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Apostolic Trip of Pope Francis to Panama for the 34th World Youth Day (23-28 January 2019) – Meeting with the bishops of Central America in the Church of San Francisco de Asís in Panama

At 11.15 local time (17.15 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met with the bishops of Central America in the Church of San Francisco de Asís.

Upon arrival he was received at the entrance to the Church by the archbishop of Panama, H.E. Msgr. José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta, O.S.A., and by Msgr. José Luis Escobar Alas, archbishop of San Salvador and president of the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America and Panama (SEDAC) which unites the bishops of the Episcopal Conferences of Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

After the welcome address of the president of SEDAC, Pope Francis gave his address.

At the end of the meeting, after greeting the cardinals and the five archbishops of SEDAC, and following the group photograph, the Pope returned to the apostolic nunciature.

The following is the address given by the Holy Father during the meeting with the bishops of Central America:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers,

I thank Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador for his words of welcome in the name of all. I find here some old friends: this is a wonderful thing. I am happy to be able to be with you and to share in a closer and more direct way your hopes, projects and dreams as pastors to whom the Lord has entrusted the care of the holy people. Thank you for your fraternal welcome.

Meeting with you also gives me the opportunity to embrace your peoples and feel closer to them, to make my

own their aspirations, but also their disappointments, and above all the unshakable faith that restores hope and encourages charity. Thank you for letting me be close to that tested yet simple faith seen on the faces of your people, who, though poor, know that “God is here; he is not sleeping, he is active, he watches and helps” (SAINT OSCAR ROMERO, *Homily*, 16 December 1979).

This meeting reminds us of an important ecclesial event. The bishops of this region were the first in America to create a means of communion and participation that continues to bear rich fruit: the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America (SEDAC). It has provided a forum for sharing, discernment and agreement that nurtures, revitalizes and enriches your Churches. Farsighted bishops gave a sign that, far from being merely programmatic, showed that the future of Central America – or of any area of the world – necessarily depends on clear thinking and the ability to broaden horizons and to join in a patient and generous effort to listen, understand, engage and involve. And, as a result, to discern the new horizons to which the Spirit is leading us (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 235).[1]

In the seventy-five years since its establishment, SEDAC has sought to share in the joys and sorrows, the struggles and the dreams of the peoples of Central America, whose history has been interwoven with and forged by the history of your own faithful. Many men and women, priests, consecrated and lay, have devoted their lives and even shed their blood to keep the Church’s prophetic voice alive in the face of injustice, the spread of poverty, and the abuse of power. I remember as a young priest how some of your surnames were a bad word, and how your perseverance indicated the way: thank you! They remind us that “those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice of the works of mercy” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 107). And this, not simply as almsgiving, but as a true vocation.

Among these prophetic fruits of the Church in Central America, I am happy to mention Saint Oscar Romero, whom I recently had the privilege of canonizing during the Synod on Young People. His life and his teachings remain a source of inspiration for our Churches and, in a special way, for us as bishops. He too was a bad word, suspected, excommunicated by the secretive gossip of many bishops. His episcopal motto, inscribed on his tombstone, clearly expresses the principle that guided his life as a pastor: *to think with the Church*. It was the compass for his life and fidelity, even in times of great turmoil.

His legacy can become an active and life-giving witness for us, who are likewise called to the daily martyrdom of serving our people, and on it, I would like to base the reflection, thinking with the Church. It is a reflection that I wish to share with you with the figure of Romero very much in mind. I know that some among us knew Archbishop Romero personally, like Cardinal Rosa Chávez, of whom Cardinal Quarracino told me of his candidature for the Nobel Prize for Fidelity! Your Eminence, if you think that I am mistaken in any of my assessments, you can correct me, without hesitation. To appeal to the figure of Romero is to appeal to the holiness and prophetic character present in the DNA of your particular Churches.

Thinking with the Church

1. Recognition and gratitude

When Saint Ignatius sets out the rules for thinking with the Church – forgive the publicity - he tries to help the retreatant overcome any type of false dichotomy or antagonism that would reduce the life of the Spirit to the habitual temptation to make God’s word serve our own interest. This can give the retreatant the grace to recognize that he is part of an apostolic body greater than himself, while at the same time being aware of his own strengths and abilities: an awareness that is neither feeble nor selective or rash. To feel part of a whole that is always more than the sum of its parts (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 235), and is linked to a Presence that will always transcend him (cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 8).

