

«WAKE UP THE WORLD!»
Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life

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When Pope Francis speaks “off the cuff” and dialogs, his speech has a certain rhythm that “undulates” progressively; one would do well to follow it with care because it is fed by the living relations he experiences with his interlocutors. Those who notice should pay careful attention not only to the contents of what he says but also to the dynamic of the relationship that is created. This is what happened during the conversation that the Holy Father held with the Union of Superiors General of religious men at the end of their 82nd General Assembly.¹ Seated among them I took note of the dialog. I will here try to express as far as possible the richness of the contents, preserving the lively and spontaneous tone of the three hour meeting. Halfway through the meeting, for a half hour, the Pope circulated among the participants to greet the Superiors General personally, taking a *mate* in a relaxed and informal atmosphere.

The Superiors had, in fact, requested only a brief meeting to greet the Pope, but the Pontiff wished to spend the whole morning with them.

¹The Assembly took place from November 27 to 29 at the *Salesianum* in Rome. It consisted of a meeting based on three experiences that guided the reflections that followed. Fr. Janson Hervé of the Little Brothers of Jesus spoke of the “lights that help me to live this service to my brothers and how Pope Francis encourages my hope.” Fr. Mauro Jöhri, a Capuchin, explained “how Pope Francis is inspiring me and challenging me in the service of directing my Order.” Finally, Fr. Hainz Kulüke of the Society of the Divine Word dwelt on “leadership inside a missionary religious Congregation in an international and intercultural context in light of the example of Pope Francis.”

He decided, however, neither to give a talk nor to listen to their prepared remarks: he wished to have a frank and free conversation consisting of questions and answers.

It is 9:25 and the arrival of the photographers announces the Pope's imminent entrance into the New Hall of the Synod in the Vatican, where approximately 120 Superiors await him.

Religious: Sinners and Prophets

Greeted by applause the Holy Father takes a seat at exactly 9:30, looks at the clock and congratulates himself for his "Swiss" punctuality. All laugh: the Pope wanted to greet Fr. Mauro Jöhre, this way: he is Swiss and the Minister General of the Capuchin Friars Minor who had just been elected vice-president of the Union of Superiors General.

After a few brief words of greeting from the president, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the Superior General of the Jesuits, and from the general secretary, Fr. David Glenday, a Columban, Pope Francis cordially thanked the Assembly in a very simple way for its invitation; the first group of questions began immediately after. The religious questioned the Pope especially about the identity and the mission of religious: "What do expect of consecrated life? What do you ask of us? If you were in our place what would you do to respond to your call to go to the frontiers, to live the Gospel *sine glossa*, evangelical prophecy? What should we hear you calling us to do?" And further: "What should be emphasized today? What are the priorities?"

Pope Francis began by saying that he, too, is a religious, and he therefore knows from experience what they were talking about.² The last Pope who belonged to a religious order was the Camaldolese Gregory XVI, elected in 1831. He then made explicit reference to Benedict XVI: "He said that the Church grows through witness, not by proselytism. The witness that can really attract is that associated with attitudes which are uncommon: generosity, detachment, sacrifice, self-forgetfulness in order to care for others. This is the witness, the "martyrdom" of religious life. It "sounds an alarm" for people. Religious say to people with their life:

² Recall that J. M. Bergoglio as provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina had published *Meditaciones para religiosos*, San Miguel: Ediciones Dieo de Torres, 1982, a book consisting of a collection of a series of reflections given to his confreres. They are useful in shedding light on several key themes that Bergoglio will develop later.

“What’s happening?” These people are telling me something! These people go beyond a mundane horizon. “Thus,” continued the Pope quoting Benedict XVI, “religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction.”³

“The Church,” therefore, “must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord. No, I do not want to say “radical.” Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.”

Pope Francis has returned in a circular fashion to concepts that he has already touched on, exploring them more deeply. In fact he continued: “You should be real witnesses of a world of doing and acting differently. But in life it is difficult for everything to be clear, precise, outlined neatly. Life is complicated; it consists of grace and sin. He who does not sin is not human. We all make mistakes and we need to recognize our weakness. 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. I want this special witness from religious.”

