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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to Cesena on the third centenary of the birth of Pope Pius VI, and Bologna for the conclusion of the diocesan Eucharistic Congress – Meeting with staff and migrants hosted by the Regional Hub of Bologna

At 10.30, the helicopter carrying the Holy Father landed in Bologna in the car park of the Chieti Savings Bank. Upon arrival the Holy Father was welcomed by H.E. Msgr. Matteo Maria Zuppi, archbishop of Bologna, the Hon. Stefano Bonaccini, president of the Emilia Romagna region, Matteo Piantedosi, prefect of Bologna, and Virginia Merola, mayor of Bologna.

At 10.40, the Pope arrived at the Regional Hub for the encounter with migrants hosted there and the staff who provide the service of assistance. The Holy Father was welcomed by the approximately one thousand migrants staying at the centre, whom he greeted, touring the square on foot before arriving at the platform provided for the encounter.

The following is the Holy Father's greeting to those present:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I greet you all cordially and I wish to assure you of my closeness. I wanted my first meeting in Bologna to be right here. This is the “door” of arrival for those who come from far away and with sacrifices that at times you are not even able to recount.

Many do not know you, and are afraid. This makes them feel as if they have the right to judge and to be able to do so harshly and coldly, believing also that they see well. But it is not so. One sees well only with the closeness that mercy gives. Without this, the other remains a stranger, even an enemy, and cannot become my neighbour. From far away we can say and think anything, as easily occurs when one writes terrible insults and phrases via the Internet. If we look at our neighbour without mercy, we are not aware of his suffering, his problems. And if we

look at our neighbour without mercy, we risk that God will look at us too without mercy. Today I see only a great desire for friendship and for help. I would like to thank the institutions and all the volunteers for their attention and efforts in caring for those of you who are guests here. In you I see, as in any stranger who knocks on our door, Jesus Christ, who is identified with the foreigner of every age and condition, welcomed or turned away (cf *Mt 25, 35: 43*).

The phenomenon requires vision and great determination in management, intelligence and structures, clear mechanisms that do not permit distortions or exploitation, even more unacceptable when they involve the poor. I believe it is truly necessary for a greater number of countries to adopt programmes for private and community support, and open up humanitarian corridors for refugees in the most difficult situations, to avoid unacceptable waits and wasted time that may cause disappointment. Integration begins with knowledge. Contact with the other leads to discovering the “secret” that each person carries inside, and also the gift it represents; to opening up to him to welcome valid aspects, learning to wish him well and conquering fear, helping him to integrate in the new community that welcomes him. Each one of you has his or her own story, said the lady who accompanied me. And this story is something sacred: we must respect it, accept it, welcome it and help in moving ahead. Some of you are minors: these boys and girls have a special need for tenderness and have the right to protection, which involves programmes of temporary guardianship and fostering.

I come among you because I want to carry your eyes in mine – I have looked into your eyes –, your heart in mine. I want to carry with me your faces that ask to be remembered, helped, I would say “adopted”, because in the end you are seeking someone who counts on you, who trusts you, who helps you to find that future, whose hope brought you here.

Do you know what you are? You are “fighters of hope”. Some did not arrive because they were swallowed up by the desert or by the sea. Men do not remember, but God knows their names and welcomes them beside Him. Let us all spend a moment in silence, remembering and praying for them. [Silence]. To you, fighters of hope, it is my wish that hope not become disappointment or, worse, desperation, thanks to the many who help you not to lose it. In my heart I want to carry your fear, the difficulties, the risks, the uncertainty – also the many things written, “Help us to get our documents”, the people you love, who are dear to you and for whom you decided to seek a future. Holding you in our eyes and in our heart will help us to work more for a welcoming city, able to generate opportunities for all. Therefore, I urge you to be open to the culture of this city, ready to walk the way indicated by the laws of this country.

The Church is a mother who does not discriminate and who loves every man as a son of God, His image. Bologna is a city that has always been well known for its welcome. This has been renewed by many experiences of solidarity and hospitality in parishes and religious environments, but also in many families and in the various social campaigns. Some have found a new brother to help or a new child to raise. Some have found new parents who desire, with him, a better future. How I would like these experience, possible for all, to multiply! May the city not be afraid of giving its five loaves and two fishes: Providence will intervene and all will be sated.

Bologna was the first city in Europe, around 760 years ago, to free servants from slavery. There were exactly 5855 of them. Very many. Yet Bologna was not afraid. They were redeemed by the Municipality, that is, by the city. Perhaps they did so also for economic reasons, because freedom helps and benefits everyone. They were not afraid of welcoming those who were then considered to be “non-people”, and to acknowledge them as human beings. They wrote all their names in a book! How I would like it if your names too were written and remembered, to find together, as was the case then, a common future.

I thank you, and bless you heartily. And please, pray for me.
