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Francis calls religious life 'prophecy,' refers to 'humiliations'

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 29, 2013 NCR Today

Pope Francis today met with 120 leaders of men's religious orders taking part in an assembly of the Union of Superiors General, the main international umbrella group for men's communities. At the moment, the group?s president is Spanish Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, the leader of the Jesuit order to which Francis also belongs.

The meeting with the pope, which took place in the Vatican?s Synod Hall, spanned three hours and occasioned some of Francis? most developed thoughts on religious life to date.

Among other points, Francis called religious life is ?prophecy,? saying that consecrated women and men can ?wake up the world,? and said that bishops must understand that religious aren?t just resources to be exploited but ?charisms that enrich the diocese.?

Francis also said that formation in religious orders is ?a work of art, not a police operation.? He said that while we?re all sinners, religious orders should not tolerate corruption: ?We accept sinners, but not the corrupt,? he said.

Upon leaving the hall, Francis also thanked the religious for their "testimony" and for ?the humiliations you have to endure." Though he didn't specify what he had in mind, Francis is clearly aware of the sometimes troubled relationship some religious communities, including his own Jesuit order, have had with the Vatican in recent decades.

The following is the text of statement on the meeting released today by the Vatican Press Office, in an NCR translation from the Italian.

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Communique of the Union of Superiors General on the meeting with Pope Francis

(New Hall of the Synod, Friday, 29.11.2013)

From Nov. 27 to 29, at the Salesianum in Rome, the 82nd General Assembly of the Union of Superiors General took place. A recount of three experiences was at the base of the reflections and the meetings focused on the challenges posed by the leadership and magisterium of Pope Francis. It was, in fact, the pope himself who decided to meet the superiors for three full hours, and not just for a brief moment as was requested. There was no speech prepared in advance, but a long fraternal and cordial exchange made up of questions and answers.

The first group of questions regarded the identity and the mission of consecrated life. A radical choice is asked of all Christians, the pontiff affirmed, but religious are called to follow the Lord in a special manner: ?They are women and men who can wake up the world. Consecrated life is prophecy. God asks us to leave the nest that contains us and to be sent to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation to domesticate ourselves. This is the most concrete way to imitate the Lord.?

Asked about the situation with vocations, the pope underlined that there are young churches which are providing new fruits. That naturally creates an obligation to rethink the inculturation of the charism. The church must ask forgiveness and look with much shame at apostolic failures caused by misunderstandings in this area, as in the case of Matteo Ricci. Intercultural dialogue must drive us to introduce into the government of religious institutes people of various cultures who express different ways to live the charism.

The pope thus insisted much on formation, which, in his view, is based on four fundamental pillars: spiritual formation, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. It?s indispensable to avoid every form of hypocrisy and clericalism, thanks to a frank and open dialogue on every aspect of life: ?Formation is a work of art, not a police operation,? Pope Francis affirmed. ?The objective is to form religious who have a tender heart, not acidic like vinegar. We?re all sinners, but we?re not corrupt. We accept sinners, but not the corrupt.?

Asked about fraternity, the pope said that it has an enormous force of attraction. It presumes accepting differences and conflicts. At times it?s difficult to live, but if it?s not lived then it?s not fruitful. In any case, ?We should never act like managers with regard to a conflict with a brother. We must face the conflict with a caress,? the pope said.

Some questions were asked about the mutual relations between religious and the particular churches in which they?re inserted. The pope affirmed that he understands the possible problems from personal experience: ?We bishops have to understand that consecrated persons aren?t resources for our use, but charisms that enrich the diocese.?

The last questions regarded the frontiers of the missions of consecrated persons. ?These must be sought on the basis of the charisms,? the pope replied. The realities of exclusion remain the most significant priority. Alongside these challenges, he cited those of culture and of education, in schools and universities. For the pope, the pillars of education are: ?transmit awareness, transmit ways of acting, transmit values. Through these, the faith is also transmitted. Education must be up to the level of the people who are educated, and must ask itself how to announce Jesus Christ to a generation that?s changing.?

Before greeting the 120 superiors general who were present, the pope announced that 2015 will be a year dedicated to consecrated life. Leaving the hall, he affirmed: ?Thank you, for what you do and for your spirit of faith and your quest for service. Thanks for your testimony, and also for the humiliations you have to endure.?

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