Avoid Fundamentalism and Light the Way the Future

Continuing his response to the first questions Pope Francis has touched on one of the key points of his thinking: “I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the center but rather from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical

³ Benedict XVI, Homily at the inaugural Mass of the General Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean at the Shrine of Aparecida (May 13, 2007). Pope Francis has taken up this theme of his predecessor a number of times. He did so in his homily at Santa Marta on October 1, adding: “When people see this witness of humility, of meekness, of gentleness, they hear the need of which the prophet Zachariah speaks: “I wish to come with you!” People sense this need when faced with the witness of charity, that humble charity without pretense, not self-important, humble, which adores and serves.” The quotation from Benedict XVI is repeated in Pope Francis’ speech of October 4 during his visit to the cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, as well as in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (n. 14).

question: reality is understood only if it is looked at from the periphery, and not when our viewpoint is equidistant from everything. Truly to understand reality we need to move away from the central position of calmness and peacefulness and direct ourselves to the peripheral areas⁴ Being at the periphery helps to see and to understand better, to analyze reality more correctly, to shun centralism and ideological approaches.”

Therefore: “It is not a good strategy to be at the center of a sphere. To understand we ought to move around, to see reality from various viewpoints.⁵ We ought to get used to thinking. I often refer to a letter of Father Pedro Arrupe, who had been General of the Society of Jesus. It was a letter directed to the *Centros de Investigación y Acción Social* (CIAS). In this letter Father Arrupe spoke of poverty and said that some time of real contact with the poor is necessary. This is really very important to me: the need to become acquainted with reality by experience, to spend time walking on the periphery in order really to 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.”⁶

The Pope lingered, therefore, on a concrete issue, that of the apostolate to youth. “Those who work with youth cannot be content with simply saying things that are too tidy and structured, as in a tract; these things go in one ear and out the other of young people. We need a new language, a new way of saying things. Today God asks this of us: to leave the nest which encloses us in order to be sent. He who lives his consecration in a cloister lives this interior tension in prayer so that the Gospel might grow. The fulfillment of the evangelical command “Go to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15) can be accomplished with this hermeneutical key shifted to the existential

⁴ Cf. J.M. Bergoglio, *Nel cuore dell'uomo. Utopia e impegno*, Milan: Bompiani, 2013, p. 23; Pope Francis, *La mia porta è sempre aperta. Una conversazione con Antonio Spadaro*, Milan: Rizzoli, 2013, p. 86ff.

⁵ Pope Francis has expressed this conviction in *Evangelii gaudium* where he wrote: “Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (236)

⁶ Pope Francis is well acquainted with this letter of Father Pedro Arrupe and also quoted it in his interview with *Civiltà Cattolica*, describing it as “inspired.” Cf. Pope Francis, *La mia porta è sempre aperta...*, p. 117.

and geographical periphery. It is the most concrete way of imitating Jesus, who went toward all the peripheries. Jesus went to all, really all. I would not really feel uncomfortable going to the periphery: you should not feel uncomfortable in reaching out to anyone.”

What, therefore, is the priority of consecrated life? The Pope answered: “Prophecy of the Kingdom, which is a non-negotiable. The emphasis should fall on being prophets, and not in playing at being them. Naturally the devil proposes his temptations to us; one of them is: just appear to be prophets. But it is not possible simply to play at these things. I myself have seen very sad things in this regard. No: religious are men and women who light the way to the future.”

In his interview with *Civiltà Cattolica* Pope Francis had clearly stated that religious are called to a prophetic life. This is what is particular to them: “to be prophets, in particular, by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never give up prophesising. [...] Let us think about what so many great saints, monks and religious men and women have done, from St. Anthony the Abbot onward. Being prophets may sometimes involve making *ruido* [Spanish for noise]. I do not know how to put it... Prophecy makes noise, uproar, some say ‘a mess.’ But in reality, the charism of religious people is like yeast: prophecy announces the spirit of the Gospel.”⁷

So, how to be prophets living one’s own particular religious charism? For Pope Francis there is a need “to reinforce that which is institutional in consecrated life and not confuse the Institute with the apostolic work. The former perdures; the latter fades away.” The Pope continues: “The charism perdures, is strong; the work fades away. Sometimes the Institute and the work are confused. The Institute is creative, is always looking for outlets. In this way too the peripheries change and a checklist can be made that is always different.”

