are a needed good. The lack of a needed good is not a grace situation. Although in the heart of this shortage it is true that the Spirit wants to tell us something.

2. Critical resistance

They have an emotional nature; their base component is fear.

a) Fear of creating strangeness among youth to whom we address the proposal. The said proposal is frequently a reason for surprise and confusion, at least at first. Also, by a reflex of defense, youth could escape from the person who questions them about vocation. The fear of this escape may retain the priest. However, for many of those who currently are priests or religious, it has been surprising but decisive that someone has had the courage to present them a vocation proposal.

b) Fear of appearing to the parents as making proselytism and being accused of putting pressure on their children. Parents, even those who are distinctly christian, keep other expectations for their children. In those circumstances it is necessary a certain prophetic courage to propose a consecrated vocation.

c) Fear of guiding a young person to a channel that requires many sacrifices and, nowadays, offers few rewards socially recognized. If a priest reads his personal history under the prism of suffering, he will be forced to experiment resistance to present this path to a young person as a way of achievement and joy.

d) Fear of not being prepared enough to convene and accompany young people in the path of vocation discernment. The task is delicate and requires a certain "specialization" that many priests believe that they miss.

3. Vocation proposition

a) This proposal addressed to youth can suffer of being reduced. In principle, all young Christians must receive an invitation to discover and follow the life path to which God calls them. They are "unique and not to be repeated people" with a defined vocation (PDV 40). If a boy or a girl shows a good and awake character, a goodness of heart, a certain religious sensibility, an attitude of service, he or she must receive an invitation to think about vocation. Today, in times of shortage of vital vocation inside the Church, a truly faithful young person should question seriously, at least once in his life, if the Lord calls him to this precise way of being Christian: be a priest or religious.

Some theoretically capable young people receive this proposal from us. Many will not receive it either from us or anyone else. Vocations surveys show that there is a non-negligible percentage who, at some point in

their lives, felt an invitation from inside to ask the question. But, either by shyness, or due to lack of words to express their feelings or to lack of proximity to a trustworthy capable believer ... these possible calls missed to be formulated to anyone and, finally, were miserably lost.

b) The proposal is not always timely offered. Frequently it is late. Today, in many areas, the opening to the alternative vocation is quickly closed in the lives of a young man. The risk of unduly and prematurely influencing the teens' spirit is now very reduced. Propose the priestly or religious vocation is not an attack on freedom, on the contrary, it is an enhancement. This becomes a counterpoint to ambient influence that, at certain ages, results almost decisive. Fearing to arrive too early makes us arrive too late.

c) Often, the proposal is pusillanimous, unsecure. The temptation to diminish the vocational invitation by reducing it to welfare service or an artificially glorified and somehow heroic task is by no means imaginary. Only clear and highly set proposals can wake up in a young person the best he can offer, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit. Only for the love of the Lord a young person engages in such a vocational option.

d) The proposal may be scarcely interpellative, like a product offered in the market "for the case where this could be of interest", without revealing its importance or the serious nature of the question of the vocation. Jesus did not call this way. We may sometimes be confused with the proposal, which must be clear and motivated to be worth considering, and the decision, whether positive or negative, will deserve our respect. But we cannot reduce the proposal to a simple invitation "on the fly, trying to catch" nor apologizing in advance to the recipients for presenting the proposal.

"The time has come to speak valiantly about priestly life as an inestimable value and a privileged and beautiful Christian way of life" (PDV 39)

II. - ECCLESIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THIS PASTORAL PRIORITY

The need for priests is vital for the Church. A church without consecrated life would impoverish greatly. Presbyterial and consecrated vocations deficit almost all over Europe is alarming. The conclusion is clear: the dedication of the priests to encourage and cultivate these vocations is a clear priority. Let us briefly formulate the theological basis of such an assertion.

1. The sacerdotal ministry provides the Church with "basic services"

The Mission of the Church is to worship God, live fraternal community, announce Jesus Christ with words and actions, and serve society, especially the poor.

It is Jesus Christ Pastor that continuously makes His Church capable to devote to this quadruple mission. It is not the deceased Founder but the living Shepherd. The Church depends on Him as the river depends on the source which continuously feeds it. Jesus Christ offers the church basic services of the Word, Eucharist, the other Sacraments, the guide to lead the way and the forces that give cohesion. Nourished by these services, Christian community is able to perform the previously identified four tasks. And so refreshed, the community is prepared so that the Holy Spirit sows there His many charismas that enrich the Church and offer invaluable services to the world. Religious life has a special relevance among these gifts.

Jesus Christ Pastor carries out His mission while respecting and following the law of the Incarnation: through signs that make this present, evident and operating. Ordained ministers are this authorized sign and sacrament of Christ Pastor: they provide the Word of God, preside the Eucharist, guide and agglutinate the community.

