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Audience with the Community of the Pontifical Portuguese College of Rome

At 11.40 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Community of the Pontifical Portuguese College of Rome.

The following is the full text of the Pope's address to those present:

Holy Father's Address

Dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you for coming to see me; welcome! I greet you all, especially the rector Fr. Caldas, thanking him for the kind words he addressed to me on behalf of the whole community. I also wish to express my gratitude to his colleagues, the religious sisters and the staff. I thank you especially for your prayers; For my part, I wish peace and hope in the Lord to each of you and your families and nations of origin.

In Portugal, this wish will bring - God willing - in person, in my now imminent pilgrimage to the Shrine of Fatima, where a hundred years ago the Madonna appeared to the three little shepherds. The encounter with Our Lady was for them an experience of grace that inspired their love for Jesus. As tender and good teacher, Mary introduced the little seers to the intimate knowledge of Trinitarian love and led them to savour God as the most beautiful reality of human existence. I cannot but wish the same to all of you, dear friends. Beyond every other goal that has brought you to Rome and keeps you here, may there always be this: knowing and loving Christ - as the apostle Paul would say - trying to conform increasingly to Him unto the total gift of self.

In a concrete sense you, dear priests, are called to progress, without tiring, in your Christian, priestly, pastoral, and cultural formation. Whatever your academic specialization, your first concern always remains that of growing on the path of priestly consecration, through the loving experience of God: a close and faithful God, as Blessed Francisco and Jacinta and the Servant of God Lucia felt Him to be. Today, contemplating their humble yet glorious lives, we feel drawn to entrust ourselves, too, to the care of the same Master. And this is not a novelty.

We always pray for this in to the most ancient Latin antiphon to Our Lady: "*Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genitrix*". It invites us to seek shelter under the mantle of a mother who takes us by the hand and teaches us to grow in the love of Christ and in fraternal communion.

I liked hearing Fr. Caldas say that since 1929, in the College Chapel, the gaze of the Mother of God has accompanied the supplications of those who approach the altar. Look to her and let her look upon you, because she is your Mother and loves you greatly; let her look upon you, to learn how to be more humble and also more courageous in following the Word of God; to welcome the embrace of her Son Jesus and, strengthened by this friendship, to love every person following the example and the measure of the Heart of Christ, to which the College is consecrated, finding love, hope and peace in Him. Let us look, brothers and sisters, at our Mother, who is in God's heart. The mystery of this girl from Nazareth is not extraneous to us. It is not a question of "She is there and we are here". No, we are connected. In effect, God turns His loving gaze (cf. Lk, 1:48) also to every man and every woman, calling them by name and surname! His gaze of love rests upon each one of us.

The relationship with Our Lady helps us to have a good relationship with the Church: both of them are Mothers. You know, in this respect, the comment of St. Isaac, the abbot of Stella; what can be said about Mary can be said about the Church, and also about our soul. All three are female, all three are Mothers, and all three give life. We must therefore cultivate the filial relationship with Our Lady because, if this is missing, there is something of the orphan in the heart. A priest who forgets the Mother, and especially in moments of difficulty, is lacking something. It is as if he were an orphan, while in reality he is not! He has forgotten his mother. But in moments of difficulty a child always goes to his mother. And the Word of God teaches us to be like children, weaned in the arms of the mother (cf. Sal 131:2).

In conclusion, I hope that your priestly community may continue to be a seedbed of apostles, a point of union between the Churches of your countries and Rome, joined in charity and in the living witness of God's love for humanity. With these wishes for the best future for the Pontifical Portuguese College, I impart my heartfelt apostolic blessing to the superiors, students, colleagues and to your families. And I pray to Our Lady of Fátima, that she may teach you to believe, worship, hope and love like Blessed Francisco and Jacinta, and the Servant of God Lucia. And please, do not forget to pray for me.
