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Pope Leo XIV greets visitors and pilgrims from the popemobile before his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 1, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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At a time when so much pressure and so many demands are placed on priests, they should find support, freedom and relief in recognizing the gifts of laypeople and collaborating with them, Pope Leo XIV said.

"The ministry of the priest must move beyond the model of exclusive leadership, which leads to the centralization of pastoral activities and the burden of all responsibilities entrusted to him alone," the pope wrote in an apostolic letter titled, "A Fidelity that Generates the Future."

The letter, released Dec. 22, marked the 60th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's decrees on priestly formation and on the life and ministry of priests.

Leo used the letter to express his "gratitude for the witness and dedication of all priests throughout the world who offer their lives in celebrating the sacrifice of Our Lord in the Eucharist, proclaiming the Word and absolving sins, as well as devoting themselves generously each day to their brothers and sisters, fostering communion and unity among them and taking special care of those who suffer most and are in need."

He also said the church must "look carefully and compassionately" at the background of priests who have left active ministry and ensure that seminary programs engage "the entire person, heart, mind and freedom" to help men make a lifelong commitment.

Leo did not ignore the clerical sexual abuse crisis and said that, too, showed the importance of a thorough preparation for ministry.

"In recent decades, the crisis of trust in the Church caused by abuses committed by members of the clergy has filled us with shame and called us to humility," he wrote. "It has made us even more aware of the urgent need for a comprehensive formation that ensures the personal growth and maturity of candidates for the priesthood, together with a rich and solid spiritual life."

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The letter did not mention that in several of the Eastern Catholic churches married men can be ordained to the priesthood.

But it insisted that "only priests and consecrated persons who are humanly mature and spiritually solid — in other words, those in whom the human and spiritual dimensions are well integrated and who are therefore capable of authentic relationships with everyone — can take on the commitment of celibacy and credibly proclaim the Gospel of the Risen One."

Most of the letter focused on fidelity, missionary outreach and recognizing that a priest's vocation flows from his baptism, a sacrament he shares with all Catholics.

"Our contemporary world, characterized by its fast pace and the anxious need to be hyperconnected, often makes us feel rushed and inclines us to activism," the pope wrote.

Two very negative consequences that can be tempting to priests, he said, are "an efficiency-oriented mentality, whereby the value of each person is measured by performance" or simply withdrawing, "adopting a lazy and defeatist approach."

Leo told the priests that nothing can take the place of devoting time to personal prayer and the celebration of the sacraments and cultivating a special bond of brotherhood with one's fellow priests, but that never should lead to a sense of superiority over laypeople.

"Even before dedicating himself to guiding the flock," the pope wrote, "every priest must constantly remember that he himself is a disciple of the Master, just like his brothers and sisters."

The pope insisted in the letter on the importance of getting priests on board with efforts to create a more synodal church, one marked by listening to each other, discerning God's will together and recognizing that every baptized Catholic has something to contribute to the church's mission.

"Communion, synodality and mission cannot be achieved if, in the hearts of priests, the temptation to self-referentiality does not yield to the mindset of listening and service," Leo wrote.

In encouraging a more synodal church, he said, "there is still much to be done."

A priest is called to let the love and mercy of Christ shine through him, the pope said, so he must shun "all forms of egotism and celebration of self."

For that reason, Leo encouraged priests to evaluate carefully their presence in the media and on social networks, "making service to evangelization the basis for discernment," because, as First Corinthians says, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial."