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Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis in Colombia (6-11 September 2017) – Meeting with priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons, seminarians and their families at “La Macarena” Events Centre, Medellín

At 16.00 this afternoon, at “La Macarena” Events Centre in Medellín, the Holy Father Francis met with priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons, seminarians and their families. The relics of Mother Laura, the first saint canonised by Pope Francis on 12 May 2013, were present on the stage.

After the liturgical greeting, an address from the auxiliary bishop of Medellín and the official responsible for vocations for the Colombian Episcopal Council, H.E. Msgr. Elkin Fernando Álvarez Botero, testimonies were heard from a priest, a cloistered nun and a family. Then, after the readings, the Pope gave the following address:

Holy Father’s Address

Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Priests, Men and Women Religious, and Seminarians,
Dear Families, Dear “Paisas”!

The parable of the true vine which we have just heard from the Gospel of John is given within the context of Jesus’ Last Supper. In that intimate moment, marked by a certain tension but full of love, the Lord washed the feet of his disciples, and wished to perpetuate his memory in the bread and wine, as he spoke from the depths of his heart to those he loved the most.

In this first “Eucharistic” night, in this first sunset after his example of service, Jesus opens his heart; he entrusts to them his testament. Just as the Apostles, some women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus (cf. *Acts* 1: 13-14) continued to meet in that Upper Room, so too we are gathered here together to listen to him, and to listen to one another. Sister Leidy of Saint Joseph, María Isabel and Father Juan Felipe have offered us their testimonies... So also each of us here could share our own vocation story. And all these would converge in our experience of Jesus who comes to meet us, who chooses us first, thus seizing our hearts. As Aparecida says: “Knowing Jesus

is the best gift that any person can receive; that we have encountered him is the best thing that has happened in our lives, and making him known by our word and deeds is our joy” (*Aparecida Document*, 29), the joy of evangelizing.

Many of you, young people, have discovered the living Jesus in your communities; communities with a contagious apostolic zeal, which inspire and attract others. Where there is life, zeal, the desire to take Christ to others, genuine vocations arise; the fraternal and fervent life of the community awakens the yearning to devote oneself entirely to God and to evangelization (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 107). Young people are naturally restless or am I mistaken? I'd like to reflect briefly now on a painful memory, by way of parenthesis. Young people are naturally restless, a restlessness that is often betrayed, destroyed by drug pushers. Medellin reminds me of this, and makes me think of so many young lives cut short, discarded, destroyed. I invite you to remember, to accompany this tragic procession, to ask forgiveness for those who destroy the ideals of so many young people, to ask the Lord for their conversion of heart, to ask that this destruction of youth be brought to an end. Young people are naturally restless and, although there is a crisis of commitment and of communitarian relationships, many of them stand together against the evils of the world and become involved in various forms of concerted action and voluntary work; there are many. And, yes, some are practising Catholics, others are “rosewater” Catholics – as my grandmother used to say – and others don't know if they believe or not, but the restlessness drives them into taking action for others, this restless concern helps to fill voluntary organizations with many young faces. Such restless concern needs to be channelled. When they do so for Jesus, feeling that they are a part of the community, they become “street preachers (*callejeros de la fe*)”, to bring Jesus Christ to every street, every town square and every corner of the earth (cf. *ibid.* 106). And how many, without knowing, bring Jesus. A richness that consists in preaching through service, being bearers of a faith that perhaps even they do not fully understand: a witness that opens us to the action of the Holy Spirit who fills and drives our hearts.

On one of my trips, World Youth Day in Poland [Krakow 2016], during a lunch with 15 young people and the Archbishop, one of them asked me: “What can I tell my young friend who is an atheist, who does not believe, what reasoning can I use?”. And it struck me how to reply: Look, the last thing you must do is say anything. He just stared at me. Begin to do, to act in such a way that the restlessness within him becomes a curiosity and then he questions you. And when he questions you, when he asks for your experience, that's when you can say something. It is so important to be a bearer, a bearer of faith, a bearer of life.

