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Live link-up of the Holy Father Francis with the International Space Station

At 15.00 this afternoon, in the Study of the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis communicated by live audiovisual connection with the crew of *Expedition 53* on board the International Space Station, in flight 400 km above the Earth.

The crew is composed of: Randolph Bresnik (U.S.A.), NASA Commander; Paolo Nespoli (Italy), ESA engineer; Mark T. Vande Hei (U.S.A.), NASA engineer; Joseph Acaba (U.S.A., of Puerto Rican origin), NASA engineer; Sergey Ryazanskiy (Russia), engineer; and Aleksandr Misurkin (Russia), engineer.

Roberto Battiston, president of the Italian Space Agency (ASI) and Josef Aschbacher, director of the Earth Observation Programs of the European Space Agency (ESA), were present during the live link-up, which lasted approximately twenty minutes.

The Pope addressed five questions to the astronauts, concluding the link with a final greeting.

The following is the text of the conversation between the Holy Father and the astronauts.

Dialogue between the Holy Father and the astronauts

Holy Father: Good morning to you all!

Paolo Nespoli: His Holiness, Good Morning. Welcome to the International Space Station, and welcome among us, the crew of Expeditions 52 and 53.

Holy Father: Good morning... or good evening, because, when you are in space, you never know! Dear Dr. Nespoli, dear astronauts, I think that the days unfold in a different way in the Space Station, right? I thank you and those who have organized this link-up, which gives me the opportunity to “meet” you and to ask you some

questions.

I will begin straight away with the first question.

(*Question 1.*) Astronomy makes us contemplate the boundless horizons of the universe, and raises questions in us: where are we from? Where are we going? I ask you, Dr. Nespoli: in the light of your experiences in space, what are your thoughts regarding man's place in the universe?

Nespoli: Holy Father, this is a complex question. I feel I am a technical person, an engineer, I am comfortable with machines, with experiments; but when we talk about these far more intimate things - "where we come from" - I too am also perplexed. It is a very delicate issue. I think our aim here is to know our being, to fill our knowledge, to understand what is around us. And besides it is interesting, because the more we know, the more we realize we in fact know little. I would love people like you, not just engineers, not just physicists, but people like you - theologians, philosophers, poets, writers ... - to be able to come here into space, and this will surely be the future; I would like them to come here to explore what it means for a human being to be in space.

Holy Father: What you say is true.

(*Question 2.*) In this room from where I am speaking, there is - as you can see - an artistic tapestry inspired by the famous verse with which Dante concludes the Divine Comedy: "L'mor che move il sole e l'altre stelle", "the love that moves the sun and other stars" (Paradise, XXXIII, 145). I ask you: what is the sense for you - all engineers and astronauts - as you said well, what sense has it for you to call "love" the force that moves the universe?

Nespoli: Holy Father, I would like to leave the word to my Russian colleague **Aleksandr Misurkin**, who will address you to Russian.

[Russian words]

Holy Father, I hope we did not surprise you by speaking in Russian: are you able to have a translation there or do we need to summarize it quickly?

Holy Father: It is best to summarize quickly.

Nespoli: My colleague Aleksandr gave a very nice answer in Russian, of which I will now give a quick rough translation. He refers to a book he is reading these days up here, to reflect, Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince". He refers to the story that he willingly gives - or would willingly give - his own life to return and save plants and animals on earth. And, basically, love is that force that gives you the ability to give your life for someone else.

Holy Father: I like this answer. It is true, without love, you can not give up your life for someone else. This is true. It is clear that you have understood the message that Saint-Exupéry explains so poetically, and which you, Russians, have in your blood, in your tradition that is so humanistic and so religious. This is beautiful. Thank you.

(*Question 3.*) This is a curiosity. They say that women are curious, but we men are also curious! What inspired you to become astronauts? What gives you the greatest joy in the time you spend in the space station?

Nespoli: Holy Father, I will leave the microphone with two colleagues: my Russian colleague **Sergei Ryazansky** and my American colleague **Randy Bresnik**.

