

Conference given at the Conclusion of the Rome Diocesan Congress

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18th September 2017



“DO NOT LEAVE THEM ALONE”

Acts 20:7-12

*(7) On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. (8) There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. (9) And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. (10) But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." (11) And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. (12) And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.*

It is beautiful to reread together this passage from the Acts, to hear how this sheds light on what we have experienced during the Congress last June!

The episode happened at Troas, on the “first day of the week”, when the community gathered together “in the upper room” to “break bread” and listen to the Word of God proclaimed by Paul. It was a community of beginners, small and full of enthusiasm, capable of listening to the Word for the whole of the night, until dawn, profiting right to the last from the presence of the Apostle. There were many lamps lighting the whole room: it is a beautiful symbol of the light of the Word and of the faith of so many people who allowed themselves to be illuminated by it. It could be said that this community is a “wise virgin”: having oil with her and the lamp alight. It was ready for the departure of the Apostle and to continue their journey without him.

It was not aware of a small point. The rhythms of this community, its luminous and adult faith, did not seem right to the young Eutychus. He remained by the window and, while Paul continued his sermon without a stop, he was overcome by profound tiredness, and fell down out of the window. This is a true image of what we are going through today: while our Christian community, in this most rich and fatiguing post-conciliar season, rediscovers with joy the centrality of meeting with the Risen One, of listening to the Word of God, the beauty of celebrating together, breaking the eucharistic bread in faith and fraternal charity, that the juvenile component of our community is slowly moving towards the window, developing a sense of non-involvement with regards to the Christian community and is falling asleep. Perhaps, like Paul, we have spoken too much about things that have little to do with the life of the young Eutychus, for which reason we have not helped him to perceive that the light was also for him; perhaps empathy was lacking and we were not aware of what Eutychus was experiencing, of how his daily life, perhaps lived even in solitude, had become heavy and tiring; perhaps we were not good at recognising that even Eutychus had something to say, questions to ask, that would have helped him to enter into the Mystery “in his own way”, to make

personal the proclamation he listened to (“Dio a modo mio” – God My Way – is the title of a recent work on the youth and faith in Italy); as usual, God wishes that his community be converted and this will not happen until we place the small ones and the poor at the centre of our attention....

For this reason Eutychus, to the bewilderment of all, fell out of the window and died. It is with enormous sadness that we see so many young people in our city who, for the very reason that in growing up the Gospel was mostly absent, are feeding themselves on mediocrity, losing the capacity to dream, imprisoning themselves in individualism, remaining alone and without words in respect to the great dramas of life. Without the Lord, the life of man is no longer his own: it is possible to be young and to be “old within”, perhaps even “dead within”.

For this reason, Paul’s gesture is exactly what we, a Christian community, are called to actualize: to leave aside all other occupations, go down to the ground floor, where the lifeless young Eutychus is to be found, then bend over him to embrace him and give him again the life of the Spirit. The verb used in the Acts in Greek is epèpesen which means he threw himself upon him, and is the same verb Luke uses in the Gospel (Lk 15: 20) to say that the Father “threw his arms around and kissed” his prodigal younger son and breathed upon him his own divine life. The bowels of Mercy of the Father, his maternal womb were moved, as also were those of Paul faced with the death of the young man. Mercy is expressed in the gesture of throwing himself upon the corpse of the young man, as had done Elijah upon the son of the widow, to give back life, breath, filial dignity, and to help him get up again on his own two feet. Every effort of ours in youth ministry cannot but begin from this imitation of the maternal womb of the Father, from this rediscovery of the mercy that God has for us, which we are called to exercise towards everyone. Also for parents, our objective is the same: to help them to rediscover their paternal and maternal vocation, the beauty of a giving love that renders them like God, the luminosity of the gesture of those who die a little so that the other, the child, can have life. We want to help fathers and mother to rediscover that faith in Jesus and relationship with him supports and also gives shape to their own way of being parents.

