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Letter of the Holy Father to the bishop of Japan on the occasion of the pastoral visit of Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples (17-26 September)

The following is the Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the bishops of Japan on the occasion of the pastoral visit of Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples (17-26 September 2017):

Letter of the Holy Father

Dear brothers in the episcopate,

The pastoral visit of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples offers me the opportunity to convey to you my cordial greeting, recalling our meeting during your *ad Limina* visit in March 2015.

I wish to confide to you that, every time I think of the Church in Japan, my thoughts turn to the witness of the many martyrs who offered their life for the faith. They have always had a special place in my heart: I think of Saint Paul Miki and his companions, who were sacrificed in 1597, faithful to Christ and to the Church; I think of the innumerable confessors of the faith, of the Blessed Justus Takayama Ukon, who in the same period preferred poverty and the life of exile to abjuring the name of Jesus. And what can we say of the so-called “hidden Christians”, who from 1600 until the mid-1800s lived clandestine lives so as not to abjure, but rather to preserve their faith and whom we recently commemorated on the 150th anniversary of their discovery? The many martyrs and confessors of the faith, diverse by nationality, language, social class and age, have in common a profound love for the Son of God, renouncing their civil status or other aspects of their social condition, “in order that [they] may gain Christ” (*Phil* 3: 8).

Remembering such a spiritual heritage, it is dear to me to address you, Brothers who have inherited and with such delicate care continue the task of evangelisation, especially taking care of the weakest and favouring their integration in the communities of the faithful of various origins. I wish to thank you for this, and also for your commitment in cultural development, interreligious dialogue and care for creation. I wish, in particular, to reflect

with you on the missionary effort of the Church in Japan. If “the Church was born catholic, that is to say she was born ‘outward-bound’, that she was born missionary” (*General Audience*, 17.9.2014). Indeed, “the love of Christ controls us” (2 *Cor* 5: 14), driving us to offer our life for the Gospel. Such dynamism dies if we lose our missionary enthusiasm. Therefore, “life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10).

I focus on the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth; ... you are the light of the world” (*Mt* 5: 13-14). The salt and light function for a service. The Church, as salt, has the task of preserving from corruption and of giving flavour; as light, she prevents darkness from prevailing, ensuring a clear view of reality and the reason for existence. These words are also a strong appeal to fidelity and authenticity; that is, it is necessary for salt to truly give flavour and for light to vanquish darkness. The Kingdom of Heaven – as Jesus speaks of it – is presented initially with the poverty of a little leaven or of a small seed; this symbolism reproduces well the current situation of the Church in the context of the Japanese world. Jesus has entrusted to her a great spiritual and moral mission. I am well aware that there exist not a few difficulties due to a lack of clergy and of men and women religious, and of limited participation by lay faithful. But the scarcity of workers cannot reduce the commitment to evangelisation: rather, it is an opportunity that stimulates us to seek them incessantly, like the master of a vineyard who goes out at all hours in search of new workers for his vines (cf *Mt* 20: 1-7).

Dear brothers, the challenges that the current situation places before us cannot make us resigned, neither should it lead to an irenic and paralysing dialogue, even if some problematic situations give rise to a number of concerns; I refer, for example, to the high divorce rates, suicide among the young, people who choose to live totally detached from social life (*hikikomori*), religious and spiritual formalism, moral relativism, religious indifference, and obsession with work and earning money. It is equally true that a society that races ahead in economic development also creates among you the poor, marginalised and excluded; I think not only of those who are materially, but also spiritually and morally poor. In this very specific context, there is an urgent need for the Church in Japan to constantly renew her choice for the mission of Jesus and that she be salt and light. The genuine evangelising force of your Church, which comes also from having been a Church of martyrs and confessors of the faith, is a great asset to protect and develop.

To this end, I would like to underline the need for a solid and integral priestly and religious formation, a particularly urgent task today, especially due to the spread of the “throwaway culture” (*Meeting with seminarians and novices*, 6.7.2013). This type of mentality leads the young in particular to think that it is not possible to love truly, that nothing stable exists and that everything, love included, is relative to the circumstances and needs of sentiments. An important step in priestly and religious formation is therefore to help those who undertake such a journey to understand and experience deeply the characteristics of love as taught by Jesus, which is free, involves the sacrifice of the self, and is merciful forgiveness. This experience makes it possible to go against the grain and to trust in the Lord, Who does not let us down. It is the witness that Japanese society thirsts for greatly.

I wish to say another word on ecclesial movements approved by the Apostolic See. With the evangelising impulse and their witness, they can be of help in pastoral service and in the *missio ad gentes*. In recent decades, in fact, the Holy Spirit has inspired in the Church men and women who intend, by their participation, to enliven the world in which they work, not infrequently involving priests and religious, who are also members of that People whom God calls to fully live their mission. Such situations contribute to the work of evangelisation; as bishops, we are called upon to know and to accompany the charisms they bear and make them participants in our work in the context of pastoral integration.

Dear brothers in the episcopate, I entrust each one of you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and I assure you of my closeness and prayer. May the Lord send workers to His Church in Japan and support you with His consolation. Thank you for your ecclesial service. I extend to you, to the Church in Japan and to her noble population my apostolic blessing, while I ask you not to forget me in your prayers.

FRANCIS

From the Vatican, 14 September 2017

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
