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# Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis in Colombia (6-11 September 2017) – Meeting with the Executive Committee of CELAM at the Apostolic Nunciature of Bogotá

## Meeting with the Executive Committee of CELAM at the Apostolic Nunciature of Bogotá

At 15.00 this afternoon, at the apostolic nunciature in Bogotá, the Holy Father Francis met with the members of the Executive Committee of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council grouping the bishops of the 22 Episcopal Conferences of Latin America and the Caribbean). Sixty-two members of the Committee were present: five members of the Presidency, 35 bishops of the Commission and 22 General Secretaries of the Episcopal Conferences.

Introduced by greetings from the President of CELAM, Cardinal Rubén Salazar Gómez, the Pope pronounced the following discourse:

## Discourse of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers,

I thank you for our meeting and for the warm words of welcome by the President of the Latin American Episcopal Council. Were it not for the tight demands of my schedule, I would have liked to visit you at the CELAM offices. I thank you for your thoughtfulness in meeting me here.

I appreciate your efforts to make this continental Episcopal Conference a home at the service of communion and the mission of the Church in Latin America, as well as a centre for fostering a sense of discipleship and missionary spirit. Over these decades of service to communion, CELAM has also become a vital point of reference for the development of a deeper understanding of *Latin American Catholicism*. I take this occasion to encourage your recent efforts to express this collegial concern through the *Solidarity Fund of the Latin American Church*.

Four years ago, in Rio de Janeiro, I spoke to you about the pastoral legacy of Aparecida, the last synodal event of the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean. I stressed the continuing need to learn from its method,

marked in essence by the participation of the local Churches and attuned to God's pilgrim people as they seek His humble face revealed in the *Virgin fished from the waters*. That method is also reflected in the *continental mission*, which is not meant to be a collection of programmes that fill agendas and waste precious energies. Instead, it is meant to place the mission of Jesus at the heart of the Church, making it the criterion for measuring the effectiveness of her structures, the results of her labours, the fruitfulness of her ministers and the joy they awaken. For without joy, we attract no one.

I went on to mention the ever-present temptations of making the Gospel an ideology, ecclesial functionalism and clericalism. At stake is the salvation that Christ brings us, which has to touch the hearts of men and women by its power and appealing to their freedom, inviting them to a permanent exodus from themselves and their self-absorption, towards fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters.

When God speaks to us in Jesus, He does not nod vaguely to us as if we were strangers, or deliver an impersonal summons like a solicitor, or lay down rules to be followed like certain functionaries of the sacred. God speaks with the unmistakable voice of the Father to His children; He respects the mystery of man because He formed us with His own hands and gave us a meaningful purpose. Our great challenge as a Church is to speak to men and women about this closeness of God, Who considers us His sons and daughters, even when we reject His fatherhood. For Him, we are always children to be encountered anew.

The Gospel, then, cannot be reduced to a programme at the service of a trendy gnosticism, a project of social improvement or the Church conceived as a comfortable bureaucracy, any more than she can be reduced to an organization run according to modern business models by a clerical caste.

The Church is the community of Jesus' disciples. The Church is a Mystery (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 5) and a People (cf. ibid., 9). Better yet, in the Church the Mystery becomes present through God's People.

Hence my insistence that missionary discipleship is a call from God for today's busy and complicated world, a *constant setting out* with Jesus, in order to know how and where the Master lives. When we set out with Him, we come to know the will of the Father Who is always waiting for us. Only a Church which is Bride, Mother and Servant, one that has renounced the claim to control what is not her own *work* but God's, can remain with Jesus, even when the only place He can lay His head is the cross.

Closeness and encounter are the means used by God, Who in Christ has drawn near to us to continually meet us. The mystery of the Church is to be the sacrament of this divine intimacy and the perennial place of this encounter. Hence, the need for the bishop to be close to God, for in God he finds the source of his freedom, his steadfastness as a pastor and the closeness of the holy people entrusted to his care. In this closeness, the soul of the apostle learns how to make tangible God's passion for His children.

