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Press Conference to present the Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with the Heads of the Churches and Christian Communities of the Middle East in Bari

At 11.00 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held for the presentation of the Holy Father Francis' meeting with the Heads of the Churches and the Christian Communities of the Middle East, entitled "Peace be upon you! Christians together for the Middle East", to take place in Bari this coming 7 July.

The speakers were His Eminence Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches; and His Eminence Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of Cardinal Leonardo Sandri

The attention that the Holy Father Francis, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, has reserved to the East since the beginning of his Pontificate is known to all; this attention has three dimensions, which however come together in one embrace.

a. That of the East already in the full communion of the Catholic Church: in the *Mass of the beginning of the Pontificate*, before the Confession of the Apostle Peter, the Holy Father prayed surrounded by the Patriarchs and major archbishops of the Eastern Catholic Churches; with them he met privately during the Plenary Sessions of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, in November 2013 and in October 2017; he has received some of the Patriarchal Churches on their *ad Limina* visits and the individual Patriarchs on several occasions. In the case of newly elected Patriarchs (Coptic, Armenian, Melkite), he chose to preside personally over the *public signification of the communio ecclesiastica* during the morning Eucharistic celebration in the Domus Sanctae Marthae.

b. The dimension of the Orthodox East and the Eastern Orthodox, about which Cardinal Koch can speak better:

words and gestures of welcome, of insistence oo opening the doors and indicating the ways… sharing of pain, coining the well-known expression *ecumenism of blood*. Let us think of the closeness expressed to the Coptic Church on the occasion of the martyrdom of some faithful by DAESH, in the bomb attacks on some churches. With regard to the relationship between Eastern and Eastern Orthodox Catholics, I can not fail to mention here the very powerful gesture by which *Pope Tawadros* and *Patriarch Ibrahim*, a Coptic Catholic, each wished to be present and to send a message for the other's enthronement, as well as the celebration for the proclamation of *Saint Gregory of Narek* as Doctor of the Church in the presence of all the Armenian, Catholic and apostolic patriarchs in April 2015, and the inauguration of the statue of the saint in the Vatican gardens last April;

c. The dimension of interreligious dialogue: in the Middle East, Islamic believers themselves too are wounded and suffer due to those who have used violence, profaning the name of God, Who is peace, and they too are compelled to leave their homes and their lands, along with the Christian and Yazidi minorities. The apostolic trip to Egypt in April 2016 and the meeting at *Al-Ahzar University* were memorable.

The sole embrace is expressed in the constant attention paid through appeals to prayer and peace initiatives to aid those who suffer or are forced to flee and seek refuge from the violence or persecutions: those who have used violence do not first ask for an "identity card" of the Christian confession to which the victim belongs (Catholic, Orthodox, Apostolic etc.; or Sunni or Shiite Muslim, etc). Those who need help must not be classified but welcomed as a man, woman or child (let us think of the trip to the island of Lesbos). We pray united and together as in the *Holy Sepulchre* during the trip to the Holy Land in May 2015; in the *Vatican Gardens*, a few weeks later, and on the *day of fasting and prayer for Syria* which culminated in the prayer vigil in Saint Peter's Square in September 2013.

The daily work carried out by the Secretariat of State, by the Cardinal Secretary, the Secretary for Relations with States and all the Papal Representatives must not be forgotten.

The idea of a meeting such as the one to be held in Bari comes from afar and from many voices: different Churches or Patriarchs have addressed the idea directly to the Holy Father during their visit to Rome. I recall, for example, the patriarchs of the Chaldean Church and of the Assyrian Church of the East – or with a written appeal such as the one transmitted in February 2016 by the Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Boutros Rai on behalf of the other Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East, gathered in assembly, with the approval and willingness to intervene also by some Heads of non-Catholic churches of the same region.

