

“BE IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT”

On Monday February 17th, the Holy Father received in the Sistine Chapel the parish priests of Rome and the Lenten preachers. Representatives of the assistant parish priests and of the pupils of the Major Roman Pontifical Seminary were present for the first time.

The Pope delivered the following address:

Venerated Confreres:

This annual meeting with the Lenten preachers and with our priests of Rome, with the parish priests and the Coadjutors especially engaged in the pastoral ministry, with the ecclesiastics of the Vicariate of Our diocese and with those of the diocesan clergy and the religious families who devote their spiritual service to it, and with representatives of our seminaries, is very precious for Us.

We see you with Our dear and reverend Cardinal to whom We are extremely grateful for the care of souls to which he devotes himself with such wisdom in this beloved City of ours. We see you attentive and eager to hear a word from Us; We see you religiously conscious of the charity which unites us at this moment in the same love for God, Christ the Church, and in the same ardent prayer for the coming of the kingdom of heaven and for our common salvation.

Let us fix the happy moment in our minds. We can see reflected in it the splendid words of the early Christian community, which was “one heart and souls” (Acts 4, 32). Let us live again for a moment this miracle of charity. We wish you were all here; and we consider you all present, dear Roman priests, even if many, detained by the duties of your ministry, are not present physically. We wish to embrace you

all, thank you all, comfort you all, bless you all. This is an hour of spiritual plenitude for Us; Our apostolic office would like to enrich it with that mysterious presence that the Lord has promised those who are gathered in His name (cfr. Mt. 18, 20): would like to prolong it in holy conversation, like Paul at Troas (cfr. Acts 20, 7); and We would have so many things to say and perhaps so many to hear from you.

But the mere fact of this meeting makes up for our talk which, instead of being long and deep, is simple and short. A homely talk, indeed; and this year, too, rather than be concerned with the great topics characteristic of Lenten preaching, it will deal with some aspects of our ecclesiastical life, now the object of many, grave discussions. We will just touch them. In any case, these problems are present and being debated in everyone's mind.

The priest in contemporary society

In the first place we must recall some dynamic ideas, which are traveling through the whole Church today, and which are upsetting ecclesiastics particularly. The first of these ideas concerns the figure of the priest. He is nearly always considered from the outside, in his sociological position, in the framework of contemporary society, which, as everyone knows, is completely in movement, completely in transformation.

The priest, remaining in his place, has seen himself abandoned by his traditional community; in many places there is emptiness around him; in others the pastoral clientele has changed; it is difficult to approach them, difficult to understand them, difficult to reassemble them in a friendly, faithful, praying community.

The priest, then, has begun to ask himself what he is doing in a world so different from the world he used to assist. Who is listening to him? And how can he make himself what he was a strange social phenomenon, anachronistic, helpless, useless, even ridiculous. And then the new, dynamic idea came to him: he must do something, he must go all out to draw near to the people again, to understand them, evangelize them. The idea, in itself, is an excellent one; and we have seen it germinate from the charity in the desolate heart of the priest, who felt

excluded from the historical, social and human world in which he should have been the central figure, the teacher and pastor; and in which, on the contrary, he has become an outsider, lonely, superfluous and mocked.

The incongruity and the suffering of this fate have become intolerable. The priest has sought inspiration and energy in the depths and essence of his vocation. We must move, he said, and take up the celebration of divine worship and the normal administration of the Sacraments.

The idea, We say, is excellent and the sign of a noble priestly conscience. The priest is not for himself, he is for others; the priest must go in pursuit of men to turn them into faithful, and not just wait for men to come to him; if his church is empty, he will have to "go out into the streets and lanes of the city" in search of poor people, and again "into the highways and the hedge-rows", and induce these guests, picked up at random, to come in (fr. Luke 14, 21-23). This apostolic urgency is weighing on the hearts of many priests, whose churches have become deserted. And when it is so, how can we fail to admire them? how can we fail to support them?

Perfect the traditional forms of apostolate

But let us be careful, keeping in mind the experimental and positive character of the apostolate. In the first place: it is not always like this. There are still communities of faithful overflowing with people and eager for normal observance: why should we leave them? why change the method of ministry for them, when the latter is still authentic, valid and magnificently fruitful? Would we not be wronging the fidelity of so many good Christians to embark on adventures the outcome of which is uncertain?

And, in the second place, when it is sufficient to open a new church and welcome with loving care the people who flock there of their own accord eager for the divine Word and for sacramental grace, why should we think up strange new forms of apostolate the success of

which is doubtful and perhaps shortlived? Would it not be better to perfect the traditional forms and make them bloom again, as the Council teaches us, with pastoral realism, new beauty and new effectiveness, before trying out others, which are often arbitrary and of doubtful outcome, or restricted to particular groups, separated from the communion of the faithful?

