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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Apostolic Trip of Pope Francis to Panama for the 34th World Youth Day (23-28 January 2019) – Vigil with young people in Campo San Juan Pablo II (Metro Park)

Vigil with young people in *Campo San Juan Pablo II* (Metro Park)

This afternoon, before leaving the apostolic nunciature to transfer by car to the *Campo San Juan Pablo II* (Metro Park) for the prayer vigil with the young people participating in the 34th World Youth Day, the Holy Father Francis met with the Jesuits of Panama and other countries of Central America. The meeting, which lasted around an hour, was attended by thirty Jesuits, mostly novices.

Upon arrival at the *Campo San Juan Pablo II* (Metro Park) the Pope was received by the archbishop of Panama, H.E. Msgr. José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta, O.S.A., who joined him on the popemobile for a tour among the faithful.

The vigil began at 18.30 local time (00.30 in Rome). After the performance of the official anthem of WYD and the presentation of a video, testimonies were given by a family, a young former drug addict and a young Palestinian. The Holy Father then gave his address.

At the end, after the adoration of the Sacrament, the final blessing and a prayer to Our Lady, Pope Francis returned by car to the apostolic nunciature.

The following is the Pope's address pronounced during the prayer vigil with young people:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear young friends, good afternoon!

We've seen this beautiful presentation about the Tree of Life. It shows us how the life that Jesus gives us is a

love story, a *life history* that wants to blend with ours and sink roots in the soil of our own lives. That life is not a salvation up “in the cloud” and waiting to be downloaded, a new “app” to be discovered, or a technique of mental self-improvement. Still less is that life a “tutorial” for finding out the latest news. The salvation that God offers us is *an invitation to be part of a love story* interwoven with our personal stories; it is alive and wants to be born in our midst so that we can bear fruit just as we are, wherever we are and with everyone all around us. The Lord comes there to sow and to be sown. He is the first to say “yes” to our lives, he always precedes us. He’s the first to say yes to our history, and he wants us to say “yes” along with him. He always precedes us, he’s first.

That was how he surprised Mary, and asked her to be part of this love story. Obviously, the young woman of Nazareth was not part of the “social networks” of the time. She was not an “influencer”, but without wanting or trying to, she became *the most influential woman in history*. So we can say, with the confidence of children: Mary, the “influencer” of God. With just a few words, she was able to say “yes” and to trust in the love and promises of God, who is the only force capable of renewing, of making all things new. And all of us today have something that needs to be renewed within. Today we have to allow God to renew something in our hearts. Let us reflect: what do I want God to renew in my heart?

We are always struck by the strength of that young woman’s “yes”, the power of those words “be it done” that she spoke to the angel. This was no merely passive or resigned acceptance. It was different to a faint “yes”, as if to say, “well, let’s give it a try, and see what happens”. Mary did not know that expression: let’s see what happens. She was determined, she knew what was at stake and said “yes”, getting straight to the point. It was something more, something different. It was the “yes” of someone prepared to be committed, someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no more security than the certainty of knowing that she was the bearer of a promise. And I ask each one of you: do you see yourselves as bearers of a promise? What promise is there within my heart to take forward? Mary’s would undoubtedly be a difficult mission, but the challenges that lay ahead were no reason to say “no”. Things would get complicated, of course, but not in the same way as happens when cowardice paralyzes us because things are not clear or sure in advance. Mary did not take out an insurance policy! Mary took the risk and for this reason she is strong, for this reason she is an “influencer”, the “influencer” of God! The “yes” and the desire to serve were stronger than any doubts and difficulties.

This afternoon we also heard how Mary’s “yes” echoes and expands in every generation. Many young people, like Mary, take a risk and stake their future on a promise. Thank you, Erika and Rogelio, for the witness you gave us. They’ve been courageous and deserve an applause. Thank you. You shared your fears and difficulties and the risks you faced with the birth of your daughter Inés. At one point, you said, “We parents, for various reasons, find it hard to accept that our child will be born with an illness or disability”. That is true, it is understandable. Yet the amazing thing was what you went on to say, “When our daughter was born, we decided to love her with all our heart”. Before her birth, when faced with all the issues and problems that came up, you made a decision and said, like Mary, “let it be done”; you decided to love her. Presented with the life of your frail, helpless and needy daughter, your answer, Erika and Rogelio, was “yes”, and so we have Inés. You found the courage to believe that the world is not only for the strong! Thank you!

