

Fr. Perozich comments —

I find this address against initiatives in favor of faith ironic coming from the Vatican. I do not remember (and maybe it is age related) much these last 8 years of preaching faith in Jesus for saving from sin, living the moral life, devotions, etc and transformation into the image of Jesus.

My experience is one of attacks on the traditional believers and expressions of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is father of all and over all.

My experience is one of immigration promotion, of “pickled pepper faced Christians”, “rosary counters”, INITIATIVES of synods to redefine the family and sin, synods for the youth to promote homosexuality, abandonment of the church in China, “God wills all religions”, synods on the Amazon to promote married priests and move toward female clergy, redefining of conscience of the internal forum, constant political drumbeat, anti capitalism, socialist promotion, “dux vult” of prelates, promotion to the episcopacy of men who preach total worldly INITIATIVES to which Catholics are called to conform rather than Scripture and Tradition for faith toward eternal life.

The accusation of bitterness here on the part of the priest is a straw man argument. I do not hear bitterness from priests in the U.S., even though the pope writes to his priests in Rome and Italy where he may hear different messages. I hear from us in the US increasing frustration from more brother priests, but NOT BITTERNESS in their hearts despite the worldly direction of the church and the bishops in the church from various priests who have been attacked, silenced, accused, drawn away from ministry by INITIATIVES requiring synods, meetings, new structures, and so forth rather than preaching and worship.

This is an odd message for me to hear.

Comments from other priests who read this are:

- “And here all this time I thought that God sent his Son into the world to redeem us from our fallen human nature! Our fallen humanity! It's theological speak, and bad at that!”*
- “Could use a bit of Occam’s Razor” (Entities should not be multiplied without necessity, and simpler theories are preferable to more complex ones because they are more testable.) In other words, this wordy document with so many attempts to prove itself confuses rather than clarifies.*

*What is much better, clear, and true is the short homily on prayer by St. John Chrysostom. Two lines that stand out for me **today** even though I have read this yearly for 30 years are:*

- **It is the longing for God, love too deep for words, a gift not given by man but by God's grace.***
- **When the Lord gives this kind of prayer to someone; he gives him riches that cannot be taken away.***

The Holy Father's Address to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome Feb 27 2020

The Bitterness in the Priest's Life

A Reflection ad Intra

I don't want to reflect so much on the tribulations that stem from the priest's mission; they are well-known things and amply diagnosed. On this occasion, I wish to speak to you of a subtle enemy that finds many ways to camouflage and to hide himself and, as a parasite, slowly robs us of the joy of the vocation to which we were called one day. I wish to speak to you of that bitterness focused around the relationship with the faith, the Bishop <and> brethren. We know that other roots and situations can exist, but these synthesize the many meetings I've had with some of you.

I make two things noted right away: the first is that these lines are the fruit of listening to some seminarians and priests of different Italian dioceses, and they cannot and must not refer to a specific situation. The second: that the greater part of priests, whom I know, are happy with their life and consider this bitterness as part of normal living, without dramas. I prefer to give back what I've heard rather than express my opinion on the subject.

To look at our bitterness in the face and to confront it enables us to have contact with our humanity, with our blessed humanity. And so to remind ourselves that, as priests, we aren't called to be omnipotent but forgiven

sinful men and sent. As Saint Irenaeus of Lyon said: “what isn’t assumed isn’t redeemed.”

We also let this bitterness point out the way to a greater adoration of the Father and to help us experience again the strength of His merciful anointing (Cf. *Luke* 15:11-32). To say it with the Psalmist: “Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, that my soul may praise Thee and not be silent” (*Psalms* 30:11-12).

First cause of bitterness: problems with the faith.

“But we had hoped that He was the One,” confided to one another the disciples of Emmaus (Cf. *Luke* 24-25). At the root of their bitterness is a disappointed hope. However, it’s necessary to reflect: is it the Lord that has disappointed us or have we exchanged hope for our expectations? Christian hope, in reality, doesn’t disappoint and doesn’t fail. To hope is not to convince oneself that things will go better, rather that everything that happens has meaning in the light of Easter. However, to know in a Christian way it’s necessary — as Saint Augustine taught Proba — to live a substantial prayer life. It’s there that one learns to distinguish between expectations and hopes.

