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Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum" dei Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale di Zimbabwe

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Alle ore 11.00 di questa mattina, il Santo Padre Francesco ha ricevuto in Udienza i Vescovi della Conferenza Episcopale di Zimbabwe, in occasione della visita "ad Limina Apostolorum".

Pubblichiamo di seguito il testo del discorso che il Papa ha consegnato ai Presuli nel corso dell'incontro:

Discorso del Santo Padre

Dear Brother Bishops,

"Peace be with you" (*Jn* 20:19)! I welcome you on your pilgrimage *ad Limina Apostolorum* to the resting places of the Apostles for whose intercession we are here to pray, as you seek unity and strength inspired by their lives given in service of Christ and his Church. I thank Bishop Bhasera for his kind words of greeting on behalf of the Bishops and all Catholics of Zimbabwe; may these days of prayer and solidarity between their pastors and the Successor of Peter be a fruitful time of spiritual renewal.

We can give praise to God for the authentic witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus given by the Church in Zimbabwe, which flourished early in the Christian history of Southern Africa. Your predecessors in the episcopate, joined with their priests, religious and lay coworkers – many of them missionaries from faraway countries – spent their lives so that the faith might take root and flourish in your land. Across Zimbabwe, mission stations blossomed into parishes and dioceses. The Church became indigenous, a strong young tree in the garden of the Lord, full of life and bearing rich fruit. Generations of Zimbabweans – including many political leaders – have been educated in Church schools. Catholic hospitals have taken care of the infirm for many decades, offering physical and psychological healing. Many vocations to the priesthood and religious life have come from your land, and these vocations continue. For all these graces, and despite every challenge, our prayer of thanks rises to God like an evening sacrifice.

The Church in your country has stood fast with her people both before and after independence, now also in the years of overwhelming suffering as millions have left the country in frustration and desperation, as many lives

have been lost, so many tears shed. In the exercise of your prophetic ministry, you gave dramatic voice to all the struggling people of your country, especially to the downtrodden and the refugees. I think particularly of your 2007 Pastoral Letter *God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed*: "The suffering people of Zimbabwe are groaning in agony: 'Watchman, how much longer the night?'" There you showed how the crisis is both spiritual and moral, stretching from colonial times through the present moment, and how the "structures of sin" embedded in the social order are ultimately rooted in personal sin, requiring of all a profound personal conversion and a renewed moral sense enlightened by the Gospel.

Christians find themselves on all sides of the conflict in Zimbabwe, and so I urge you to guide everyone with great tenderness towards unity and healing: this is a people both black and white, some richer but most exceedingly poorer, of numerous tribes; the followers of Christ belong to all political parties, some in positions of authority, many not. But together as the one pilgrim People of God, they need conversion and healing, in order to become ever more fully "one Body, one Spirit in Christ" (cf. *Eph* 4:4). Through preaching and works of the apostolate, may your local Churches demonstrate that "reconciliation is not an isolated act but a lengthy process by which all parties are re-established in love – a love that heals through the working of God's word" (*Africae Munus*, 34).

While Zimbabweans' faithfulness is already a balm on some of these national wounds, I know that many people have reached their human limit, and do not know where to turn. In the midst of all this, I ask you to encourage the faithful never to lose sight of the ways in which God is hearing their supplications and answering their prayers, for, as you have written, he cannot fail to hear the cry of the poor. In this Easter season, as the Church throughout the world celebrates the victory of Christ over the power of sin and death, the Gospel of the resurrection which you are entrusted to proclaim must be clearly preached and lived in Zimbabwe. Let us never forget the lesson of the resurrection: "on razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly. However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads. Each day in our world beauty is born anew, it rises transformed through the storms of history" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 276).

Fearlessly proclaim this Gospel of hope, bringing the Lord's message into the brokenness of our time, tirelessly preaching forgiveness and the mercy of God. Keep encouraging the faithful to renew their personal encounter with the Risen Lord, and to return to the sacraments, especially to Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist, source and summit of our Christian life.

As shepherds of the flock ever docile to the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 20:28), work closely to foster unity with your priests, striving to eliminate every form of dissension and self-interest. I encourage you to continue to seek out vocations to the priesthood: men who once formed with the wide hearts of shepherds and fathers will go out to find their people in every part of the country. Accompany your newly ordained priests attentively, that they may live wholesome and upright lives. Exhort them to continue preaching and living – in season and out of season – the Gospel values of truth and integrity, and the beauty of a life lived in faith, in love of God, and in selfless service of their neighbour, in prophetic hope for justice in the land.

The future of the Church in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole greatly depends on the formation of the faithful (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 75). Together with holy priests, the Church needs zealous, well-formed catechists who will work with clergy and laity, so that what the Church believes is reflected in the way her people live in society. Support the many generous religious brothers and sisters who sanctify the country with hearts undivided in love for God and for his people. Show particular concern for the preparation and clear guidance of young Catholics desiring Christian marriage, opening up to them the richness of the Church's moral teachings on life and love, thus enabling them to find true happiness in freedom as mothers and fathers.

Dear Brother Bishops, in these days when you and the whole Church in Zimbabwe are renewed in the Easter joy of the risen Lord, I pray that you will return home strengthened in fraternal communion. May you leave from this meeting with the Successor of Peter more determined to give everything in the service of the Word, so that Catholics in Zimbabwe may become ever more the salt of the African earth and light of the world. I commend you, with the clergy, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses, to the intercession of Mary, Queen of Africa and Mother of the Church, and to all I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of hope and joy in the Lord.

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