Saying “yes” to the Lord means preparing to embrace life as it comes, with all its fragility, its simplicity, and often enough too, with its conflicts and annoyances, and to do so with the same love with which Erika and Rogelio spoke. To embrace life as it comes. It means embracing our country, our families and our friends as they are, with all their weak points and their flaws. Embracing life is also seen in accepting things that are not perfect, pure or “distilled”, yet no less worthy of love. Is a disabled or frail person not worthy of love? I ask you: is a disabled person, a frail person not worthy of love? [young people reply: “Yes!”]. I can’t hear you very well… [“Yes!”]. Another question and let’s see how you reply. Someone who happens to be a foreigner, someone who made a mistake, someone ill or in prison, is that person not worthy of love? [“Yes!”] And we know what Jesus did: he embraced the leper, the blind man, the paralytic, the Pharisee and the sinner. He embraced the thief on the cross and even embraced and forgave those who crucified him.

Why did he do this? Because *only what is loved can be saved*. You cannot save a person, you cannot save a situation, if you do not love it. Only that which is loved can be saved. Can we repeat this together? Only that which is loved can be saved. Once again. [young people repeat: “Only that which is loved can be saved”]. Let’s

not forget. For this reason we're saved by Jesus, because he loves us and can't go against his nature. We can do any number of things against him, yet he loves us and he saves us. Because only that which is loved can be saved. Only that which is embraced can be transformed. The Lord's love is greater than all our problems, frailties and flaws. Yet it is precisely through our problems, frailties and flaws that he wants to write this love story. He embraced the prodigal son, he embraced Peter after the denials and he always, always, always embraces us whenever we fall: he helps us to get up and get back on our feet. Because the worst fall, and pay attention to this, the worst fall, that can ruin our lives, is to remain down and not allow ourselves to be helped up. There is a beautiful alpine tune that is sung while going up a mountain: "In the art of climbing, the victory lies not so much in not falling down, but in not staying fallen down". Don't stay down.

So, the first step is *not to be afraid to welcome life as it comes, not to be afraid to embrace life as it is!* This is the tree of life that we have seen today.

Thank you, Alfredo, for your testimony and your courage in sharing it with us all. I was impressed when you told us: "I started working on a construction project, but once it was finished, I was without a job and things changed fast: without an education, a trade and a job". Let me summarize this in four "withouts" that left our life rootless and parched: without work, without education, without community and without family. In other words, life without roots. Without work, without education, without community and without family. These are the four "withouts" that kill.

It is impossible for us to grow unless we have strong roots to support us and to keep us firmly grounded. It is easy to drift off, when there is nothing to clutch onto, to hold onto. And here is a question that we older people have to ask ourselves, those of us who are here, but also a question that you need to ask us, a question that you, young people, need to ask us, older people, and which we have to answer: What roots are we providing for you, what foundations are we providing for you to grow as persons? It is a question for us older persons. It is easy enough to criticize and complain about young people if we are depriving them of the jobs, education and community opportunities they need to take root and to dream of a future. Without education, it is difficult to dream of a future; without work, it is very difficult to dream of a future; without a family and without a community, it is almost impossible to dream of a future. Because dreaming of a future means learning how to answer not only the question *what* I am living for, but also *who* I am living for, the one who makes it worthwhile for me to offer my life. And that is something we, older persons, must facilitate by providing work, education, community and opportunities.

As Alfredo told us, when we find ourselves at a loss and without work, without education, without community and without family, at the end of the day we feel empty and we end up filling that emptiness with anything we can, any useless thing. Because we no longer know for whom to live, to fight and to love. To the older persons who are here and to those who are following us I ask: What are you doing to build the future and to foster aspirations for the future in today's young people? Are you able to make determined efforts so that they can have education, work, family and community? Each of us older persons can respond to this question in our hearts.