So I would like to focus this preliminary *thinking with the Church*, along with Saint Oscar, on thanksgiving, or rather gratitude, for all the unmerited blessings we have received. Romero instinctively knew how to understand and appreciate the Church, because he loved her deeply as the wellspring of his faith. Without this deep love, it

would be difficult to understand the story of his conversion. It was that same love that led him to martyrdom: a love born of receiving an utterly free gift, one that does not belong to us but instead frees us from any pretension or temptation to think that we are its proprietors or its sole interpreters. We did not invent the Church; she was not born with us and she will carry on without us. This attitude, far from encouraging sloth, awakens and sustains boundless and unimaginable gratitude. Martyrdom has nothing to do with faintheartedness or the attitude of those who do not love life and cannot recognize its value. On the contrary, the martyr is one who is capable of incarnating and living fully this act of thanksgiving.

Romero “thought with the Church”, because before all else he loved the Church as a mother who had brought him to birth in the faith. He felt a member and a part of her.

2. *A love flavoured by people*

This love, loyalty and gratitude brought him to embrace passionately but also with hard work and study, the currents of renewal authoritatively proposed by the Second Vatican Council. There he found a firm guide for Christian discipleship. He was neither an ideologue nor ideological; his actions were born of a thorough familiarity with the Council documents. Against this ecclesial horizon, *thinking with the Church* meant, for Romero, contemplating her as the People of God. For the Lord did not want to save us alone and apart from others, but to establish a people who would profess him in truth and serve him in sanctity (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9). A people that as a whole possesses, guards and celebrates the “anointing of the Holy One” (ibid., 12), and to whom Romero carefully listened, so as not to be deprived of the inspiration (cf. SAINT OSCAR ROMERO, *Homily*, 16 July 1978). In this way, Romero showed us that the pastor, in order to seek and discover the Lord, must learn to listen to the heartbeat of his people. He must smell the “odour” of the sheep, the men and women of today, until he is steeped in their joys and hopes, their sorrows and their anxieties (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1), and in so doing ponder the word of God (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 13). His must be an approach that listens to the people entrusted to his care, to the point of identifying with them and discovering from them the will of God who calls us (cf. *Address at the Meeting on the Family*, 4 October 2014). An approach free of dichotomies or false antagonisms, for only the love of God is capable of integrating all our loves in a single feeling and gaze.

For Romero, in a word, to think with the Church means to take part in the Church’s glory, which is to live, heart and soul, the *kenosis* of Christ. In the Church, as the saint expressed in his homily of 1 October 1978, Christ lives among us, and so she must be humble and poor, since an aloof, prideful and self-sufficient Church is not the Church of *kenosis*.

3. *Living, heart and soul, the kenosis of Christ*

This is not only the Church’s glory, but also a vocation, a summons to make it our personal glory and our path of holiness. Christ’s *kenosis* is not a thing of the past, but a present pledge that we can sense and discover his presence at work in history. A presence that we neither can nor want to silence, since we know from experience that he alone is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”. Christ’s *kenosis* reminds us that God saves in history, in the life of each person, and that this is also his own history, from which he comes forth to meet us (cf. SAINT OSCAR ROMERO, *Homily*, 7 December 1978). It is important, brothers, that we not be afraid to draw near and touch the wounds of our people, which are our wounds too, and to do this in the same way that the Lord himself does. A pastor cannot stand aloof from the sufferings of his people; we can even say that the heart of a pastor is measured by his ability to be moved by the many lives that are hurting or threatened. To do this as the Lord does, means allowing this suffering to have an impact on our priorities and our preferences, influencing vigorously the use of our time and money, and even our way of praying. In this way, we will be able to anoint everything and everyone with the consoling friendship of Jesus Christ within a community of faith that contains and opens a constantly new horizon that gives meaning and hope to life (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49). Christ’s *kenosis* involves giving up “virtual” ways of living and speaking, in order to listen to the sounds and repeated cries of real people who challenge us to build relationships. Allow me to say this: networks help to build relationships, but not roots; they are incapable of giving us a sense of belonging, of making us feel part of a single people. Without this sense, all our words, meetings, gatherings and writings will be the sign of a faith that failed to accompany the Lord’s *kenosis*, a faith that stopped halfway along the road. Where, even worse –

recalling the words of a Latin-American author – we will be the sign of a faith in God without Christ, a Christ without a church, a church without a people.

Christ's kenosis is young

This World Youth Day is a unique opportunity to go out to encounter and draw even closer to the experiences of our young people, so full of hope and desires, but also many hurts and scars. With them, we can interpret our world in a new way and recognize the signs of the times. For as the Synod Fathers affirmed, young people are one of the “theological sources” in which the Lord makes us know some of his expectations and challenges for the shaping of the future (cf. SYNOD ON YOUNG PEOPLE, *Final Document*, 64). With them, we can envision how to make the Gospel more visible and credible in the world in which we live. They are like a barometer for knowing where we stand as a community and as a society.

