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## Our Lady of Aparecida in the Vatican Gardens

This morning Pope Francis blessed a bronze image of the Virgin of Aparecida, patroness of Brazil, which will be placed in the Vatican Gardens from today. The initiative was organised by the Brazilian embassy to the Holy See and the archdiocese of Aparecida, whose archbishop, Cardinal Raymundo Damasceno Assis, announced it in 2014, at the time of the works of the Synod on the Family.

The event coincides with the approach, in 2017, of the third centenary of the discovery of the original statue in the Paraíba do Sul river. The Holy Father, just a few weeks after his election, visited several cities in Brazil, in particular Rio de Janeiro, to preside at the 28th World Youth Day. In the context of this pilgrimage, he celebrated Mass on 24 July at the famous and beloved shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, to whom he consecrated the country, and indicated a possible return to Brazil in 2017 to mark the tenth anniversary of the fifth general conference of the episcopates of Latin America and the Caribbean, reported at the time in the Brazilian media.

The statue in the Vatican Gardens depicts the moment of the discovery of the image, when in 1717 three fishermen responsible for providing fish for the banquet of the Count of Assumar, who intended to stop in the village of Giaratinguetá during a journey. The three fishermen went to the river Paraíba, and after various unsuccessful attempts they cast their nets in the area of Porto Itaguacu, and one of them found entangled in them a statue of the Virgin, without the head. They cast the nets again and this time brought up the head. Shortly after the nets were filled with fish.

For 15 years the image was conserved in the house of one of the fishermen, Felipe Pedroso, and the neighbours went there to pray the Rosary. Devotion to the image began to spread and several people who had prayed before the image affirmed that they had been granted the grace they asked for. Worship of Our Lady of Aparecida subsequently spread throughout Brazil.

As he unveiled the image this morning, the Pope expressed his joy at the presence of the statue in the Vatican Gardens, and with regard to his wish to return to Brazil in 2017, he affirmed that although he does not yet know if it will be possible, he will at least keep the statue of Our Lady of Aparecida close to him.

“I invite you to pray that she continue to protect all Brazil, all the Brazilian people, in this sad moment; that she

protect the poorest, the discarded, the abandoned elderly, children on the street; that she protect the marginalised and those who have fallen into the hands of exploiters of every kind; that she save her people with the social justice and the love of Jesus Christ, Her Son. Let us ask with love, for all the Brazilian people, that she, Mother, give her blessing. She was found by poor workers; may she be found today by all, especially those who are in need of work and education, those who are deprived of their dignity”.

He then prayed a Hail Mary with those present and they sang the hymn of Aparecida together. Francis then imparted his blessing.

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