

***Address of His Holiness Pope Francis
Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Religious and Catechists
Maputo, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Thursday, 5 September 2019***

Dear Brother Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious, Seminarians, Catechists and Pastoral Workers in Christian communities,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good Afternoon!

I thank Dom Hilário for his words of welcome in your name, and I greet all of you with affection and much gratitude. I know that you have made a great effort to be here. Together we want to renew our response to the call that once set our hearts on fire and that Holy Mother Church helped us to discern and confirm with a mission. Thank you for your testimonies, which spoke of the difficult times and serious challenges that you faced, conscious of your own limitations and weaknesses, yet also marvelling at God's mercy.

I was pleased by something one of the catechists said: "We are a Church that is part of a heroic people" that has experienced suffering yet keeps hope alive. With this holy pride that you take in your people, a pride that invites a renewal of faith and hope, all of us want to renew our "yes". How happy is Holy Mother Church to hear you manifest your love for the Lord and for the mission that he has given you! How she rejoices to see your desire to keep returning to your "first love" (Rev 2:4)! I pray that the Holy Spirit will always grant you the wisdom to call things by their name, the courage to seek forgiveness and to learn to hear whatever he wants to tell us.

Dear brothers and sisters, whether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is. Times change and we need to realize that often we do not know how to find our place in new scenarios: we keep dreaming about the "leeks of Egypt" (Num 11:5), forgetting that the promised land is before us, not behind us, and in our lament for times past, we are turning to stone. Instead of proclaiming Good News, we announce a dreary message that attracts no one and sets no one's heart afire.

We are gathered in this Cathedral dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary to share, as a family, what is happening in our lives. Like a family born in the "yes" that Mary spoke to the angel. Not even for a moment did she look backwards. We hear about this first chapter of the mystery of the incarnation from the evangelist Luke. From his account, we may perhaps find an answer to the questions you asked today, and the incentive needed to respond with the same generosity and concern as Mary.

Saint Luke draws a parallel between events in the lives of Saint John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. By contrasting them, he wants to make us see how God's acting and our way of relating to him in the Old Testament is yielding to the new way brought to us by the Son of God made man.

Obviously, in the two Annunciations there is the appearance of an angel. The first takes place in the most important city of Judea – Jerusalem – not just anywhere but in the Temple and, within it, the Holy of Holies, and the announcement is made to a man and a priest. On the other hand, the announcement of the incarnation is made in Galilee, in a remote and conflict-ridden region and a little town – Nazareth. It takes place in a house, not a synagogue or a religious place, and is made to a

layperson and a woman. What has changed? Everything. And in this change, we find our deepest identity.

You asked what to do about the crisis of priestly identity, how to counteract it? In this regard, what I want to say specifically to priests is something that all of us (bishops, catechists, consecrated persons, seminarians) are called to cultivate and foster.

In a crisis of priestly identity, sometimes we need to step away from important and solemn places, and return to the places from which we were called, where it was clear that the initiative and the power was from God. At times, without wanting it, and with no moral fault, we get used to identifying our daily activity as priests with certain rituals, with meetings and conversations, where our presence in those meetings, at the table or in the hall is “hierarchical”. Then we are more like Zechariah than like Mary. Yet, “I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the priest is very little indeed: the incomparable grandeur of the gift granted us for the ministry sets us among the least of men. The priest is the poorest of men unless Jesus enriches him by his poverty, the most useless of servants unless Jesus calls him his friend, the most ignorant of men unless Jesus patiently teaches him as he did Peter, the frailest of Christians unless the Good Shepherd strengthens him in the midst of the flock. No one is more ‘little’ than a priest left to his own devices; and so our prayer of protection against every snare of the Evil One is the prayer of our Mother: I am a priest because the Lord has regarded my littleness (cf. Lk 1:48)” (Homily at Chrism Mass, 17 April 2014).

Returning to Nazareth can be the way of facing a crisis of identity and being renewed as shepherds, disciples and missionaries. You yourselves spoke of a certain exaggerated concern with managing resources or caring for our personal well-being. We then take “circuitous routes” that frequently end up giving priority to activities with a guaranteed recompense, and these make us resist devoting our lives to everyday pastoral care. The image of that simple young woman in her home, as opposed to all the activities of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, can be a mirror in which we see the complications and concerns that dim and dissipate the generosity of our “yes”.

Zechariah’s doubts and his need for explanations contrast with the “yes” of Mary, who asks only to know how everything spoken to her was to come about. Zechariah could not overcome his desire to control everything; he could not abandon the mindset of someone needing to be responsible for making things happen. Mary did not hesitate or think about herself: instead, she surrendered herself; she trusted. It is a constant struggle to experience our relationship with God like Zechariah, like a doctor of the law: always complying, always judging whether the recompense is proportionate to the work done, whether it is my due if God blesses me, whether the Church is bound to recognize my virtues and my hard work. We should not be running for our own benefit; rather, our weariness should be related to our “ability to show compassion; our hearts are to be ‘moved’ and fully engaged in carrying them out. We are to rejoice with couples who marry; we are to laugh with the children brought to the baptismal font; we are to accompany young fiancés and families; we are to suffer with those who receive the anointing of the sick in their hospital beds; we are to mourn with those burying a loved one” (Homily at Chrism Mass, 2 April 2015).

