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Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with the Heads of the Churches and Christian Communities of the Middle East in Bari (7 July 2018) (II)

At the end of the dialogue behind closed doors in the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, the Holy Father Francis and the Patriarchs exited onto the parvis and, in the presence of the faithful awaiting in the square, the Pope read out some words of greeting. The Holy Father and the Patriarchs then travelled by coach to the archbishopric for lunch.

At 14.50, Pope Francis took leave of the Patriarchs and, before departing, paid a brief visit to the Cathedral. When he reached the heliport, he greeted the Authorities who had received him on arrival. The helicopter carrying the Holy Father departed at 15.45 for the return journey to the Vatican.

The following are Pope Francis' words of greeting, at the conclusion of the dialogue:

Words of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am most grateful for this graced moment of sharing. As brothers and sisters, we have helped one another to appreciate anew our presence as Christians in the Middle East. This presence will be all the more prophetic to the extent that it bears witness to Jesus, the Prince of Peace (cf. *Is* 9:5). Jesus does not draw a sword; instead, he asks his disciples to put it back in its sheath (cf. *Jn* 18:11). Our way of being Church is also tempted by worldly attitudes, by a concern for power and profit, for quick and convenient solutions. Then too, there is the reality of our sinfulness, the disconnect between faith and life that obscures our witness. We sense our need for renewed conversion to the Gospel, the guarantee of authentic freedom, and our need to do so urgently, as the Middle East endures a night of agony. As in the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, it will not be *flight* (cf. *Mt* 26:56) or *the sword* (cf. *Mt* 26:52) that will lead to the radiant dawn of Easter. Instead, it will be our gift of self, in imitation of the Lord.

The Good News of Jesus, crucified and risen out of love, came from the Middle East and has won over human hearts down the centuries because it is bound not to the powers of this world, but to the unarmed power of the cross. The Gospel invites us to daily conversion to God's plans; it invites us to find our safety and consolation in him alone, and to make him known to everyone despite all obstacles. The faith of the lowly, so deeply rooted in the Middle East, is the wellspring from which we can draw water to drink and to be purified. This is always the case whenever we return to our origins and go as pilgrims to Jerusalem, the Holy Land or the shrines of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and the other holy places in the region.

Encouraged by one another, we have engaged in fraternal dialogue. It has been a sign of our need to pursue encounter and unity without being afraid of our differences. So it is with peace: it too must be cultivated in the parched soil of conflict and discord, because today, in spite of everything, there is no real alternative to peacemaking. Truces maintained by walls and displays of power will not lead to peace, but only the concrete desire to listen and to engage in dialogue. We commit ourselves to walking, praying and working together, in the hope that the art of encounter will prevail over strategies of conflict. In the hope that the display of threatening *signs of power* will yield to *the power of signs*: men and women of good will of different beliefs, unafraid of dialogue, open to the ideas of others and concerned for their good. Only in this way, by ensuring that no one lacks bread and work, dignity and hope, will the cries of war turn into songs of peace.

If this is to happen, it is essential that those in power choose finally and decisively to work for true peace and not for their own interests. Let there be an end to the few profiting from the sufferings of many! No more occupying territories and thus tearing people apart! No more letting half-truths continue to frustrate people's aspirations! Let there be an end to using the Middle East for gains that have nothing to do with the Middle East!

War is the scourge that tragically assails this beloved region. The poor are its principal victims. Let us think only of war-torn Syria, especially the Daraa region, where bitter conflicts have started again, displacing a large number of people who are now subjected to terrible suffering. War is the daughter of power and poverty. It is defeated by renouncing the thirst for supremacy and by eradicating poverty. So many conflicts have been stoked too by forms of fundamentalism and fanaticism that, under the guise of religion, have profaned God's name – which is peace – and persecuted age-old neighbours. Violence is always fueled by weapons. You cannot speak of peace while you are secretly racing to stockpile new arms. This is a most serious responsibility weighing on the conscience of nations, especially the most powerful. Let us not forget the last century. Let us not forget the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Let us not turn the Middle East, where the Word of peace sprang up, into dark stretches of silence. Let us have enough of stubborn opposition! Enough of the thirst for profit that surreptitiously exploits oil and gas fields without regard for our common home, with no scruples about the fact that energy market now dictates the law of coexistence among peoples!

To blaze paths of peace, let us turn our gaze instead to those who beg to live with others as brothers and sisters. May every community be protected, not simply the majority. Let the way to the right of common citizenship be opened in the Middle East, as the path to a renewed future. Christians too are, and ought to be, full citizens enjoying equal rights.

With deep anguish, but with constant hope, we turn our gaze to Jerusalem, a city for all peoples, a unique and sacred city for Christians, Jews and Muslims the world over. A city whose identity and vocation must be safeguarded apart from various disputes and tensions, and whose *status quo* demands to be respected, as decided by the international community and repeatedly requested by the Christian communities of the Holy Land. Only a negotiated solution between Israelis and Palestinians, firmly willed and promoted by the international community, will be able to lead to a stable and lasting peace, and guarantee the coexistence of two states for two peoples.

Hope has the face of children. In the Middle East, for years, an appalling number of young people mourn violent deaths in their families and see their native land threatened, often with their only prospect being that of flight. This is the death of hope. All too many children have spent most of their lives looking at rubble instead of schools, hearing the deafening explosion of bombs rather than the happy din of playgrounds. May humanity listen – this is my plea – to the cry of children, whose mouths proclaim the glory of God (cf. *Ps 8:3*). Only by

wiping away their tears will the world recover its dignity.

With this concern for the children – let us not forget the children! – we will shortly let our desire for peace take wing by releasing some doves. May the longing for peace rise higher than any dark cloud. May our hearts remain united and turned to heaven, as in the days of the Flood (cf. *Gen* 8:11), in expectation of a fresh twig of hope. And may the Middle East no longer be an *ark of war* lying between continents, but an *ark of peace* that welcomes peoples of different backgrounds and beliefs. Beloved Middle East, may you see dispelled the darkness of war, power, violence, fanaticism, unfair gains, exploitation, poverty, inequality and lack of respect for rights. “May peace be upon you” (*Ps* 122:8) – all together: “May peace be upon you” – may justice dwell within your borders, and may God’s blessing come to rest upon you. Amen!
