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Francis tells religious to 'wake the world,' outlines modern struggles for church

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 3, 2014 NCR Today

Priests, brothers, and sisters in Catholic religious orders around the globe should "wake up the world" by being "real witnesses" to a counter-cultural way of life that relies on generosity and self-forgetfulness, Pope Francis told a meeting of superiors general of religious orders in November.

Those religious, the pope also added, should also not be afraid of making mistakes or even committing sins.

"You should be real witnesses of a world doing and acting differently," the pope told some 120 leaders of male religious orders during a closed-door Nov. 29 meeting at the Vatican, according to a new account of the event released Friday by the Italian Jesuit magazine *La Civilta Cattolica*.

"But in life it is difficult for everything to be clear, precise, outlined neatly," the pope continued. "Life is complicated; it consists of grace and sin."

"He who does not sin is not human," said the pope. "We all make mistakes and we need to recognize our weaknesses. A religious who recognizes himself as weak and a sinner does not negate the witness that he is called to give, rather he reinforces it, and this is good for everyone."

"What I expect of you therefore is to give witness," he said. "I want this special witness from religious."

The November meeting was between Francis and 120 leaders of the Union of Superiors General, the main international umbrella group for men's communities. Francis is a member of the Society of Jesus, and Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the global head of the Jesuits, is the current president of the superiors' group.

While some superiors in the meeting had previously spoken [1] about the pope's words to their group, Friday's account outlines in depth Francis' words on a number of issues, including how he believes formation for religious life should be conducted, how religious institutes should interact with bishops around the world, and how they should handle an influx of members from Africa and Asia.

Written by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, the editor of the Jesuit magazine who also released in September [2] a wide-ranging interview with the pope in 16 publications run by the order around the world, the account also finds the pope outlining again a vision for a church that addresses people's needs with mercy and compassion, and allows itself to take risks for the sake of spreading the Christian message.

In fact, at one point towards the end of the some 3-hour exchange, during which Francis had no prepared text, the pope even seems to distil his ministry to one question: How can we proclaim Christ to a world that is continually changing?

Responding to a an inquiry from the superiors about what he might say to men in religious orders who serve as educators, the pope calls education a "key, key mission" of religious. Commenting on the pope's response,

Spadaro states that the pontiff began recalling his own experience as archbishop in Buenos Aires speaking to young adults "who live in complex situations, especially family ones."

"I remember the case of a very sad little girl who finally confided to her teacher the reason for her state of mind: 'my mother's girlfriend doesn't like me,'" Spadaro quotes the pope.

"The percentage of children studying in schools who have separated parents is very high," the pope continues. "The situation in which we live now provides us with new challenges which sometimes are difficult to understand."

"How can we proclaim Christ to these boys and girls?" the pope asks. "How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing? We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them."

La Civilta Cattolica released Spadaro's account [3] of the pope's exchange with the superiors -- which spans 15 pages -- in Italian, English, and Spanish on Friday. While the English version translates the pope's description of the girl as "my mother's fiancé doesn't like me," the Italian version states it is the mother's *fidanzata*?, which translates to a girlfriend or female partner.

Elsewhere in Spadaro's text, the pope also reveals that he has asked Vatican offices to consider revising a 1978 document outlining the relationships between their religious orders and local bishops, calling it "outdated."

That document, called *Mutuae Relationes* and issued jointly by the Congregation for Bishops and the Congregation for Religious, said that while religious orders have their own organizational structures they are part of the local church and cannot be considered independent from it.

"That document was useful at the time but is now outdated," the pope said. "The charisms of the various institutes need to be respected and fostered because they are needed in dioceses."

"Dialogue between the bishop and religious must be rescued so that, due to a lack of understanding of their charisms, bishops do not view religious simply as useful instruments," the pope said.

Among other issues the pope addresses in his talk with the men religious:

The need of priests to minister "at the periphery" of the church.

Referencing a letter sent from Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, who led the Jesuit order from 1965-83, the pope said that "real contact" with the poor is necessary to understand poverty:

"This is very important to me: the need to become acquainted with reality by experience, to spend time walking on the periphery in order [to] really become acquainted with the reality and life-experiences of people. If this does not happen we then run the risk of being abstract ideologists or fundamentalists, which is not healthy."

How religious orders should handle the influx of members from Africa and Asia.

"What does the Lord wish to say by sending us vocations from the youngest Churches?" the pope asks. "I don't know. But I ask myself the question. We have to ask it. The Lord's will is somehow in all of this. There are Churches who are bearing new fruit. At one time they perhaps were not so fertile, but they are now. This necessitates, of course, rethinking the inculturation of the charism."

Referencing a saying of Jesuit founder St. Igantius of Loyola that charisms need to lived according to the place, time, and person, Francis continued: "The charism is not a bottle of distilled water. It needs to be lived

energetically as well as reinterpreted culturally."

That Christians should make mistakes.

Commenting on updating religious charisms, Francis continues: "In this way there is the danger of making a mistake ? of committing errors. It is risky."

"But this should not stop us, because there is the chance of making worse mistakes," he states. "In fact we should always ask for forgiveness and look shamefully upon apostolic failures due to a lack of courage."

That formation for religious priests and brothers is at a different state now than it has been in the past.

"Inculturation today calls for a different attitude," he states. "For example: problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Dialog as well as confrontation are needed."

Referencing advice he received as a young man to "think clearly and speak obscurely" the pope says "that was a clear invitation to hypocrisy." "We need to avoid that at all costs," he states.

"Formation is a work of art, not a police action," the pope continues. "We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And these little monsters mold the People of God. This really gives me goose bumps."

At the center of priestly formation should be concern for lay people.

"We must always think of the faithful, of the faithful people of God," states the pope. "Persons must be formed who are witness of the resurrection of Jesus. The formator should keep in mind that the person in formation will be called to care for the People of God."

"We always must think of the People of God in all of this," he continues. "Just think of religious who have hearts that are as sour as vinegar: they are not made for the people. In the end we must not form administrators, managers, but fathers, brothers, traveling companions."

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