Now, the relationship with God — more than pastoral disappointments — can be the profound cause of bitterness. Sometimes it almost seems that He doesn’t respect the expectations of a full and abundant life that we had on the day of our Ordination. Sometimes unfinished adolescence doesn’t help to pass from dreams to *spes*.

Perhaps as priests, we are too “proper” in our relationship with God and we don’t hazard to protest in prayer, as the Psalmist does, instead, very often — not only for ourselves but also for our people; because the Pastor bears also the bitterness of his people —; but the Psalms have also been “censured” and it’s hard for us to have a spirituality of protest. So we fall into cynicism: unhappy and somewhat frustrated. The true protest — of the adult — is not against God but before Him, because it’s born precisely of trust in Him. The man of prayer reminds the Father who He is and what is worthy of His Name. We must sanctify His Name, but sometimes it’s up to the disciples to waken the Lord and say to Him: “Don’t you care that we are lost?” (*Mark* 4:35-41). So the Lord wants to involve us directly in His Kingdom, not as spectators but taking part actively.

What difference is there between expectation and hope? Expectation is born when we spend our life to save our life: we get angry, seeking securities, rewards, advancements . . . When we receive what we want we almost feel as if we will never die, that it will always be like that! — because we are the point of reference. Hope, instead, is something born in the heart when one decides not to defend oneself anymore. When I recognize my limitations, and that not all begins and ends with me, then I recognize the importance of having trust. The Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli already taught it in his *Spiritual Combat*: the key to all is in a double and simultaneous movement: to mistrust oneself and to trust God. I hope, not when there is nothing more to do, but when I stop getting busy only for myself. Hope is based on an alliance: God has

spoken to me and on the day of my Ordination He promised me that mine would be a full life, with the fullness and savor of the Beatitudes: certainly troubled — as that of all men —, but beautiful. My life is tasty if I live Easter, not if things go as I say.

And here, something else is understood: it's not enough to listen only to history to understand these processes. It's necessary to listen to history and <see>our life in the light of the Word of God. The disciples of Emmaus overcame their disappointment when the Risen One opened their mind to the intelligence of the Scriptures. See: things will go better not only because we will change Superiors, or missions, or strategies, but because we will be consoled by the Word. The Prophet Jeremiah confessed: "Thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (15:16). Bitterness, which isn't a fault, is accepted. It can be a great occasion. Perhaps it's also salutary because it makes the interior alarm bell ring: pay attention, you have exchanged security for an alliance "foolish and late of heart." There is a sadness that can lead us to God. Let us accept it <and> not get angry with ourselves. It could be a good turn. Saint Francis of Assisi also experience it, he remembered it in his *Testament* (Cf. *Franciscan Sources*, 110). Bitterness will change into great sweetness, and the easy, worldly sweetness will be transformed into bitterness.

Second cause of bitterness: problems with the Bishop

I don't want to fall into rhetoric or look for a scapegoat, and even less so to defend myself or defend

those of my ambit. The commonplace, which finds in Superiors the faults of everything, no longer holds. We are all lacking in the small and in the great. Today one seems to breathe a general atmosphere (not only among us) of a widespread mediocrity, which does not let us clamber over easy judgments. However, the fact remains that much bitterness in a priest's life is caused by the omissions of Pastors.

We all experience our limitations and deficiencies. We face situations in which we realize that we are not adequately prepared . . . However, rising to services and ministries with greater visibility, the deficiencies become more evident and lauder; and it's also a logical consequence that in this relationship one plays a lot, in the good and in the bad. What omissions? One is not alluding here to the divergences often inevitable regarding managerial problems or pastoral styles. This is tolerable and is part of life on this earth. Until Jesus is all in all, we will all seek to impose ourselves on all! It's the fallen Adam that is in us to make these jokes.

The true problem that embitters is not the divergences (and perhaps not even the errors: a Bishop also has the right to err as all creatures do!) but, rather, two very serious and destabilizing motives for priests.

First of all, there is a certain soft authoritarian tendency. Those among us who think differently aren't accepted. Because of a word, one is transferred to the category of those that row against, for a "distinction" one is registered among the discontented. The parrhesia is buried by the frenzy to impose projects. The cult of

initiatives goes substituting the essential: one faith, one baptism, one God Father of all. Adherence to initiatives risks becoming the measure of communion. However, the latter does not always coincide with unanimity of opinions. Nor can it be pretended that communion is exclusively unidirectional: the priest must be in communion with the Bishop . . . and the Bishops in communion with the priests: it's not a problem of democracy, but of paternity.

