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Pope Francis gives his homily during vespers with Portuguese bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians and pastoral workers in the Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 2, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Vatican City — August 7, 2023
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Assuring Rome priests of his gratitude and prayers, Pope Francis asked them to use part of their summer rest to reflect on ways to strengthen the unity of the church and promote greater collaboration with laypeople.

"I'm thinking of you at this time when, in addition to summer activities, you also may be having a bit of a rest after the pastoral labors of the last few months," the pope wrote in the letter dated "Lisbon, Aug. 5," indicating it was signed while he was in Portugal for World Youth Day. The Vatican published it two days later.

As the bishop of Rome, Francis used "our" when referring in the letter to the local church and to the ministries and responsibilities of priests in the diocese while assuring the priests that he is aware of their "joys and sufferings, projects and

struggles, your disappointments and pastoral consolations."

"Most of all," he said, he wanted the priests to know that "I share your desire for communion -- affective and effective -- while I offer my daily prayer that our mother church of Rome, called to preside in charity, cultivates the precious gift of communion especially internally, making it blossom in the various realities and sensibilities that comprise it."

"May the church of Rome be an example of compassion and hope for everyone," he continued, "with its pastors always -- literally always -- ready and available to lavish God's forgiveness as channels of mercy which quench the aridness of people today."

No matter the limitations of its ministers or the seeming lack of success their projects have, the pope said, they must remember, as the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac had written, no mistake or even infidelity on the part of ministers can stop the church from being God's church.

"Brothers, this is the hope that sustains our steps, lightens our burdens, restores momentum to our ministry," the pope said. "Let us roll up our sleeves and bend our knees -- those of you who can!" add the pope, who cannot kneel because of ongoing knee trouble.

Saying he knows he mentions it often, Francis repeated his call for the priests to be wary of "spiritual worldliness" and clericalism.

"Spiritual worldliness, in fact, is dangerous because it is a style of living that reduces spirituality to appearances" and "leads us to being 'merchants of the spirit,' men clothed in sacred forms who, in reality, continue to think and act according to the ways of the world," he said.

Too often, he said, when a priest is overly rigid about what he thinks is proper doctrine or liturgy, he is seeking his own glory and power, not the Lord's.

Clericalism is a manifestation of spiritual worldliness, Francis said.

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"As an old man and from the heart," he wrote, "I must tell you that it worries me when we fall back into forms of clericalism; when, perhaps without realizing it, we

make people think we are superior, privileged, placed 'on high' and thus separated from the rest of God's holy people."

The antidote to spiritual worldliness and clericalism, the pope said, is to keep one's gaze fixed on the crucifix, knowing that Jesus died for everyone's sins -- including the priest's -- and that to minister in his name means emptying oneself as he did.

"Let us pray to the Spirit for one another," Francis told the diocese's priests. "Let us ask him to help us not to fall, in our personal lives or pastoral activity, into that religious appearance full of many things but empty of God, so as not to be functionaries of the sacred, but passionate proclaimers of the Gospel, not 'clerics of the state,' but pastors of the people."