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To the pilgrimage of the poor of Lyon: you are at the heart of the Church, as Jesus always gave priority to those who suffer

Vatican City, 6 July 2016 – "Your presence is very important for me, and it is also important that you are at home here", said Pope Francis this morning in the Paul VI Hall, greeting the participants in the Pilgrimage of the Poor of the French diocese of Lyon, accompanied by their bishop, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin. "Whatever your condition or history may be, whatever burden you carry, it is Jesus Who gathers us around Him. If there is something that Jesus has, it is precisely this capacity for welcoming ... each person as he is. In Him we are brothers, and I would like you to feel how welcome you are. ... With those who accompany you, you offer beautiful witness of evangelical fraternity in this journeying together in pilgrimage. Indeed, you have come here accompanying each other. You help each other generously, by offering resources and time to enable you to come, and you by giving them, giving us, giving me, Jesus Himself".

"Jesus wanted to share in our condition, and out of love made Himself one of you; despised by men, forgotten, one who did not count. When you feel all of this", he added, clearly moved, "do not forget that Jesus too felt like you. It is the proof that you are precious in His eyes, and that He is close to you. You are in the heart of the Church ... since Jesus, in His life, always gave priority to people who were like you, who lived in similar situations. And the Church, who loves and prefers what Jesus loved and favoured, cannot rest until she has reached out to all those who experience denial and exclusion, and who do not count for anyone. In the heart of the Church, you enable us to encounter Jesus, because you speak to us of Him not so much with words, but with all your life. And you bear witness to the importance of small gestures, within reach of everyone, that contribute to building peace, reminding us that we are brothers, and that God is Father of us all".

The Pope told the pilgrims that he tried to imagine what people must have thought when they saw Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the street, fleeing to Egypt. "They were poor, they were afflicted by persecution: but there, there was God". He went on to thank again those who accompanied the poor on their pilgrimage, faithful to the intuition of the French priest Fr. Joseph Wresinski (1918-1988), founder of the International Movement ATD – Fourth World, committed to combating illiteracy, who believed in the primacy of shared life rather than abstract theories. "Abstract theories lead us to ideologies, and ideologies lead us to deny that God made Himself flesh, one of us. It is life shared with the poor that transforms us and converts us. Remember this! Not only do you go towards them – and also towards those who are ashamed and hide themselves – not only do you journey with them, endeavouring to understand their suffering, to enter into their state of mind, but you also seek to enter into

their desperation. In addition, you inspire a community around them, restoring to them an existence, identity, dignity. And the Year of Mercy is an occasion to rediscover and live this dimension of solidarity, fraternity, help and mutual support".

"I ask you to conserve the courage and, in the midst of your anguish, to conserve the joy of hope. That flame that abides in you must not be spent. Because we believe in a God Who amends all injustices, Who consoles all suffering and knows how to recompense those Who maintain their trust in Him. As we await that day of peace and light, your contribution is essential for the Church and for the world: you are witnesses of Christ, intercessors before God, Who hears your prayers in a special way".

At the end of his address, Pope Francis added that the pilgrims had asked him to remind the Church in France that Jesus suffers at the door of our churches if the poor are not there, and quoted the Roman deacon St. Lawrence, who said that the poor are the treasure of the Church. Finally, he asked "a favour, or rather a mission", of the poor of Lyon.

"A mission that only you, in your poverty, are able to fulfil", he continued. "I will explain: Jesus was very severe at times, and strongly reproached those who did not welcome the Father's message. And so, just as He said that beautiful word 'blessed' to the poor, the hungry, to those who weep, to those who are despised and persecuted, He said another that strikes fear: 'Woe' to the rich, the wise, to those who laugh now, to those who like to be adulated, to the hypocrites. I give you the mission of praying for them, so that the Lord may change their heart. I ask you also to pray for those who are responsible for your poverty, so that they convert! Pray for the many rich who ... feast without being aware of Lazarus at their door, seeking to quell his hunger with the crumbs from the rich man's table. Pray also for priests, for the Levites, who, seeing the man beaten half to death, walk on by, looking the other way, because they have no compassion. To all these people, and certainly also to the many others who are linked negatively to your poverty and with many sufferings: smile at them from your heart, wish well to them and ask Jesus to convert them. And I assure you that, if you do this, there will be great joy in the Church, in your heart, and in beloved France".

The Holy Father concluded by commending the pilgrims to the protection of the Mother of Jesus, and of St. Joseph, and by reciting the Lord's Prayer with them.
