**(2.2)**

**PASTORAL VISIT TO INDIA**

**13-15 SEPTEMBER 2015**

**MEETING WITH FORMATORS, SEMINARIANS AND NOVICES**

**ARCHDIOCESE OF CALCUTTA**

***Monday, 14 September 2015***

Your Excellencies, Formators and Staff, Seminarians and Novices,

It is my great pleasure being here with you today, as part of my second Pastoral Visit to your beautiful country, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. I take this occasion to convey to you greetings from His Holiness Pope Francis and his Apostolic Blessing.

From its very inception, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples considered priestly formation as one of the most important ministries in the Church, since future Priests, along with the Religious and Laity, become the main pastoral agents and collaborators of the Bishop in building the local community and in fostering communion within the Diocese.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I must say that formation today is indeed a great challenge, especially in the context of contemporary globalization. At a time when many values are being eroded, it is all the more important to have priests who are well grounded in Gospel values within their own culture so that they can serve as wise and good shepherds that are close to their people, both in their struggles and challenges. By their good example they are to lead their people to discover the presence of God in the depths of their hearts and within their surroundings.

It is my duty and pleasure to thank the formators who understand well their responsibility before God, the Church, and society at large, in forming tomorrow’s priests and religious. I greatly appreciate that as Formators you keep yourselves well versed in the most recent Church Teachings and Norms on Priestly and Religious Formation. What immediately comes to mind is Pope Francis’ most recent directive of not allowing Seminary “hopping.” When a Seminarian is dismissed by a Seminary or by a House of Religious Formation, the decision was most certainly taken after careful discernment and comprehensive evaluation of the candidate and those responsible must surely have had good reason for taking such a decision. Therefore, it would neither be wise or opportune for a Seminarian dismissed by one Seminary to be admitted by another Seminary or a House of Religious Formation, except for grave reasons known to the Ordinary or his Delegate for Formation.

During these last fifty years, it has been the constant desire of the Church that “*the whole pattern of Seminary life, permeated with a desire for piety and silence and a careful concern for mutual help, be arranged that it provides, in a certain sense, an initiation into the future life which the priest shall lead*” (cfr. *Optatam totius* n.11, Decree on priestly training, published 28th October 1965). Thus, as the signs of our times indicate, a holistic formation program with a particular missionary thrust in a given seminary’s pastoral formation deserve much attention and appreciation in order to intensify the missionary activity of the particular Churches in the Region of West Bengal. To pursue this goal, great care must be taken to ensure that seminarians are introduced to an authentic missionary spirituality that would transform them into zealous, committed, and joyful ministers of the Gospel of Jesus.

The world is constantly changing, cultures continuously move forward and are transformed, people easily change their ideas, nevertheless, as as St. John Paul II stated in *Pastores dabo vobis*, his Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in present day circumstances (published on the 25th March 1992): “*there is an essential aspect of the priest that does not change: the priest of tomorrow, no less than the priest of today, must resemble Christ. When Jesus lived on this earth, he manifested in himself the definitive role of the priestly establishing a ministerial priesthood with which the apostles were the first to be invested.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Dear Seminarians and Novices, this is what Jesus asks from you; this is what the Church expects from you as people of faith. Yes, through your faith and generosity you gave a positive response to the One who called you; the One who chose you to be “an instrument in His hands.” Your humble response must be consonant with a life of faith and is easily recognized by others in your words and actions. Remember you are being called to a spiritual service, not to something that brings personal gain, status in society, or power.

So ask yourselves: Why are you here today? What motivates you to attend the Seminary? Are you ready, through faith and generosity, to offer your whole life to Christ? Are you ready to offer all of your physical energy to serve Christ and His Church, in a celibate and chaste life? Are you ready to serve the People of God, the poor and the Gospel, in obedience? Are you ready to sacrifice the temptation to pursue an egoistic career in order to be a Priest at the service of the People of God: offering them the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins; consoling the afflicted; and imparting the Holy Spirit? From your answers to these questions you will know if your presence in the Seminary today makes sense, or it is a sheer waste of time. Do not forget that these questions are the same questions that your Bishop will formally put to you on the day of your priestly ordination. Nevertheless, allow me to forcefully remind you that you needed to have given a positive response to these questions long before that day.

Dear Seminarians and Novices, I further urge you to realize that as ministers of Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd, you need to be thankful and joyful for what you have received throughout your formation: a singular grace and treasure from Jesus Christ. It is truly a grace that you have been freely chosen to be a “living instrument” in the work of salvation. But what will be your response to this grace you received? First and foremost, there must be a thirst for God and for an active and meaningful relationship with Him. In order to progress in this relationship the Seminary program provides you with the necessary aids of spiritual accompaniment, time for personal and communal prayer and meditation, retreats and penitential services etc. It is up to you to make the best of the formation offered to you with great commitment and dedication. At the end of the day, it is you who are responsible before God for your formation.