*Aparecida* is a treasure yet to be fully exploited. I am certain that each of you has seen how its richness has taken root in the Churches you hold in your hearts. Like the first disciples sent forth by Jesus on mission, we too can recount with enthusiasm *all that we have accomplished* (cf. *Mk* 6:30).

Nonetheless, we have to be attentive. The essential things in life and in the Church are never written in stone, but remain a living legacy. It is all too easy to turn them into memories and anniversaries to be celebrated: fifty years since Medellín, twenty since *Ecclesia in America*, ten since Aparecida! Something more is required: by cherishing the richness of this patrimony (*pater/munus*) and allowing it to flourish, we exercise the *munus* of our episcopal paternity towards the Church in our continent.

As you well know, the renewed awareness born of an encounter with the living Christ requires that His disciples foster their relationship with Him; otherwise, the face of the Lord is obscured, the mission is weakened, pastoral conversion falters. To pray and to foster our relationship with Him: these are the most essential and urgent activities to be carried out in our pastoral mission.

When the disciples returned excited by the mission they had carried out, Jesus said to them: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place” (*Mk* 6:31). How greatly we need to *be alone with the Lord* in order to encounter anew the heart of the Church’s mission in Latin America at the present time. How greatly we need to be recollected, within and without! Our crowded schedules, the fragmentation of reality, the rapid pace of our lives: all these things might make us lose our focus and end up in a vacuum. Recovering unity is imperative.

Where do we find unity? Always in Jesus. What makes the mission last is not the generosity and enthusiasm that burn in the heart of the missionary, even though these are always necessary. It is rather the companionship of Jesus in His Spirit. If we do not we set out with Him on our mission, we quickly become lost and risk confusing our vain needs with His cause. If our reason for setting out is not Jesus, it becomes easy to grow discouraged by the fatigue of the journey, or the resistance we meet, by constantly changing scenarios or by the weariness brought on by subtle but persistent ploys of the *enemy*.

It is not part of the mission to yield to discouragement, once our initial enthusiasm has faded and the time comes when touching the flesh of Christ becomes *very hard*. In situations like this, Jesus does not feed our fears. We know very well that to Him alone can we go, for He alone has the words of eternal life (cf. *Jn* 6:68). So we need to understand and appreciate more deeply the fact that He has chosen us.

Concretely, what does it mean to set out on mission with Jesus today, here in Latin America? The word “concretely” is not a mere figure of speech: it goes to the very heart of the matter. The Gospel is always concrete, and never an exercise in fruitless speculation. We are well aware of the recurring temptation to get lost in the cavils of the *doctors of the law*, to wonder how far we can go without losing control over our own bailiwick or our petty portion of power.

We often hear it said that *the Church* is *in a permanent state of mission*. Setting out with Jesus is the condition for this. Setting out, yes, but with Jesus. The Gospel speaks of Jesus Who, having proceeded from the Father, journeys with His disciples through the fields and the towns of Galilee. His journeying is not meaningless. As Jesus walks, He encounters people. When He meets people, He draws near to them. When He draws near to them, He talks to them. When He talks to them, He touches them with His power. When He touches them, He brings them healing and salvation. His aim in *constantly setting out* is to lead the people He meets to the Father. We must never stop reflecting on this and examining our consciences. The Church has to re-appropriate the verbs that the Word of God conjugates as He carries out His divine mission. To go forth to meet without keeping a safe distance; to take rest without being idle; to touch others without fear. It is a matter of working by day in the *fields*, where God’s people, entrusted to your care, live their lives. We cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by our air-conditioned offices, our statistics and our strategies. We have to speak to men and women in their concrete situations; we cannot avert our gaze from them. The mission is always carried out by *one to one* contact.

