

Rome, 10-16 January 2007

MEETING: HELP TO CONFRERES IN DIFFICULTY

Homily Closing Eucharist

Tuesday, 16 January 2007

Readings: Hebrews 6:10-20; Mark 2:23-28

In preparing for this Eucharist, I asked myself the question: "In what way might the word of God today, which the Universal Church presents to us, enlighten us as we bring to a close this workshop on how to help confreres in difficult situations?" At the heart of the Gospel, Mark presents us, in his second chapter, the Sabbath controversy. The Sabbath in itself is a good thing. The leaders of God's people, inspired by God's grace, wanted to assure that people would take the opportunity to step away from the busyness of their lives and focus on the most important: he who is the source of all life and all energy. In order to avoid circumstances in which people's lives become so busy and God gets crowded out, the Sabbath was established as that day of rest, as that time in which we are to focus on he who is the source of our very being. It is a day of thanking our Creator for the possibility of participating in his very plan of creation. It is that opportunity, through the grace of God, to be re-created ourselves.

Yet, as time went by, the Sabbath's true meaning began to be obscured by the fundamentalist human instincts of abiding by the law. Rather than the Sabbath being a law of God that helps us to come to know and love him more deeply by resting in his presence, the focus was more on just fulfilling the law and then punitive actions against those who did not fulfill it. In other words, the purpose of the law lost its meaning.

In these days, we too have focused a great deal on the law, the Church's universal law and our own particular law, with regard to confreres in difficult situations. One of the things that struck me throughout the week, in the documentation that we received, in the presentations that were given by different experts in the field, as well as in our own personal reflections and the dialogue among ourselves, was the continual reminder that we are to keep a clear focus on helping our brothers in difficult situations. How many times were we asked to be compassionate and patient with those, who for one

reason or another, stray from living out, in an authentic way, our Vincentian vocation?

We know that many times the temptation is just to follow strictly the law, and perhaps, at times, we are not able to see beyond the law and its purpose in helping one to bring about a change and conversion in his own life. From the very beginning, in the preparations for this workshop, the concern of all those who participated in its development was not only to learn how to deal with those legal situations that many times confront us, when confreres, for one reason or another, have gone astray, but also how to avoid these, so to speak, pitfalls, that often take the individual confrere, as well as the Community, along winding, suffering paths.

Our hope was that we might also be able to discuss how to prevent these situations from occurring, and thus how to help a confrere respond to that first fervor that all of us had and which filled our hearts with a desire to follow Jesus, evangelizing and serving the poor. That Jesus is the Son of Man. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. In and through him we have the experience of divine love and it is in and through our intimacy with Jesus that we have the ability to love God with his own heart and thus be able to love others with the heart of God, as Father Cencini shared with us in his talk on "Affective Maturity in the Consecrated Life."

In reaching out to confreres in difficulty, our hope is to help them to recover their ability to love in an authentic and free way. Many times, in order to bring back our brother, he needs to be reminded or reeducated, which can mean compliance to the rules and regulations that are a help in disciplining ourselves to recover our first fervor, to re-ignite in us that attraction or attractiveness to those who often may be the least lovable, our brothers and sisters who are marginalized and excluded. Many times our confreres, who have gone through difficult situations, being difficult themselves, may even seem to us those who are least lovable. As we reflected in these days how Saint Francis kissed the leper, we too, as members of the Congregation of the Mission, have that call to reach out to each and everyone of our brothers. They are the lepers we are called to kiss.

As we celebrate this Eucharist of thanksgiving, I pray that Jesus might always give us the ability to reflect his love to others and that he might enable us to take the graces that we have received this week to assist our confreres, who find themselves in difficult situations.

Some perhaps feel uncomfortable with the title that we had given to this workshop. I often heard people saying that we have to look for another title. Yet I think it reflects the reality in which we are living. This was made quite clear from the opening conference of Father José María Nieto and the statistics that represent real persons, who, in one way or another, made a commitment to follow Jesus

Christ for their whole lives in the Congregation of the Mission and who, for one reason or another, lost sight of that call. This is our reality. We are called, as brothers, to confront these situations in a way that will best reflect who we are and who Saint Vincent invites us to be: Brothers who love one another.

Those in “trouble,” so to speak, are a small portion of the little Company, among the 3500 of us incorporated. Many confreres are “on the road” and provide for us good example and encouragement in living out our vocation to evangelize the poor. Together we can support those who feel weaker. Let our strength come from our unity in the Eucharist we share.

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