Like Paul, we too can exclaim, “Do not be alarmed, his life is in him!” (In the CEI translation; “he is still alive”). Yes, in the heart of every young person in this city is a profound desire for God, a spirit that expresses this desire in thousands of different ways: a desire to speak about their own experiences, to experiment, to try “dramatic” things; a profound need to be with others, to overcome isolation, to find a welcome and points of reference among adults; a refusal of formalism, of non-authentic relationships, of rigid and lifeless spaces, because they are searching to belong, for a new way of being in the world, of thinking about themselves, of acting. A nostalgia for God even leaks into many of those who say they do not believe in any type of religion or philosophy (almost a half of our young people): more than being a rejection of God, it is a distancing themselves from a certain way of living Christian life which they learnt in the parish catechism classes and which now, to these adolescents, no longer says anything, because it has almost nothing to do with what they are experiencing. (Bichi-Bignardi, Dio a modo mio, [God my way] p.176). This challenges us deeply: “his life is still in him”. What openings and what paths is the Holy Spirit producing deep within our young people? How can we intercept these openings, these movements of the Spirit, and place our youth in contact with the Gospel of Jesus and the life of the Christian community? How is the Spirit preparing within the hearts of the youth the faith and the Church of the future? To what conversions is the Spirit calling us, what exoduses does the Lord want us to make, through the provocations that the youth give us and that we are called to listen to and to take seriously into consideration?

Yes, because there is a real risk before us: that we do not fully grasp the epochal shift through which we are passing. The Lord is speaking to us through the voice of these young people, our children: to transmit the faith to them requires a profound rethinking not only of youth pastoral work, but of our being Church. Let us take as a slogan or stock phrase certain phrases of our Bishop, Pope Francis, when he speaks of an “ecclesial renewal which cannot be deferred”: “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27). By now, many years have passed since the magisterium of our Popes has reminded us of the need for an ecclesial reform that, taking in even more fully the Second Vatican Council, may signal an authentic missionary conversion “which cannot leave things as they presently are”(EG 25). The real risk is that not only is Eutychus falling asleep, but also the whole Christian Community! We cannot stay looking on shocked as Eutychus plunges into the void: we must do as Paul did, who sped to embrace him and give life back to his soul.

The Church is “an open-hearted mother” (first chapter of EG): it is a disciple, a daughter generated by the Word and missionary, a mother who generates new children to the faith (a Christian community which evangelizes and lets herself be evangelized) incarnating herself in human limits and accompanying the actual path of people. As in every one of her epochs, the Church renews herself, thanks to two profoundly spiritual “movements” connected one to the other: she returns to the sources of the Word and lets herself be provoked by the flesh of mankind whom she is called to serve. Also, because she herself is made up of that flesh and cannot pretend not to be so! To block the fecundity of even one of these two movements means to carry out a half-hearted reform of the life of the Church. Let us become listeners to the Word, consigned to us in Scripture and Church Tradition, and let us listen to the voice of the Spirit who speaks in the hearts of people and in human history, effecting through communities a wise discernment of the signs of the times. This is the journey awaiting us, and it is a fascinating adventure!

With this talk today, I do not intend to do anything else but raise once more the Pope’s words and propose some suggestions for the paths of parochial communities and other ecclesial realities of the Rome diocese. From the outset I want to point out that priority should not be given to “things to do”. In order to circulate new ideas effectively, experiences are useful, such as the June workshops, because in the groups many proposals were shared, you told of many initiatives that were successful. Prefecture meetings, gatherings of the catechists and the animators of various parishes are precious occasions! What is more important (and a good deal more difficult) is to mature attitudes and start processes. There are also the preoccupations of our Bishop, Pope Francis: our spiritual sicknesses which restrict the circulation of the life of the Spirit, which hinder the Christian community from meeting the youth and their families in a fruitful way; the sicknesses that lead us to have the short-sighted view of those who do not sense which direction to take and therefore settle upon “already done and therefore settled” when for some time now, “settled it certainly is not”!

Well then, I will tell you what it seems to me is essential to do in the coming pastoral year: every parish community, every ecclesial reality, should reflect with frankness upon what may be their spiritual sickness. On the occasion of a community assembly, with the pastoral council, with the team of catechists, it should be asked: in what things are we sick? What slows us down in our evangelizing dynamism? What hinders us from being an openhearted mother, capable of welcoming

and going out to people? Why do the youth we have accompanied in Christian initiation, distance themselves from our community (obviously, for what depends on us...)? The second chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* "Amid the crisis of community commitment", in the section concerning "Temptations facing pastoral workers" (EG 76-101) we are offered basic material to reflect upon. The diocesan offices will prepare study notes to assist this community enquiry. Attention: it is not a simple operation to pinpoint the spiritual sickness of our community! It cannot be done hastily, because it requires a deep interior liberty and a wise discernment enlightened by the Spirit.

