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Audience with the Major Archbishop, the Metropolitans and the Permanent Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

This morning, in the Sala Bologna of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Permanent Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

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Beatitude, dear Brother Major Archbishop,
Eminences, Excellencies,
dear Brothers!

It was my wish to invite you here to Rome for fraternal sharing, also with the superiors of the competent dicasteries of the Roman Curia. I thank you for accepting the invitation; it is good to see you. Ukraine has for some time been experiencing a difficult and delicate situation, for more than five years wounded by a conflict that many describe as “hybrid”, composed as it is of acts of war in which those responsible camouflage themselves; a conflict where the weakest and the smallest pay the highest price; a conflict aggravated by propagandist falsifications and manipulations of various types, also in the attempt to involve the religious aspect.

I hold you in my heart and I pray for you, dear Ukrainian brothers. And I confide to you that at times I do so with prayers that I remember and that I learned from Bishop Stepan Czml, then a Salesian priest; he taught me them when I was twelve years old, in 1949, and I learned from him to serve the Divine Liturgy three times a week. I thank you for your fidelity to the Lord and to Peter’s Successor, which has often cost dearly throughout history, and I beg the Lord to accompany the actions of all those with political responsibility to search not the so-called partisan good, which in the end is always an interest at someone else’s expenses, but the common good, peace. And I ask of the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1: 3), to comfort the souls of those who have lost their loved ones due to the war, those who bear wounds in their body and in their spirit, those who have had to leave their home

and work, and face the risk of searching a more human future elsewhere, far away. Know that my gaze goes every morning to the Madonna which His Beatitude gave to me, when he left Buenos Aires to assume the office of major Archbishop that the Church had entrusted to him. Before that icon, I begin and conclude the days, entrusting to the tenderness of Our Lady, who is Mother, all of you, your Church. It may be said that I begin and end the days “in Ukrainian”, looking at Our Lady.

The main role of the Church, faced with the complex situations caused by the conflicts, is that of offering witness of *Christian hope*. Not a hope of the world, that is based on passing things, that come and go, and often divide, but the hope that never lets us down, that never gives way to discouragement, that knows how to overcome every tribulation with the gentle strength of the Spirit (see *Rom 5: 2-5*). Christian hope, nurtured by Christ’s light, makes the resurrection and life shine even in the world’s darkest nights. Therefore, dear Brothers, I hope that in difficult times, even more than in those of peace, the priority for believers may be that of remaining united to Jesus, our hope. It is about renewing that union based in Baptism and rooted in faith, rooted in the history of our communities, rooted in the great witnesses: I think of the line of everyday heroes, of those numerous “saints next door” who, with simplicity, in your people, responded to evil with good (see *Mt 5: 39-44*). In the violent field of history they planted Christ’s cross. And they bore fruit. These brothers and sisters of yours who suffered persecution and martyrdom and who, clinging only to the Lord Jesus, rejected the logic of the world, according to which one responds to violence with violence, wrote with their lives the clearest pages of the faith: they are fruitful seeds of Christian hope. I read with emotion the book *Persecuted for the truth*. Behind those priests, bishops, nuns, there is the people of God, who carries forward all the population with faith and prayer.

A few years ago the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church adopted a pastoral programme entitled *The living parish, place of encounter with the living Christ*. In some traditions, the expression “living parish” is rendered with the adjective “vibrant”. Indeed, the encounter with Jesus, spiritual life, prayer that vibrates in the beauty of your liturgy, transmit that beautiful force of peace, that soothes wounds and infuses courage, but not aggression. When, like water that springs from a well, we drawn from that spiritual vitality and transmit it, the Church becomes fruitful. She becomes the announcer of the Gospel of hope, teacher of that inner life that no other institution is able to offer.

Therefore, I wish to encourage you all, inasmuch as you are pastors of the Holy People of God, to have this primary concern in all your activities: *prayer, spiritual life*. It is the first occupation, no other goes before it. May all know and see that in your tradition, you are one Church that knows how to speak in spiritual and not worldly terms (see *1 Cor 2: 13*). Because every person who approaches the Church needs heaven on earth, nothing else. May the Lord grant us this grace and ensure we are all devoted to our sanctification and that of the faithful who are entrusted to us. In the night of conflict that you are experiencing, as in Gethsemane, the Lord asks His people to “keep watch and pray”, not to defend themselves, nor to attack. But the disciples sleep instead of praying, and upon Judas’ arrival they draw their sword. They had not prayed and they fell to the temptation, the temptation of worldliness: the violent weakness of the flesh prevailed over the meekness of the Spirit. Not weariness, not the sword, not flight (see *Mt 26: 40, 52,56*), but prayer and the gift of self unto the end are the responses the Lord awaits from His people. Only these responses are Christian, and these alone will save from the worldly spiral of violence.