The event of 7 July has the aspect of a powerful and essential gesture. It will consist of two principal moments: the prayer on the seafront with the faithful who wish to participate in person or live on television, and the moment of reflection and mutual listening between the Holy Father and the Heads of Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the Middle East, each bringing his point of view, observations and proposals. An introductory report, entrusted to Monsignor Pierbattista Pizzaballa, apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, will be followed by a period for free interventions. All this part will take place behind closed doors. The Holy Father is expected to speak at the beginning of the public prayer and at the end of the meeting, when the doors of the Basilica of Saint Nicholas will be reopened. Pope Francis and others present will go to the parvis and will release doves that will have been given to them by some children: a prophetic gesture, because above all to the children and the young generations of the Middle East we have to give back that hope that bad actions or simple indifference during these years have taken away from them.

Bari, the city that conserves the relics of Saint Nicholas and venerates the Mother of God as Odegitria (the leader on the way), is a symbolic place: the presence of the East in the West, a place of pilgrimage and a gateway for hope.

Thanksgiving: the journey of preparation, undertaken decisively by the Holy Father, was then continued by our Dicastery with a first exchange of news with Professor Riccardi, of the Sant'Egidio Community, and then with the Secretariat of State, along with the Prefecture of the Papal Household, the Vatican City State Security Directorate, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and in close connection with the archdiocese of Bari-Bitonto. The hymns will be performed by the archdiocesan *choir*, with soloists in Arabic and Aramaic thanks

to the presence of some students from the Pontifical Institute of Religious Music belonging to the Chaldean, Melkite and Maronite Churches. The *Gospel* will be sung in *Arabic* by a *deacon from Syria*. In the prayer book, which will be made available, you will be able to see how languages other than Italian are used: French, English, Arabic, Greek, Western and Eastern Syriac, and Armenian. Special thanks are due to the Vatican Media and the theological-pastoral office for the production of the video clips that we saw at the beginning and which will serve to refocus attention and prayer in preparation for the meeting in Bari.

The Holy Father, ever since the announcement of the meeting, which was made on 25 April, has asked us to prepare for and accompany the event of 7 July in prayer, an appeal renewed in the *Angelus of Sunday 1 July* and in a *tweet* from the same day: the Italian dioceses via the President, Cardinal Bassetti, and the European ones, through Cardinal Bagnasco, president of the CCEE, are invited to make particular efforts to raise awareness in the parishes, and for Italy a framework of texts and prayers has been sent.

With regard to the presence of the patriarchs of the Oriental Catholic Churches in the Middle East, all will be present (Coptic, Syriac, Maronite, Chaldean, and Armenian) apart from the Melkite patriarch, who will be represented by the Metropolitan of Aleppo, and the apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Intervention of Cardinal Kurt Koch

The Middle East is the land of origin of Christianity. For this reason it occupies a unique place in the movement for Christian unity. The Ecumenical movement has always been convinced that by deepening their common roots, Christians can find paths of unity.

It is therefore not by chance that the event that marked the beginning of the “dialogue of charity” between Catholics and Orthodox took place in Jerusalem. I refer to the pilgrimage that Blessed Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras undertook together on 6 January 1964. In the land where Christ founded His Church and shed His blood for her, the two Primates exchanged the kiss of peace, listened to the reading of the chapter XVII of the Gospel of Saint John, and together recited the Sunday Prayer, working together and irreversibly on the path of unity.

The Middle East, the land of its origins, is also one of the regions of the world where the situation of Christians is most precarious. Because of wars and persecution, many families abandon their historical homeland in search of security and a better future. The percentage of Christians in the Middle East has fallen dramatically over the course of a century: while they represented 20% of the population of the Middle East before the First World War, now they make up only 4%.

A martyred region, the Middle East is also a place where ecumenical relations are stronger and more promising, especially between Orthodox and Catholics. I would like to mention three main dimensions: the ecumenism of life, the ecumenism of holiness and the ecumenism of blood.