1)

Allow me now to underline three spiritual diseases (I will take my inspiration from the last chapter of EG: "Spirit-filled evangelizers", that seem particularly dangerous to me for our ecclesial life. In the second part of this talk I shall propose some reflections on pastoral ministry to youth and on dialogue and collaboration with parents, for the purpose of setting in motion processes leading to carrying out some initiatives.

a. The Christian community is essentially a community of faith, which lives from the joy of meeting with the Risen One (EG 264-267), which is nourished by his Word and by friendship with Him, that perceives the beauty and responsibility of being his visible body in the world for the building up of the kingdom. Let us hold on tight to Christ and may the knowledge and the following of him be the heart of every pastoral program! This means that the community is not built upon the efficiency of its organizational machine, is not reduced to a space set aside for children and the aged, above all that it does not settle upon mundane logic of various types: narcissistic self celebration, sterile and ideological faithfulness to rites and customs, the defence of a protected and reassuring space removed from the problems of the world.... This is certainly not the Church of Jesus the Lord! Let us say it in the words of Pope Francis: enough of Pelagianism! This means: we have had enough of community paths in which we pretend to build up the Church by ourselves according to a logic that is wholly human. The Church becomes an infertile woman when it loses its contemplative gaze and ceases to make a truly spiritual reading, of faith, of what she is living and of what the men and women of her time are living. We must believe in the logic of the beatitudes: the more the Christian community makes itself small, poor, meek, the more it focuses on relationships (a family!) and not on structures, the more it becomes credible and lets the light of the Spirit pass through. A community that does not continually convert to the Lord by renewing discipleship is a community that will not go very far: in the end its members will implode because every single one of them will become attached to their role or their ideas. Right from the beginning, from the Christian initiation of babies and children to groups for the aged, there is a need to assure that the Gospel of Jesus stands at the heart of every Christian journey, with the methods suitable for each age. Obviously this goes also for adolescents and young people: we must not wait until they are at a different age in order to tell them about the Word of God, but it is necessary to combine the Gospel with their lives. By listening in depth to their troubles, the way in which they are challenged and see God in the wounds of their existence, will make it easier to understand that the Lord is already coming towards them, what he is saying to them, that through these experiences he wants to help them to grow.... Something similar is also being said to the parents or the children: at the heart of what we propose for them is the renewed proclamation of the Gospel, perhaps from the very rich angle of what it means to be fathers and mothers in Scripture and in Christian spirituality; it would really be to the point if we paused for some, though useful, advice on parental relationship!

b. Besides putting Christ at the centre, communities are invited to rediscover “the pleasure of being a people” (EG 268-274). The insistence of the Pope here is extremely healthy, it does us good, because it reminds us that in Christ we are bound one to another and that if we become divided, who will put us back together again. When we are separated from others, who are our brothers and sisters in the Christian community or from the inhabitants of our own quarter, it makes us grow ill. It is from contemplation of the Incarnation that we learn to make our own a different way of acting, that with which Jesus came close to people, sharing his life with authentic sympathy, entering into a deep relationship, burdening himself with the pains and difficulties of others. This is what the Pope calls a revolution of tenderness: a fully Gospel way of living relationships. We have had enough then with individualism and identity affirmation played “against someone”! The history of our parishes and our ecclesial communities in recent years has had its light and shade concerning this point. How much we have done together, what a wealth of charisms put into circulation, how beautiful were some initiatives that united us (I am thinking of the Jubilee and the mission to the city, of the Pentecost vigil we celebrated together in Saint Peter’s, and so many other things ....) It was not by chance I chose as a symbol of my episcopal ministry the pomegranate, since it represents service to the ecclesial community: the various seeds held together by the Lord.... On the other hand there are not a few situations in which it was preferred to entrench oneself, defend oneself; an ecclesial experience was made absolute to the detriment of others, we were looked at with distrust, perhaps to conclude that cohabitation was impossible. For example, the difficulty of working together in the prefecture was significant: it indicates not so much an organizational incapacity or a lack of time, but perhaps a widespread spiritual sickness. As for rapport with those who live in our quarters and with whom we would like to share the Gospel and build up a dialogue and a positive collaboration, let us recall the first two of the three underlying attitudes to which Pope Francis had called us in the 2016 Convention: Take off your sandals before the lives of others, because they are holy places; do not lock yourself up in the ghettos of our presumed perfections, despising and condemning people without appeal. We will return to the third attitude in a while.