Oh! we will not forget the words of Jesus, who bids us leave the ninety-nine sheep that are in safety to go in search of the one lost sheep (cfr. Luke 15, 4); and especially if the proportion, as happens in certain situations today, were reversed, that is, one sheep in the fold and ninety-nine lost. But the principle of unity and of the completeness of our flock, the principle of pastoral love and of our responsibility towards souls and their inestimable value, will always give us guidance.

We must be careful. The need, nay the duty, of an efficacious mission inserted in the reality of social life, may produce other drawbacks, such as that depreciating the sacramental and liturgical ministry, as if it were a curb and an obstacle as regards the direct evangelization of the modern world; or the attempt, rather widespread today, to make the priest a man like any other, in dress, in secular profession, in going to places of entertainment, in social and political commitment, in the formation of a family of his own with renunciation of holy celibacy.

People say this is an attempt to integrate the priest into society. Is this the way to understand the masterly words of Jesus, who wants us in the world, but not of the world? Did He not call and choose his disciples, those who were to extend and continue the announcement of the kingdom of God, distinguishing them, in fact separating them from the ordinary way of life, and asking them to leave everything to follow Him alone?

The whole Gospel speaks of this qualification, this "specialization" of the disciples who were afterwards to act as apostles. Jesus took them away, not without their radical sacrifice, from their everyday occupations, from their legitimate and normal interests, from their assimilation in the social setting, from their sacrosanct affections; and He wished them to be dedicated to himself, with the complete gift of themselves, committing

themselves forever, and although this response was to be a free and spontaneous one, He expected it to be one of total renunciation, and heroic immolation.

Let us listen again to the list of what we must relinquish from the lips of Jesus himself: "*Omnis, qui reliquerit domum, vel fratres aut sorores, aut patrem aut matrem, aut uxorem, aut filios, aut agros propter nomen meum . . .*" (Mt. 19, 29). And the disciples were aware of this personal and paradoxical condition of theirs; Peter says: "*Ecce nos reliquimus omnia, et secuti sumus Te*" (ib. 27). Can the disciple, the apostle, the priest, the authentic minister of the Gospel be a man socially like other men? He can be poor, like others, a brother, for others; a servant, of others; a victim, for others; but at the same time he is endowed with a lofty and a very special function: "*Vos estis sal terrae . . . Vos estis lux mundi!*" And it is clear, if we have the concept of the organic composition of the body of the Church; St. Paul could not be more explicit in this connection: "*Corpus meum non est unum membrum, sed multa . . . Quod si essent omnia unum membrum, ubi corpus? Nunc autem multa quidem membra unum autem corpus . . .*" (1 Cor. 12, 14-21 ss).

The diversity of functions is a constitutional principle in the Church of God; and it concerns firstly the ministerial priesthood: let us take care not to lose this specific function out of a mistaken intention of assimilation, of "democratization," as is said today, in the society around us: "If salt loses its taste, what is there left it out of doors for men to tread it under foot" (M. 5, 13). These are words of the Lord, which must make us reflect on the discernment necessary in the application of the formula quoted: *to be in the world, but not of the world.*

The lack of this discernment, of which ecclesiastical education, ascetic tradition, canon law have spoken to us so much, may lead to just the opposite effect from the one we had hoped to obtain when we imprudently abandoned it: effectiveness, renewal, modernity. In this way, in fact, the efficacy of the priest's presence and action in the world may be wiped out; that every efficacy which we hoped to obtain when we imprudently reacted to the separation of the priest from the rest of society. Wiped out: in the esteem and confidence of the people, and by the practical necessity of dedicating to secular occupations and hu-

man affections: time, heart, freedom, superiority of spirit (cfr. 1 Cor. 2, 15), which the priestly ministry alone wished to keep for itself.

Generous intentions and mistaken promptings

We repeat, venerated and beloved brothers, we must be careful. This desire to insert the priest in the social setting in which his life and his ministry take place, is good in itself, but from being a generous intention to emerge from the shell of a crystallized and privileged condition, it may become a very grave error which may paralyze the priestly vocation in its most intimate, its most charismatic, its most fruitful aspects; and it may suddenly demolish the edifice of pastoral functionality.

As it may also expose good priests, young ones particularly, to the influences of the most questionable and dangerous movements of thought fashionable in the world, it may therefore make them vulnerable from the outside and expose them to supine acceptance of other people's ideas at their face value. Ideological and practical gregariousness has become contagious.

