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## Audience with pilgrims from Slovakia

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the pilgrimage from Slovakia, to whom he addressed the following words:

### Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome! *Vitajte*! [Welcome]

I greet all of you, who have come to express your bond to Peter's Successor and to make your public profession of faith, precisely in this Easter season.

[I warmly greet Cardinal Jozef Tomko, whose presence makes us feel that the Church is a family that knows how to honour seniority as a gift. But I have a doubt, he seems younger than me! I greet Archbishop Stanislav Zvolenský, metropolitan of Bratislava, who is accompanying this pilgrimage as President of the Slovak Episcopal Conference; I thank him for his words. I greet all the bishops present, the priests, the consecrated persons and lay faithful. I am pleased to greet the civil authorities, in particular the President of the Parliament of the Slovak Republic and the President of the Constitutional Court. And I would like to take advantage of the opportunity to send a greeting to Madam President of the country.

I carry in my heart our meetings last September in Bratislava, Prešov (Preshov), Košice (Coshitse) and at the national Shrine of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows in Šaštín (Shashtjin). It was a great pleasure for me to see how the Church in Slovakia lives the richness of the diversity of rites and traditions, like a bridge uniting the West and the Christian East. I thank the Lord that, despite the pandemic, I was able to visit your country; may he make ripen the fruits of the apostolic journey!

Today you have come in large numbers to give thanks, but I realize that Slovak pilgrims come willingly to Rome: I see this in the general audiences. Your people are very attached to the See of Saints Peter and Paul!

Coming among you, I wished to encourage you to walk in the style of encounter, all together: the young, families, the elderly, the various communities that historically form part of your society. The culture of encounter is built in the search for harmony among diversity, a harmony that requires acceptance, openness and creativity. At the root of this style of life there is the Gospel, there is the Holy Spirit. But we know that in history and in real life, this harmony is at times harmed by our sins and our limits. Therefore, during my visit, we prayed also for the healing of wounds. Remember: never tire of invoking the Holy Spirit, who is the Creator of harmony and balm for wounds!

I have been told that the large carpet used for the stage during the meeting with the Rom community in Košice (Coshitse) was cut up and distributed among the families of the neighbourhood, and can serve as a welcome at the door of every house. As a guest, I was received by you with bread and salt. The salt of welcome, which refers to the salt of the Gospel. And recently your welcome has shown itself again, this time in the tragic context of the war. In recent months, many of your families, parishes and institutions have welcomed under their roof the mothers and children of Ukrainian families forced to split up in order to save themselves, who had arrived with their meagre luggage.

Looking in their eyes, you are witnesses of how war commits violence to the bonds of families, depriving children of the presence of their father, of school, and leaving grandparents in a situation of neglect. I urge you to continue to pray and work for peace, which is built in our life every day, also with these gestures of welcoming charity. And I know that you are in solidarity not only with your neighbouring brothers and sisters, but also those who are far away, such as those in Cuba.

Whoever welcomes a person in need performs not only an act of charity, but also of faith, because he or she recognizes Jesus in the brother and sister. May God keep you always rich in the salt of hospitality! And may your salt never lose its taste, always renewing itself by drawing lifeblood from its roots. I know that you are proud of the heritage of Saints Cyril and Methodius. I invite you to always preserve and cultivate this heritage, to build bridges of fraternity together with all the peoples who are nourished by the same roots of the evangelization of Europe, with both lungs of Christianity, of which the Holy Pope John Paul II spoke.

Thank you, dear ones, for your fidelity to Christ, manifested in the witness of lived faith, in the practical ecumenism of your relations with your neighbours, in the welcoming charity of those who are different, in respect for every human life and in responsible care for the environment. May Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, patroness of Slovakia, be for you the Mother who always accompanies you on your journey and teaches you to console and bring hope. That hope which does not disappoint and which has a name: the Risen Christ. *Christos voskrese*!

Now I will give you my blessing, and we will pray together so that the Lord will bless you all. And then I will greet you, but there is a problem: this leg isn’t right, it doesn't work, and the doctor has told me not to walk. I like to ... but this time I must obey the doctor! That's why I am going to ask you to make the sacrifice of climbing the stairs, and I will say goodbye to you from here. It is a humiliation, but I offer it for your country. Thank you!