*A Church able to be a sacrament of unity*

What lack of focus we see all around us! I am referring not only to the squandering of our continent’s rich diversity, but also to a constant process of disintegration. We need to be attentive lest we let ourselves fall into these traps. The Church is not present in Latin America with her suitcases in hand, ready, like so many others over time, to abandon it after having plundered it. Such people look with a sense of superiority and scorn on its *mestizo* face; they want to colonize its soul with the same failed and recycled visions of man and life; they repeat the same old recipes that kill the *patient* while lining the pockets of the *doctors*. They ignore the deepest concerns present in the heart of its people, the visions and the myths that give strength in spite of frequent disappointments and failures. They manipulate politics and betray hopes, leaving behind scorched land and a terrain ready for more of the same, albeit under a new guise. Powerful figures and utopian dreams have promised magic solutions, instant answers, immediate effects. The Church, without human pretensions, respects the varied face of the continent, which she sees not as an impediment but rather a perennial source of wealth. She must continue working quietly to serve the true good of the men and women of Latin America. She must work tirelessly to build bridges, to tear down walls, to integrate diversity, to promote the culture of encounter and dialogue, to teach forgiveness and reconciliation, the sense of justice, the rejection of violence. No lasting construction in Latin America can do without this unseen yet essential foundation.

The Church appreciates like few others the deep-rooted shared wisdom that is the basis of every reality in Latin America. She lives daily with that reserve of moral values on which the life of the continent rests. I am sure that, even as I say this, you can put a name on this reality. We must constantly be in dialogue with it. We cannot lose contact with this moral substratum, with this rich soil present in the heart of our people, wherein we see the subtle yet eloquent elements that make up its *mestizo* face – not merely indigenous, Hispanic, Portuguese or African, but *mestizo*: Latin American!

*Guadalupe* and *Aparecida* are programmatic signs of the divine creativity that has bought this about and that underlies the popular piety of our people, which is part of its anthropological uniqueness and a gift by which God wants our people to come to know Him. The most luminous pages of our Church's history were written precisely when she knew how to be nourished by this richness and to speak to this hidden heart. For it guards, like a small spark beneath a coat of ashes, the sense of God and of his transcendence, a recognition of the sacredness of life, respect for creation, bonds of human solidarity, the sheer joy of living, the ability to find happiness without conditions.

To speak to this deepest soul, to speak to the most profound reality of Latin America, the Church has no other way than to continually learn from Jesus. The Gospel tells us that He spoke *only in parables* (cf. *Mk* 4:34). He used images that engaged those who heard His word and made them characters in His divine stories. God's holy and faithful people in Latin America understand no other way of speaking about Him. We are called to set out on mission not with cold and abstract concepts, but with images that keep multiplying and unfolding their power in human hearts, making them grain sown on good ground, yeast that makes the bread rise from the dough, and seed with the power to become a fruitful tree.

*A Church able to be a sacrament of hope*

Many people decry a certain deficit of hope in today's Latin America. We cannot take part in their "moaning", because we possess a hope from on high. We know all too well that the Latin American heart has been taught by hope. As a Brazilian songwriter has said, "hope dances on the tightrope with an umbrella" (João Bosco, *O Bêbado e a Equilibrista*). Once you think hope is gone, it returns where we least expect it. Our people have learned that no disappointment can crush it. It follows Christ in his meekness, even under the scourge. It knows how to rest and wait for the dawn, trusting in victory, because – deep down – it knows that it does not belong completely to this world.

The Church in these lands is, without a doubt and in a special way, a sacrament of hope. Still, there is a need to watch over how that hope takes concrete shape. The loftier it is, the more it needs to be seen on the faces of those who possess it. In asking you to keep watch over the expression of hope, I would now like to speak of some of its traits that are already visible in the Latin American Church.

*In Latin America, hope has a young face*

We often speak of young people and we often hear statistics about ours being the continent of the future. Some point to supposed shortcomings and a lack of motivation on the part of the young, while others eye their value as potential consumers. Others would enlist them in drug trafficking and violence. Pay no attention to these caricatures of young people. Look them in the eye and seek in them the courage of hope. It is not true that they want to return to the past. Make real room for them in your local Churches, invest time and resources in training them. Offer them incisive and practical educational programmes, and demand of them, as fathers demand of their children, that they use their gifts well. Teach them the joy born of living life to the full, and not superficially. Do not be content with the palaver and the proposals found in pastoral plans that never get put into practice.

