

In conversation with the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy

# Today's Priest: Man of the Gospel and Man of Dialogue

Journalist Darko Grden interviews Cardinal Lazzaro You Heung-sik

*Last year, Mgr. Lazzaro You Heung-sik, emeritus Archbishop of Daejeon, Korea, began work as the Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for the Clergy. During his visit to the archdiocesan seminary of Zagreb (Croatia) in early June 2022, the Catholic weekly, Glas Koncila published this interview with the Prefect. We re-print it here in a slightly abridged version and thank Glas Koncila for permission to share it here.*

*The Church in Croatia and of Zagreb is rather proud of the fact that news of Pope Francis' naming you a cardinal came during your trip here. What does this mean personally for you, for the Dicastery for the Clergy and also for the Church and people of Korea?*

When I heard the news the first thing I felt was that I was unworthy but I immediately said that I should accept this task as a call to serve all the priests of the world more fully. Then I thought that I should love the Church more, and especially, as his collaborator, the Pope.

Regarding Korea, I was surprised by the big reaction generated on social media there. Some said that in the midst of so much negative news circulating in our country, that at last we have some good news to give us a little consolation.

The President of the Republic even called me on the phone and I was struck by what he said, that now we must work together for the poor. This pleased me very much.

*Could you tell us something about the Dicastery for the Clergy, its principal tasks, its range of operation, its way of doing things and so on?*

It is a bit hard to spell out our work in a few words. I could say, to sum up, that the Dicastery is at the service of all the priests, deacons and seminarians in the world.

One thing our work is involved with is dispensations for priests who wish to or who are required to leave the priesthood. However, I would rather see the Dicastery as a laboratory that reflects on the kind of Church, the kind of priest, the kind of formation needed in today's Church. In this sense, our work is 'preventative.' It is a looking at the Church as the

Pope wants it to be today, a seeking and forming priests for this mission. If we're thinking of a Church of the past and to form priests to serve in *that* Church, it will be difficult for them when they finish their studies and become pastors. In my own formation and ministry, I've always had the icon of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples before my eyes. For me this is the image of the priest. Now, with the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis gives us another icon that does just as well, that of the good Samaritan. This is what the priest of today should be.

*It's less than a year since you were appointed Prefect. Could you tell us what guides your ministry? What are the Dicastery's most important tasks and what should it be developing?*

As I was saying, I think the Dicastery's principal task is the formation of future priests. Then it is also to support initiatives that encourage those already ordained so that they serve the people of God with joy. So the Dicastery should be involved in having priests who are happy. Wouldn't that be beautiful?

I would like to add that my nomination as Prefect is a further sign of the universality of the Church, expressed in the universality of the Roman Curia as well. This is a challenge, but also an enrichment.

*Let's speak of the Dicastery that used to be called the Congregation for the Clergy. In a few days there won't be congregations anymore, as we know, when the new apostolic constitution *Praedicate evangelium* will take effect. What will change for your Dicastery other than its name?*

Our role will be more or less the same as before. We should reinforce those dimensions already present in *Praedicate evangelium*: evangelization and charity. We should form priests who have these aspects close to their hearts: an outward evangelizing, always beginning with themselves, since we cannot evangelize if we are not trying to convert ourselves. It is a being ready to live charity, to serve, to be aware that evangelization is a fruit of charity and should be preceded by witness.

*When we speak of formation of clergy in recent years this has often generated a lot of negativity, sadly because of child abuse. There are attempts to combat the root causes so that this is never repeated and there is zero tolerance. In your opinion is there a danger of focusing too much on these aspects, leaving out the positive ones? Can we speak about the principal characteristics of a priest of the 21st century?*

I'm often asked this question. What is there to say? This problem causes me much suffering.

But we've also become very realistic. These priests have done great harm and we have to try to do everything possible from the disciplinary viewpoint, with the guidelines adopted by all the Churches for the protection of minors and the vulnerable, especially regarding the victims who have been neglected for too long.

However, as I have said, we must insist on preventative formation so that these cases should not happen again. Rather than a repressive system, what is needed is providing formation to a life more in conformity with the Gospel. It's the Word of God that forms the community. We shouldn't forget that there are also many wonderful and exemplary priests in the world. Indeed, we should bring out these heroic examples – good example is the best formation. Often there are problems because an adequate formation has been lacking. So we should

focus much more on a concrete living of the Word of God. Whoever lives the Word builds his house on the rock.

*A question about the identity of the priest. Over the last few years, including in the synodal process, there's been much talk about the responsibility of all the baptized for the Church. There has been the extension of lay ministries (lector, acolyte) and the catechist has been instituted as a stable ministry...So why should a young man become not only a layman active in the apostolate and a missionary, but a priest as well?*

The priest serves the community, because the community lives on the Eucharist, united in the Eucharist. Without a priest there would not be the Eucharist.