Young people bring with them a restlessness that we need to appreciate, respect and accompany. This is good for us, because it unsettles us and reminds us that a pastor never stops being a disciple and a wayfarer. This healthy restlessness both prods and precedes us. The Synod Fathers recognized this: “Young people, in certain aspects, go ahead of their pastors” (ibid., 66). The pastor in relation to his flock does not always go ahead; sometimes he must do so to indicate the way to the faithful; sometimes he must stay in the middle to appreciate what is happening, to understand his own; sometimes he must stay at the rear to protect the vulnerable so that none are left behind in danger of becoming disposable material. We should rejoice to see how the seed sown has not fallen on deaf ears. Many of the concerns and insights of young people took root in the family, encouraged by a grandmother or a catechist. Speaking of grandmothers, it’s already the second time I see her, yesterday and today, an elderly lady, thin, around my age, who had put on a mitre made of cardboard and with a sign that said “Holiness, we grandmothers also know how to “make a mess”. What a wonderful people! Young people learned much in the family as too in the parish and in educational and youth programmes. They then grew through hearing the Gospel within lively and fervent faith communities that provided rich soil in which they could flourish. How can we not be grateful to have young people concerned with the Gospel! Of course this is tiring and at times testing. A phrase from a Greek philosopher comes to mind which he himself applied to young people: “they are like horseflies on the back of a noble horse, preventing the horse from sleeping” (cf. *Plato*, *The Apology of Socrates*). Aren’t we the horses? This reality encourages us to help them grow by providing them with more and better opportunities to be part of God’s dream. The Church is naturally a Mother, and as such, she engenders life, bears it in her womb and protects it from all that threatens its growth: a “gestation” that takes place in freedom and for freedom. So I urge you to promote programmes and educational centres that can accompany, support and empower your young people. Please, snatch them from the streets before the culture of death can entice their young minds, taking advantage of their restlessness, selling them its smoke and mirrors, or offering its chimerical “solutions” to all their problems. Do so not paternalistically, looking down from on high – which they hate – because that is not what the Lord asks of us, but as true fathers and brothers to all. Young people are the face of Christ for us, and, as Romero said in his homily of 2 September 1979, we cannot reach Christ by descending from above, but by rising up from below.

Sadly, many young people have been taken in by easy answers that end up costing dearly. And there are so many others who have been offered short-sighted illusions within some movements that convert them into Pelagianists or self-sufficient individuals only to be abandoned halfway on the journey. As the Synod Fathers noted, young people find themselves boxed in and lacking opportunities, amid highly conflictual situations with no quick solution: domestic violence, the killing of women – our continent is experiencing a plague of this – armed gangs and criminals, drug trafficking, the sexual exploitation of minors and young people, and so on. It is painful to observe that at the root of many of these situations are experiences of being “orphaned”; without a mother, they are orphaned as the fruit of a culture and a society run amok. Often families have been broken by an economic system that did not prioritize persons and the common good, but made speculation its “paradise”, without worrying about who would end up paying the price. And so we see our young people without a home, without a family, without a community, without a sense of belonging, easy prey to the first charlatan who comes along.

Let us not forget that “man’s true pain belongs first to God” (George Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*). Let us not separate what he wanted to unite in his Son.

The future demands that we respect the present, by ennobling it and working to value and preserve the cultures of your peoples. Here too, dignity is at stake: in cultural self-esteem. Your peoples are not the “backyard” of society or of anyone. They have a rich history that needs to be appropriated, valued and encouraged. The seeds of the Kingdom were sown in these lands. We must recognize them, care for them and watch over them, so that none of the good that God has planted will languish, prey to spurious interests that sow corruption and grow rich by plundering the poor. Caring for these roots means caring for the rich historical, cultural and spiritual heritage that this land has for centuries been able to harmonize. Continue to speak out against the cultural and spiritual desertification of your towns that causes a radical poverty, since it weakens their power of resistance, the necessary and vital immunity that preserves their dignity at times of great difficulty. I congratulate you for the initiative whereby this World Youth Day started with the Day of Indigenous Youth – in the Diocese of David I believe – and with the Day of Youth for those of African descent. That was a good step in showing the multifaceted nature of our people.

