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Apostolic Trip of His Holiness Francis in Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritius (4 to 10 September 2019) – Meeting with the bishops of Madagascar and Visit to the Tomb of Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo

Meeting with the bishops of Madagascar in the Cathedral of Andohalo

Visit to the Tomb of Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo

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This afternoon, at 15.30 (14.30 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis left the apostolic nunciature and transferred by car to the Cathedral of Andohalo for the meeting with the bishops of Madagascar.

Upon arrival, at 16.00 (15.00 in Rome), the Pope was greeted at the entrance to the Cathedral by His Eminence Cardinal Désiré Tsarahazana, metropolitan archbishop of Toamasina and president of the Episcopal Conference of Madagascar, and the parish priest who brought him the crucifix and the holy water for aspersion. Before beginning the meeting, the Pope briefly paused in prayer before the Sacrament.

After the introductory greetings from the president of the Episcopal Conference of Madagascar, the Holy Father gave his address.

At the end, after greeting the bishops present individually, Archbishop Odon Marie Arsène Razanakolona of Antananarivo introduced to the Pope the religious leaders of the Christian confessions belonging to the Ecumenical Council of the Christian Churches of Madagascar. They gave the Pope a Bible in the ecumenical translation, and a typical Malagasy cloak.

The following is the address given by the Pope during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Thank you, Your Grace, for your words of welcome in the name of all your confreres. I appreciate your desire to show how the mission that we have undertaken is carried out amid contradictions: a rich land with widespread poverty; an ancestral culture and wisdom that respect the life and dignity of the human person, but also the presence of inequality and corruption. The task of a shepherd in such circumstances is not easy. So too, faced with inequalities, the shepherd risks wandering away and leaving the others. And the same with corruption: I do not say that the shepherd becomes a corrupt man, but there is the danger ... I will carry out this work, and that other one ..., and in doing so become a businessman; or make that exchange, that other one, that other ... and in the end, that good shepherd is stained with corruption. It happens, it happens. In the world, it happens. Keep your eyes open!

“Sower of peace and hope”. The theme chosen for my Visit can serve as an echo of the mission with which we have been entrusted. In effect, we are sowers, and those who sow do so in hope; they do it counting on their own efforts and personal commitment, but also knowing that many other factors combine to make the seed take root, grow and finally give abundant grain. The sower may be weary and concerned, but he does not give up. This word must always accompany us, both in the active and in the contemplative life, as we have seen today [in the meeting with the cloistered nuns]: may you be courageous, be a courageous man. The sower may be weary and concerned, but he does not give up and stop sowing, much less burn his field when things do not turn out well... He knows how to wait, he trusts, he realizes the limitations of his sowing. But he never stops loving the field entrusted to his care. Even if he is tempted, he does not abandon it or leave it to another.

The sower knows his land, he “touches” it, “feels” it and prepares it to produce its best. We bishops, like the sower, are called to spread seeds of faith and hope on this earth. To do so, we need to develop that “sense of smell” that can enable us to recognize more clearly whatever compromises, hinders or damages the sowing. This is *the shepherd’s intuition*. The shepherd can be very intelligent, can have academic qualifications, may have participated in many international congresses, know everything, studied everything, and even be a good person, a good person, but if he lacks the intuition, he will never be a good shepherd. The intuition. For this reason, “the Church’s pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people’s lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. It is not possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven. This is the truth left by the neo-liberal enlightenment: they were also working for the people, yes, all *for* the people, and not *with* the people! Without any relationship with the people, without the intuition ... The true shepherd instead is among the people, immersed among the people, in the love of his people, because he understands them. We know that God wants his children to be happy in this world too, even though they are called to fulfilment in eternity, for he has created all things ‘for our enjoyment’ (1 Tim 6:17), the enjoyment of everyone. It follows that Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life ‘related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good’. Consequently, no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 182-183). The shepherd among the people. The shepherd who understands the language of the people. The shepherd anointed by the people, whom he serves, whose servant he is.

I know that you have many reasons for concern and that among these you are conscious of your responsibility to protect the dignity of your brothers and sisters who strive to build a nation of greater solidarity and prosperity, endowed with solid and stable institutions. Can a pastor worthy of that name remain indifferent before the challenges facing his fellow citizens of all social categories, regardless of their religious affiliation? Can a pastor with the heart of Jesus be indifferent to lives entrusted to his care?