c. A third consideration I would like to share with you concerns the spiritual sickness of those communities which are now defeatist with regard to the task of evangelization, understood both as proclamation of the Gospel and as collaboration in transforming the world into God’s kingdom. How many introverted communities there are, turned in on themselves, who have forgotten to be the yeast mixed into human history, who stand looking at the happenings in the world from the balcony of their own security! With time they shrivel up and end up saying or doing things as usual: a little bit of catechesis for the children, even some devotional practice, but we do not give witness to anything anymore to the people of our city! Deep down the sickness consists of a lack of faith in Easter, in the Risen Lord who is working also today by means of the Spirit in the world and in the hearts of persons! Enough of sterile pessimism! It is not possible for the Christian community to forget history and mankind. To give up searching for people, to give up being involved in their joys and hopes, their sadnesses and distress, is a form of practical atheism. People, in fact, already have a place in God’s heart and it is there we should look for them. In the weave of their exciting and painful, courageous and complicated lives is present and working the Spirit of the Risen One. The disciple of Jesus who sees in people and in the world just a pagan place, bereft of God’s presence, full of darkness and enemies, is a disciple who does not believe in the Resurrection which continues to work throughout history.

We will then verify the spiritual sicknesses! Also in the clergy sector meetings, the subject will be gone into deeply. Every parish community, in particular, will share with their own auxiliary Bishop the conclusions of their own reflections.

2)

And now we want to go back to Eutychus, a symbol of the youth of our city. The coming Synod of Bishops, as you know, will be devoted to reflecting on the challenge of youth pastoral work. The Papal Apostolic Exhortation that will follow will hand down to us precious contributions with which to challenge ourselves. But even now (as you have understood from the first part of this talk) we want to take the most important step, we want to place ourselves, as a diocesan Church, in a state of conversion in order to listen to the cry that rises up from the lives of young people (see the Pope's letter that accompanies the preparatory document for the Synod). It seemed to us that it was necessary from the outset to address those who have the main responsibility for their growth – their parents. The title of the Convention: "Do not leave them alone", suggests the attitude we can use to come close to them is one of collaboration and of service and not, certainly, of criticism and condemnation. I propose here some points which sum up the Pope's discourse and I throw in some proposals, gathered from the reports of the workshops and other contributions that have come to me in the meantime, with the intention, as I told you, of initiating processes.

a. Let's take a close look at Eutychus. Let us observe him, as the Pope told us, as someone coming from Rome and who is in motion. It is the incarnate love of God's Son which urges us not to look at young people in the abstract, as in the still useful sociological surveys, but at their actual faces, at the young people who live in the territory of our community. A pastoral ministry to young people who come from Rome signifies that we are called to meet them. Let us not speak about them, but with them. Then we would recognize their most beautiful and fragile faces, often most fragile, because defaced in a thousand ways from loneliness and dependence, from the arrogance and violence of those who use and abuse them. When they are gathered together, perhaps they seem to us a dangerous and impenetrable "pack"; but we know that that is just a facade, the manifestation of a deep frailty. The Lord wants us to meet them. I believe that this means reviving courageous pastoral ministry of presence in the territory and of dialogue. Many of you have emphasized the contact that can be brought about with adolescents by means of the world of the school, above all through the teachers of religion: with respect to the different roles and approaches (the religion teacher is not a catechist) it is already evident to all of us what an enormous potentiality is contained in creating a bridge between the parish community and the scholastic institute. I invite you to make contact with the school office, with Fr Filippo Morlacchi, so that he can relate to you the so many experiences that have been already realized in Rome with much fruit. It will also be necessary to upgrade another channel, that of presence in other places where young people spend their lives, especially in those at more risk for them. It is shocking the deviant situations in which many adolescents live, often in the ear-splitting silence of the adults and institutions, even our own. Children running berserk, nobody's children. In this sector also significant initiatives have been carried out, I am thinking of Fr Giovanni Carpentieri and the team collaborating with him and other situations present in our dioceses. What we are talking about then is setting off a permanent process of meeting and of listening, and to this we are all called: to become aware of how Eutychus lives, to speak with him, get him to tell us something about how he thinks about himself, his life, his falls, how he thinks about God and the Christian community, from which he has distanced himself.... I