In your most recent Pastoral Letter, you pointed out that, “our region has recently been affected by a new kind of migration, massive and organized. This has called attention to the reasons for forced migration and to the dangers it entails for the dignity of the human person” (SEDAC, *Message to the People of God and All Persons of Good Will*, 30 November 2018).

Many migrants have young faces; they are seeking a better life for their families. Nor are they afraid to take risks and to leave everything behind in order to offer them the minimum conditions for a better future. Realizing this is not enough; we need also to clearly proclaim a message that is “good news”. The Church, by virtue of her universality, can provide the fraternal hospitality and acceptance that can enable the communities of origin and of destination to dialogue and to help overcome fears and suspicions, and thus to consolidate the very bonds that migrations – in the collective imagination – threaten to break. “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating” people can be the four words with which the Church, in this situation of mass migration, expresses her motherhood in the history of our time (cf. SYNOD ON YOUNG PEOPLE, *Final Document*, 147). The Vicar General of Paris, Monsignor Benoist de Sinety, has just published a book on welcoming immigrants (cf. *Il faut que des voix s’élèvent. Accueil des migrants, un appel au courage*, Paris 2018). It is a call to courage, a real gem, and he is here for this World Youth Day.

Every effort made to build bridges between ecclesial, parish and diocesan communities, and between your episcopal conferences, will be a prophetic gesture on the part of the Church, which is, in Christ, “a sign and instrument both of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). This will help eliminate the temptation simply to call attention to the problem, and become instead a proclamation of the new life that the Lord gives us.

Let us recall the words of Saint John: “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:17-18).

All of these situations raise questions; they are situations summoning us to conversion, solidarity and decisive efforts to educate our communities. We cannot remain indifferent (cf. SYNOD ON YOUNG PEOPLE, *Final Document*, 41-44). Whereas the world, the spirit of the world, discards people, as we are painfully aware, Christ’s kenosis does not. We have experienced this, and we continue to experience it in our own flesh through forgiveness and conversion. This tension requires that we constantly ask ourselves, “Where do we wish to stand?”

The kenosis of Christ is priestly

We all know about Archbishop Romero’s friendship with Father Rutilio Grande, and how much he was affected by his assassination. It seared his heart as a man, a priest and a pastor. Romero was no human resources manager; that was not how he dealt with individuals or organizations, but as a father, a friend and a brother. He can serve as a yardstick, however daunting, to help us measure our own hearts as bishops and ask, “How much does the life of my priests affect me? How much do I let myself be impacted by what they experience, grieving

when they suffer and celebrating their joys? The extent of ecclesial functionalism and clericalism – which represent a caricature and perversion of ministry – can start to be measured by these questions. This has to do not with changes in style, habits or language – all of which are certainly important – but above all with the time we bishops make to receive, accompany and sustain our priests, “real time” to care for them. That is what makes us good fathers.

Our priests are normally the ones responsible for making their flock the people of God. They are on the front lines. They shoulder the burden and the heat of the day (cf. *Mt 20:12*), exposed to an endless number of daily situations that can wear them down. So they need our closeness, our understanding and encouragement; they need our fatherhood. The outcome of our pastoral work, evangelization and mission does not depend on the material means and resources at our disposal, or on the number of our events and activities, but on the *centrality of compassion*: this is one of the unique things that we, the Church, can offer our brothers and sisters. I am worried about how the compassion of Christ has lost a central place in the Church, even among Catholic groups, or is being lost – not to be so pessimistic. Even in the Catholic media there is a lack of compassion. There is schism, condemnation, cruelty, exaggerated self-praise, the denouncing of heresy... May compassion never be lost in our Church and may the centrality of compassion never be lost in the life of a bishop. Christ’s kenosis is the supreme expression of the Father’s compassion. Christ’s Church is the Church of compassion, and that begins at home. It is always good to ask ourselves as pastors, “How much does the life of my priests affect me?” Am I able to be a father, or am I content to be a mere executive? Do I allow myself to be bothered? I think back on what Benedict XVI told his compatriots at the beginning of his pontificate: “Christ did not promise us an easy life. Those looking for comfort have dialled the wrong number. Rather, he shows us the way to great things, to goodness, to an authentic human life” (BENEDICT XVI, *Address to German Pilgrims*, 25 April 2005). The bishop must grow in his ability, daily, to let himself be bothered, to be vulnerable to his priests. I am thinking of a former bishop of a large diocese, hard-working, who received visitors all morning. It often happened that when he finished receiving and was looking forward to his lunch, two priests would be waiting there, not in his diary. The bishop went back and listened to them as if he had the whole morning ahead of him. To allow ourselves to be bothered and to let the spaghetti be overcooked and the meat grow cold. To allow ourselves to be bothered by our priests.

