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Francis: Priests aren't the boss, but should walk side-by-side with their flocks

by Joshua J. McElwee

The Francis Chronicles

Vatican City — Pope Francis told thousands of priests gathered in Rome for a special celebration of the Jubilee year Friday that they should not seek to stand apart from their people but to instead become immersed in their lives, "always ready to dirty [their] hands" in the work of pastoring.

"The good pastor is not familiar with gloves!" the pontiff told the clergy in his homily during a Mass in St. Peter's Square concluding the events of the Jubilee for Priests.

The Catholic clergyman, the pope said, "is anointed for his people, not to choose his own projects but to be close to the real men and women whom God has entrusted to him."

"He is not a boss to be feared by his flock, but a shepherd who walks alongside them and calls them by name," said Francis. "He wants to gather the sheep that are not yet of his fold."

The pontiff was speaking Friday to thousands of priests who have come to Rome this week from around the world to attend celebrations dedicated for them during the ongoing Jubilee year of mercy.

Celebrating the Mass for the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the pope called on the clergy to do three specific things in their daily ministry: seek out, include, and rejoice.

"The prophet Ezekiel reminds us that God himself goes out in search of his sheep," said Francis. "As the Gospel says, he 'goes out in search of the one who is lost' without fear of the risks."

"Without delaying, he leaves the pasture and his regular workday," said the pope. "He does not put off the search. He does not think: 'I have done enough for today; I'll worry about it tomorrow.'"

"Instead, he immediately sets to work; his heart is restless until he finds that one lost sheep," said the pope. "Having found it, he forgets his weariness and puts the sheep on his shoulders, fully content."

A heart that seeks out, said Francis, "does not set aside times and spaces as private."

"Woe to the pastor that makes their ministry private!" he exclaimed.

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"A shepherd after the heart of God does not protect his own comfort zone; is not worried about protecting his good name, but instead, without fearing criticism, is disposed to take risks in seeking to imitate his Lord," said the pope.

"He does not live by calculating his gains or how long he has worked," said Francis. "He is not an accountant of the Spirit, but a Good Samaritan who seeks out those in need. For the flock he is a shepherd, not an inspector, and he devotes himself to the mission not fifty or sixty percent, but with all he has."

"In seeking, he finds, and he finds because he takes risks," said the pope. "If the pastor does not risk, he does not find, eh?"

The good pastor, said the pontiff, "is stubborn in doing good, anointed with the divine obstinacy that loses sight of no one."

"Not only does he keep his doors open, but he also goes to seek out those who no longer wish to enter them," said Francis. "Like every good Christian, and as an example for every Christian, he constantly goes out of himself."

The pontiff said that a priest should become changed "by the mercy that he freely gives," repeating: "that he freely gives!"

"In prayer he discovers God's consolation and realizes that nothing is more powerful than his love," said the pope. "He thus experiences inner peace, and is happy to be a channel of mercy, to bring men and women closer to the heart of God."

"Harshness is foreign to him, because he is a shepherd after the meek heart of God," said Francis.

The pontiff ended his homily by thanking the priests "for saying 'yes' to giving your life in union with Jesus -- and for the many hidden yesses of every day that only the Lord knows."

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