This is the vine which Jesus refers to in the text we have just proclaimed: that vine which is the entire “people of the covenant”. The prophets, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, refer to the people as a vine, as does Psalm 80, which says: “You brought a vine out of Egypt... You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land” (vv. 9-10). At times they express the joy of God contemplating the vine, at other times his anger, bewilderment or disappointment; yet he never, he never forgets his vine, he never ceases to feel their distance – if I move away, he suffers in his heart – he never ceases to go out to them, who, when they turn away from him, dry up, burn away and are destroyed.

How is the land, the sustenance, the support where this vine is growing in Colombia? Under what conditions are the vocational fruits of special consecration born? No doubt in situations full of contradictions, of light and darkness, of complex relational realities. We all would like to count on a world with straightforward families and relationships, but we are a part of this changing age, of this cultural crisis and, in the midst of it, in response to it, God continues to call. So they'd better not come to me saying: “Of course there is a shortage of vocations to special forms of consecration due to the crisis we are living”. Do you know what this is? This is nonsense! Are we clear? Even within this crisis, God still calls. It would be almost unrealistic to think that all of you heard the call of God in the midst of families sustained by a strong love and full of values such as generosity, compromise, fidelity and patience (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 5); some yes, but not all. Some families are like this, and I pray to God that they are many. But keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground means recognizing that our vocational experiences, the awakening of God's call, brings us closer to what God's word already reveals and to what Colombia knows so well: “This thread of suffering and bloodshed runs through numerous pages of the Bible, beginning with Cain's murder of his brother Abel. We read of the disputes between the sons and the wives of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the tragedies and violence marking the family of David, the family problems reflected in the story of Tobias and the bitter complaint of Job” (*ibid.*, 20). And it has been this way since the beginning: don't think of an ideal situation, for this situation is the real one. God manifests his

closeness and his election where he wills, in the land he wills, in whatever situation it is in, with its real contradictions, as he wills. He changes the course of events to call men and women in the frailty of their own personal and shared history. The night before last, a girl with special abilities who formed part of the welcoming group at the Nunciature said that at the heart of humanity is a vulnerability and she explained why. I felt the need to ask her: are we all vulnerable? She replied: "Yes". But I asked: Is there anyone who is not vulnerable? She answered: "God". Yet God wished to become vulnerable and go out to share his news with us, he wished to go out and live with us as we are, he wished to become man in the midst of contradictions, in the midst of something incomprehensible, through the "yes" of a girl who did not understand yet obeyed and through a just man who did what he was asked to do. But all this in the midst of contradictions. Let us not be afraid of this complex world! God always brings about the miracle of producing good clusters on the vine, like *arepas* at breakfast. May there be vocations in every community and in every family in Medellín! And when at breakfast you find one of those delicious surprises, just say: "How good! Can God do something with me?". Ask him before eating the *arepa*, ask him.

This vine – which is Jesus' vine – has the characteristic of being true. He has used this term before on other occasions in the Gospel of John: true light, true bread from heaven, and true testimony. Now, truth is not something that we receive – as bread or light – but rather what springs up from within. We are a people chosen for the truth, and our call has to be in truth. There can be no place for deceit, hypocrisy or small-mindedness if we are branches of that vine, if our vocation is grafted onto Jesus. We must all be careful that every branch fulfils its purpose: to bear fruit. Am I willing to bear fruit? From the start, those who accompany the vocational process need to encourage a right intention, in other words, that genuine desire to be configured to Jesus, the shepherd, the friend, the spouse. When these processes are not nourished by this true sap that is the Spirit of Jesus, then we experience dryness and God learns with sadness that these branches are already dead. Vocations associated with special consecrations die when they love to be sustained with honours, when they are driven by a search for personal reassurance and social advancement, when the motivation is "to climb the ladder", to cleave to material interests and to strive shamefully for financial gain. I have said before on other occasions, and I want to repeat it as something which is true and certain. Please never forget: the devil enters through the wallet, always. This not only applies to the early stages of vocation; all of us have to be careful because the corrupting of men and women in the Church begins in this way, little by little, and then – as Jesus himself says – it takes root in the heart and it ends up dislodging God from our lives. "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6:21, 24). Jesus says: "You cannot serve two masters". In other words, there seem to be only two masters in the world, and you cannot serve God and money. Jesus refers to the master of money, what does he mean? These words mean that if that master grabs hold of you, he will not let go, he will be master of your heart from within, so take care. We cannot take advantage of our religious state and the goodness of our people in order to be served and gain material benefits.