I purposely chose Panama, the isthmus of this continent, as the site of the 2019 World Youth Day, which will propose the example of the Virgin Mary, who speaks of herself as a servant and is completely open to all that is asked of her (cf. *Lk* 1:38). I am certain that in all young people there is hidden an "isthmus", that in the heart of every young person there is *a small strip of land* which can serve as a path leading them to a future that God alone knows and holds for them. It is our task us to present the young with lofty ideals and to encourage them to

stake their lives on God, in imitation of the openness shown by Our Lady.

*In Latin America, hope has a woman's face*

I need not dwell on the role of women on our continent and in our Church. From their lips we learned the faith, and with their milk we took on the features of our *mestizo* soul and our immunity to despair. I think of indigenous or black mothers, I think of mothers in our cities working three jobs, I think of elderly women who serve as catechists, and I think of consecrated woman and those who quietly go about doing so much good. Without women, the Church of this continent would lose its power to be continually reborn. It is women who keep patiently kindling the flame of faith. We have a grave obligation to understand, respect, appreciate and promote the ecclesial and social impact of all that women do. They accompanied Jesus on His mission; they did not abandon Him at the foot of the cross; they alone awaited for the night of death to give back the Lord of life; they flooded the world with the proclamation of His risen presence. If we hope for a new and living chapter of faith in this continent, we will not get it without women. Please, do not let them be reduced to servants of our ingrained clericalism. For they are on the front lines of the Latin American Church, in their setting out with Jesus, in their persevering amid the sufferings of their people, in their clinging to the hope that conquers death, and in their joyful way of proclaiming to the world that Christ is alive and risen.

*In Latin America, hope passes through the hearts, the minds and the arms of the laity*

I would like to repeat something I recently said to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. It is imperative to overcome the clericalism that treats the *Christifideles laici* as children and impoverishes the identity of ordained ministers.

Though much effort has been invested and some steps have been taken, the great challenges of the continent are still on the table. They still await the quiet, responsible, competent, visionary, articulated and conscious growth of a Christian laity. Men and women believers, who are prepared to contribute to the spread of an authentic human development, the strengthening of political and social democracy, the overturning of structures of endemic poverty and the creation of an inclusive prosperity based on lasting reforms capable of preserving the common good. So too, the overcoming of inequality and the preservation of stability, the shaping of models of sustainable economic development that respect nature and the genuine future of mankind, which unfettered consumerism cannot ensure, and the rejection of violence and the defence of peace.

One more thing: in this sense, hope must always look at the world with the eyes of the poor and from the situation of the poor. Hope is poor, like the grain of wheat that dies (cf. *Jn* 12:24), yet has the power to make God's plans take root and spread.

Wealth, and the sense of self-sufficiency it brings, frequently blind us to both the reality of the desert and the oases hidden therein. It offers textbook answers and repeats platitudes; it babbles about its own empty ideas and concerns, without even coming close to reality. I am certain that in this difficult and confused, yet provisional moment that we are experiencing, we will find the solutions to the complex problems we face in that Christian simplicity hidden to the powerful yet revealed to the lowly. The simplicity of straightforward faith in the risen Lord, the warmth of communion with Him, fraternity, generosity, and the concrete solidarity that likewise wells up from our friendship with Him.

I would like to sum up all of this in a phrase that I leave to you as a synthesis, a synthesis and reminder of this meeting. *If we want to serve* this Latin America of ours from CELAM, *we have to do so with passion*, a passion that nowadays is often lacking. We need to put our heart into everything we do. We need to have the passion of young lovers and of wise elders, a passion that turns ideas into viable utopias, a passion for the work of our hands, a passion that makes us constant pilgrims in our Churches. May I say that we need to be like Saint Toribius of Mogrovejo, who was never really *installed* in his see: of the twenty-four years of his episcopacy, eighteen were passed visiting the towns of his diocese. My brothers, please, I ask you for passion, the passion of evangelization.

I commend you, my brother bishops of CELAM, the local Churches that you represent, and all the people of Latin America and the Caribbean, I commend you to the protection of Our Lady under the titles of Guadalupe and Aparecida. I do so, in the serene certainty that God who spoke to this continent with the *mestizo* and black features of his Mother, will surely make His kindly light shine in the lives of all. Thank you.

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