They are not all in the Church. They are a kind of stewardship service to allow the Christian community to dedicate to his own duties: worship, fellowship, announcement, service.

In cases where these services fail, the Church would weaken without any remedy. The charismas (including religious charisma) couldn't blossom. Accordingly, it is clear that vocations' promotion, especially the priestly and also the religious life, must be a priority task to which the priests, secular or religious, should specially dedicate their devotion. "This duty belongs to the mission of the priest" (PDV 41)

2. The priestly ministry and his mission to the charismas

Our Church is, at the same time, ministerial and charismatic. Without priestly ministry there would be no basic services. Without the richness and variety of the charismas there is no rich life in the Christian community. It is true that the priestly ministry is also a permanent charisma, received in the ordination forever. But it is not a charisma among others; It is rather a special charisma for the service to the other charismas. If all of them convert the blessed in a servant, presbyterial charisma converts us into servants of servants.

What does this service consist of? First, it must discover in the believers, i.e., to awaken in them the ecclesial and social service potential sown by the spirit, but often asleep and frozen. The priest is "minister of concern" to support the servants when they are tempted by fatigue or failure. Secondly, it belongs to the priest to discern if such gifts come really from the Spirit and, in this case, to help release them from possible attachments that do not originate from the Spirit: rigidity, pride, sectarianism, disembodied prophecy. These attachments must be lopped off so that they have and give more life. Thirdly, he must align confluence between them so that they are a sign of unity and diversity of the Church. Presbyterial mission is to be "director of choir" articulating and tuning, without homogenizing, different voices and patch cords.

Without the priestly ministry, the Church would not acquire "charismatic temperature" so that the Spirit sows His charismas. This is why the ordained Ministry is an "original charisma." Without their effective service, the charismas would lack their "coordinator and regulator" element (PDV 26) which guarantees their unity and fertility. This is why the dicasterial document "New vocations for a new Europe", while emphasizing the importance of all special vocations, underscores the need for priestly vocations (No. 22). The priestly ministry includes "the non transferable task to promote each vocation.... The ordained Ministry owes to all vocations and all vocations owe to the ordained ministry in a mutual communion" (Ibm).

Cultivate all charismas, especially the religious and the unique presbyterial charisma is, in these times of shortage, not only consistent with the priestly mission but particularly necessary and urgent.

3. The priestly ministry and the common priesthood of all baptized

The N.T. says that the Church is a sacerdotal body (1 Pe. 2, 4-5) and that all the baptized are priests (Rev 1, 5-6). It is an existential priesthood. In other words, our existence lived to love God and all brothers is the offer that we give to the Father, united with Christ. While making such offer we are exercising our common priesthood. The greatest exercise of this priesthood is participation in the Eucharist. In it we are offering our entire lives. The special priesthood of bishops and priests is at the service of the common priesthood. Its objective is to stimulate and activate among all Christians the above said priesthood by providing them with the light, the company and the testimony they need to exercise. "Their figure and their mission in the Church do not override but on the contrary promote the baptismal priesthood of all the people of God. They are at the service of faith, hope and charity" (PDV 17)

A vast multitude of secular vocations remain devoid of a necessary catalyst because they lack the services and the priestly testimony. Analogously, many secular vocations receive major formative and testimonial

support from several religious charismas. Therefore, full Christian people salvation depends in a significant measure on the quality and the sufficient number of priestly and religious vocations.

4. The priestly ministry and its "reproductive dynamism"

"Nothing is more logical and consistent in a vocation than creating other vocations" (New vocations... No. 6). Every living creature has a reproductive vitality ensuring the conservation of the species. Inside the Church, the priestly ministry includes in its genes this same dynamism. It is the Spirit which makes vocations appear. But the priest collaborates with the Holy Spirit in gestation and generation of special vocations and very particularly the priestly vocation. A priest must look with eagerness and prayer to perpetuate himself in new priests encouraged by his ministry. In the priestly charisma there is a movement of paternity specially expressed in the priestly vocations that he generates in the Church and for her under the action of the Spirit.

III. - NECESSARY ATTITUDES AND TASKS FOR THE VOCATIONS' PROMOTION

1. Attitudes

The first is to assume, theoretical and practically, the priority of this task on many others of the priest ministry. Our pastoral activity must be duly hierarchical. And, therefore, the promotion of vocations should occupy the first positions. It is not enough to argue that we are very occupied by other important tasks. Insofar as we can, the vocations activity (suggest, invite, accompany) must be part of our work schedule and be evaluated periodically.