Authority in the Church

We must be careful. Another dynamic idea, which is also basically praiseworthy, but often intemperate in its formulation and explosive in its application to problems is that of the so-called "structures." It is not very clear what meaning this term is given in ecclesiastical language, especially when one wishes to have some due regard for the work of Christ, for the Church as she is, in her constitutional plan, her doctrinal heritage, her traditional formulation, the instrument and sacrament of salvation. But a formula prevails: the structures must be changed. Is this possible? Is it permissible? Is it useful?

It seems to Us that sometimes the unrealistic dream of an invisible Church, or the crazy hope of being able to eliminate the difficulties and the materiality of the Church-as-institution, to preserve a pure Christianity, of vague and free conception, or the rash utopia of conjuring up a Church of one's own invention, prevent people from reflecting on the superficiality of this ambition, particularly if it is proposed to begin

the change of structures with the destruction, not the reform, of those that exist, and if the initiative lacks the authority and experience for such a grave operation.

Under the transparent veil of an abstract nominalism, destructive novelties are sometimes put forward, without taking into account two things that wisdom and prudence should recommend to us: one, that the modernization of the structures, or let us rather say, of ecclesiastical legislation is already underway; but for it to be healthy and vital and promoted by the joint responsibility of those who have the knowledge and those who have the authority, calls for study and patience, which We Ourselves are the first to try to promote, especially with the revision of the Code of Canon Law; two, that the structures, now contested, are often far from being contrary to the effects that people aim at obtaining by changing them. Anyone who knows the Church from inside, is aware of this; and while regretting certain undeniable defects, sees that love, obedience, confidence, zeal may very well breathe new life into the trunk, like that of a gnarled olive-tree, gnarled of the old structures, causing it to burst into a new vegetation of genuine Christian vitality.

But no matter: people would like to change the structures, and many of them, when they say this, are thinking of the vexation of authority in the Church. They wish to abolish it, and they cannot; they wish to trace its source to the community; and they are violating the constitutional character of the Church, which Christ willed to be apostolic; they wish it to be service, and this is all right provided it is the rightful service of the pastoral authority; they wish to ignore it but how can a Christianity remain authentic without a magisterium, without a ministry, without the unity and authority derived from Christ? (cfr. Gal. 1. 8-9; 2 Cor. 1, 24; 2 Cor. 10, 5; St. Ignatius of A., to the Magnesii, c. IV). Authority in the Church! For him who feels its heavy weight, and does not covet the honor, it is not easy to make its apologia! Let it be enough now for Us to have made this modest defense of it.

Unity of faith, charity, discipline

Our discourse is becoming long without Our having spoken to you of what We are most anxious to speak: the renewal of the tissue of the relationships within our Church. We would like the diocese of

Rome to excel, once more, in charity (cfr. St. Ign. of A., ad Rom., Prologue); and We praise and encourage those of you who are working to give solidity to our Roman community, to give it an impulse of friendship, goodness, concord, mutual esteem and confidence, willing collaboration. We wish there to be no divisions among you (I Cor. 1, 10); there may be difference of practical views, diversity of free opinions, variety of scientific research, multiplicity of pastoral initiatives, novelty of good institutions, and so on; but at the same time and above all there must prevail among us unity of faith, of charity, of discipline.

Notice, please, dear friends, how the style of Our ecclesiastical government aims at being pastoral, that is, aims at being guided by duty and charity, open to understanding and indulgence, demanding in sincerity and in zeal, but fatherly and brotherly and humble in sentiment and in its forms. From this point of view, if the Lord helps Us, We would like to be loved. Thus you recognize Us and help Us. And likewise you, old priest or priests holding some responsible office, try to understand your confreres, those whose duty it is to work for you, young priests particularly. And the latter, our dear young priests, let them know that they are loved and esteemed; and let them by all means use the dialogue to establish sincere and trusting relations with their Superiors, without, however, taking away from him who rules the responsibility and the freedom of making decisions, and without depriving themselves of the merit of obedience.

It is in a study of common obedience that the redeeming mystery of Christ's obedience is fulfilled and celebrated among us. Let us set up the new Church institutions that the Council prescribed: the Priests' Council and the Pastoral Commission; let us give diocesan problems our joint interest and renewed and generous activity; and in order that we may all be able to celebrate and live again the paschal mystery with fullness of faith and gladness, let our Lent programme be, in a word, charity, in its inward charism of grace and love, and its outward practice of service for every need of our brothers and of society, for the necessities of the poor particularly, for the problems of workers and students, in a word, for the cause of Christ.

May Our Apostolic Blessing support you in doing so.