We know that our work, our visits and meetings – especially in parishes – have a necessarily administrative component. This is part of our responsibility, but it does not mean that we should spend all our limited time on administrative tasks. When visiting, the most important thing – the one thing we cannot delegate – is “listening”. Many of our everyday tasks we ought to entrust to others. What we cannot delegate, however, is the ability to listen, the ability to keep track of the good health and the lives of our priests. We cannot delegate to others the door that must be open to them. An open door that invites trust rather than fear, sincerity rather than hypocrisy, a frank and respectful exchange rather than a stern monologue.

I recall the words of Blessed Rosmini, who was accused of heresy and is today blessed: “There is no doubt that only great men can form other great men... In the early centuries, the bishop’s house was the seminary of priests and deacons. The presence and saintly life of their prelate turned out to be a radiant, constant and sublime lesson, in which one learned theory from his learned words and practice from his diligent pastoral outreach. So the young Athanasius learned from Alexander, and so many others in like manner” (ANTONIO ROSMINI, *The Five Wounds of the Holy Church*).

It is important that the parish priest encounter a father, a shepherd in whom he can see a reflection of himself, not an administrator concerned about “reviewing the troops”. It is essential that, despite differing viewpoints and even eventual disagreements and arguments (which are normal and to be expected), priests should perceive their bishop as someone who is unafraid to get involved, to confront them, to encourage them and be an outstretched hand when they are bogged down. *A man of discernment able to guide* and to find practical and possible ways to move forward during the difficult times in each person’s life. When I was in Argentina, sometimes I would hear some say: “I called the bishop – priests called – and the secretary told me that his diary was full and that I should call in three weeks’ time. I was not asked why I was calling but told only that the bishop couldn’t receive me and that I would be put on the list”. Of course the priest concerned did not call again and kept his request to the bishop, good or bad, to himself. I offer this to you, not so much as advice, but rather as something that comes from the heart; yes, do have your diaries full, God be praised, knowing that you have

earned your meal, but if you see that a priest has called today, then call him back tomorrow, latest, and say: “You called me. What’s up? Do you need me now or can you wait for such and such a day? That priest will know from that day on that he has a father.

The word “authority” is derived from the Latin root *augere*: “to increase, promote, advance”. The authority of a pastor is based on his ability to help others to grow, to give priority to his priests rather than himself (for that would simply make him a confirmed bachelor, not a father). The joy of a father and pastor lies in seeing his children grow and become fruitful. Brothers, let this be our authority and the sign of our fruitfulness.

And the final point: The kenosis of Christ is poor

Thinking with the Church means thinking with our faithful people, the suffering and hope-filled people of God. It means realizing that our ministerial identity is born and understood in the light of this unique and constitutive sense of our identity. Here I would repeat to you the words Saint Ignatius wrote to the Jesuits: “Poverty is a mother and a wall”; it gives birth and it encloses. A *mother*, because it asks us to be fruitful, to give life, to be able to give of ourselves in a way impossible for hearts that are selfish or avaricious. A *wall* because it shields us from one of the most subtle temptations we can face as consecrated persons. That is spiritual worldliness, which puts a religious and “pious” veneer over the desire for power and influence, over vanity and even pride and arrogance. A wall and a mother that can help us be a Church that is increasingly free because centred in the kenosis of her Lord. A Church that does not want her strength to be – as Archbishop Romero used to say – in the backing of the powerful or political leaders – but advances with noble detachment, relying only on the true strength born of the embrace of the crucified Jesus. This translates into clear, practical and visible signs, it challenges us and calls us to examine our consciences about our decisions and priorities in the use of our resources, influence and position. Poverty is a mother and a wall because, above all, it keeps our hearts from slipping into concessions and compromises that sap the freedom and courage that the Lord demands of us.

Brothers, as we now conclude, let us place ourselves beneath the mantle of the Blessed Virgin. Together let us ask her to keep watch over our hearts as shepherds. May she help us to be ever better servants of the body of her Son, the holy and faithful people of God that journeys, lives and prays here in Central America. Let us pray to Our Mother.

Hail Mary...

May Jesus bless you and may Our Lady protect you. And please, do not forget to pray for me so that I can fulfil all that I have told you. Thank you very much.

1 Here I would call to mind those bishops, who, motivated by pastoral zeal and love for the Church, established this ecclesial body, like Archbishop Luis Chávez y González of San Salvador and Archbishop Víctor Sanabria of San José de Costa Rica, among others.
