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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to Pietrelcina and to San Giovanni Rotondo, on the occasion of the centenary of the apparition of the permanent stigmata and the 50th anniversary of the death of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (17 March 2018) (I)

At 7.00 this morning the Holy Father Francis left by helicopter from the Vatican heliport destined for Pietrelcina, in the diocese of Benevento, and to San Giovanni Rotondo, in the diocese of Manfredonia-Vieste-San Giovanni Rotondo, on the centenary of the apparition of the permanent stigmata and the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina.

Upon arrival, at around 8.00, in the square adjacent to the Liturgical Hall of Piana Romana, the Pope was received by the archbishop of Benevento, H.E. Msgr. Felice Accrocca, and by the mayor of Pietrelcina, Mr. Domenico Masone.

The Holy Father paused briefly in prayer in the Saint Francis Chapel before the *elm of the stigmata*. Then, at 8.15, in the square in front of the Liturgical Hall, the Pope met with the faithful.

After greetings from the archbishop, Pope Francis gave his address.

At the end, the Holy Father greeted the Capuchin Community and a representation of faithful.

Then, at around 9.00, he left from Piana Romana to transfer to San Giovanni Rotondo.

The following is the Pope's address to the faithful:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am glad to be in this town, where Francesco Forgione was born and began his long and fruitful human and spiritual life. In this community he tempered his humanity, he learned to pray and to recognize in the poor the flesh of the Lord, so that he grew in following Christ and requested to be admitted to the Friars Minor Capuchin, becoming in this way Brother Pio of Pietrelcina. Here he began to experience the maternity of the Church, to whom he was always a devoted son. He loved the Church, he loved the Church with all her problems, with all her difficulties, with all her sins. Because we are all sinners, we are ashamed, but the Spirit of God has convoked us in this Church which is holy. And he loved the holy Church and her sons, sinners, all of them. This was Saint Pio. Here he meditated with intensity on the mystery of God Who loved us to the extent of giving Himself for us (cf. *Gal 2: 20*). Recollecting with esteem and affection this holy disciple of Saint Francis, I cordially greet all of you, his countrymen; your parish priest; and the mayor, along with the Pastor of the diocese, Msgr. Felice Accrocca, the Capuchin community and all those of you who wished to be present.

We find ourselves today on the same land where Father Pio dwelt in September 1911, to “breathe a little healthier air”. At that time there were no antibiotics and diseases were treated by returning to one’s home town, to one’s mother, to eat things that are good for you, to breathe the air well and to pray. This is what he did, like any other man, like a peasant. This was his nobility. He never denied his home town, he never denied his origins, he never denied his family. Indeed, in that time he resided in the town of his birth for health reasons. That was not, for him, an easy time: he was greatly tormented inwardly and feared to fall pray to sin, feeling he was under assault by the devil. And this did not give him peace, because he was restless. But do you believe that the devil exists? ... You are not so convinced? ... I will tell the bishop to do some catechesis ... Does the devil exist or not? [they answer: “Yes!”]. And he goes, he goes everywhere, he gets inside us, he moves us, he torments us, he deceives us. And he [Father Pio] was afraid that the devil would assail him, would drive him to sin. He spoke with few people, either by letter or in the town: only to the Archpriest Don Salvatore Pannullo did he manifest “almost all” his “intent to have some enlightenment” (*Letter 57*, in *Epistolary I*, p.250), because he did not understand, he wanted to clarify what was happening in his soul. He was a good boy!

In those terrible moments, Father Pio drew vital lymph from the continuous prayer and the trust he was able to place in the Lord: “All the ugly ghosts – so he said - that the devil is introducing into my mind disappear when I trustfully abandon myself to the arms of Jesus”. Here there is all theology! You have a problem, you are sad, you are sick: abandon yourself to the arms of Jesus. And this is what he did. He loved Jesus and he trusted in Him. Thus he wrote to the provincial minister, asserting that his heart felt “attracted by a superior force before joining Him in the morning in the Sacrament”. “And this hunger and thirst, instead of remaining satisfied”, after receiving it, “grows [more] more and more” (*Letter 31*, in *Epistolary I*, p. 217). Father Pio immersed himself in prayer to adhere ever better to the divine plans. Through the celebration of Holy Mass, which constituted the heart of his day and the fullness of his spirituality, he reached a high level of union with the Lord. During this period, he received special mystical gifts from above, which preceded the manifestation in his flesh of the signs of the Passion of Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters of Pietrelcina and of the diocese of Benevento, you include Saint Pio among the most beautiful and luminous figures of your people. This humble Capuchin friar amazed the world with his life devoted to prayer and patient listening to his brothers, on whose sufferings he poured out the love of Christ as a balm. Imitating his heroic example and his virtues, may you also become instruments of God’s love, of Jesus’ love for the weakest. At the same time, considering his unconditional loyalty to the Church, you will bear witness to communion, because only communion – that is, always being united, in peace among us, the communion between us – edifies and constructs. A town that quarrels every does not grow, does not build itself up; it scares people. Instead, a town where one seeks peace, where everyone cares for each other – more or less, but they care for each other – they do not wish evil upon each other, this town, even if it is small, grows, grows, grows, it expands and becomes strong. Please, do not waste time, strength, quarrelling between yourselves. This does not serve any purpose. It does not make you grow! It does not make you walk onwards. Let us think of a child who cries, cries, cries and does not want to move from his crib, and cries, cries. And when his mother puts him on the floor so that he can start to crawl, he cries, cries ... and returns to the crib. I ask you: will that child be able to walk? No, because he is always in the crib! If a village quarrels, quarrels, quarrels, will it be able to grow? No. Because all the time, all its strength goes towards quarrelling. Please: peace between you, communion between you. And if one of you feels like gossiping about another, bite your tongue. It will do good to your soul, because the tongue will swell up but it will do good, also to the town. Give this witness of communion.

I hope that this territory will be able to draw new life from the teachings of the life of Father Pio in a difficult time like the present, as the population gradually decreases and ages because many young people are forced to go elsewhere to look for work. The internal migration of the young, a problem. Pray to Our Lady to give you the grace that the young may find work here, among you, near to the family, and that they are not compelled to go away and look elsewhere, so that the town declines. The population ages, but this is a treasure, the elderly are a treasure! Please, do not marginalize the elderly. The elderly must not be marginalized, no. The elderly are wisdom. And may the elderly learn to speak with the young and the young learn to speak with the elderly. They have the wisdom of a village, the elderly. When I arrived I had the pleasure of greeting a man of 99 years, and a youngster of 97. Beautiful! These are your wisdom! Speak with them. May they be the protagonists of the growth of this town. May the intercession of your Saint and fellow citizen support the intention of joining forces, so as to offer to the young generations in particular concrete perspectives for a future of hope. Do not miss be lacking in caring attention, full of tenderness, as I said, for the elderly, who are the heritage of our communities. I would like it if the Nobel prize could be awarded once to the elderly who give memory to humanity.

I encourage this land to preserve as a precious treasure the Christian and priestly testimony of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina: it is for each one of you an incentive to live your life in fullness, in the style of the Beatitudes and with the works of mercy. May the Virgin Mary, whom you venerate with the title of *Madonna della Libera*, help you to walk with joy on the path of holiness. And please, pray for me, because I am in need. Thank you!