In the Rule, — we are in the famous chapter III — Saint Benedict recommends that the Abbot, when he must address an important question, must consult the entire community including the youngest members. Then he continues to confirm that the ultimate decision corresponds to the Abbot, who must dispose everything with *prudence* and *fairness*. For Benedict, authority is not in question. Quite the opposite, it's the Abbot who answers before God the way he conducts the monastery, however, it's said that, in deciding, he must be “prudent and fair.” We know the first word well: prudence and discernment are part of the ordinary vocabulary.

Less common is “fairness”: fairness means to take into account the opinion of all and to safeguard the representativeness of the flock, without having preferences. The Pastor's great temptation is to surround himself with his “own,” those “close” to him, and so, unfortunately, real competence is supplanted by a certain presumed loyalty without distinguishing any longer between one who pleases and one who advises in a selfless way. This makes the flock suffer very much, which often accepts without externalizing anything. The Code of Canon

Law reminds that the faithful “have the right and even sometimes the duty to manifest to the sacred Pastors their thought on what concerns the good of the Church” (canon 212 § 3). Of course, in this time of precariousness and widespread fragility, the solution seems to be authoritarianism (this is evident in the political realm). However, the true cure — as Saint Benedict counsels — lies in fairness, not in uniformity.[1]

Third cause of bitterness: problems among ourselves

In these last years, the priest has suffered the blows of scandals — financial and sexual. The suspect has drastically made relationships colder and more formal; the gifts of others are no longer enjoyed, rather, it seems that it’s a mission to destroy, minimize, make one suspect. In the face of the scandals, the Evil One tempts us, pushing us to a “Donatist” vision of the Church: the impeccable inside, those in error outside!. We have false concepts of the Militant Church, in a sort of ecclesiological Puritanism. The bride of Christ remains the field in which the wheat and the tares grow until the Parousia. One who has not acted on this evangelical vision of reality exposes himself to unspeakable and useless bitterness.

In any case, the public and publicized sins of the clergy have made all more wary and less disposed to tighten significant bonds, especially in order to share the faith. If we multiply the common appointments — permanent formation and others — but one participates with a less willing heart. There is more “community” but less communion! The question we ask ourselves when we

meet a new brother rises silently: who do I really have before me? Can I trust him? “

It's not about solitude: that isn't a problem but an aspect of the mystery of communion. Christian solitude, — that of one who goes into his room and prays to the Father in secret — is a blessing, the true wellspring of loving welcome of the other. The true problem lies in not finding more time to be alone. Without solitude, there isn't free love, and others become a surrogate of voids. In this connection, as priests, we must always learn again to be alone “evangelically,” as Jesus at night with the Father.[2] Here the drama is isolation, which is something other than solitude. Isolation not only and not so much exterior — we are always in the midst of the people —, but inherent to the soul of a priest. Beginning of the most profound isolation to then touch it in a largely visible way.

Isolated in regard to grace: lapped by secularism, we don't believe or feel any longer that we are surrounded by heavenly friends — the “great cloud of witnesses” (Cf. *Hebrews* 12:1) —; we seem to feel that our story, the afflictions, don't touch anyone. The world of grace has become little by little foreign to us, the saints seem to be only the “imaginary friends” of children. The Spirit that dwells in the heart — essentially and not figuratively — is something that, perhaps, we have never experienced because of dissipation or negligence. We know but we don't “touch.” The distance from the force of grace produces rationalisms or sentimentalisms, never a redeemed flesh.

To isolate oneself in regard to history: everything seems to be consummated in the *here and now*, without hope in the goods promised and in the future reward. Everything opens and closes with us. My death isn't the passing of a witness, but an unjust interruption. The more one feels special, powerful, rich in gifts, the more one closes the heart to the continuous meaning of the history of the People of God to which one belongs. Our individualized conscience makes us believe that there was nothing before and nothing after. This is why we work so hard to take care of and guard what our predecessor initiated that was good: we often arrive in the parish and we feel it a duty to have a *tabula rasa*, to distinguish ourselves and mark the difference. We are not capable of *continuing* to make the good live to which we didn't give birth! We begin from zero because we don't feel the taste of belonging to a community journey of salvation.

