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A group of men in suits and cassocks gather around Pope Francis and hand him a seran-wrap

Seminarians and a priest from Italy's Calabria region give Pope Francis a basket of citrus fruit at the end of an audience at the Vatican March 27, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis asked the bishops of the 11 Latin-rite dioceses of Calabria, Italy, to consider further consolidating their seminaries, saying that a student body "of four, five or 10 is not a seminary."

At the same time, he told them the Vatican would not dictate what to do with the four major seminaries currently operating in the region.

"We give ideas, guidance and advice, but you have the charism, you have the Holy Spirit" for discerning what to do, the pope told the bishops March 27. "If Rome started making the decisions, it would be a slap in the face to the Holy Spirit, who works in the particular churches."

According to statistics released by the Italian bishops' conference in November 2021, there were 29 seminarians in Calabria. The number did not include boys doing their high school studies and initial vocational discernment in the region's eight minor seminaries.

Speaking to the bishops of Calabria, the rectors and staff of the seminaries and the seminarians themselves, Francis said he knew deciding to move or close a seminary would not be easy, especially if the bishop and many of his priests have an emotional attachment to the place.

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But, he said, "the Lord demands of us an attitude of vigilance, lest it happen to us 'as in the days of Noah,' when the people, intent on business as usual, did not notice that the flood was coming. We need open eyes and attentive hearts to catch the signs of the times and look ahead!"

Speaking directly to the seminarians, Francis asked them the same question Jesus asked the first disciples in the Gospel of John: "What are you looking for?"

"What is the desire that prompted you to go out to meet the Lord and follow him on the path to the priesthood? What are you looking for in the seminary? And what are you looking for in the priesthood?" the pope asked them. "We have to ask ourselves, because sometimes it happens that behind appearances of religiosity and even love for the church, we actually seek human glory and personal well-being."

"Perhaps we seek priestly ministry as a refuge where we can hide or as role to give us prestige, instead of desiring to be pastors with the same compassionate and merciful heart as Christ," the pope said.

The years in a seminary, he said, are a time to come to "the truth about ourselves, dropping the masks, the tricks, the appearances. And in this process of discernment, let the Lord work in you, making you shepherds according to his heart."