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To the new metropolitan archbishops: prayer is the way out of being closed

Vatican City, 30 June 2016 – Today in St. Peter's Basilica, on the Solemnity of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, Francis blessed the pallia that will be imposed on the metropolitan archbishops during the year. The pallium – a white stole with six black crosses – is a liturgical symbol of the jurisdiction of the Pope and the metropolitan archbishops within their Churches and their Provinces, and is stored in a silver casket near the Confessio Petri. It is a sign of communion with the Apostolic See that will be imposed on each one of the archbishops by the papal representative in their respective metropolitan sees.

After the rite of the blessing of the pallia, the Holy Father presided at the Eucharistic celebration with the new metropolitan archbishops. As is usual on the Solemnity of the patron saints of Rome, the Mass was attended by a delegation from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, sent by His Holiness Bartholomew I, and headed by the Metropolitan of Boston, Methodios, Archbishop Job of Telmessos and the patriarchal deacon Nephon Tsimalis.

After the Gospel reading the Pope pronounced a homily focusing on the contrast between closing and opening, exemplified in the symbol of the keys that Jesus promises to Simon Peter so that he can "open" the entrance to the Kingdom of heaven and not to close it to the people, like some of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus had reproached. The following is the full text of the Holy Father's homily:

"The reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows us three examples of 'closing': Peter is cast into prison; the community gathers behind closed doors in prayer; and – in the continuation of our reading – Peter knocks at the closed door of the house of Mary, the mother of John called Mark, after being set free.

In these three examples of 'closing', prayer appears as the main way out. It is a way out for the community, which risks closing in on itself out of persecution and fear. It is a way out for Peter who, at the very beginning of the mission given him by the Lord, is cast into prison by Herod and risks execution. And while Peter was in prison, 'the Church prayed fervently to God for him'. The Lord responds to that prayer and sends his angel to liberate Peter, 'rescuing him from the hand of Herod'. Prayer, as humble entrustment to God and his holy will, is always the way out of our becoming 'closed', as individuals and as a community. It is always the eminent way out of our becoming 'closed'.

Paul too, writing to Timothy, speaks of his experience of liberation, of finding a way out of his own impending execution. He tells us that the Lord stood by him and gave him strength to carry out the work of evangelising the nations. But Paul speaks too of a much greater 'opening', towards an infinitely more vast horizon. It is the horizon of eternal life, which awaits him at the end of his earthly 'race'. We can see the whole life of the Apostle in terms of 'going out' in service to the Gospel. Paul's life was utterly projected forward, in bringing Christ to those who did not know him, and then in rushing, as it were, into Christ's arms, to be 'saved for his heavenly kingdom'.

Let us return to Peter. The Gospel account of his confession of faith and the mission entrusted to him by Jesus shows us that the life of Simon, the fishermen of Galilee – like the life of each of us – opens, opens up fully, when it receives from God the Father the grace of faith. Simon sets out on the journey – a long and difficult journey – that will lead him to go out of himself, leaving all his human supports behind, especially his pride tinged with courage and generous selflessness. In this, his process of liberation, the prayer of Jesus is decisive: 'I have prayed for you [Simon], that your own faith may not fail'. Likewise decisive is the compassionate gaze of the Lord after Peter had denied him three times: a gaze that pierces the heart and brings tears of repentance. At that moment, Simon Peter was set free from the prison of his selfish pride and of his fear, and overcame the temptation of closing his heart to Jesus' call to follow him along the way of the cross.

I mentioned that, in the continuation of the passage from the Acts of the Apostles, there is a detail worthy of consideration. When Peter finds himself miraculously freed from Herod's prison, he goes to the home of the mother of John called Mark. He knocks on the closed door and a servant by the name of Rhoda comes. Recognising Peter's voice, in disbelief and joy, instead of opening the door, she runs to tell her mistress. The account, which can seem comical, and which could give rise to the 'Rhoda complex', makes us perceive the climate of fear that led the Christian community to stay behind closed doors, but also closed to God's surprises. Peter knocks at the door. Behold! There is joy, there is fear... 'Do we open, do we not?...'. He is in danger, since the guards can come and take him. But fear paralyses us, it always paralyses us; it makes us close in on ourselves, closed to God's surprises. This detail speaks to us of a constant temptation for the Church, that of closing in on herself in the face of danger. But we also see the small openings through which God can work. St. Luke tells us that in that house 'many had gathered and were praying'. Prayer enable grace to open a way out from closure to openness, from fear to courage, from sadness to joy. And we can add: from division to unity. Yes, we say this today with confidence, together with our brothers from the Delegation sent by the beloved Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to take part in the celebration of the Holy Patrons of Rome. Today is also a celebration of communion for the whole Church, as seen by the presence of the metropolitan archbishops who have come for the blessing of the pallia, which they will receive from my representatives in their respective sees.

May Sts Peter and Paul intercede for us, so that we can joyfully advance on this journey, experience the liberating action of God, and bear witness to it before the world".
