



## “Fridays of Mercy”: Meeting with priests who have left their priestly ministry

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With the same secrecy with which he has acted in all of his previous “Fridays of Mercy”, today, as well, Pope Francis arrived for as a surprise for an unexpected visit. At 15:30 he left the Casa Santa Marta to go to Ponte di Nona, a neighborhood in the very outskirts of eastern Rome, where, in the middle of large apartment buildings, the only attraction is the big shopping mall. In one of these apartments, the Pope met with 7 families. The novelty of this gesture is that the families are all those of young men who have left the priesthood over the past years. Pope Francis intended to offer a sign of nearness and affection to these young men who have made a choice often not shared by their brother priests or others close to them. After a number of years dedicated to priestly ministry in parishes, the solitude, lack of understanding, and fatigue about the huge task of their pastoral responsibilities brought a crisis to their original choice for priesthood. Then followed months and years of uncertainty and doubts that frequently brought them to think that they had made a mistake in entering the priesthood. From there came the choice to leave the priesthood and begin a family.

This story remains a problematic chapter in the life of the Church, because it often emarginates the one who makes these choices; moreover the age at which they are made does not permit the man to find another work easily, which in not a few cases results in an instability in their lives.

Pope Francis, therefore, met with these young men: four are from the Diocese of Rome, where they had been pastors of various parishes in the city; one from Madrid and another from Latin America now live in Rome; while the last is from Sicily. The entrance of the Holy Father into the apartment was marked by great enthusiasm: the children were gathered around Pope Francis to hug him, while their parents could not hold back their emotion. The gesture was greatly appreciated by all of them, who experienced from the Pope not a judgment about their choice, but his nearness and the affection of his presence. The time passed quickly: the Pope listened to their stories, and he followed with attention the considerations offered regarding the developments of the juridic proceedings of the individual cases. His paternal words reassured everyone of his friendship and the certainty of his personal interest. In this way, once again, Pope Francis has intuited how to give a sign of mercy to someone in spiritual and material need, drawing attention to this necessity so that no one may feel deprived of love and the solidarity of his or her Pastors.

