

## **What do the faithful expect from the priests of today?** *(Reactors: Ms Chintana Soonsawang and Mr. Chanvit Taratippyakul )*

Self introduction: (Chintana and Chanvit)

My name is Chintana. I live in a Focolare community in Bangkok.

My name is Chanvit, I am married with 1 son, 2 daughters, and 3 grandchildren. I was a public school teacher, and I am now retired. I have been active with the life in the parish and at the same time I am a committed member of the Focolare Movement.

### **(First Speaker)**

We are supposed to share on the topic: “What do the faithful expect from the priests of this present time?”. To begin with, we should have no expectations from anyone. We know well that no one is born a saint, no one is perfect. Besides, priests are persons loved by God in a special way and are called to a life of total self-giving, of sacrifice and they have responded to this call with generosity. They are precious instruments in the hands of God for the Church and for God’s Kingdom. Having said that, if we trust in one another, and if we love one another, we can become a gift to one another. In sincere dialogue we can help each other in fulfilling more and more what God expects from us, each according to his or her vocation.

To prepare for our reaction today, we have conducted a simple survey among some of our friends who are lay people coming from different social backgrounds and who are participating in the life of the parish. We would like to present to you what they shared in simple language. What they shared are some considerations or observations about the priest as a pastor on a personal level, his personal witness, and how he lives his vocation as a priest. The survey also share how priests relate to other people: to parishioners if he is a parish priest, and to seminarians if he is a formator. In short, this looks into the social dimension or the communitarian aspect of the priest’s ministry.

In both personal and communitarian dimensions, we need to capture the “signs of time” or what God wants from the priests NOW, TODAY. It is important that priests are constantly updated, in order to follow the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world.

It is easy to say this, but not so easy to keep up with the changing times. First of all, we are all conditioned by our traditions (and the Church has a very long and rich tradition). There is a natural tendency to conserve and be on the safe side. Another factor that conditions us is our own culture. Each culture has its positive values as well as some practices to which we are expected to conform. Ultimately, what counts most is the individual personality

that is formed in the course of time and which may or may not be easily open to new challenges.

Here we can already draw one conclusion: while we talk of our expectations of priests today, we see the utmost importance of seminary formation. The future priests should be trained not just to conform to a set of rules and regulations, but they should be trained in being open to the Holy Spirit and to the needs of the ever-changing world in order to be effective servants in their future ministry, in their work of evangelization.

There are two phrases (among many others) of Pope Francis that can be taken as key words for priests today: **GO OUT and TAKE RISKS**. These two phrases remind us of the words of Saint John Paul II on the New Evangelization: **new expressions, new ways and new ardor**. Priests are urged by Pope Francis to go out of the “maintenance mode” or the so-called “comfort zone” in order to undertake new initiatives, new approaches to reach their “flock”!

We thank God for His immense gift to the Church today in the person of Pope Francis, with his personal witness, his words of wisdom and his challenges! We feel that, besides many wonderful things that he has said in various occasions, his exhortation letter “*Evangelii Gaudium*” is a masterpiece that we can define as “What the Church is expecting from the priests and from all of us”! Reading what the Pope wrote in the letter, we see clearly that he has the charism of St. Peter to turn the direction of the Church in order for her to be decisively “pastoral”. This, we feel, is what the Church needs today. All expectations may fall into just one: Priests would be appreciated if they, while rooted in the Church doctrines, are basically “pastoral”, bearers of God’s merciful love.

### **(Second Speaker)**

Now we present to you what some of our friends have shared with us, though not in any particular order. Obviously, these observations are specific and therefore cannot be generalized.

1 One of the expectations by the faithful is that priests should be living witnesses of the Gospel, good examples in every aspect of their daily life. They should teach more, by example, how the faithful should grow in their relationship with God.

Our present society lacks good models. Priests should, first of all, be good models for their faithful. In a materialistic society, the faithful wish that the priests live a simple and modest life, giving no importance to social status even if our culture gives excessive reverence to the priesthood. Pope Francis is setting an unprecedented example. Due to cultural constraints, it would be easier for priests to bridge the gap and let the faithful feel that all are brothers and sisters of the same Father.

2 Sometimes it seems that there is too much theory and abstract talk in the sermons that tend to be rather long and do not offer practical or down-to-earth applications to life. Sermons should help a person find better ways to deepen one's Christian spirituality and apply it in all levels of life. Through his sermons, the priest should make Christian-living appealing and at the same time relevant. Some sermons do not seem to reach the heart of the faithful. Instead, some create a wider gap between the faithful and the Church.

In this regard, it is highly suggested that priests take note of what Pope Francis wrote about giving sermons in his apostolic letter "Evangelii Gaudium".

3 In some parishes the pastoral programs do not seem to be properly organized. They need further planning and more "team work" between the priest and the faithful. Maybe it would help if the priest give more space and delegate more responsibility to the laity in proclaiming the Word of Jesus within their parish and beyond.

