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Apostolic Trip of His Holiness Francis to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (22-25 September 2018) – Meeting with priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons and seminarians

After greeting twenty people including benefactors and collaborators, the Holy Father transferred to the Cathedral of Kaunas where at 14.40 (13.40 in Rome) the meeting with priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons and seminarians took place.

Upon arrival by popemobile, the Pope was received at the main entrance of the Cathedral by the parish priest, a man and woman religious, and a seminarian.

The Holy Father then proceeded along the central nave up to the apse where a man and woman religious presented him some flowers, laid in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, where he paused in silent prayer for a few minutes. Before leaving the Chapel, Pope Francis greeted a group of religious present, addressing some extemporaneous remarks to them.

After the entrance hymn, H.E. Msgr. Linas Vodopjanovas, O.F.M., bishop of Panevėžys and responsible for consecrated life, gave a welcome address to the Pope and, after a prayer and bible reading, the Holy Father pronounced his address.

At the end of the meeting, the Pope imparted his blessing. He then transferred by car to the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.

The following is the Holy Father's address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good afternoon!

Before all else, I would like to say a word about what I am feeling. Looking out at you, I see many martyrs behind you. Anonymous martyrs, in the sense that we do not even know where they were buried. Also, one among you: I greeted one who knew what it meant to be in prison. A word comes to mind at the outset: *do not forget, remember*. You are the children of martyrs, that is your strength. And may the spirit of the world not tell you something different than what your forebears experienced. Remember your martyrs and follow their example: they were not afraid. Speaking with Bishops, your Bishops, today, they said: "What can we do to introduce the cause of beatification for the many for whom we have no documents, but we know that they are martyrs?" It is comforting, it is good to hear this: the concern for those who gave us their witness. They are saints.

The Bishop [Linas Vodopjanovas, OFM, in charge of consecrated life] spoke without any nuances – that's how Franciscans speak: "Today, often, in various ways, our faith gets put to the test", he said. He was not thinking of persecution by dictators, no. "After having answered the call of a vocation, we often no longer experience joy, neither in prayer nor in community life".

The spirit of secularization, of boredom with everything concerning the community, is the temptation of the next generation. Our fathers and mothers struggled, suffered, were imprisoned and we perhaps do not have the strength to go forward. Take this into account!

The Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us: "Do not forget the former days. Do not forget your elders" (cf. 10:32-39). This is the plea that I wish to make to you at the outset.

My entire visit to your country has been summed up in one expression: "Jesus Christ, our hope". Now, as this day draws to its close, we have heard a text of the apostle Paul that invites us to hope with perseverance. Paul tells us this after having proclaimed to us God's dream for every human being, and indeed for all creation: "God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him" (*Rom 8:28*). He "straightens" all things: that would be the literal translation.

Today I would like to share with you some aspects of this hope: aspects that we – as priests, seminarians, consecrated men and women – are asked to embody in our lives.

First, before his invitation to hope, Paul repeats three times the word "groan": creation groans, men and women groan, the Spirit groans within us (cf. *Rom 8:22-23.26*). This groaning comes from an enslavement of corruption, from a yearning for fulfilment. Today we would do well to ask if we ourselves groan inwardly, or whether our hearts are still, no longer yearning for the living God. As your Bishop was saying: "We no longer experience joy in prayer or in community life".

Ours should be the longing of the deer for springs of water as we seek God's mystery, his truth and his beauty. Dear friends, we are not "God's bureaucrats"! Perhaps our "prosperous society" keeps us sated, surrounded by services and material objects; we end up "stuffed" with everything and filled by nothing. Perhaps it keeps us distracted and entertained, but not fulfilled. Even worse: sometimes we no longer feel hunger. As men and women of special consecration, we can never afford to lose that inward groaning, that restlessness of heart that finds its rest in the Lord alone (SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, I,1.1). The restlessness of the heart. No instant news, no virtual communication can substitute for our need of concrete, prolonged and regular moments – calling for sustained effort – our need of daily dialogue with the Lord through prayer and adoration. We need to keep cultivating our desire for God, as Saint John of the Cross wrote. This is what he said: "Try to be continuous in prayer, and in the midst of bodily exercises, do not leave it. Whether you eat, drink, talk with others, or do anything, always go to God and attach your heart to him" (*Counsels to a Religious on How to Attain Perfection*, 9b).