invite you to do it, to read together these stories, even as a pastoral council, to reflect about these things and send your reflections to the Youth Pastoral Service. Listening could extend you and help you understand, as well, some of the parents, teachers and educators, workers in the area of minors. Teachers of religion could, in agreement with parish communities in the territory of the school, try to gather in classes the reflections of the youth and share them with the priests and the youth workers in prefecture meetings. An idea of this type should not be thought of as a dream, it doesn't serve to draw up statistical data, that serves only you: but an idea of this kind is a way by which the Christian community of the territory meets and starts to listen to the young people who live there and allows itself to be put in crises and to be encouraged by their expectations, criticism or appreciation, by the way in which they perceive God and Christian life. Pope Francis has then invited us to read with the "right kind of glasses" the age of the young people, as something in motion: it is not a pathology needing medical care but a precious stage of life for them and for their whole family. It is precious also for us, a Christian community: it urges us to get young again, to accept the challenge, to begin living the necessary transformations in order to evangelize the generation to come.

b. The whole Christian community is the subject that is called to be converted and to welcome the young people as a mother. How I would wish that we were fully convinced of this and could fully understand the consequences of this! We usually think that youth evangelization requires particular approach techniques, sophisticated training contributions, professional educators or "pastoral fireworks", without which nothing would be effective: and because they are not within our reach, we get discouraged right from the beginning. Those in the know and who get close to teenagers grasp that the youth have a fundamental need of adults they can refer to, of communities to which they can belong, communities who express towards them a paternal and maternal sensitivity and attention, without being paternalistic. They feel good that they are living in a weave of relationships that make them feel at home; free, because they are searching for their identity, but at home. Look how many young people get on well with their grandparents, who are "light years" away from them in mentality but by whom they feel particularly loved and left in a sort of free space (it is the parents who give them reproaches!) In fact, in the methods of evangelization and catechesis we ought to remember that not everything is mediated by communicating doctrinal content (of which, often, the youth remember hardly anything!), but that there exist other important educative factors: the welcome that makes them feel in a family, the sense of belonging that can grow to maturity in a group forming part of the Christian community (it is here I like to be!), the ecclesial witness to the Word that awakens faith and identity which flows from this belonging and this witness, composed of life as well as the human word; from this can be born the young Christian who is committed in the Church and in the world. So that this process of becoming a Christian can function, the attention is required of the whole Christian community (the "reliable company" that Pope Benedict spoke to us about): because if a child is welcomed by a smiling catechist but is immediately after shunned or shoved aside by a "child-eating" sacristan, all the effort is likely to be frustrated! In fact, I have the clear perception that our Christian communities lack nothing for being ready to relaunch a good youth ministry: they must "only" (between quotation marks) be converted to an attitude of greater attention and openness. Even the language suitable for the youth does not come out of roundtable meetings of educators, but from a community passionate for the Gospel and for young people: this community, you will see, knows how to find words to make themselves understood! To sustain this process of transformation of the Christian community, I suggest to you to dedicate one Sunday in