The prophetic dimension of the Church’s mission calls, always and everywhere, for a discernment that, in general, is not easy. In this regard, a prudent and independent cooperation between the Church and the state

remains a constant challenge, for there is always a danger of collusion, especially if we end up losing the “zest of the Gospel”. By attentive listening to what the Spirit continues to say to the Churches (cf. *Rev 2:7*), we can escape pitfalls and release the ferment of the Gospel for the sake of a fruitful cooperation with civil society in the pursuit of the common good. The mark of such discernment will be that the proclamation of the Gospel demonstrates concern for all forms of poverty, not only “ensuring nourishment or a ‘dignified sustenance’ for all people, but also their ‘general temporal welfare and prosperity’”. This means education, access to healthcare, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 192).

The defense of the human person is yet another aspect of our pastoral responsibility. To be pastors according to God’s heart, we must be the first to choose to preach the Gospel to the poor. “There can be no room for doubt or for explanations which weaken so clear a message. Today and always, ‘the poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel’, and the fact that it is freely preached to them is a sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them” (*ibid.*, 48). In other words, we have a particular duty to protect and remain close to the poor, the marginalized and the little ones, to children and those most vulnerable, to the victims of exploitation and abuse; victims of today’s throw-away culture. Today worldliness has led us to include in social programs, in development programs, a throw-away culture as a possibility: the rejection of those about to be born and the rejection of those about to die, to quicken their departure.

This vast field is not only cleared and ploughed by the prophetic Spirit; it also awaits the seed sown with Christian patience, in the knowledge that we are neither in control of, or responsible for, the entire process. A pastor who is a sower will not try to control every detail. He cannot. The sower does not go to dig the earth every day to see how the seed is growing. A shepherd avoids controlling everything – the shepherd-controllers never allow things to grow! Give plenty of room for new initiatives, let things mature in their own good time, not everyone follows the same timing in terms of growth – and do not try to fit everything into one mould. Life is not about uniformity; life is diverse, everyone has their own way of being, their own way of growing, their own way of being a person. Uniformity is not a Christian way. The true shepherd does not demand more than what is reasonable, or disregard apparently meagre results: “This time it went like this ... keep going, be calm! It will be better next time”. He always knows how to receive the results as they come. Permit me to share with you the image that sometimes comes to my mind when I think about the life of the shepherd. The shepherd should take life as it unfolds, with the results that come. The shepherd is like the goalkeeper of the football team: he catches the ball from where they throw it. He knows how to move, how to take reality as it comes. And to correct things later, but at that moment he takes life as it comes. This is the shepherd’s love. This speaks about a kind of fidelity to the Gospel that also makes us pastors close to God’s people, starting with our brother priests – our closest brothers – who should be the object of our particular care.

The shepherd must be close to God, to his priests and to the people: the shepherd’s three kinds of closeness. Closeness to God in prayer. Let us not forget that when the Apostles “invent” the deacons – this I have said many times – Peter, in order to explain this new invention of the deacons, says: “And to us [Apostles], prayer and the proclamation of the Word”. The first task of the pastor is to pray. Each of you could ask yourself: do I pray? How much? how? Closeness to God. Closeness to priests: priests are the closest neighbours of the bishop. “I called the bishop, the secretary took the call and tells me that I won’t be able to get an appointment for the next three months”. A brother’s advice: if your secretary leaves a message for you from a priest, that same day, or at the latest the next day, call him back. You may not have time to meet him, but call him back. That priest will know he has a father! And the third kind of closeness: closeness to the people. The pastor who turns away from the people, who loses the smell of the people, ends up as a “Monsieur l’Abbé”, a court official ... pontifical court, important, but always of the court in the end, and this is not needed.

Not long ago, I shared with the Italian bishops my concern that our priests should see in their bishop an elder brother and a father who encourages them and supports them on their journey (cf. *Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference*, 20 May 2019). That is what spiritual fatherhood is; it inspires a bishop not to leave his priests orphans, but to remain close to them, not only by being always ready to receive them, but also by seeking them out and supporting them in times of difficulty.

Amid the joys and challenges of their ministry, priests should see you, dear bishops, as fathers who are always there for them, ready to offer them encouragement and support, able to appreciate their work and guide their growth. The Second Vatican Council made specific mention of this point: “Bishops should show particular affection for their priests, who take up part of their duties and concerns and devote themselves daily to them with great zeal. They should treat them as sons and friends. They should always be ready to listen to them, in an atmosphere of mutual trust, thus facilitating the pastoral work of the entire diocese” (*Christus Dominus*, 16).