Isolated in regard to others: isolation in regard to grace and to history is one of the causes of the incapacity among us to establish significant relationships of trust and of evangelical sharing. If I am isolated, my problems seem unique and insurmountable: no one can understand me. This is one of the preferred thoughts of the father of lies. We recall Bernanos' words: "Only after much time one recognizes him, and the sadness that announces him, precedes him, how sweet it is! It's the most substantial of the elixirs of the devil, his ambrosia!"[3] Thought that little by little takes shape and closes us in ourselves, moves us away from others and puts us in a position of superiority because no one is up to the height of the

demands. Thought that by dint of being repeated ends up by nesting in us. “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (*Proverbs 28:13*).

The devil doesn't want you to speak, to tell, to share. And then you search for a good Spiritual Father, a clever elderly man that can accompany you. Never isolate yourself, never! One only has a profound sentiment of communion when one personally becomes aware of the “us” that I am, was and will be. Otherwise other problems come in cascades: of isolation, of a community without communion competition is born and certainly not cooperation; the desire for recognition arises and not the joy of a shared sanctity; one enters in relationship either to compare oneself or to support one another.

We recall the people of Israel when, walking in the desert for three days, arrived at Mara, but couldn't drink the water because it was bitter. In the face of the people's protest, Moses invoked the Lord and the water became sweet (Cf. *Exodus 15:22-25*). The faithful holy People of God is known more than any other. They are very respectful and know how to accompany and take care of their Pastors. They know our bitterness and they pray to the Lord for us. Let us add our prayer to theirs, and ask the Lord to transform our bitterness into sweet water for His people. Let us ask the Lord to give us the capacity to recognize what is making us bitter and so allow ourselves to be transformed and to be reconciled persons that reconcile, peaceful persons that pacify, full of hope that infuse hope. The People of God expect from us teachers of

spirit capable of pointing out the wells of sweet water in the middle of the desert.

From a homily by John Chrysostom, bishop

(Supp. Hom. 6 De precatone: PG 64, 462-466)

Prayer is the light of the spirit

Prayer and converse with God is a supreme good: it is a partnership and union with God. As the eyes of the body are enlightened when they see light, so our spirit, when it is intent on God, is illumined by his infinite light. I do not mean the prayer of outward observance but prayer from the heart, not confined to fixed times or periods, but continuous throughout the day and night.

Our spirit should be quick to reach out toward God not only when it is engaged in meditation; at other times also, when it is carrying out its duties, caring for the needy, performing works of charity, giving generously in the service of others, our spirit should long for God, and call him to mind, so that these works may be seasoned with the salt of God's love, and so make a palatable offering to the Lord of the universe. Throughout the whole of our lives we may enjoy the benefit that comes from prayer if we devote a great deal of time to it.

Prayer is the light of the spirit, true knowledge of God, mediating between God and man. The spirit, raised up to heaven by prayer, clings to God with the utmost tenderness; like a child crying tearfully for its mother, it craves the milk that God provides. It seeks the satisfaction of its own desires, and receives gifts outweighing the whole world of nature.

Prayer stands before God as an honored ambassador. It gives joy to the spirit, peace to the heart. I speak of prayer, not words. **It is the longing for God, love too deep for words, a gift not given by man but by God's grace.** The apostle Paul says: "We

do not know how we are to pray but the Spirit himself pleads for us with inexpressible longings."

When the Lord gives this kind of prayer to someone; he gives him riches that cannot be taken away, heavenly food that satisfies the spirit. One who tastes this food is set on fire with an eternal longing for the Lord: his spirit burns as in a fire of the utmost intensity.

Practice prayer from the beginning. Paint your house with the colors of modesty and humility. Make it radiant with the light of justice. Decorate it with the finest gold leaf of good deeds. Adorn it with the walls and stones of faith and generosity. Crown it with the pinnacle of prayer. In this way you will make it a perfect dwelling place for the Lord. You will be able to receive him as in a splendid palace, and through his grace you will already possess him, his image enthroned in the temple of your spirit.