the month to Lectio divina (prayerful meditation together on Scripture) on the topic of being fathers and mothers of the faith, a Church which gives birth to new children by means of the Word: you could propose this biblical itinerary to the adults of the parish community, to catechists, to parents, to the fraternities of families. The theme of giving birth to the faith by narrating is very rich in Scripture. We will prepare material on this initiative. The Youth Pastoral Ministry Service, guided as you know, by Fr Antonio Magnotta, is aiming at supporting those working with the youth by offering them a formative way from the prefecture and itineraries for rediscovery of baptismal identity (this year on priestly duty). The university pastoral ministry (Mons. Leuzzi) is proposing this year a way of rediscovering the missionary discipleship in Mark's Gospel. Here I would like to emphasize an important point for the future of the youth pastoral ministry of the diocese: to appreciate the prefecture as the place where the Christian communities and the educators of adolescents and young people meet to think, plan, verify their activities; they are supported by training meetings, they make contact with the schools in the territory and with other educative agencies, set up a team of road operators, carry on the vocational dimension of youth ministry and even more. I don't think that this is just a utopian dream, but it is a concrete objective to work upon in the coming years. As regards vocation stimulation of the youth pastoral ministry, I point out the initiative of Fr Fabio Rossini called "The new road": it consists of monthly meetings for the youth, on the subject of wise discernment, carried out with the help of the respective parish priests, in four parishes, one for each of the cardinal points of our city: St Linus, St Bernadette, St Annunziata and Sts Simon and Jude Thaddeus. Besides, other initiatives will be promoted by the Pastoral Centre for Families, the Catechistic Centre, the Liturgical Centre, Caritas and C.O.R.

c. "Only if our old people have dreams, will our youth have visions", as Pope Francis has told us many times, quoting the prophet Joel. Only if Christian communities wake themselves up from their lethargy and begin to dream again, will they be capable of supporting the youth and encouraging them to have "visions" for today, for their life and for that of the actual situation in which they live. The wish to be protagonists, to respond to challenges, to experience enthusiasm and try out dizzying things, which the Pope spoke about, can today be expressed if they are put in contact with a community which, even though a little aged, has the desire to dream, because their dream is God's dream, a community which desires yet again to tell the story to the coming generation, the great story of the crucified love of the Lord. Within the positive weave of community relationships in which he feel welcomed and appreciated, the young Eutychus put in contact with God's dream for his life and the life of everyone, will not fall asleep but will feel his heart beating strongly, his head whirling, his hands itching to go. If we speak to the whole person of Eutychus, the Pope tells us, if we use all the educational levels (of thinking, loving, doing), our young man will regain the unity of his existence and he will invent "his own way" of believing, hoping, loving. The visions of young people, in fact, do not often coincide with the dreams of the aged, they are not the same thing: but the second are at the service of the first. The believing young people of today live faith in a personal manner, less normative and rigid, more autobiographical and less institutional; this is not relativism, but the normal process that happens when living faith passes from one generation to the next. Therefore, the old people should dream and allow the young people to work out their visions. From the believing testimony of those who have walked with the Lord can be born new ways of giving witness in the present time. Underlined in many of the workshops is the importance of intergenerational initiatives, and not just those of the same age, so that there can emerge to assist the youth the testimonies of important adults in the Christian community. Also to be valued is the



pastoral work of adolescents spread in many parishes where there is present the neocatechumenal way, where a family gives hospitality in their house and accompanies the development of life and faith of small groups of adolescents. Note also that there continue to spread, as well, the practice of entrusting a young person for spiritual accompaniment to a lay adult or to a family, so that they can orientate him or her in their fundamental choices. Also here, there is a process to start with conviction and a plan of work for the coming years!

d. Finally, a glance at the parents of the youngsters, who in reality are the central topic of this year's Convention. We do not want to leave them alone in their educational duty. Often we are able to involve parents of children in some parish meeting, but it is very rare that we can involve the parents of adolescents. Often this depends on the fact that they have fear of being criticized and held responsible for the intemperance and follies of their children: we must make them feel in its entirety, however, the whole of our closeness to them, our willingness to collaborate. Parents greatly appreciate the parish community when they manage to involve their children, especially if at home they experience that they are no longer taken into account by their children. Many of the initiatives pointed out in the workshops are truly very beautiful and I invite you to spread them and to assist them to circulate. The Service for pastoral ministry to youth will prepare various aids for organizing meeting between parents and animators for the adolescents, between parents and children. I would like, however, to emphasize two things: we will become credible to the parents if they hear us speaking not only about what their children are going through, but also about what they, the parents, are going through. I repeat: they must be able to feel our warmth, our empathy and through this, God's tenderness. Besides, it is very important that we speak to them about the beauty of generating new life, of being fathers and mothers as we find in the scriptures. There, in the pages of the bible, is a treasure that amazes, fascinates and motivates the task of education. I have also asked the Pope if he could give us something helpful for the time of Advent and Lent concerning simple suggestions for family prayer. It would be very beautiful if he could help us to recover this capacity of speaking about God and of praying to him in the home, which families had up until the preceding generation and is now lost, contributing to the rupture in transmitting the faith. The little domestic Church, which the family is, can rediscover in this way its own dignity and its vocation.