Regarding identity, I see a priest as father, son and brother. Father because he guides and teaches, but if he is only 'father' that places him above the others and falls into clericalism. The priest is also 'brother, because [he is] chosen from the community, from the family of the community. When a brother becomes a father, he never stops being a brother, even if he cannot be only the 'brother, since in communities there are different roles and tasks, and in a family there's also authority. Someone is also tasked with guiding. And a priest shouldn't forget he is always a 'son'. This is because he is born in the community to serve the community. He drank - and keeps drinking - the 'milk' of the Word as it is read in the community. This is the priest: father, brother and son in a community encompassed by the Word.

*In this context and in others, the celibate life is spoken of and at times questioned. Is the radicality of celibacy perhaps a strong sign of the uniqueness of the priestly vocation?*

Celibacy for me can only be understood from the viewpoint of faith. A small family can only be left for the sake of a bigger family. This is the priest's role: to give up a small family to dedicate all his time to the big family that is the Church. The first aim of the priest is to build the Church.

*Could you give a brief account of the Church in South Korea?*

Firstly I'm glad to say that the Korean Church was born from laypeople who began reading books on Christianity by Matteo Ricci, and immediately starting to live what he wrote.

Then they sent one of their number to Peking (Beijing) in China, where he was baptized and learned more about Christianity. Upon returning to Korea, he tried to practice what he had learned, such as that we are all brothers and sisters of the one Father. Along with this, they understood that polygamy didn't respect women and thus many women were sent away, but with adequate compensation so that they could live in a dignified manner.

After about a year of this Christian life, they tried to organize themselves, as they'd seen was done in China. They nominated their own hierarchy, choosing the wisest of the elders as a bishop and others as priests. They even celebrated the Eucharist and confessed to the priests they themselves had chosen. Isn't this interesting?

In the end, the bishop of Peking heard about this and put an end to it. Only after ten years did he send a priest. Then, 50 years after the first baptism, there came French missionaries. And then also a priest, Andrew Kim, was ordained.

But as this Christian life spread, it provoked great persecution because it went against Korean traditional principles like worship of the king. Within a hundred years, there were between 10,000 and 30,000 martyrs. It is hard to know an accurate number because many died of hardship, fleeing persecution and going to the mountains where they formed Christian villages and lived like the first Christians. They strived to love one another and it was a strong experience of lived charity. They all bore witness. Thus even under persecution the number of Christians increased.

*You come from Asia, where Catholics are normally a minority. Although a minority you are considered a very minority which is very much alive. How do you see Europe, Christianity, and the Church in Europe from an Asian perspective?*

I know Europe has Christian roots and it is based on Christianity. I hope Europeans can return to living the Gospel with all its values, including cultural and social ones. Otherwise, it's not up to me to judge.

*It's well known that there is a crisis of priestly vocations in the West. In your opinion is this only because of the process of secularization or is it due to reasons within the Church?*

As an Asian, I don't feel I should criticize the Church in the West. Secularization is a complex reality. What could I say? What's important for Christianity is to live the Gospel more.

*Let's go to a personal question. It's known that in your life, maybe even your priestly vocation, the Focolare Movement has played a big role. It's also known that many priestly vocations have come from ecclesial Movements or similar communities. Can this be a 'compass,' a sign of the times, for the future of the priesthood? If you agree, in what sense (since not all priests belong to a Movement or specific community)?*

After my baptism I left my family and entered the seminary but I didn't find the paradise that I expected there and was disappointed. I didn't know what to do or whether I should leave. But just in that same time period, three Focolarini came to our seminary to share their experience and gave many examples of living the Gospel. I, too, immediately began living the Word and although the situation didn't change, my eyes changed. My way of seeing things up until then changed.

The Church says we should live our own spirituality. In my opinion we should draw from a spirituality that can help the formation and life of a priest. I say this to bishops, too, when they come on *ad limina* visits. I've always seen that living the Word helps us grow in community life, too. In general – even with their different charisms – the new Movements and Communities emphasize living the Gospel. This aids formation and priestly life.

*Can we speak of varying 'continental' characteristics of the priesthood? For example, are there typical traits of Asian priests? Is this true of African or Latin American priests? Can we learn from one another?*

For the Asians, as priests of Jesus we are in a minority. It's very important to be able to dialogue with other religions and cultures. In the other continents too, each has their own characteristics. It's enough not to forget that the Gospel is more than a culture. We need to

evangelize the culture. For this we have to be open and able to dialogue with all. The priest has to be a man of dialogue.

**Interview by Darko Grden**  
*Glas Koncila (Zagreb)*