The high quality of our Evangelical testimony is another required attitude. According some specialists, symbolic capacity (to understand and accept to be affected and motivated by the signs) is much reduced in our society. They may be right. But if the signs are of great quality they are still able to challenge and motivate. Therese of Calcutta, Mons. Romero, a Rwanda or Algeria nun, really interpellate. A body and soul devoted priest, poor and praying, calls with his life and creates in his parishioners very salutary concerns. "The testimony raises vocations" (Benedict XVI).

The joy of a priestly life surprises and challenges young people around the priest. This does not need to coincide with the joviality or juvenility of some priests' temperament. Joy is another thing: it is to feel good in one's skin, live centered in his mission; it is also the ability to overcome the difficulties and the setbacks with fairplay. It leads us to perceive the positive side of people and life. It is a relative immunity to despondency. It is the capacity to communicate the desire to live. It is the virtue of awaken in people the best of themselves and weaken their worse behavior.

The proximity to the young people is also an indispensable attitude. It consists in frequent and familiar relationship with young people. This is where the priest self life project is frequently communicated in an osmotic way. The identification process inherent to the birth of a vocation often happens here. Is it not true that too many priests are too "busy" to "waste our time" with the young people? In addition, this proximity is fundamentally a positive attitude towards young generations that, without forgetting their large gaps, does not adopt a position of suspicion or strangeness before them and, still more important, loves them. It was evident how much John Paul II loved young people.

Together with love, hope is also necessary. In the first chapter of my conference, I tried to reflect to what proof is submitted today the priests' hope concerning vocations. The emergence and the stability of vocations remain precarious. Our hope could be sinking if we do not deepen the belief that God cannot deny to His church what is essential for her and we do not feed that belief with insistent prayers for

vocations. "Today the Holy Spirit keeps calling the sons of his Church to be heralds of the salvation message everywhere in the world" (New Vocations for a New Europe, no. 1)

The difficulty and the delicacy of this pastoral must be a stimulus for better preparation. The message of Scripture, the theology and the psychology of vocations, the spirituality of conscripts and of appellants should be assimilated by the priests who animate to deploy definitely this important service.

When these attitudes are present in the manners of a priest or a religious educator towards the young believers close to them, they confide their intimacy, their projects and fears, and as well as their family, emotional, sexual or religious problems. Experience of having been backed up, consoled and illuminated by the priest will be a unique opportunity for this young to experiment in his inside the value of a life devoted to priesthood or education. It happens then something well known from evolutionary psychology. Just as the love received from the parents makes the child capable to love, the service received from the priest or religious awakens in some young people a movement of identification that leads them to the question: would it be my way to also offer myself this service to others?

2. Tasks

It would be something appropriate for a lucid and motivated priest in this area to educate the parish community about the need of priestly and other special consecration vocations, as well as to encourage active desire to ensure that in its bosom such vocations are born. For this it appears to be adequate means preaching, the days of prayer for vocations, as well as discussing this subject in the Pastoral Council. Indeed, a developed parish community should have a vocation commission. In certain circumstances, the Pastoral Council itself dare ask some young or adult people to put themselves the vocation question in first person.

The parents of these young people need the proximity of the priest to end dispelling their fears and prejudices, to stimulate their respect to the inclination of the boy or girl, as well as to remember their responsibility as believers to support and not obstruct the options for their children. Finally, also to denounce with firmness and indulgence, the instinct of undue protection or forged ambitions on the future of their children.

The priest must sow into the catechists and religion teachers the concern to favor these special vocations, in particular the service vocation. To keep this concern lucid, he will provide indoctrination, awareness and education sessions to the world of vocations.

In addition to the general invitation open to all in the catechetical or academic spaces, he will always keep a direct invitation to young people and adults showing relevant signs of both human and religious fitness. If they appear willing to discernment, the priest should ensure accompaniment. If they are rather reluctant, it would be good kindly asking why and give them help to identify their resistances and fears. It goes without saying that, as a prerequisite, such invitation presupposes mutual proximity between the priest and the recipients of his appeal.

IV. - A FEW FACTS FROM WHICH WE MUST LEARN

Arrived to this point, there is a very biting question that we cannot avoid: how is it that in the middle of winter vocation in Western Europe, there are Church spaces where fairly abundant vocations appear. Our spontaneous reaction is often strongly critical to proposals for vocations formulated in these spaces. We use to say that they force young people, isolate them, create generations always "against everything", aggregate not very wise boys and girls ...

It is quite possible that, at least for some of these groups, this formulated judgment has solid foundations. But with this critique we do not respond to the problem unless we also make some self-critique. It may happen that these practices, possibly not well targeted, strengthen in their own way some aspects we are failing in our vocations pastoral. Let's see them with more attention.

