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Pope Francis places his hand on the head of a black-haired priests who bows before him

Pope Francis blesses a member of the National Association of Hispanic Priests after a meeting in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Nov. 16, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The daily rhythm of the life of a priest should resemble "ping pong" -- praying on one's knees before the tabernacle, helping those in need and returning to prayer, Pope Francis told a group of Latino priests from the United States.

"Do not leave those who suffer alone; do not leave the Lord in the tabernacle alone. Convince yourselves that you cannot do anything with your hands unless you do it on your knees," the pope told members of the National Association of Hispanic Priests during an audience in the Apostolic Palace Nov. 16.

"It's like ping pong, one thing leads to the other," the pope told them.

Priests in the group had been invited to send the pope questions in advance. He prepared a general response but added liberally to his prepared text.

Meeting the priests in the Clementine Hall, a room ornately decorated with marble and frescoes, Francis told them to "beware of ecclesiastical elegance" because concern for keeping churches pristine increases the temptation to keep the doors closed and "that won't do."

During the U.S. National Eucharistic Revival and with preparations well underway for the National Eucharistic Congress in July 2024, the pope focused his remarks on the importance of eucharistic adoration and the essential tie between reverencing the Eucharist and serving one's brothers and sisters.

Francis said he did not want to make anyone "blush," so he would not ask the priests how many hours a week they spend in adoration, but "I'll throw the question out there."

In the busy life of a priest, there are many possible excuses for limiting time in private prayer, he said. "But if you don't pray, if you don't adore, your life is worth little."

The pope said he wanted to respond to one of the questions sent in by the group by recalling a talk about the women at the foot of Jesus' cross given by St. Manuel González García, one of the patron saints of the National Eucharistic Revival.

"The same helplessness, the same desire to act against injustice, that the holy women experienced in those moments, we can experience in the face of the problem of immigrants, the closure of certain civil and religious authorities, the challenges of interculturality, the complexity of proclamation -- so many things," the pope said.

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But the saintly bishop noted that "Jesus does not cease to suffer" and that although he has risen, "he is still on Calvary in the person of his brothers and sisters," the pope said. "In every tabernacle, in every consecrated ciborium, we see the cross being erected, and ask ourselves, 'Can we do something to alleviate the suffering Christ of today?' "

"What God asks of you is not to abandon them," the pope said.

Francis said a priest cannot always schedule or predict when someone experiencing injustice or simply in need of spiritual consolation will need him.

"Sometimes the modern world leads us to schedules," he said, imagining a conversation: "Father, can I confess?" "No. The schedule is from such and such a time to such and such a time."

"Please," the pope said, "first the people, then the schedule. Do not become clerks of the sacred."

Francis told the story of a priest at a parish in a poor neighborhood who "used to say that he wanted to board up his window" because if people came looking for him and found the door closed, they would just go to the window.

Keep the doors open, the pope told them, and be "priests for the people."

While priests often will not get to see the results of the seeds they plant, he said, God wants them to trust that he will make them bear fruit.

"May you sow much and not have to take sleeping pills because you are very tired when night comes," Francis said.