There are some situations, customs and choices that show signs of dryness and death. When does this happen? Such things cannot keep hindering the flow of sap that nourishes and gives life! The poison of lies, obfuscation, manipulation and the abuse of the People of God, the weak and especially the elderly and young, can have no place in our communities. When does this happen? It happens when a consecrated person, a community, an institution – be it called a parish or something else – chooses a way of life that is like a dry branch. All that one can do is wait for the Lord to come and cut it off.

And God does not only cut away; the allegory goes on to say that God purifies the vine of its imperfections. This purification is so good! It is painful but it is good. The promise is that we will bear fruit, and abundantly, just like the grain of wheat, if we are able to give ourselves, to offer our lives freely. In Colombia, there are examples that this is possible. We remember Saint Laura Montoya, a remarkable religious whose relics are here. She, who going forth from this city, gave herself completely to a great missionary effort on behalf of indigenous people throughout the country. A consecrated woman. How much we can learn from her: that silent and selfless surrender, with no greater desire than to transmit the maternal face of God. So too we remember Blessed Mariano de Jesús Euse Hoyos, one of the first students of the Seminary of Medellín, and other Colombian priests and women religious, whose canonization processes have begun; as well as so many others, thousands of unknown Colombians who in the simplicity of their daily lives knew how to give of themselves for the Gospel, and whom you surely hold dear in your memory and who encourage you in your own commitment. They all show us that it is possible to respond faithfully to the Lord's call, that it is possible to bear much fruit, even today, in

these times and in this place.

The good news is that the Lord is willing to cleanse us. The good news is that we are not yet cut off, for we are “work in progress”, like good disciples on a journey. How does Jesus eliminate those things which lead to death and which take hold of our lives and distort his call? By inviting us to dwell in him. Dwelling does not only signify being, but rather also indicates maintaining a relationship that is alive, existential and absolutely necessary; it means to live and grow in a fruitful union with Jesus, “the source of eternal life”. Dwelling in Jesus cannot be a merely passive act or a simple abandonment without any consequences in our daily lives. It always brings consequences, always. And allow me to propose – and this is getting quite long [They reply: “No!”] Well you wouldn’t say “yes” so I don’t believe you! – allow me to propose three ways of making this “dwelling” effective, in other words, three ways that can help you dwell, remain, in Jesus:

1 Dwelling in Jesus by touching the humanity of Jesus:

With the gaze and attitude of Jesus, who contemplates reality not as a judge, but rather as a good Samaritan; who recognizes the value of the people who walk with him, as well as their wounds and sins; who discovers their silent suffering and who is moved by peoples’ needs, above all when they are overwhelmed by injustice, inhumane poverty, indifference or by the perverse actions of corruption and violence.

With Jesus’ gestures and words, which express love for those nearby and search for those far away; tender and firm in denouncing sin and in announcing the Gospel, joyful and generous in surrendering and in service, especially for the smallest among us, steadfastly rejecting the temptation to believe that all is lost, to accommodate ourselves or to become mere administrators of misfortune. How many times do we hear of male and female consecrated persons who instead of administering joy, growth and life, seem to administer misfortune, always complaining about the hardships of the world. This is the sterility of those who are incapable of touching the suffering flesh of Jesus.

2 Dwelling by contemplating his divinity:

Awakening and sustaining an admiration for the study which increases knowledge of Christ because, as Saint Augustine reminds us, we cannot love someone we do not know (cf. Saint Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book X, ch. I, 3).

Giving priority, in this way of knowing, to the encounter with Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospel where Christ speaks to us, reveals his unconditional love for the Father, and instils the joy that comes from obedience to his will and the service of our brothers and sisters. I want to ask you a question, but don’t reply aloud, only in the silence of your hearts. How many minutes or hours do I spend daily reading the Gospel or other parts of Sacred Scriptures? Answer in your hearts. Whoever does not know the Scriptures, does not know Jesus. Whoever does not love the Scriptures, does not love Jesus (cf. Saint Jerome, *Preface to the Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, PL 24, 17). Let us spend time prayerfully reading the Word of God, listening to what God wishes for us and for our people.