Caring for the earth also entails patiently awaiting the outcome of processes. The pastor waits for the processes. And at harvest time, the farmer also assesses the quality of his workers. As pastors, you have an urgent task – I am talking about the quality of workers – an urgent task of accompaniment and discernment, especially with regard to vocations to the consecrated life and the priesthood, one that is fundamental for ensuring the authenticity of those vocations. And in this, please, be careful. Do not be deceived by the need and the number: “We need priests and because of this need I admit people without discerning the vocations”. I do not know, I believe that this is not common among you because you have vocations and therefore you have a certain freedom to go slowly with discernment. But in some European countries it is lamentable: the lack of vocations pushes the bishop to take from here, from there, from anywhere without examining their past life; they take people “rejected” by other seminaries; people “expelled” from religious life, who were expelled because they are immoral or because of other shortcomings. Please be careful. Do not let the wolf enter the flock. The harvest is plentiful and the Lord – who desires only real workers – is not limited in the ways he calls young people to make a generous gift of their lives. After admission, the training of candidates for the priesthood and the consecrated life rightly aims to ensure their growth in maturity and the purification of their intentions. In this regard, and in the spirit of the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, I would emphasize that the fundamental call, without which the others have no reason to exist, is the call to holiness and that this “holiness is the most attractive face of the Church” (No. 9). I appreciate your efforts to ensure the formation of authentic and holy workers for the abundant harvest that awaits us in the field of the Lord.

Furthermore, I would like to emphasize an attitude that I do not like, because it does not come from God: rigidity. Today it is fashionable, I do not know about here, but in other parts of the world it is fashionable, to find rigid people. Young, rigid priests, who want to save with rigidity, perhaps, I don’t know, but they take this attitude of rigidity and sometimes – excuse me – from the museum. They are afraid of everything, they are rigid. Be careful, and know that under any rigidity there are serious problems.

This effort must also extend to the vast world of the lay faithful. They too are sent out to the harvest, called to cast their nets and devote their time to their own apostolate, which “in all its many aspects, is exercised both in the Church and in the world” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 9). In all its breadth, its problems and its varied situations, the world is the specific area of the apostolate where they are called, with generosity and a sense of responsibility, to bring the leaven of the Gospel. For this reason, I express my appreciation for all those initiatives that you have undertaken as pastors to provide training for lay men and women – thank you for this – and not to leave them alone in their mission to be *the salt of the earth and the light of the world*. In this way they will be able to contribute to the transformation of society and the life of the Church in Madagascar. And please, make sure you do not clericalize the laity. Lay faithful are lay faithful. I heard, in my previous Diocese, proposals like this: “My Lord Bishop, I have a wonderful lay person in the parish: he works hard, he organizes everything ... should we ordain him a deacon?”. Leave him there, don’t ruin his life, let him remain a lay person. And speaking of deacons, deacons often have the temptation of clericalism; they see themselves as presbyters or pseudo-bishops ... No! The deacon is the custodian of service in the Church. Please do not keep deacons at the altar: let them do their work outside, in service. If they have to go on a mission to baptize, let them baptize: it’s ok. But in service, let them not be pseudo-priests.

Dear brothers, this great responsibility for the Lord’s field should challenge us to open our hearts and minds, and to banish the fear that tempts us to withdraw into ourselves and to cut ourselves off from others. Fraternal dialogue among yourselves is important as is the sharing of gifts and cooperation between the Particular Churches of the Indian Ocean; may these be a path of hope. Dialogue and cooperation. The similarity of the pastoral challenges you face, such as the protection of the environment in a Christian spirit, or the problem of immigration, calls for shared reflection and coordinated action on a large scale in devising effective approaches.

In conclusion, I would like in a special way to greet, through you, all those priests and men and women religious who are elderly or ill. I would like each of you to ask yourself this question: Will I go and visit them? I ask you to convey to them my affection and the assurance of my prayers, and to care for them with gentle love and to confirm them in their fine mission of intercessory prayer.

Two women protect this Cathedral. The chapel nearby holds the remains of Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo, who was able to do much good and to defend and spread the faith in difficult times. There is also the statue of the Virgin Mary, whose arms, outstretched to the valley and the hills, seem to embrace everything. Let us ask these two women always to enlarge our hearts, to teach us the maternal compassion that women, like God himself, feel for the forgotten of the earth and to help us to sow seeds of hope.

As a sign of my constant heartfelt encouragement, I now impart to you my blessing, I bless you as a brother and I extend this blessing to all your dioceses.

Please, do not forget to pray for me, and to ask others to do the same!

Visit to the Tomb of Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo

At the end of the meeting with the bishops of Madagascar, at 17.10 local time (16.10 in Rome) the Pope visited the chapel opposite the Cathedral of Andohalo to visit the tomb of Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo, where he gathered himself in silent prayer. He then transferred to the diocesan field of Soamandrakizay, for the vigil with young people.