The Church is called to realize her pastoral mission with various means. After prayer comes *closeness*. That which the Lord had asked of His apostles that evening, to stay close to Him and to keep watch (cf. *Mk 14: 34*), today He asks of His pastors: to stay with the people, keeping watch beside those who pass through the night of pain. The closeness of pastors to faithful is a channel that is built day by day, and which brings the living water of hope. It is built thus, encounter after encounter, with the priests who know and take to heart the concerns of the people, and the faithful who, through the care they receive, assimilate the proclamation of the Gospel that the pastors transmit. They do not understand if the pastors are intent only on *saying God*; they understand if they make the effort to *give God*: giving themselves, remaining close, witnesses of the God of hope made flesh to walk the paths of man. May the Church be the place where hope is drawn, where the door is always found open, where consolation and encouragement are received. Never closed, to no-one, but with an open heart: never staying there looking at the clock, never sending away those who need to be listened to. We are servers of time. We live in time. Please, do not fall to the temptation of living as slaves to the clock! Time, not the clock.

Pastoral care consists first of all of the liturgy which, as the major archbishop has often highlighted, along with spirituality and catechesis constitutes an element that characterizes the identity of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. In a world “so often disfigured by selfishness and greed, the liturgy reveals the way to the harmony of the new man” (Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Orientalis lumen*, 11): the way of charity, of unconditional love, by which every other activity must be routed, as it nurtures the fraternal bond between people, within and outside the community. With this spirit of closeness, in 2016 I promoted a humanitarian initiative, in which I invited the Churches in Europe to participate, to offer aid to those who had been directly affected by the conflict. I once again thank with all my heart those who contributed to the realization of this collection, both at an economic and also an organizational and technical level. I would like this first initiative, by now substantially concluded, to be followed by other special projects. Already in this meeting, some information can be provided. It is very important to be close to all and to be practical, also to avoid the danger that a grave situation of suffering end up being forgotten. One cannot forget the brother who suffers, wherever he may be from. One cannot forget the brother who suffers.

I would like to add a third word to prayer and closeness, which is so familiar to you: *synodality*. Being Church is being a community that walks together. It is not enough to *have* a synod, you must *be* a synod. The Church needs intense internal sharing: a living dialogue between the Pastors and between the Pastors and the faithful. As an Eastern Catholic Church, you already have a marked synodal expression in your canonical order, which calls for frequent and regular recourse to the assemblies of the Synod of Bishops. But every day we must be a synod, striving to walk together, not only with those who think in the same way – this would be easy – but with all believers in Jesus.

Three aspects revive synodality. First of all, *listening*: listening to the experiences and suggestions of the bishops and priests. It is important that everyone within the Synod feels they are heard. Listening is all the more important as you rise in the hierarchy. Listening is sensitivity and openness to the opinions of brothers, even those who are younger, even those who are considered less experienced. A second aspect: *co-responsibility*. We cannot be indifferent to the errors or the carelessness of others, without intervening in a fraternal but convinced way: our confreres need our thoughts, our encouragement, as well as our corrections, because, precisely, we are called to *walk together*. You cannot hide what is wrong and move on as if nothing had happened to defend your good name at all costs: charity must always be lived in truth, in transparency, in that *parrhesia* that purifies the Church and keeps it going. Synodality – third aspect – also means involvement of the laity: as full members of the Church, they too are called to express themselves, to give suggestions. Participants of ecclesial life, they should not only be welcomed but listened to. And I emphasize this verb: to listen. Whoever listens can then speak well. Those who are used to not listening, do not speak: they bark.

Synodality also leads to broadening horizons, to living the wealth of one’s own tradition within the universality of the Church: to deriving benefits from good relations with other rites; to considering the beauty of sharing significant parts of one’s theological and liturgical treasure with other communities, also not Catholic; to weaving fruitful relationships with other particular Churches, as well as with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia. The unity in the Church will be far more fruitful, the more the understanding and cohesion between the Holy See and the particular Churches will be real. More precisely: the greater the understanding and cohesion between all the bishops and the bishop of Rome. This certainly “must not imply a diminished awareness of their own authenticity and originality” (*Orientalis lumen*, 21), but rather form it within our Catholic, that is, universal, identity. Inasmuch as it is universal, it is endangered and can be worn away by attachment to particularisms of various types: ecclesial particularisms, nationalistic particularisms, political particularisms.

Dear brothers, may these two days of meetings, which I strongly desired, be strong moments of sharing, of mutual listening, of free dialogue, always inspired by the search for good, in the spirit of the Gospel. May they help us to walk better together. It is, in a certain sense, a sort of Synod dedicated to the themes that are most at the heart of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in this period, afflicted by the military conflict still underway and characterized by a series of political and ecclesial processes that are much broader than those regarding our Catholic Church. But I recommend to you this spirit, this discernment by which to confirm oneself: prayer and spiritual life in the first place; then closeness, especially to those who suffer; then synodality, walking together, an open journey, step by step, with meekness and obedience. I thank you, I accompany you on this journey and I ask you, please, to remember me in your prayers.

Thank you!