1. The initiation of young people to prayer

I am not addressing these shared and emotional intimate experiences in which we can create a climate of "feeling good" close to each other. Nor those overly long, intense and premature sessions which are the worst of the pedagogies to prepare the sustained adult prayer of tomorrow. I am referring to individual and shared prayer in which God, who simply draws me, becomes for me a God who attracts and engages.

To generate a vocation it is essential to teach young Christians how to pray. I consider crucial to help introduce frequent or daily prayer in their life project. Also, introduce them to the innumerable and beautiful texts relating to the vocation both in the Old and New Testament, by offering proper questions for meditation and adequate comments, seem to be an excellent way to "provoke" the call of God. I have long personal experience which confirms my assertion.

2. The practice of spiritual accompaniment

We cannot deny that the classic spiritual direction is still a delicate instrument. It can as well promote growth and progressive freedom or excessive conditioning creating dependency. It appears that the practice of spiritual direction in some groups is not always beneficial. However, I do not intend to refer to these potential abuses.

Since God has a personal project for my life, it will be much needed an insight to succeed in knowing it. Normally He does not speak through pace and clear signs, but its appeal is also not so enigmatic that it cannot be decrypted. It is in this *chiaroscuro* that discernment stays. Accompanied by the spiritual director, these boys and girls, yet little accustomed to give name to what they feel or perceive, are able to read the signs that Jesus sends them and to identify a tangible appeal. "It is necessary to rediscover the great tradition of individual spiritual accompaniment that always gave so many and valuable fruits in the life of the Church" (PDV. 40)

This accompaniment should be as extensive as possible. It should not be reduced to vocational aspects but extend to all aspects of the life of the accompanied person. Concrete vocation unfolds in the context of a biological, mental, sexual, social, moral, religious and ecclesial life. It determines all these aspects and is also conditioned by them. Therefore, it is appropriate that the escort knows them all to be able to help discernment.

In addition to the extension, accompaniment must have depth. It needs reaching the motives of a vocation tendency. This inclination can hide the desire to be protagonist, the spirit of the "incurable dreamer", the fear of the "inclement weather" of civilian life, low self appreciation, the feeling of being morally vulgar, fear the man or the woman, discomfort to own body, latent homosexuality. It is in the dialogue of accompaniment that such motives may emerge, so there is the need to discern whether they are determinative or simply concurrent. In any case an effort is required for the purification of these motivations and it is also necessary to detect and create other incentives with more clear Evangelical imprint.

3. The strong sense of belonging to the Group

Groups that attract enough consecrated vocations are usually well defined groups: they know what they are. It is not inaccurate or undecided collective. Their needs may sometimes be excessive and their decisions premature. But they teach that every Christian group, even very juvenile, must have some degree of definition. And not all of them do.

It is usual to find in these groups a "mystics of the group" comprising a high valuation of their community, large dependence on their leaders and also much defined membership and loyalty links.

Our parish groups have, generally, a fairly low temperature gestures. However, without encouraging intimate attitudes, we need to promote the intimacy. Without creating dependencies of the community, we should cultivate cohesion, both internal and external (with other groups and the parish). These groups must gain more and more identity. To achieve this goal they must pursue defined and clearly Christian targets.

These juvenile groups should not isolate their members from the relationship and the feeling of belonging to the young generation. They must be strong enough to neutralize the negative dependencies from the same generation. In the event that the Group is specifically about vocations, it is important to prevent that it is the only group in the lives of the members. This way we avoid "smell in sacristy" or "glass-house plants" that sometimes spread from some vocational groups.

4. The radical proposal

Vocations "fruitful" groups usually offer demanding but sometimes impetuous goals. Among them some "shock therapy" is used as formative methodology, where they identify their vocations' elements of contrast and opposition to the dominant juvenile models, awakening the ability to oppose. They often make clear their opposition to some models of young people behavior: uncontrolled experience of sexuality, abuse of alcohol and drugs, the worship of money, hedonism as highly rated value. In these contrasting communities, the awareness of belonging to a selected and clean group, free of vulgarity and slavery of youth "in the world", is developed.

An individual or group education that highlights both the contrast and the opposition of the young person to the world and to his own world is not healthy. The same can be said about pedagogy that does not cultivate the Christian opposition to specific attitudes, behaviors and lifestyles that are inhuman, unliable or reckless. It is important to debate, but starting from communion, made with the sense of love and belonging. Similarly, only a group without high targets and demanding evangelical sense can be called Christian. If we reduce the Gospel, we make it unattractive for the young people that could be more attentive to it. After all, the high goals must be accompanied by a gradation to avoid hasty maturities as well as abandonment by withdrawal and helplessness.

With the willingness to give a small light to the subject, I present to this congress the contents of my thinking and I truly wish that they will be useful to all.