The minority situation in which Christians are found in the Middle East is an urgent reason for meeting in what could be called an “ecumenism of life”. In his *Letter to Christians in the Middle East*, Pope Francis rejoiced in the concrete ecumenism lived by Christians in the Middle East: “In the midst of hostility and conflicts, the communion which you experience in fraternity and simplicity is a sign of God’s Kingdom” (21 December 2014). This ecumenism of life has sometimes been translated into pastoral agreements which provide, in case of necessity, access to the sacraments of other Churches by the faithful – for example, between the Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church (1984) and between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East (2001). Christians in the Middle East show the way of unity to their Western brothers.

The difficult context in which Christians find themselves quickly transforms the ecumenism of life into an

“ecumenism of holiness”. The Conciliar decree *Unitatis redintegratio* emphasizes that the holiness of life is the best guarantee of Christian unity: the more Christians approach God, the closer they are to one another (*Unitatis redintegratio* 7). It is obvious that the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East is for them a call to holiness and therefore a pledge of unity. In his own Letter to Christians in the Middle East, the Holy Father underlined this ecumenical call to holiness for Christians in all the Churches of the Middle East: “The situation in which are you living is a powerful summons to holiness of life, as saints and martyrs of every Christian community have attested”.

When difficulties become suffering, this ecumenism of holiness becomes an ecumenism of blood. Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has made this topic one of his main ecumenical themes. Among the various statements, I recall his words at the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem: “When Christians of different confessions suffer together, side by side, and assist one another with fraternal charity, there is born an ecumenism of suffering, an ecumenism of blood. … Those who kill, persecute Christians out of hatred, do not ask if they are Orthodox or Catholics: they are Christians. The blood of Christians is the same” (25 May 2014).

The situation in which Christians live in the Middle East is an incentive to ecumenism not only for them, but also for Christians all over the world. Thus, the various joint declarations signed by the Pope and by other Heads of Church have often had as their focus the common concern for Christians in the Middle East, such as the joint declarations with Patriarch Bartholomew in Jerusalem (25 May 2014) and Istanbul (30 November 2014), with the Armenian Patriarch Karekin in Echmiadzin (26 June 2016), with Pope Tawadros in Cairo (28 April 2017), and with Patriarch Kirill in Havana (12 February 2016). The difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East thus promotes ecumenical rapprochement on a universal level. Also in this sense, the sufferings of these brothers and sisters in the faith will not have been in vain.

After these ecumenical observations, I would like to finish by recalling some of the principles of the Catholic Church regarding Christians in the Middle East.

The first of these convictions, very simple, is the following: Christians will remain in the region only if peace is restored. This is why, since the beginning of the crisis, the Catholic Church has tirelessly called for the restoration of peace, above all through the search for a political solution. This call has also taken the form of prayer and fasting. In particular, I would like to mention the organization throughout the Catholic Church, on the initiative of Pope Francis, of a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Syria and the Middle East on 7 September 2013.

A second principle is that it is not possible to imagine a Middle East without Christians: not only for religious reasons, but also for political and social reasons, because Christians are an essential element of the balance in the region. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Middle East: “A Middle East without Christians, or with only a few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East, since Christians, together with other believers, are part of the distinctive identity of the region” (Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* 31).

A third principle is the need to protect the rights of every person and every minority. The primacy of law, including respect for religious freedom and equality before the law, based on the principle of citizenship regardless of ethnic origin or religion, has been repeatedly emphasized by the Catholic Church as a fundamental principle for the realization and for the maintenance of a peaceful and fruitful coexistence among the various communities in the Middle East. The Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, recalled incisively: “Christians do not want to be a ‘protected minority’ and well tolerated. They want to be citizens whose rights are defended and guaranteed together with those of all other citizens” (Return to the roots. Conference on the Nineveh Reconstruction Hel, 27 September 2017, Rome).

A fourth fundamental conviction is the urgent need to continue the interreligious dialogue, on which Pope Francis particularly insists in his Letter to Christians in the Middle East: "Inter-religious dialogue is all the more necessary when the situation is more difficult. There is no other road. Dialogue based on an attitude of openness, in truth and love, is also the best antidote to the temptation of religious fundamentalism, which is a threat to believers of

all religions”.

We hope to be able to reflect and pray on these few convictions, and on many others, during the meeting in Bari.