We often spend hours and days accompanying a mother with AIDS, an orphaned child, a grandmother taking care of many grandchildren, or a young person who came to the city and is desperate because he or she cannot find a job... “All these emotions can exhaust the heart of a pastor. For us priests, what happens in the lives of our people is not like a news bulletin: we know our

people, we sense what is going on in their hearts. Our own heart, sharing in their suffering, feels 'compassion', is exhausted, broken into a thousand pieces, moved and even 'consumed' by the people. Take this, eat this... These are the words the priest of Jesus whispers repeatedly while caring for his faithful people: Take this, eat this; take this, drink this... In this way our priestly life is given over in service, in closeness to the People of God... and this always leaves us weary" (ibid.).

Renewing our vocation often entails discerning if our weariness and worries are the result of a certain "spiritual worldliness" imposed by "the allure of a thousand distracting commercial advertisements in order to walk ahead, freely, along paths that lead us to love of our brothers and sisters, to the Lord's flock, to the sheep who wait for the voice of their shepherds" (Homily at Christ Mass, 24 March 2016). Renewing our call has to do with choosing to say yes and to let our weariness come from things that bear fruit in God's eyes, things that make present and incarnate his son Jesus. Would that we might find, in such salutary weariness, the wellspring of our identity and happiness!

Would too that our young people might see that we allow ourselves to be "eaten and drunk", and be inspired themselves to follow Jesus and, radiant with the joy of a daily commitment, not imposed but fostered and chosen in silence and prayer, desire to say their own "yes". You who are still asking, or you who are already on the path to definitive consecration, should never forget that "the stress and quick pace of the world constantly bombarding us with stimuli can leave no room for that interior silence in which we can perceive Jesus' gaze and hear his call. In the meantime, many attractively packaged offers will come your way. They may seem appealing and exciting, although in time they will only leave you feeling empty, weary and alone. Don't let this happen to you, because the maelstrom of this world can drive you to take a route without real meaning, without direction, without clear goals, and thus thwart many of your efforts. It is better to seek out that calm and quiet that enable you to reflect, pray, look more clearly at the world around you, and then, with Jesus, come to recognize the vocation that is yours in this world" (Christus Vivit, 277).

The study in contrasts presented to us by the evangelist Luke culminates in the encounter between two women: Elizabeth and Mary. The Blessed Virgin visits her elderly cousin and everything is one great celebration of praise. There is a part of Israel that grasped the profound and dizzying change in God's plan, and allowed itself to be visited. As a result, the child leaps in the womb. For a moment, in a patriarchal society, the world of men steps back and is silent, like Zechariah. Today too, we need catechists, Mozambican women who remind you that nothing should make you lose your enthusiasm for evangelizing, for carrying out your baptismal mission. In them, we can see all those others who go forth to encounter their brothers and sisters: those who, like Mary, visit others, and those who allow themselves to be visited, who allow others to change their lives by sharing with them their culture, their ways of living and expressing the faith.

The concern you expressed shows us that inculturation will always be a challenge, shuttling back and forth, as it were, between those two women who were both changed by encounter, dialogue and service. "Particular Churches should actively promote at least preliminary forms of inculturation. The ultimate aim should be that the Gospel, as preached in categories proper to each culture, will create a new synthesis with that particular culture. This is always a slow process and at times we can be overly fearful. But if we allow doubts and fears to dampen our courage, instead of being creative, we will remain comfortable and make no progress whatsoever. In this case, we will not take an active part in

historical processes, but become mere onlookers as the Church gradually stagnates” (Evangelii Gaudium, 129).

The “distance” between Nazareth and Jerusalem is shortened and disappears with that “yes” spoken by Mary. Because distance, provincialism and party spirit, the constant building of walls, undermine the dynamic of the incarnation, which has broken down the wall that separated us (cf. Eph 2:14). You, at least the older ones among you, witnessed how division and conflict ended in war. You must always be ready to “visit”, to shorten distances. The Church in Mozambique is invited to be the Church of the Visitation; it cannot be part of the problem of rivalry, disrespect and division that pits some against others, but instead a door to solutions, a space where respect, interchange and dialogue are possible.

The question raised about how to react to interreligious marriages challenges this persistent tendency of ours for fragmentation, for separating rather than uniting. The same is true of relations between nationalities and races, between North and South, between communities, priests and bishops. It represents a challenge because developing “a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter” requires “an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part: a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and willingness to achieve this”. This is the necessary condition for “progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity”, for “the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonized within a shared pursuit” (Evangelii Gaudium, 220, 221). Just as Mary journeyed to the house of Elizabeth, we too, as a Church, have to find the road to take in the face of new problems, taking care not to remain paralyzed by the mindset of opposition, division and condemnation. Set out on that path, and seek answers to these challenges by imploring the unfailing help of the Holy Spirit. For he is the Teacher who can show us new paths to follow.

Let us, then, revive our vocation and calling in this magnificent temple dedicated to Mary. May our committed “yes” proclaim the greatness of the Lord and make the spirit of our people rejoice in God our Saviour (cf. Lk 1:46-47). May it fill with hope, peace and reconciliation this, your country, our beloved Mozambique!

I ask you please to pray for me, and to invite others to do the same.
May the Lord bless you and the most holy Virgin watch over you.
Thank you.