

Meeting of Pope Francis with the Superiors General

The Union of Superiors General held its 82nd General Assembly in the Salesianum in Rome from November 27-29, 2013. The story of three experiences provided the basis for reflections and encounters of the various linguistic groups. Fr. Janson Hervé of the Little Brothers of Jesus spoke of “the light that helps me be at the service of my brothers and how Pope Francis strengthens my hope”. Br. Mauro Jöhri, Capuchin, explained “how Pope Francis is an inspiration to me and a challenge for the office I hold within my Order” Finally, Fr. Hainz Kulüke, of the Society of the Divine Word, spoke about “leadership within a religious missionary congregation against the background of an international and inter-cultural context following the example of Pope Francis”.

The Holy Father chose to meet with the Superiors in the Vatican for three hours, rather than the short encounter normally foreseen: no address was prepared in advance, but instead a long, informal and fraternal discussion took place, composed of questions and answers. Various aspects and problems of the religious life were tackled. The Pope often interspersed his speech with personal stories taken from his pastoral experience.

The first set of questions related to the identity and mission of consecrated life. What kind of consecrated life do we expect today? One which offers a special witness was the answer. “You must truly be witnesses of a different way of doing and being. You must embody the values of the Kingdom”. The Pope stated that a radical approach is required of all Christians, but religious people are called upon to follow the Lord in a special way: “They are men and woman who can awaken the world and enlighten the future. Consecrated life is prophecy. God asks us to fly from our cozy nest and to be sent to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation to ‘domesticate’ them. This is the most concrete way of imitating the Lord”.

The Pope continued by saying that to be prophetic is to strengthen what is institutional in consecrated life that is the charism of the Congregation, without mistaking it for the apostolic work which is carried out. The first remains, the second will pass. The charism remains because it is strong. Sometimes there is confusion between charism and its practical implementation. The former is creative, always looking for new paths. The charismatic witness must be realistic and include the possibility of being sinful witnesses “We all make mistakes.

We have to recognize our frailty. Accepting to be sinners does us a world of good”.

One of the participants asked “Pope Francis, you have often invite us to go to the **peripheries** of the world. How can we do that?”. The Pope answered that the world perspective is different if seen from the outskirts rather than from the centre. This forces us to continuously rethink our religious life. He mentioned a letter by Fr Arrupe to the Jesuit social centres in which he stated that in order to make a preferential option for the poor it is necessary to live with the poor. “We have to look at things from the periphery. We have to go there in order to really know the life of the people. Otherwise we tend to embrace stern, fundamentalist positions, based on a centralised vision. This is not healthy. For example: those who work with youth cannot give a regimented vision of reality all the time because that is like water off a duck’s back. Today God asks us to leave our nest. Even those who choose the cloister receive the mandate to pray for the spreading of the Good News. This is the most concrete way of imitating the Lord: to go out!”.

When asked about the **situation of vocations and training**, the Pope emphasised that there are young Churches which are bearing new fruit. All cultural setups can produce vocations. What is to be avoided is the “traffic in novices” whereby some congregations go “candidate hunting” in countries where they are not present so that they can send them to the ‘home country’ where vocations are scarce. It’s also important to try and fathom the right intention of any young man or woman wanting to join. There could be a rather spurious intention at the beginning and this has to be purified during the formation years. One must always be alert: is this young person looking for a shelter, some kind of safe nest? This naturally gives rise to a re-evaluation of the inculturation of the charism which is specific, but at the same time, it interacts with the different cultures.

The Church must ask for forgiveness and look with shame upon apostolic failures caused by misunderstandings in this field like in the case of Matteo Ricci in China who was grossly misjudged. Intercultural dialogue must push for the introduction of persons of various cultures in the governance of religious institutes, thus expressing different ways of living the charism. It has nothing to do with folklore but it’s rather a question of mentality, of different ways of thinking. You cannot train a person for the religious life without taking into account his/her culture, his/her world view. One cannot lose his/her cultural and personal identity during his/her period of cultural dialogue must prahrough this meeting. om dsfunctional damental to be fully equipped tion for Religious institute formation.

The Pope insisted upon the **importance of training for religious life which he presented as being founded upon four fundamental**

pillars: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. It is indispensable to avoid every form of hypocrisy and clericalism by means of a frank and open dialogue on all aspects of life: “Formation is an artisanal craft, not a form of policing”, he commented; “its aim is to form religious persons with a tender heart, not bitter like vinegar. Time allotted to training varies according to one’s gifts and culture. Otherwise we’ll produce “little monsters”. We mustn’t forget that “young people use a different language and categories. It’s not a question of geographical differences but of a cultural change which is in answer to an epochal transformation”.

We must train young people so that they may be witnesses of the Resurrection, of the Gospel values, so that they may lead and train the people of God. That is the aim of training for religious life: it’s for the faithful people of God that we enter such life. Thus, if a seminary accepts a candidate who has been sent away from a formation house for serious reasons, it’s a case of not thinking about the people of God and that is a serious problem.