4 Someone said that the priest should take care of the sheep (the parishioners) in an equal way, and in a paternal and fraternal manner. He avoids whatever smacks of favoritism or partiality to some people or certain groups within the parish community.

5 Others wish to be able to reach the priest more easily, without going through so many protocols, while respecting the priest's work and privacy.

6 There is the impression, in some churches, that the youth are being neglected maybe due to their indifference towards the Church or because of the generation gap between the priest and the youth. We should find new ways to approach and attract the youth. Maybe the pastoral methods or activities need updating in order to be in tune with what the youth need today. Equally important is the pastoral care for the families, especially after the recently concluded Synod of Bishops which has highlighted numerous family problems and difficult situations which we also find in our society.

7 For such a 'new openness' or out-reach approach, the parish should invite knowledgeable or skillful parishioners (youth and adults alike) to participate in the formulation of pastoral programs, making activities more appealing to the youth or even to adults. These 'knowledgeable' parishioners can be also more active in teaching Catechism which needs a 'brush up' and new commitment from the Church leaders and laity.

8 There should be more emphasis on building 'living community or living parishes' which could give convincing witness and have more influence on the surrounding society. One common suggestion is that the diocesan priests should have a more 'community base' life. As much as possible they should not live alone, but in community with other priests. Quite often priests are handling parishes alone by themselves. A community of priests

would certainly give more effective witness to the faithful and to the surrounding environment as well.

9 We should not be ‘Christians of the Sunday mass’ only; we need the help of priests to apply the Gospel in our daily life, be it in our families, work places and in all environments of the society by being true witnesses of Jesus and his message. Pope Francis wants a “poor church for the poor” and wants us to go to the “peripheries to serve”. It is important that Catholic communities (parishes, movements, and organizations) should promote social initiatives and go to the less fortunate, the least of our brothers, in a genuine spirit of service.

10 A common assignment for Thai priests is the management of Catholic schools. If priests are needed in the administration of the Catholic schools, they should not take administrative or executive positions for too long. Better still if they would not take those positions which carry the danger of getting attached to the prestige and the power that the position offers. It is a common wish that priests should focus on the pastoral work, and the moral and spiritual formation of the students rather than school administration. They should try to raise the moral standard among the teachers as well as the staff (who may not be Christians) so as to create a “sound and healthy environment” befitting of a Catholic institution.

Schools are highly competitive in Thailand (due to the decrease of the number of children, and since parents are more likely to send their children to public schools). In this difficult situation, running the school is taking up too much of the priests’ time. Quite a few people mentioned that they would like priests to be more oriented to spiritual and pastoral formation, to care more for the souls rather than for other things, and reach out more to the faithful with a missionary spirit.

**(First Speaker)**

11 The rapid change in technology is bringing people closer to each other. Not all priests are up-to-date in exploiting these modern ways that can be useful to keep in touch with other priests or parishioners. These can help promote a network of relationships that will increase the sense of belonging to the Church as a family. Social media, though, has its negative side. Priests are in a good position to help particularly the youth not to be addicted to it, to help them be aware of “the use and the abuse” of these modern gadgets in particular and the dangers of consumerism in general.

12 Be creative in coming up with initiatives that can promote communion and sense of belonging. One simple example, already practiced in various communities, is that of gathering together after the Mass for a cup of coffee or just to get to know each other and share a conversation. The parish priest has an important role in transforming the parish

community into a family, where parishioners feel welcome and at home whenever they come for Mass or for other liturgical services.

13 Some people would like their priests to update them regarding what is going on in the parish. This could also strengthen the bond in the community by letting all know what is happening in the parish. Over and above this, priests are expected to update them, in the most appropriate moment and in a simple language, the life of the universal Church, the news of the Pope, of what he says...

14 It is felt sometimes that when priests need to collaborate with nuns, ecclesial movements, or parishioners there is a kind of hierarchical or vertical relationship where the 'instructions' come only from above. Maybe the better kind of collaboration could be more of a same-level relationship where all work as a team.

15 For priests in Asia, due to its religious and cultural context, there should be a greater openness and concrete collaboration with the followers of other religions. The topics of interreligious dialogue and inculturation are the top priorities that call for the attention of the Church in our Continent. This is true for priests and the laity alike.

16 Just a few words for the priest formators working in seminaries. The seminary should be a "school and home of communion" (as Saint John Paul II called it). It begins with the communion among formators themselves who will encourage the reality of "Church as communion" among the seminarians. To keep up with the ever changing society, the formation curriculum may need revision, taking into account the novelties that Pope Francis has introduced to the Church.

To conclude, we would like to paraphrase a well-known sentence: "Ask not what the Church and the priests can do for you, but what you can do for them".

Thank you very much for your kind listening!