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"We are all Christians at the service of others"

In his 15 March general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about the fundamental equality of all the faithful and being apostles in an apostolic Church.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on the passion of evangelizing: not only on “evangelizing”, the *passion* for evangelizing and, in the school of Vatican Council II, let us try to understand better what it means to be “apostles” today. The word “apostle” reminds us of the group of the Twelve disciples chosen by Jesus. At times we refer to some saint, or more generally the bishops, as “apostles”: they are apostles, because they go in the name of Jesus. But are we aware that being apostles concerns every Christian? Are we aware that it concerns each one of us? Indeed, we are required *to be apostles* – that is, envoys – *in a Church* that, in the Creed, we profess as *apostolic*.

So, what does it mean to be apostles? It means being *sent for a mission*. The event in which the Risen Christ sends his apostles into the world, passing on to them the power he himself

received from the Father and giving them His Spirit, is exemplary and foundational. We read in the Gospel of John: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me even so I send you’. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (20:21-22).

Another fundamental aspect of being an apostle is the *vocation*, that is, the calling. It has been thus ever since the beginning, when the Lord Jesus “called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him” (*Mk* 3:13). He constituted them as a group, attributing to them the title of “apostle”, so they would come with him and send them on their mission (cf. *Mk* 3:14; *Mt* 10:1-42). Saint Paul, in his letters, presents himself as “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle”, that is, an envoy (*1 Cor* 1:1), and again, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle”

(*Rm* 1:1). And he insists on the fact that he is “an apostle not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (*Gal* 1:1); God called him from his mother’s womb to proclaim the gospel among the nations (cf. *Gal* 1:15-16).

The experience of the Twelve apostles and the testimony of Paul also challenges us today. They invite us to verify our attitudes, to verify our choices, our decisions, on the basis of these fixed points: everything depends on a gratuitous call from God; God also chooses us for services that at times seem to exceed our capacities or do not correspond to our expectations; the call received as a gratuitous gift must be answered gratuitously.

The Council says: “the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate” (Decree

Apostolicam actuositatem [AA], 2). It is a calling that is common, just as “a common dignity [is shared] as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity” (Lumen gentium, 32).

It is a call that concerns both those who have received the sacrament of Orders, consecrated persons, and all lay faithful, man or woman: it is a call to all. You, the treasure you have received with your Christian vocation, are obliged to give it: it is the dynamic nature of the vocation, the dynamic nature of life. It is a call that empowers them to actively and creatively perform their apostolic task, within a Church in which “there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and

ruling in His name and power. But the laity too: all of you, the majority of you are laypeople. The laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world” (AA, 2).

In this framework, what does the Council mean by the collaboration of the laity with the hierarchy? How is it meant? Is it a mere strategic adaptation to new situations as they come? Not at all, not at all: there is something more, that exceeds the contingencies of the moment and which maintains its own value for us too. The Church is like that, it is founded and apostolic.

Within the framework of the unity of the mission, the diversity of charisms and ministries must not give rise, within the ecclesial body, to

privileged categories: here there is not a promotion, and when you conceive of Christian life as a promotion, that the one who is above commands all the others because he has succeeded in climbing, this is not Christianity. This is pure paganism. The Christian vocation is not a promotion, so as to rise, no! It is something else. It is a great thing because, although by the will of Christ some are in an important position, perhaps, doctors, “pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ” (*LG*, 32). Who has more dignity in the Church: the bishop, the priest? No, we are all Christians at the service of others. Who is more important in the Church: the religious sister or the common person, baptized, not baptized, the child, the bishop...?

They are all equal, we are equal and one of the parties themselves to be more important than the others, turning up their nose, it is a mistake. That is not the vocation of Jesus. The vocation that Jesus gives, to everyone, but also to those who seem to be in the highest places, is service, serving others, humbling oneself. If you find a person who in the Church has a higher vocation and you see he is vain, say, "Poor soul," pray for him, because he has not understood what the vocation of God is. The vocation of God is adoration of the Father, love for the community, and service. This is what being apostles is, this is the witness of apostles.

The matter of equality in dignity asks us to rethink many aspects of our relations, which are decisive for evangelization. For example, are we aware of the fact that with our words we can undermine the dignity of people, thus ruining relationships

within the Church? While we try to engage in dialogue with the world, do we also know how to dialogue among ourselves as believers? Or in the parish, one person goes against another, one speaks badly of another in order to climb up further? Do we know how to listen to understand another person's reasons, or do we impose ourselves, perhaps even with appeasing words? To listen, to be humble, to be at the service of others: this is *serving*, this is being Christian, this is being an apostle.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us not be afraid to ask these questions. Let us shun vanity, the vanity of positions. These words can help us to confirm how we live our baptismal vocation, how we live our way of being apostles in an apostolic Church, which is at the service of others. Thank you.

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