Your response to God’s grace is the gift of yourself: now, in your responsibilities during your formation, and later in the pastoral charity that you will offer throughout your many years of your priestly ministry. Be aware that there is an intrinsic relationship between a priest’s and a religious’ spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry, especially in the celebration of the sacraments and in receiving the saving effects from the action of Christ himself present in the Sacraments.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A future priest must certainly train himself in obedience. Priestly and Religious obedience also demands from you a marked spirit of asceticism, by this I mean not giving in to the tendency to become too bound up by one’s own preferences or points of view. It also has a particular pastoral character. It is lived in an atmosphere of constant readiness to allow oneself to be taken up, and “consumed” by the needs and demands of the flock. Here, I remind you once again of your response to God’s grace as your gift: to your bishop, your superiors, your parish priest and your parishioners.

Often times giving of yourselves in your ministry may lead to a search for compensations or half-measures. It is only God who will compensate you. Here, it is vital for you to understand the importance of the theological motivation of the Church’s law on celibacy, which is based on the words of Jesus himself: “*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me*” (Mt. 16, 24). Priestly celibacy is a Church law but it is also an expression of your readiness to configure yourself to Jesus Christ, the head and spouse of the Church. For an adequate spiritual life, this “*sweet burden*” as Blessed Paul VI referred to it in his Encyclical Letter on the Celibacy of the Priest, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, (published on the 24th June 1967), ought not to be considered and lived as an isolated or purely negative reality, but as one aspect of the positive, specific, and characteristic approach to being a priest.

Please remember that prayer, together with the Church’s Sacraments and ascetical practices, will give you hope in difficulties, forgiveness in failings, and confidence and courage in your life and ministry. In the context of the Year of Consecrated Life I urge you to find more time for prayer and reflection. Remember that when we pray and spend time before Jesus in the Holy Tabernacle we see and feel the depth of Christ’s love for us, which sustains us and gives us dignity.

As Pope Francis wrote in his Apostolic Letter for the Year of Consecrated Life of the 21st November 2014, II, 2: “*radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. This is the priority that is deeded right now: to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth*.” Although there are various ways of defining what prophecy entails, when it comes to consecrated life, first and foremost the consecrated persons’ commitment must be to community life. Community life is more than just doing things together. It is a commitment to one another in order to give testimony to the Church and the world. Indeed, it is in the context of community life that the living the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience are better understood and made possible. Last, but not least, among the prophetic aspects of Consecrated Life are the various charisms of particular congregations. Such charisms reach their goal in as much as they reinvigorate the members of religious congregations and offer particular gifts to the Church and to the world.

Dear Seminarians and Novices, it is my sincere prayer, that with the full cooperation of the formators and all of staff members, your precious time devoted to your formation will prepare you to continue to be responsive to the needs of the Church in West Bengal and to the mission of the Universal Church. May God help you and bless you. Thank you.

1. In fact, in 1627 Pope Urban the 8th (VIII) (1623-1644) specifically established a Pontifical College, known as the *Urbanum*, for the formation of candidates for the priesthood from mission countries. The Urban College continues to prepare future generations of indigenous candidates for Holy Orders, including many of those who are later appointed Bishops of the young Churches, none the least of which in India. Today, however, most of these candidates are formed in minor and major seminaries that have been established in their own countries, which is true also for India.  Nevertheless, even today, candidates from mission countries are chosen and sent by their bishops for their priestly formation to the *Urbanum* in Rome and for their theological and pastoral specialization at the Pontifical Colleges of St. Peter, and St. Paul. Maybe some of you present here today are ex-alumni of these Colleges. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “*This priesthood is destined to last in endless succession throughout history. In this sense the priest of the third millennium will continue the work of the priests who, in the preceding millennia, have animated the life of the Church. In the third millennium the priestly vocation will continue to be the call to live the unique and permanent priesthood of Christ. It is equally certain that the life and ministry of the priest must also adapt to every era and circumstance of life.... For our part we must therefore seek to be as open as possible to light from on high from the Holy Spirit, in order to discover the tendencies of contemporary society, recognize the deepest spiritual needs, determine the most important concrete tasks and the pastoral methods to adopt, and thus respond adequately to human expectations*” (*PDV* n.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Among the various Sacraments and the specific grace proper to each of them, I would like to make special mention of the Sacrament of Penance, of which you will be ministers but should also be its beneficiaries and witnesses of God’s mercy towards sinners. I advise you to receive the Sacrament of Penance regularly, in order to become effective and efficacious ministers of God’s mercy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)