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Pope calls religious to be 'real witnesses'

by Joshua J. McElwee

Priests, brothers and sisters in Catholic religious orders around the globe should "wake up the world" by being "real witnesses" to a countercultural 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 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 Jan. 3 by the Italian Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà 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," Francis said. "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."

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 had previously spoken about Francis' words at the meeting (*NCR*, Dec. 20-Jan. 2), the Jan. 3 account outlines in depth what he said 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, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the account also finds the pope outlining 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, toward the end of the three-hour exchange, during which Francis had no prepared text, the pope seemed to distill his ministry to one question: How can we proclaim Christ to a world that is continually changing?

Responding to an inquiry from the superiors about what he might say to men in religious orders who serve as educators, the pope called education a "key, key mission" of religious. Spadaro states that Francis began recalling his own experience as archbishop in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 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.

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"The percentage of children studying in schools who have separated parents is very high," the pope continued. "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 asked. "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 Civiltà Cattolica released Spadaro's account -- which spans 15 pages -- in Italian, English, Spanish and Portuguese. While the English version originally translated the pope's description of the girl's words as "my mother's fiancé doesn't like me," the Italian version uses *fidanzata*, which translates to a girlfriend or female partner. (A new English version was posted to the magazine's website by Jan. 7, changing fiancé to fiancée, the feminine form of the word.)

The report of the pope's comments about the mother, her girlfriend and her child quickly sparked debate in Italy after several outlets in the country alleged it indicated a new openness by the pope to same-sex unions. The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, took to Vatican Radio Jan. 5 to deny those allegations.

"To speak of an 'opening to gay couples' is paradoxical," Lombardi said, "because the pope's comment is completely general and because even the small concrete example made by the pope in this regard ... alludes to the suffering of the child."

Likewise, Spadaro published a front-page essay in Italy's *Corriere della Sera* newspaper Jan. 7 calling those who reported an openness by Francis on the subject as being "misleading" and promoting "manipulation" of the pope's words.

Elsewhere in the Jan. 3 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," Francis said.

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

? Formation directors should guard against priests who will become "little monsters": "Inculturation today calls for a different attitude," he stated. "For example: Problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Dialogue as well as confrontation are needed."

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

"Formation is a work of art, not a police action," the pope continued. "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 laypeople: "We must always think of the faithful, of the faithful people of God," Francis said. "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."

? Priests should 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 really 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?" Francis asked. "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. Ignatius of Loyola that charisms need to be 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."

The pope also warned against recruiting people from Africa and Asia solely to replace priests in Europe, saying, "We need to keep our eyes open for such situations."

? Christians should make mistakes: Commenting on updating religious charisms, Francis said, "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. In fact, we should always ask for forgiveness and look shamefully upon apostolic failures due to a lack of courage."

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