“The Charism is not a Bottle of Distilled Water”

At this point the questions asked centered around themes of vocations. We are witnessing a profound change in the human geography of the Church and so too of religious institutes. Vocations in Africa and

⁷ Ibid. 63f.

Asia are increasing, which alone account for most of their total number. All this poses a series of challenges: inculturation of the charism, vocational discernment and the selection of candidates, the challenge of interreligious dialog, the search for a more equitable representation in the governmental organizations of the Institutes and, more generally, in the structure of the Church. The Pope was thus asked to offer some guidance concerning this situation.

Pope Francis says that he is well aware of the many geographical changes in consecrated life and that “all cultures are able to be called by the Lord, that he is free to stir up more vocations in one part of the world than in another. What does the Lord wish to say by sending us vocations from the youngest Churches? I don’t know. But I ask myself the question. We have to ask it. The Lord’s will is somehow in all 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. The charism is one but, as Saint Ignatius used to say, it needs to be lived according to the places, times and persons. The charism is not a bottle of distilled water. It needs to be lived energetically as well as reinterpreted culturally. But in this way there is the danger of making a mistake, you say, of committing errors. It is risky. Certainly, certainly: we will always make mistakes, no doubt about it. But this should not stop us, because there is the chance of making worse mistakes. In fact we should always ask for forgiveness and look shamefully upon apostolic failures due to a lack of courage. Just think, for example, of the pioneer intuitions of Matteo Ricci which were allowed to crumble at that time.”⁸

“I am not referring to folkloric adaptations of customs” — the Pope continued —: “it is a question of mentality, of a mindset. For example: there are peoples who think in a more concrete than abstract way, or at least in a kind of abstraction different from that in the West. I lived this difference myself when I was the Jesuit provincial in Argentina. I

⁸ The lack of understanding was due to the fact that, in their missions, the Jesuits were trying to adapt the proclamation of the Gospel to the local culture and rituals. This worried some, and several voices were raised in the Church that objected to the spirit of such an approach, fearing that it might contaminate the Christian message. Prophetic positions are not usually accepted when formulated because they go beyond the ordinary way of understanding the facts.

remember how much effort a Jesuit Brother and I expended when we talked even about simple things of daily life; he was from an area where the Guarini live, a people who have developed a very concrete way of thinking. We need to live courageously and face these challenges when they deal with important subjects as well. In the end I cannot form a person as a religious without consideration of his or her life, experience, mentality and cultural context. This is the way to proceed. This is what the great religious missionaries did. The extraordinary adventures of the Spanish Jesuit Segundo Llorente come to mind, a tenacious and contemplative missionary in Alaska. He not only learned the language but also the concrete way of thinking of the people.⁹ Inculturating the charism, therefore, is fundamental, and this never means relativizing it. We must not make the charism rigid or uniform. When we make our cultures uniform we kill the charism,” the Pontiff concluded decisively, indicating the necessity of “introducing persons of various cultures into the central governance of the Orders and Congregations, who express divers ways of living the charism.”

Pope Francis is certainly aware of the risks, even in terms of “vocational recruitment,” by younger Churches. He recalled, inter alia, that in 1994, in the context of the Ordinary Synod on Consecrated Life and the Missions, the Filipino bishops criticized the “novice trade,” i.e., massive arrival of foreign Congregations who were opening houses in the archipelago with an eye toward recruiting vocations to be transplanted to Europe. “We need to keep our eyes open for such situations,” the Pope said.

He also spent some time on the vocation of brothers and, more generally, religious who are not priests. He complained that an adequate awareness of this specific vocation has not yet been developed. He referred to a document related to this which has never appeared, and

⁹ Father Segundo Llorente (Mansilla, Mayor, León [Spain], November 18, 1906 — Spokane, Washington [USA] January 26, 1989, a Spanish Jesuit who spent more than 40 years as a missionary in Alaska. He was the Representative to the United States Congress from the State of Alaska, of which he is considered a co-founder. He was buried in an Indian cemetery in De Smet, Idaho, where only indigenous native Americans can be buried. When he arrived in Akulurak at the age of 29 his first problem consisted not only of learning Eskimo but also of speaking about God to people with a radically different way of thinking from that of Europe. He wrote 12 books about his missionary experience.

which might be looked at again. It might be finished and so as to facilitate a more satisfactory reflection. At this point the Pope signaled to Cardinal João Braz de Avix, Prefect of the Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and to the secretary of that Congregation, Monsignor José Rodríguez Carballo, who were present in the Assembly, inviting them to consider the question. He concluded: “I do not actually believe that the vocational crisis among religious who are not priests is a sign of the times telling us that this vocation has ended. We should rather understand what God is asking us.” Answering a question concerning religious brothers as superiors in clerical orders, the Pope replied that this was a canonical issue that needs to be dealt with at that level.

