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Introductory address of the Holy Father at the opening of the 70th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference

Greeting of the Holy Father

Holy Father's Address

At 16.30 this afternoon, in the New Synod Hall, the Holy Father Francis opened 70th Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (C.E.I.), taking place in the Vatican from today until 25 May.

After the initial prayer and the greeting to the Assembly at the beginning of its session, the Pope gave a long address to the Italian bishops.

At the end of the meeting, at 18.45, the Holy Father handed the prepared text to those present.

The following is the greeting with which the Pope introduced the works and his prepared text:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Pope Francis:

Good evening, brothers and sisters.

Thank you for the words the Cardinal President addressed to me. I would like to thank him for these ten years of service in the presidency, and also for the patience he has had with me, because it is not easy to work with this Pope. And he has had a lot of patience, and I thank him very much. He came with a plan, and left with another:

that is how it is. But in this job, I can say that we wish each other well and have made a good friendship. I have only one fear: how much will he make me pay next Saturday to enter Genoa?

Cardinal Bagnasco:

Sure! Sure! [laughter, applause]. Prepare yourself...

Pope Francis:

The Genoese don't give...

Cardinal Bagnasco:

...discounts, nothing! [laughter]

Pope Francis:

Very good. Many thanks, Eminence, and also to all those who have collaborated with you in these ten years. But, as you are so accustomed, passing from one presidency to the other, now... but it will be easier [reference to the presidencies of the Council of European Episcopal Councils].

Cardinal Bagnasco:

I think so...

Pope Francis:

It will be easier. I have written something I wanted to tell you, but then reading it, rereading it, I have seen that it was more of a meditation than an introduction. And it seemed useful to me to leave it to you to take it away, to read it and reflect on it. It is a service. At the end of today's session, they will give you the text and each one of you can take it away, read it, reread it... I have written it only with the wish to help the Conference to go ahead, and in this way bear more fruit. My idea is to engage in dialogue, in sincere dialogue as we did the other time, which worked very well, and was good for me, asking things clearly without fear. Because when there is no dialogue, when the person who presides does not permit dialogue, it sows gossip, which is worse: this is worse. Let us engage in dialogue among ourselves. For my part, I am willing also to listen to opinions that are not agreeable to me, but with full freedom, with full freedom. Because, according to the most beautiful definition, the Pope is the servant of the servants of God. And this is what I must do today, responding to your questions, to your concerns and engaging in dialogue. Eminence, how long do we have?

Cardinal Bagnasco:

Until 7.

Pope Francis:

Until 7, good. Will we finish? If there is nothing to say, we will finish earlier [laughter]. Thank you to all those who collaborate, journalists, secretaries, everyone, all of you, for this help; I welcome those who have been appointed or ordained between the last assembly and today, the "new" people. The last one ordained in the previous one was Accrocca; who was the last one ordained in this one? The last one to have been consecrated, who was it? [Msgr. Guglielmo Giombaco, bishop of Patti]. Welcome!

And now, solemnly, *extra omnes!* [laughter, applause]

Holy Father's Address

Dear brothers,

In these days, while I prepared for the meeting with you, several times I found myself invoking the "visit" of the Holy Spirit, of He Who is the gentle persuader of the inner man. Truly, without His strength, "there is nothing in man, nothing that is not harmful", and all our efforts are in vain; if his "most blessed light" does not invade us profoundly, we remain prisoners of our fears, incapable of recognizing that we are saved only by love: what is in us that is not love distances us from the living God and from His Holy People.

"Come, Holy Spirit, send forth the heavenly radiance of Your light. ... Give to your faithful, those who trust in You, the sevenfold gifts".

The first of these gifts is already present in the *convenire in unum*, the willingness to share time, listening, creativity and consolation. I hope these days will be characterized by open, humble and frank exchange. Do not fear moments of opposition: entrust yourselves to the Spirit, Who opens to diversity and reconciles difference in fraternal charity.

Live episcopal collegiality, enriched by the experience each person bears, and which draws upon the tears and joys of your particular Churches. To walk together is the *constitutive way* of the Church; the *figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the *condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time.

The breath and the pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions. Only from this perspective can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today's world; only in this way can we address the complexity of this time, thankful for the journey accomplished thus far, and determined to continue it with *parrhesia*.

In reality, this path is marked also by closures and resistances: our infidelities are a heavy debt on the credibility of the testimony of the *depositum fidei*, a far worse threat than that which comes from the world with its persecutions. This awareness helps us to recognize that we are recipients of the *Letters to the Churches* that begin Revelation (1:4-3:22), the great book of Christian hope. Let us ask for the grace to be able to listen to what the Spirit says to the Churches today; let us receive the prophetic message to understand what He wants to nurture in us: *"Come, Father of the poor; come, giver of gifts; come, light of the heart"*.

Like the *Church of Ephesus*, perhaps at times we have abandoned the love, the freshness and the enthusiasm of previous times. Let us return to the origins, to the founding grace of the beginnings; let us allow ourselves to be looked at by Jesus Christ, the "Yes" of the faithful God, the *unum necessarium*: "May this Assembly of ours gathered here not shine with any other light than that of Christ, Who is the Light of the world; may our minds not seek another truth but the word of the Lord, Who is our only Teacher; let us not be concerned with anything other than to obey His precepts with faithful submission in everything; may no other trust sustain us than that which corroborates our feeble weakness, so that it is founded on His words: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20)" (Paul VI, *Address for the Opening of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council*, 29 September 1963).