The courage shown by Benedict XIV in dealing with cases of sexual abuse must encourage us to be serious about the formation of our candidates. And he concluded by saying “we are not training administrators or managers but parents, brothers and travelling companions”. When asked about the **vocation to become brothers**, the Pope said that “this is not a lesser choice but a different call”. It’s necessary to reflect on the matter and to highlight the importance of such choice. “I don’t think for a moment that this type of vocation belongs to the past” said Pope Francis but “we must understand what God wants from us”. There is a document on the brothers which is being reviewed by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. It’s been there for a long time and it’s necessary to look at it again. On the question concerning brothers as Major Superiors in Clerical Institutes, the Holy Father replied that it is an issue pertaining to Canon Law and that’s the realm where it should be addressed.

Another set of questions addressed community life. Pope Francis remarked that it has a great force of attraction, and presupposes the acceptance of differences and conflicts. There are different forms of community life depending on the various institutes. At times it is difficult to live in fraternal love, but without it no fruit may be borne. “Someone who is not capable of community life is not fit for the religious life”. At times one notes a certain tendency towards individualism which is often a flight from community life. How to combine mercy and compassion though with firmness towards those confreres in a difficult situation?

The Pope went on to say: “Even in the best families there are some members who go through a rough time. Community conflicts are necessary: we can’t dream of a community or any human group which is

free of conflicts and we must tolerate them and overcome them not by eliminating or ignoring them but by facing them. At times, we can be very cruel to each other. We are all tempted to criticise either because we think we are better or for some personal gain". In certain cases, accompaniment may be required, especially in the case of mental or physical illness. In any case, "we must never act like managers when faced with a brother's conflict: but our charity must reach out like a gentle touch", said the Pope.

When faced by conflict we mustn't react like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan who simply ignored the problem: we can't avoid conflict but we mustn't remain stuck in it either: we need to tackle it and behave like wise people trying to find possible solutions. Patience and tenderness are the virtues we need. It is painful but it's the only way forward. Certainly, if there is no resolution of the problem, other solutions will need to be found such as a transfer or even leaving the order but everything must be done in a gentle and caring way.

At this point the Pope mentioned a personal experience. A young man, 22, an alcoholic who suffered from depression, was rescued by his mum's loving and tender care. Now he's a successful person. We must pray for the gift of loving care. "In the Office readings on the feast of St Joseph's there is an expression that I liked a lot which said that Saint Joseph treated his family with a *Eucharistic tenderness*. That's how we should treat our brothers" – concluded the Holy Father.

Some questions tackled the mutual relationship between the Religious and the local Churches in which they work. Pope Francis stated that he knows from experience that there are problems. "We, the Bishops, ought to understand that consecrated people are not just helping hands but they enrich the Dioceses with their charism. Dioceses need your charism" – he added. The insertion of religious communities in a Diocese is important and the bishop must acknowledge and respect this charism. Conflicts generally appear when dialogue is lacking. Here the Pope gave some examples from his own experience. He also noted that the issue has been dealt with several times and that the Prefect for the Congregation for Religious institutes is working on a shared document

The final questions regarded the frontiers of the mission of consecrated persons. "They must be sought on the basis of the charism of each institute", answered the Pope. He mentioned Fr Arrupe, former Superior General of the Jesuit and the choice he made in favour of the refugees. "Situations of exclusion remain the first priorities but they also need discernment. The first criterion is to send the best and most gifted people to those situations because of the risk implied which requires men of courage and prayer. It's necessary that the superiors keep in close touch with the people involved in this type of work".

Alongside these challenges, he mentioned the cultural and educational mission in schools and universities. These are sectors where consecrated people can give a tremendous contribution. “When the fathers from (the magazine) *Civiltà Cattolica* came to see me, I told them about the frontiers of the new philosophies, like the ‘Weak Thought’ and the ‘Pensée unique’. I also reminded the Superior General of the Salesians of the frontier of Patagonia which was the dream of Don Bosco”.

For the Pope, **the pillars of education are “transmitting knowledge, transmitting methods, transmitting values.** By these means, faith is communicated. The educator must measure up to those he educates, and must give careful thought to how to proclaim Jesus Christ to a changing generation”. Then he insisted that the educational task is of paramount importance. He recalled some of his experiences in Buenos Aires and how it is fundamental to be well equipped when receiving into an educational context children and boys/girls who come from dysfunctional families. How do you proclaim Christ to these young people without inoculating them with a “vaccine against the faith”?

Before taking leave of the 120 Superiors General present, the Pope announced that 2015 would be a year dedicated to consecrated life. He concluded by saying: “Thank you for the act of faith you made by coming to this meeting. Thank you for what you do and for your spirit of faith and your service. Thank you for your witness and also for the humiliations through which you have had to pass: it’s the path of the Cross”.

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