Formation is a work of art, not a police action

Pope Francis then listens to a few questions about formation. He answers immediately, indicating his priorities: “The formation of candidates is fundamental. There are four pillars of formation: spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic. The ghost to fight against is the image of religious life understood as an escape or hiding place in face of an “external,” difficult and complex world. The four pillars should be integrated right from the first day of entrance into the noviceship, and should not be arranged sequentially. They must be interactive.”

The Pope is aware of the fact that the problem of formation today is not easy to deal with: “Daily culture is much richer and conflictual than that which we experienced in our day, years ago. Our culture was simpler and more ordered. Inculturation today calls for a different attitude. For example: problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Dialog as well as confrontation are needed. To avoid problems, in some houses of formation, young people grit their teeth, try not to make mistakes, follow the rules smiling a lot, just waiting for the day when they are told: ‘Good. You have finished formation.’ This is hypocrisy that is the result of clericalism, which is one of the worst evils. I said as much to the bishops of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) this summer in Rio de Janeiro: we need to conquer this propensity toward clericalism in houses of formation and seminaries too. I summarize by some advice that I once received as a young man: ‘If you want to advance, think clearly and speak obscurely.’ That was a clear invitation to hypocrisy. We need to avoid that at all costs.” As a matter of fact in Rio

the Pope identified clericalism as one of the causes of the “lack of maturity and Christian freedom” in the People of God.¹⁰

It follows that: “If the seminary is too large, it ought to be divided into smaller communities with formators who are equipped really to accompany those in their charge. Dialog must be serious, without fear, sincere. It is important to recall that the language of young people in formation today is different from that in the past: we are living through an epochal change. Formation is a work of art, not a police action. We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And then these little monsters mold the People of God. This really gives me goose bumps.”

The Pope then insisted on the fact that formation should not be oriented only toward personal growth but also in view of its final goal: the People of God. It is important to think about the people to whom these persons will be sent while forming them: “We must always think of the faithful, of the faithful People of God. 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. 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.”

Finally, Pope Francis wanted to highlight a further risk: “accepting a young man in a seminary who has been asked to leave a religious institute because of problems with formation and for serious reasons is a huge problem. I am not speaking about people who recognize that they are sinners: we are all sinners, but we are not all corrupt. Sinners are accepted, but not people who are corrupt.” Here the Pope recalled Benedict XVI’s important decision in dealing with cases of abuse: “this should be a lesson to us to have the courage to approach personal formation as a serious challenge, always keeping in mind the People of God.”

¹⁰ Ibid. Speech during a meeting with the coordinators of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) during the general organizational meeting at the Centro Studi di Sumaré, Rio de Janeiro, July 28, 2012

Living Brotherhood by “Soothing Conflicts”

The Synod on the New Evangelization had asked religious to be witnesses of the humanizing power of the Gospel through a life of brotherhood. Taking a cue from this call, the Pope was asked a few questions about how religious should live together as brothers: “How can we keep commitments of the mission as well as those of community life? How can we combat the tendency toward individualism? How should we act toward brothers in difficulty or who live or create conflict? How can we combine justice and mercy in difficult cases?”

Pope Francis recounted that the previous day he met with the prior of Taizé, Frère Alois: “There are Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, etc. monks at Taizé.... They all live a real life of brotherhood together. They are an impressive apostolic role model for young people. The fraternal community has an enormous power to call people together. The illnesses of the community, on the other hand, have power that destroys. The temptation against fraternity is that which is the most disruptive to progress in consecrated life. Saint John Berchmans¹¹ used to say that his greatest penance was precisely community life. Sometimes living fraternally is difficult, but if it is not lived it is not productive. Work, even that which is ‘apostolic’ can become an escape from fraternal life. If a person cannot live brotherhood he cannot live religious life.”