May all of our study help us to interpret reality with the eyes of God, that it may not be a way of avoiding what is happening to our people, nor be subject to the whim of fashions or ideologies. May our study not be overcome by nostalgia or the tendency to confine the mystery, nor may it be unwilling to respond to questions that people no longer ask themselves, and may it not abandon those who find themselves in an existential void and who question us from their worlds and cultures.

Dwelling in and contemplating his divinity by making prayer a fundamental part of our lives and our apostolic service. Prayer frees us from the burden of worldliness, and teaches us to live joyfully, to distance ourselves from superficiality, in an exercise of true freedom. In prayer we grow in freedom, in prayer we learn to be free. Prayer draws us out of our self-centredness, from being reclusive in an empty religious experience; it leads us to place ourselves, with docility, in the hands of God in order to fulfil his will and to realize his plan of salvation. In prayer. And I want to offer you some advice here: ask, contemplate, thank, intercede, but also be familiar with the need to adore. It is not very fashionable to adore. Grow accustomed to adoring. To learn to adore in silence. Learn to pray in this way.

Let us be men and women who have been reconciled in order to reconcile. Being called does not give us a certificate of right conduct and sinlessness; we are not clothed in an aura of holiness. “Woe” to the consecrated person, the priest or the nun who lives with “a prayer card face”, please: “Woe”. We are all sinners and we all need forgiveness and God’s mercy to rise each day. He uproots whatever is not good in us, as well as the wrong we have done, casting it out of the vineyard to be burned up. He cleanses us so that we may bear fruit. This is the merciful fidelity that God shows his people, of which we are part. He will never leave us at the side of the road, never. God does everything to prevent sin from defeating us and subsequently closing the doors of our lives to a future of hope and joy. He does everything to prevent this, and if he does not achieve this, he waits at one side until I am inclined to look up, until I realize that I have fallen. This is how he is with us.

3 Finally, dwelling in Christ in order to live joyfully. This is the third way, to remain in him in order to live joyfully. If we remain in him, his joy will be in us. We will not be sad disciples and bitter apostles. Read the end of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [the Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI], I recommend this. On the contrary, we will reflect and be heralds of true happiness, a complete joy that no one will be able to take away from us. We will spread the hope of a new life that Christ has given to us. God’s call is not a heavy burden that robs us of joy. Is it burdensome? Sometimes, but it never robs us of joy. Through that burden God also gives us joy. He does not want us to be immersed in sadness – one of the evil spirits that takes over the soul and which the monks of the desert used to denounce – God does not want us to be immersed in a weariness that comes from activities lived poorly, but rather wants a spirituality that brings joy to our lives and even to our weariness. Our contagious joy must be our first testimony to the closeness and love of God. We are true dispensers of God’s grace when we reflect the joy that comes from encountering him.

In the Book of Genesis, after the flood, Noah planted a vine as a sign of a new beginning; at the end of the Exodus, Moses sent scouts to inspect the promised land, who returned with a cluster of grapes about this size [Holy Father indicates this with a gesture], a sign that in the land flowed milk and honey. God has looked upon us, our communities and our families, they are present here and it seems to me a wonderful detail that with us also are the fathers and mothers of the consecrated persons, priests and seminarians. God has looked upon us, upon our communities and families. The Lord has cast his gaze on Colombia: you are a sign of this loving election. It is now up to us to offer all our love and service while being united to Jesus, who is our vine. To be the promise of a new beginning for Colombia, that leaves behind the floods – as Noah’s - of discord and violence, a Colombia that wants to bear abundant fruits of justice and peace, of encounter and solidarity. May God bless you; may he bless the consecrated life in Colombia. And, please, do not forget to pray for me, so that he may bless me also. Thank you.

At the end of the meeting, after the final blessing, the Holy Father transferred to the “José M. Córdoba” Airport in Rionegro, where he boarded an Avianca A321 destined for the CATAM military air base of Bogotá. He returned by car to the apostolic nunciature where, upon arrival, he was welcomed by a group of consecrated persons, newlyweds and couples celebrating their gold and silver wedding anniversaries.