This groaning can also come from our contemplation of the world around us, as a protest against the unsatisfied needs of our poorest brothers and sisters, before the absence of meaning in the lives of our young, the loneliness experienced by the elderly, the misuse of creation. It is a groaning that would mobilize efforts to shape events in our nation, in our cities, not by acting as a pressure group or in a bid for power, but in service to all. We too should be moved by the cry of our people, like Moses before the burning bush, when God spoke to him of

the suffering of his people (cf. *Ex* 3:9). Listening to God's voice in prayer makes us see, makes us hear and feel the pain of others, in order to set them free. Yet we should also be concerned when our people stop groaning, when they stop seeking water to quench their thirst. At those times, we need to discern what is silencing the voice of our people.

The cry that makes us turn to God in prayer and adoration is the same that makes us sensitive to the plea of our brothers and sisters. They put their "hope" in us, and they require us to discern carefully and then to organize, boldly and creatively, our apostolic outreach. May our presence not be haphazard but one that can genuinely respond to the needs of God's people, and thus be leaven in the dough (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33).

The apostle also speaks of *perseverance*: constancy in suffering and in the pursuit of goodness. This calls for our being centred in God, firmly rooted in him and faithful to his love.

The older among you – and here how can I fail to mention Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevičius – know what it is to bear witness to this constancy in suffering, this "hoping against hope" (cf. *Rom* 4:18). The violence you endured for your defence of civil and religious freedom, the violence of slander, imprisonment and deportation, could not prevail over your faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of history. You have much to tell us and teach us. Yet you also have much advice to give, without the need to pass judgement on the apparent limitations of the young. And you, the young, when you meet with little frustrations that can discourage you and make you want to turn in on yourselves, seeking activities and pastimes at odds with your consecration, go back to your roots and consider the path taken by your elders. I see that there are young people here. I am repeating this, because some are young. And you, younger ones, when faced with the little frustrations that discourage you, you tend to close in on yourselves, to resort to behaviour and escapism that is not consistent with your consecration. Seek out your roots and keep to the path that your elders walked. It is better to take a different path than that you live in mediocrity. That was for the young. You are still in time, and the door is still open. It is tribulation that brings out what is distinctive about Christian hope. For when our hope is merely human, we can become frustrated and end in failure. That does not happen with Christian hope: it is renewed and purified when tested by tribulation.

It is true that we are living in different times and situations, but it is also true that this advice proves most helpful when those who experienced those hardships do not keep them to themselves but share them with others. Their stories are simply expressions of nostalgia for times past, as if they were somehow better, or veiled criticisms of those who have a more fragile emotional makeup. A community of disciples can draw upon great resources of constancy if it can integrate – like the scribe in the Gospel – both new and old (cf. *Mt* 13:52), if it is conscious that historical experiences are the roots that enable the tree to grow and flourish.

Finally, looking to Jesus Christ as our hope means *identifying ourselves with him, sharing as a community in his lot*. For the apostle Paul, the salvation we await is not merely negative: freedom from some internal or external, historical or eschatological tribulation. Paul instead speaks of it as something supremely positive: our sharing in the glorious life of Christ (cf. *1 Thess* 5:9-10), our sharing in his glorious kingdom (cf. *2 Tim* 4:18), the redemption of our bodies (cf. *Rom* 8:23-24). Each of you should try to glimpse the mysterious and unique plan that God has for him or her, for each one of us. For no one can ever know us as profoundly as God does. He calls us to something apparently impossible; he gambles on us, trusting that we will reflect the image of his Son. He expects much of us, and we put our hope in him.

Us: That "us" includes, but also exceeds, each of us as an individual. The Lord calls us, justifies us and glorifies us together, and with us, he includes all creation. Often we so stress personal responsibility that our responsibility as a community ends up in the background, no more than a backdrop. But the Holy Spirit gathers us, reconciles our differences and generates new energies to advance the Church's mission (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 131, 235).

This Cathedral in which we are gathered is dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. Both these apostles were conscious of the treasure they had received; both, at different moments and in different ways, had been asked to "put out into the deep water" (*Lk* 5:4). All of us are in the boat that is the Church. We too want constantly to *cry out* to God, *to persevere* amid tribulation and to hold fast to Jesus Christ as the *object of our hope*. And this boat

sees it as central to her mission to proclaim the eagerly-awaited glory that is God present in the midst of his people in the risen Christ, a glory that one day, to fulfil the yearning of all creation, will be revealed in the children of God. This is the challenge that impels us: the mandate to evangelize. This is the basis of our hope and our joy.