[Dr. Ryazansky speaks in English]

Nespoli translates: Sergei said that his inspiration was his grandfather: his grandfather was one of the first pioneers in space; he worked on the Sputnik satellite, the first satellite that flew from Earth. He was one of the leaders in the construction of the satellite, and [Sergei] was inspired by his grandfather, he wanted to follow in his footsteps, because in his opinion space is not only interesting and beautiful, but also very important to us as human beings.

[Bresnik speaks English]

Nespoli: He says, what I see from here is an incredible perspective: it is the opportunity to see Earth a little as God does, and to see the indescribable beauty of this planet.

[Bresnik continues in English]

Nespoli translates: At our orbit speed of 10 km per second, we see Earth with different eyes: we see an Earth without boundaries, we see an Earth where the atmosphere is extremely fine and fragile, and looking at the Earth in this way allows us to think of how human beings, of how all of us should work together and collaborate for a better future.

Holy Father: I liked everything that you two said in your answers. You, the first, returned to your roots to explain this: you returned to your grandfather. And you, from America, you have succeeded in understanding that the Earth is too fragile, it is a moment that passes – at 10 km per second, Dr. Nespoli said. It is a very fragile reality, an atmosphere so fine it can be destroyed. And you looked, precisely with God's eyes. The grandfather and God: our roots and our hope, our strength. Never forget your roots: it is very good for me to hear this, to hear it from you. Thank you!

(*Question 4.*) I would like to ask you another question: travelling in space modifies many things that we take for granted in daily life, such as the idea of “up” and “down”. I ask you: is there something in particular that has surprised you about living in the Space Station? And, on the contrary, is there anything that has struck you precisely because it has been confirmed there too, in such a different context?

Nespoli: Thank you, Holy Father, for this question. I will leave the word to my American colleague **Mark Vande Hei**.

[Vande Hei speaks in English]

Nespoli translates: Mark says that what has surprised him is that in space you find things completely different that seem the same but are unrecognizable. Every now and then I approach something from a completely different angle and at the beginning I find it a bit unsettling as I am not able to understand where I am or what it is. What has not changed, however, is that even here where there is no longer an “up” or “down”, in order to understand where I am and find myself in that situation, I have to decide where “up” is and where “down” is. And so I establish my own microcosm, my micro-universe with my senses and my systems of reference.

Holy Father: And this is something typically human: the capacity to decide, for decision. Your answer seems interesting because it goes also to our human roots.

(*Question 5.*) And now, if you may be so kind as to listen, I will ask another question. Our society is very individualistic, and instead in life collaboration is essential. I think of all the work that is behind an endeavour such as yours. Can you give me a significant example of your collaboration in the Space Station?

Nespoli: Holy Father, it is an excellent question. I will leave the answer to my American colleague Joe Acaba, of Puerto Rican origin.

Joe Acaba: Holy Father, it is a great honour to speak with you. [Continues in English].

Nespoli: Joe recalled that in this Station there is cooperation between different nations from around the world: there are the United States, Russia, Japan, Canada, nine European nations... And he commented on how these nations work together to obtain something that is beyond each one of us. But one of the important and interesting things he said is the fact that we bring diversity, and these diversities, brought together, make a whole that is much greater than what the individual person would be; and working together in this way, in this collaborative spirit to go beyond, this is the way that we, as human beings, can come out of the world and continue our voyage in knowledge.

Holy Father: You are a little "Glass Palace"! The total is greater than the sum of the parts, and this is the example you give to us.

Many thanks, dear friends – or, I would like to say, dear brothers, because we see you as representatives of all the human family in the great research project that is the Space Station. I thank you heartily for this interview, which has enriched me greatly. May the Lord bless you, your work and your families. I assure you, I will pray for you, and please, pray for me. Thank you!

Nespoli: Holy Father, on behalf of all of us, I want to thank you for being with us today, on the International Space Station. This is a place where we do a lot of research, where we go in search of things every day. I thank you for being with us and for having lifted us a little higher, for bringing us out of mechanical daily life, of making us think about things that are greater than us. Thank you again!

Holy Father: Thank you!
