**Meeting of the Prefect**

**of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples**

**with the Priests**

**20/01/2015 - Hà Nội**

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,

1. **Greeting**.

I greet you, dear Brothers, and I bring you the blessing of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. I am happy to be in this holy land, a land of a living and steadfast Church, where the blood of many martyrs has flowed heroically. Every year on the 24th of November – the day on which the Church celebrates the Memorial of the priest, St. Andrew Dung-Lac, and his 126 Companion Martyrs – I have the occasion to read again the beautiful letter of St. Paul Lê Bảo Tịnh, written to the seminarians from his prison cell. I am deeply moved by his love for the Lord Jesus and for the Church, as well as his pastoral concern for the seminarians entrusted to him. His example always prompts in me an ardent desire for the Lord and to serve His Church. As priests and those responsible for the Church in Vietnam, you are called to be “*salt and light*” (cf. Mt. 5:13-15) in this society. Imitate your heroic predecessor martyrs and be worthy to be their successors.

1. ***Evangelii gaudium****.* Dear Brothers, the theme of evangelization is still relevant and will always be present, since the Church by her nature is missionary. This theme is reaffirmed and underlined by Pope Francis, particularly in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*). This invaluable document must be the point of reference for the Church of Vietnam, which is called concomitantly to a path of conversion and to a strong commitment to evangelization. In this sense, we recall that evangelization comes forth from the Gospel and is continuously reborn in the personal encounter with Jesus. This encounter with Jesus brings with it a change of life and, at the same time, gives true and profound joy that always seeks to communicate itself. “*For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives,”* the Pope writes, *“how can we fail to share that love with others?”* (*EG*, n. 8). To evangelize is to proclaim Christ, and to encounter Him is to be renewed by Him. What the Pope wrote in his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei,* andreiterated in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is interesting: “*It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’”* (n.15). As those evangelizing, we experience this joy of the Gospel in becoming sons of God, in being priests of the Lord, and in the service to the faithful entrusted to our care.
2. **Spiritual Life**.First of all, I would like to speak about the spiritual life of priests, because “*If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit”*, according to the teaching of St. Paul to the Galatians (5:25). With these words, the Apostle reminds us that the spiritual life of the priest must be animated and guided by the Spirit of God, Who leads us to sanctity, perfected by charity. We priests, more than the rest of the faithful, are called to sanctity through our identity: being consecrated with the Anointing and sent to announce glad tidings to the poor. The sanctification of the priest consists above all in his intimate and profound bond with Jesus, Head and Pastor of the Church. Priests are called to radically live the Gospel, following the example of the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ. The priest is, first and foremost, one who is called to be configured to Jesus, the Eternal High Priest. In other words, we must love as Jesus loves, think as Jesus thinks, act as Jesus acts, and serve as Jesus serves in every moment of our lives. The priesthood is not a profession or a bureaucratic office, fulfilled by working contracted hours; it is a “style of life”, not a job. The priest lives out his Priesthood, but he never possesses it all. We must be priests of God rather than being “clerical”: simply going through the motions of being religious. To fully live out the priestly identity, the spiritual life of the priest must be tied to prayer, to listening to the Word of God. Pray and listen like Mary. This is the behavior of him who places his trust in the power of God, allowing himself to be transfigured by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, allowing himself to be corrected by God and allowing God to act in his own life.
3. **Moral Life**. Regarding the moral life, I would like to speak of priestly celibacy. This choice must be considered within the context of “…*the link between celibacy and Sacred Ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ the head and spouse of the Church. The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her”* (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 29). Understood thus, the priest embraces celibacy “*continually renewed with a free and loving decision”* (*Ibid*.), being aware of the weakness of his own human condition. Thus, we know that “*To put into practice all the moral, pastoral and spiritual demands of priestly celibacy, it is absolutely necessary that the priest pray humbly and trustingly”* (*Ibid*.). One way to protect the priestly life is to foster fraternal relationships with brother priests. The accompaniment and support of other priests are always a gift of grace and an invaluable aid to bringing life into our Priesthood and into our ministry. If this fraternal relationship is lacking among priests, a crisis always follows. A good relationship of esteem and confidence must also be fostered with one’s own Bishop, as the father and head of our local Church.
4. **Pastoral Life**. Concerning the pastoral life, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has warned us of the risk that runs among priests *“obsessed with protecting their free time”.* He writes: *“This is frequently due to the fact that people feel an overbearing need to guard their personal freedom, as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God’s love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive. Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia”* (*EG*, n. 81). In order to dedicate our entire lives and all that we have to the service of the Church, we need to have the pastoral charity of Jesus, Who has given His life for the flock. We must imitate Jesus in His gift of Self and in His service. It is precisely pastoral charity, with which we must be imbued, that enriches our priestly ministry and will determine *“our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people”* (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 23). Pastoral charity asks of us a pastoral conversion, urging us to *“go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel”* (*EG,* n. 20). The privileged recipients of pastoral charity are the poor, the marginalized, the little ones, the sick, sinners, and unbelievers.

In a particular way in the large cities, we need to focus our attention on the immigrants and to the “slaves” of the modern day. In his Message for the World Day of Peace 2015, the Holy Father spoke of the various kinds of slavery: workers reduced to servitude, migrants, female and male sex slaves, to name a few. Furthermore, in his message for the 101st Word Day of Migrants and Refugees 2015 (September 3, 2014), he wrote that “*Jesus is* ‘*the evangelizer par excellence and the Gospel in person’ (*[*ES*](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)*, 209). His solicitude, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalized, invites all of us to care for the frailest and to recognize His suffering countenance, especially in the victims of new forms of poverty and slavery.”* Pastoral charity renders us always more available to assume whatever responsibilities arise for the good of the Church and of souls.

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood, I thank you for your zeal and for your tireless commitment to evangelization. Let us continue onward, animated by our common love for the Lord and for Holy Mother Church. May Our Lady of La Vang protect you and walk by your side. May we remain always united in prayer.