How often we encounter priests, religious men and women, who are sad. *Spiritual sadness* is an illness. They are sad because they do not know... Sad because they do not find love, because they have not fallen in love with the Lord. They left aside a married life, family life, because they wanted to follow the Lord. But now they seem tired... And then sadness descends on them. Please, when you find yourselves sad, stop. And seek out a wise priest, a wise sister. Not wise because they have university degrees, no, not for that reason. Wise because they have been able to move forward in love. Go and ask for counsel. When that sadness starts, we can predict that if it is not cured in time, it will turn you into sad old spinsters and bachelors, men and women who are not fruitful. And of this sadness you should be afraid! It is the devil who sows this.

Today, the “deep water” into which we must “put out” is “the changing scenarios and ever new challenges” of this Church on the move. Yet we need to ask once more: What is it that the Lord is asking of us? Which are the peripheries that most need our presence so that we can bring them the light of the Gospel (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20)?

Otherwise, if you do not reflect the joy of a vocation, who will be able to believe that Jesus Christ is our hope? Only the example of our lives will show the reason for our hope in him.

There is something else linked to sadness: confusing a vocation with a business, with a company. “I am employed here, I work here, I am enthusiastic in this... and I am happy because I have this”. But tomorrow a bishop comes along, another one or the same one, or another superior, and says to you: “No, stop doing that and come this way”. It is the moment of defeat. Why? Because in that moment you will realize that you have gone down a dubious path. You will realize that the Lord, who called you for love, is disappointed by you, because you preferred to become a wheeler-dealer. At the outset I said to you that the life of one who follows Jesus is not that of a bureaucrat: it is a life of loving the Lord, and of apostolic zeal for his people. Let me give you a caricature: what does a priest bureaucrat do? He has his schedule, his office hours, he opens the office at that hour, does his work, closes the office... and the people are outside. He does not draw close to the people.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, if you do not wish to be bureaucrats, let me give you a word: *closeness*! Closeness, nearness. Closeness to the Tabernacle, a heart-to-heart with the Lord. And closeness to the people. “But, Father, the people do not come...”. Go out and find them! “But, the youth of today do not come...”. Make up something new: an oratory, for accompanying them, helping them. Closeness to the people. And closeness to the Lord in the Tabernacle. The Lord wants you to be pastors of his people, and not clerks of the state! Later I will say something to the sisters, but later...

Closeness means mercy. On this earth, where Jesus was revealed as the merciful Jesus, a priest cannot *not* be merciful. Especially in the confessional. Think of how Jesus would welcome this person [who comes to confession]. Life has already beaten him down, poor thing! Let them feel the embrace of the Father who forgives. If you cannot give them absolution, for example, give them the consolation of a brother, of a father. Encourage them to go on. Convince them that God forgives everything. But do this with a father’s warmth. Never chase someone from the confessional! Never chase them away. “Look, you can’t... I can’t right now, but God loves you, you pray, come back, and we’ll speak...”. Like that. Closeness. This is being a father. Is that sinner whom you are sending way not important to you? I am not speaking about you, because I do not know you. I am speaking about other situations. And mercy. The confessional is not a psychiatrist’s rooms. The confessional is not for digging into a person’s heart.

And for this reason, dear priests, closeness for you also means having mercy in your very being. And the being of mercy, do you know where you get this from? There, at the Tabernacle.

And you, dear sisters... Often we see good sisters – all sisters are good – but who gossip and gossip and

gossip... Ask that one in the front row on the other side – the second last one – if in prison she had time for gossiping, while she was sowing gloves. Ask her. Please, be mothers! Be mothers, because you are the icon of the Church and of Our Lady. And every person who sees you, may they see Mother Church and Mother Mary. Do not forget this. And Mother Church is not an “old spinster”. Mother Church does not gossip: she loves, serves, helps others to grow. Your closeness is the way to be a mother: as icon of the Church and icon of Our Lady.

Closeness to the Tabernacle and prayer. That thirst of the soul which I spoke of, and with others. Priestly service and consecrated life not as bureaucrats, but as fathers and mothers of mercy. And if you do this, when you are elderly you will have a beautiful smile and shining eyes! Because you will have a soul full of tenderness, meekness, mercy, love, fatherhood and motherhood.

And pray for this poor bishop. Thank you!