Like the *Church of Smyrna*, in moments of trial perhaps we are also victims of fatigue, of solitude, of worry for the future; we are troubled to realize that the God of Jesus Christ might not correspond to the image and the expectations of the "religious" man: He disappoints, overwhelms, scandalizes. If we keep our trust in God's surprising initiative, the strength of patience and the fidelity of Confessors: we do not have to fear the second

death.

Like the *Church of Pergamum*, perhaps we also seek sometimes to make the faith coexist with spiritual worldliness, the life of the Gospel with logics of power and success, presented forcedly as functionalities of the social image of the Church. The attempt to serve two masters is, rather, a sign of the lack of inner convictions. Let us learn to renounce pointless ambitions and self-obsession in order to live constantly under the gaze of the Lord, present in so many humiliated brothers: in this way we will find the Truth that truly sets us free.

Like the *Church of Thyatira* we are perhaps exposed to the temptation to reduce Christianity to a series of principles without concreteness. We thus fall into a disincarnate spiritualism, which neglects reality and makes us lose the tenderness of a brother's flesh. Let us return to what truly counts: faith, love of the Lord, service rendered with joy and gratuitousness. Let us adopt Jesus' sentiments and gestures, and we will truly enter into communion with Him, the morning star Who never sets.

Like the *Church of Sardis*, we can perhaps be seduced by external appearance and by opportunism, conditioned by the fashions and judgements of others. Christian difference, instead, speaks of the welcome of the Gospel with works, concrete obedience, lived faith; with resistance to the arrogant, the proud and the prevaricator; with friendship to the small and sharing with the needy. Let us be called into question by charity, let us cherish the wisdom of the poor, promoting their inclusion; and by mercy, we will again find ourselves participants in the book of life.

Like the *Church of Philadelphia*, we are called to perseverance, to throw ourselves into reality without timidity: the Kingdom is the precious stone for which we sell all the rest without hesitation and open ourselves fully to the gift and the mission. Let us enter with courage through every door that the Lord opens before us. Let us make the most of every occasion to be near. Even the best leaven is inedible by itself, whereas in its humility it can ferment a great quantity of flour; let us mingle in the city of men, let us collaborate actively to encounter different cultural riches, let us strive together for the common good of each and all. We will again become citizens of the New Jerusalem.

Like the *Church of Laodicea*, we perhaps know the lukewarm nature of our commitment, the calculated indecision, the snare of ambiguity. We know that it is precisely these attitudes that receive the severest condemnation. Indeed as a witness of the twentieth century reminds us, cheap grace is the mortal enemy of the Church: it ignores the living word of God and precludes the way to Christ. The true grace – that cost the life of the Son – cannot but be but at a dear cost: because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ, because it costs man the price of life, because it condemns sin and justifies the sinner, because it does not dispense from work ... It is a dear price, but it is grace that gives life and leads us to live in the world without being lost in it (cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Sequela*). Let us open our heart to the knocking of the eternal Pilgrim: let us allow Him to enter, let us dine with Him. We will depart once more, to arrive everywhere with a proclamation of justice, fraternity and peace.

Dear Brothers, the Lord never seeks to depress us, so let us not linger on reproaches, which in any case are born of love (cf. Revelation 3:19) and lead to love. Let us allow ourselves to be roused, purified and consoled: "Cleanse that which is unclean, water that which is dry, heal that which is wounded. Bend that which is inflexible, fire that which is chilled, correct what goes astray".

It takes boldness to avoid getting used to situations that are so deeply rooted as to seem normal or insurmountable. Prophecy does not exact wrenches but courageous choices, proper for a true ecclesial community: they lead us to allow ourselves to be "troubled" by events and persons and to enter into human situations, animated by the healing spirit of the Beatitudes. On this path we will be able to reshape our proclamation, which radiates first of all with charity. Let us move with the confidence of one who also knows that this time is a *kaïros*, a time of grace inhabited by the Spirit of the Risen One: we bear the responsibility of recognizing Him, receiving Him and to following Him obediently.

"Come, Holy Spirit. Greatest comforter, sweet guest of the soul, sweet consolation".

Dear Brothers, “placed to feed the Church of God” (Acts 20:28), participants in the mission of the Good Shepherd: may no-one be invisible or marginal in your eyes. Reach out to every person with the solicitude and compassion of the merciful Father, with a strong and generous spirit. Take care to perceive as yours the good and the evil of the other, and be capable of offering life itself gratuitously and tenderly. May this be your vocation because, as Saint Therese of the Child Jesus wrote, “love alone makes the members of the Church act: if love was extinguished, the Apostles would no longer proclaim the Gospel, the martyrs would refuse to shed their blood...”.

In this light, I also thank on your behalf Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco for his ten years of presidency of the Italian Episcopal Conference. Thank you for your humble and shared service, not without personal sacrifice, in a moment of a not easy transition in the Church and in the country. May the election and subsequent appointment of his successor also be none other than a sign of love of Holy Mother Church, a love lived with spiritual and pastoral discernment, in accordance with a synthesis that itself is also a gift of the Spirit.

And pray for me, called to be custodian, witness and guarantor of the faith and of the unity of the whole Church: *with* you and *for* you, may I accomplish this mission with gladness to the end.

“Come, Holy Spirit. Grant the reward of virtue, grant the deliverance of salvation, grant eternal joy”.