“Religious brotherhood” — continued the Pope — “with all its possible diversity, is an experience of love that goes beyond conflicts. Community conflicts are inevitable: in a certain sense they need to happen, if the community is truly living sincere and honest relationships. That’s life. It does not make sense to think of living in a community in which there are brothers who are not experiencing difficulties in their lives. Something is missing from communities where there is no conflict. Reality dictates that there are conflicts in all families and all groups of people. And conflict must be faced head on: it should not be ignored.

¹¹ John (Jan) Berchmans (Diest [Belgium], March 12, 1599 — Rome, August 13, 1621 was a Jesuit, canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1888. He pronounced his first religious profession as a Jesuit on September 24, 1618 and moved to Rome to complete his philosophical studies at the Roman College, where he fell ill. He died only two years later, August 13, 1621. True to his favorite mottos: *Age quod agis* (Do what you are doing well) and *Maximi facere minima* (Do the most with the least), he succeeded in accomplishing ordinary things in an extraordinary way and became the patron saint of community life.

Covering it over just creates a pressure cooker that will eventually explode. A life without conflicts is not life.”

The stakes at play are high. We know that one of the fundamental principles of Pope Francis is that “unity is superior to conflict.” His words to religious should be read in light of *Evangelii gaudium* (n. 226-230), where he wonders about “the acceptance of bearing conflict, of resolving it and transforming it into a link that leads to a new process” (227). It is important to recall that for Bergoglio personal fulfillment is never an exclusively individual undertaking, but collective, communitarian.¹² Conflict in this sense can, and even should evolve in a process of maturation.

In any case conflict must be approached with spiritual counseling: “We should never act like the priest or levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, who just walked by. But what should we do? I recall,” says the Pope, “the story of a young man, 22 years old, who was suffering from a deep depression. I am not speaking of a religious, but of a young man who lived with his mom, who was a widow and who did the laundry of wealthy families. This young man no longer went to work and lived in an alcoholic haze. The mom was not able to help him: every morning before leaving she would simply look at him with great tenderness. Today this young man has a position of responsibility: he overcame that problem, because in the end that look of tenderness from his mom shook him up. We have to recapture that tenderness, including maternal tenderness. Think of the tenderness that Saint Francis lived, for example. Tenderness helps to overcome conflicts. If this is insufficient, it might be necessary to change communities.

“It is true,” — Pope Francis continued — “sometimes we are very cruel. We all experience the temptation to criticize for personal satisfactions or to gain personal advantage. Sometimes the problems in the brotherhood are due to fragile personalities, in which case the help of a professional, a psychologist, should be sought. There is no need to be afraid of this: one need not fear necessarily succumbing to psychologism. But never, never should we act like managers when dealing with conflicts in the brotherhood. We should involve the heart.

¹² Cf. J.M. Bergoglio, *È l'amore che apre gli occhi*, Milan: Rizzoli, 2013, p. 46.

“Brotherhood is a delicate thing. In the hymn of First Vespers of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph in the Argentine breviary the Saint is asked to take care of the Church with *ternura de eucaristía*, ‘Eucharistic tenderness.’¹³ This is how we should treat brothers: with Eucharistic tenderness. We need to caress conflicts. I recall when Paul VI received a child’s letter with many drawings. Paul said that the reception of such a letter on a desk covered only with letters that dealt with problems did him a lot of good. Tenderness does us good. Eucharistic tenderness does not mask conflict but rather helps us to confront it like people.”

The Mutual Relations between Religious and Local Churches

At this point the Superiors General asked the Pope several questions regarding the activities of religious communities in the context of local Churches and about their relationship with bishops: how can the charisms of the various Institutes be both respected and promoted for the welfare of the Church where they live and work? How can communion among the distinct charisms and forms of Christian life be fostered so as to cultivate the growth of all and a better development of mission?