The Church is a family: the image is that of a domestic table, to which the Lord invites everyone to be seated, a table where there is a place for all because everyone may feel at home. This house belongs to the Trinity, it is the Trinity: God has prepared in himself a place for each one of us (Benedict XVI). Here on earth the Church is the sacrament of the maternal love of God, who invites everyone to the table of God's kingdom, to the banquet of the Word and the Eucharist: sinners, the poor, lame and blind, the old and the young.... Adolescents and their families, whom we spoke about in the June convention, have always been in God's heart: if this is so, then we are being asked to place ourselves in the service of the Lord who is searching for them, is calling them, inviting them to be seated at the table of the Word and the Eucharist, to feel at home there. When we think of children and their families, we ought to imagine them in this "place": in God's heart. It is there we ought to search for them.

Prayer for educators and parents of children

O Father,

we turn to you at the beginning of the year in which our community desires to dedicate itself in a renewed manner to serving the growth of their children and the youth.

We are aware that the future will pass beyond the way in which we have managed to render sensitive, strong and free the consciences of those who are now young.

We know that we cannot leave the new generations to themselves; nor can we leave parents, educators and teachers alone in carrying the responsibility of giving a meaning and an orientation to children's life.

All of us together as a community wish to take on the duty of giving to the children and the youth reasons for living and for hope; with them we want to believe in the future. In our lives we would like to manage to get them to reach out, to convince them that life is worth the pain that comes from living it and that, in the light of the Gospel and in the footsteps of your son Jesus, life will acquire a vastness of horizons, a fulness and an intensity that goes far beyond what we could ever desire.

We are aware of having contributed to preparing for them a society which loves things more than persons, that excludes the weak, that does not become indignant about injustice and no longer knows how to weep for the pain in others.

You know, Father, that adults are overwhelmed by fatigue, overcome by disillusion, and that life often appears to them more a burden than a blessing.

We know how many times we did not know how to direct the desires of the younger children along the right path, we did not know how to find the right word to communicate to them the beauty of life and of faith; at times we did not manage to recognize and welcome their urges towards good or we did not know how to respect and decipher their silences.

As disciples of your Son, we did not know how to make them see all the beauty of a life lived according to the Gospel.

Father, while we ask you to have mercy on our poverty, we invoke from you with even greater strength the gift of your Holy Spirit, without whom nothing is possible for us.

Upheld by you, we feel able to present to you our renewed commitment.

We desire to commit ourselves in a new way to the education of the new generations.

- We commit ourselves to feeling all our children and youth as our own children, and to listen to them in their need for life, love, fulfillment and joy;
- We commit ourselves to making them see, through our everyday life, how beautiful, good and joyful can be life that develops under your fatherly gaze and draws from the Gospel of Jesus;
- We commit ourselves to looking with special intent on the most fragile children, those who have been too little loved and who are at risk of no longer believing in anything;

- We commit ourselves to making sure that children and the youth are respected for their dignity and to keep for everyone that reserve of tenderness of which the society has great need.
- We commit ourselves to supporting families, to become every day allies of the parents in that educational duty which we feel also as our own;
- We commit ourselves to not pretending to young people that they are better than us, but together with them we want to give life to a fully human world;
- We commit ourselves to making a place for them in our community and society, aware that the youthfulness of the Church needs their presence, their thought, their heart and their newness.

We present our prayer to you Father through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Jesus and Mother of every woman and man. May she, who knew the beauty and effort of accompanying the young Jesus towards life, support our journey.           Amen

Translated from <http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?p=9023>