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Audience with a group of faithful from Sri Lanka

At 11.35 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a group of faithful from Sri Lanka, including members of the Organising Committee for his pastoral visit in January 2015.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends,

I am pleased to welcome members of the Organizing Committee for my Pastoral Visit to Sri Lanka back in January 2015. I greet each of you, together with your spouses who have come on this pilgrimage. As you welcomed me to your land, and planned my visit so carefully, also in cooperation with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, so now I gladly welcome you here; and even though I would like our visitors to feel at home, I cannot quite equal the forty elephants that greeted me on the road from the airport to Colombo...!

The possibility of visiting your country was a special grace for me, at a moment when, after years of strife and suffering, the nation was striving for reconciliation and healing. I was deeply moved by the great number of Sri Lankans, united across religions and cultures, who came out to greet me at the airport and along the road to Colombo. I was struck also by the moving and beautiful celebration of the canonisation of Saint Joseph Vaz, the great missionary to the Pearl of the Indian Ocean, surely the high point of our time together, as well as by the vast crowds that gathered prayerfully around the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, symbol of refuge and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Looking back with gratitude on my Visit, I thank you in a special way for all your hard work, often unseen and at a great cost in time and energy, that made my Visit so fruitful. I thank your families too, who made many sacrifices and encouraged you in your work. Your presence here today has brought something of Sri Lanka's

fragrant air to our house, and so reminds us of the many divine graces we experienced together in your country.

Entrusting Sri Lanka's people and her leaders to the intercession of Our Lady of Madhu, I willingly invoke God's blessing upon you, your families and all who cooperated with you in the planning of this Visit, as a pledge of peace and strength in the Lord.