Pope Francis answers that the request to review the directive criteria that were promulgated in 1978 by the Congregation for Religious and by the Congregation for Bishops (*Mutuae relationes*) concerning the relations between bishops and religious in the Church has been pending for quite a few years now. The Pope is of the opinion that the time is ripe now because “that document was useful at the time but is now outdated. The charisms of the various Institutes need to be respected and fostered because they are needed in dioceses. I know by experience the problems” — he continued — “that can arise between a bishop and religious communities.” For example: “if the religious decide one day to withdraw from one of their works due to a lack of manpower the bishop often finds himself suddenly left with a hot potato in his hand. I myself have had such difficult experiences. I would be informed that a work was being dropped and I did not know what to do. I was once actually told after the fact. On the other hand I can also speak about other, positive developments. The fact is: I know the problems, but I also know that the

¹³ *Guarda a la Iglesia de quien fue figura / la inmaculada y maternal María; / guárdala intacta, firme y con ternura / de eucaristía.*

bishops are not always acquainted with the charisms and works of religious. We bishops need to understand that consecrated persons are not functionaries but gifts that enrich dioceses. The involvement of religious communities in dioceses is important. Dialog 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.” For this reason the Pope confided to the Congregation for Religious the task of resuming reflection on the document *Mutuae relationes* and to work on a revision.

The Frontiers of Mission: Marginalization, Culture and Education

The last questions once again brought up the frontiers of the mission of consecrated persons. The Pope has often spoken about “departing,” “going,” and “frontiers.” The Superiors General, therefore, inquired what these frontiers might be to which we should depart: “how do you see the presence of consecrated life in the reality of exclusion in our world? Many Institutes are engaged in the work of education: how do you see this kind of service? What would you say to religious who are engaged in this field?”

First of all the Pope states that geographical frontiers certainly remain, and that it is necessary to be available to move. But there are also symbolic frontiers that are not predetermined and are not the same for everyone, rather they “need to be sought on the basis of the charisms of each Institute. Discernment, therefore, should be undertaken in function of one’s own charism. The realities of exclusion certainly remain the most significant priorities, but they call for discernment. The first criterion is to send the best, most gifted people into these situations of exclusion and marginalization. These are the most risky situations and call for courage and a great deal of prayer. And it is necessary that superiors support and encourage the people dedicated to this work.” There is always the risk, the Pope recalled, to allow oneself to be overcome by enthusiasm; this might result in sending religious who have good will but who are not prepared for situations they will find in the frontiers of the marginalized where they are sent. We must not make decisions concerning the marginalized without being sure of adequate discernment and support.

Besides this challenge of the marginalized the Pope referred to two other ever-present and important challenges: one cultural and the other having to do with education in schools and universities. Consecrated life

can be of great service in these areas. He recalled: “When the Fathers of *Civiltà Cattolica* came to visit me I spoke with them about the frontiers of thought, thought that is unique and weak. I recommended this frontier to them. As the major rector of the Salesians knows, everything for them began on the basis of a dream of education at the frontier, the dream of Don Bosco that thrust his Salesians to the geographical peripheries of Patagonia. We could give many other examples.”

The pillars of education according to the Pope are: “convey understanding, convey ways of doing things, convey values. Faith is conveyed through these. The educator should be up to being a person who educates, he or she should consider how to proclaim Jesus Christ to a generation that is changing.” He insisted, therefore: “Education today is a key, key, key mission!” And he recalled some of his experiences in Buenos Aires regarding the preparation necessary to welcome children in an educational context, little boys and girls, 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 fiancé doesn’t like me.’ The percentage of children studying in schools who have separated parents is very high. The situation in which we live now provides us with new challenges which sometimes are difficult for us to understand. How can we proclaim Christ to these boys and girls? How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing? We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them.¹⁴

At the end of three hours, around 12:30, the Pope said he was sorry to have to end the conversation: “let’s leave some questions for next time” he said smiling. He confessed that the dentist was waiting for him. Before saying good-bye to the Superiors General he has an announcement to make: 2015 will be a year dedicated to consecrated life; these words were greeted with a long applause. The Pontiff looks smiling at the Prefect and the Secretary for the Congregation for Religious and of

¹⁴ Pope Francis has lingered here for a while in the past, on themes about education in various interventions in his capacity of cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires. See in particular *Scogliere la vita. Proposte per tempi difficili*, Milan: Bompiani, 2013.

Institutes of Apostolic Life, saying: “it’s their fault; it’s one of their ideas: it’s dangerous when these two get together,” provoking laughter among all in the Assembly.

As he left the hall he stated: “I thank you, I thank you for this act of faith that you have made in this meeting. Thank you for what you do, for your spirit of faith and your pursuit of service. Thank you for your witness, for the martyrs that you continue to give to the Church, as well for the humiliations to which you must submit: this is the way of the Cross. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

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