I remember once talking with some young people, and one of them asked me: "Why are so many young people today not interested in whether God exists or find it difficult to believe in him, and they seem so bored and aimless in life? I asked them in return what they thought. I remember one particular answer that touched me and it relates to the experience Alfredo shared – "Father, it's because many of them feel that, little by little, they stopped existing for others; often they feel invisible". Many young people feel that they have stopped existing for others, for the family, for society, for the community… They often feel, as a result, invisible. This is the culture of abandonment and lack of concern for others. Not everyone, but many people feel that they have little or nothing to contribute, because there is no one around to ask them to get involved. How can they think that God exists, if they, these young people, have long since stopped thinking that they exist for their brothers and sisters and for society? In this way we are encouraging them not to look to the future and to fall into the clutches of drugs and anything that destroys them. We can ask ourselves: What do I do for the young people I see? Do I criticize them or am I disinterested in them? Do I help them or show disinterest? Can it be true that, for me, they stopped existing a long time ago?

We know well that to feel acknowledged or loved it is not enough to be connected all day long. To feel respected and asked to get involved is greater than simply being “on-line”. It means finding spaces where, with your hands, your heart and your head, you can feel part of a larger community that needs you and that you yourselves, young people, need.

The saints understood this very well. I think, for example, of Saint John Bosco [young people applaud]. He did not go off to seek young people in far-off places – I can see here those who love Don Bosco, an applause! Don Bosco did not go off to seek young people in far-off or special places; he simply learned to see with God’s eyes everything that was going on around him in his city. Thus he was deeply affected by the hundreds of children and young people left to themselves, without education, without work and without the helping hand of a community. Many other people were living in the same city, and many criticized those young people, but they were unable to see them with God’s eyes. We need to see young people with God’s eyes. Don Bosco did, and found the energy to take the first step: to embrace life as it presented itself. From there, he was not afraid to take the second step: to create a community, a family with them, where through work and study they could feel loved. *He gave them roots from which they could reach up to heaven.* So that they could be someone in society. To give them roots to hold onto and to help them stand securely when the first stormy winds come their way. That is what Saint John Bosco did, this is what the saint did, this is what communities do that know how to look at young people with God’s eyes. Would you older persons like to look at young people with God’s eyes? [“Yes!”]

I think of many places in our Latin America that promote what they call *familia grande hogar de Cristo*. With the same spirit as other centres, they seek to accept life as it comes, in its totality and complexity, because they know that the tree always holds a hope: “if it be cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not cease” (*Job* 14:7).

It is always possible to “sprout shoots and grow”, it is always possible to start again when there is a community, a warm home that enables us to take root, that provides the confidence we need and prepares our hearts to discover a new horizon: the horizon of a beloved son or daughter who is sought, found and entrusted with a mission. Through real faces, the Lord makes himself present. To say “yes”, like Mary, to this love story is to say “yes” to becoming a means of building in our neighbourhoods those ecclesial communities capable of walking the streets of our cities, embracing and weaving new relationships. To be an “influencer” in the twenty-first century is to be guardians of roots, guardians of all that prevents our life from dissipating and evaporating into nothingness. You, older people, be guardians of everything that can make us feel part of one another. Guardians of all that which makes us feel that we belong.

That was what Nirmeen experienced at World Youth Day in Krakow. She found a lively, happy community that welcomed her, gave her a sense of belonging and therefore identity, and allowed her to live the joy that comes from being found by Jesus. Nirmeen avoided Jesus. She avoided him. She kept her distance until someone helped her to see the roots, gave her a sense of belonging. That community encouraged her to embark on the journey she spoke to us about.

A Latin American saint once asked: “Will the progress of society consist only in owning the latest car or buying the newest gadget on the market? Is that the extent of our greatness as human beings? Is that all there is to live for?” (cf. SAINT ALBERTO HURTADO, *Holy Week Meditation for Young People*, 1946). So let me ask you young people: Do you want that greatness? Or not? [“No!”] You don’t seem sure. I can’t hear you well here… What’s wrong? [“No!”] Greatness is not only about acquiring the latest car or the newest gadget on the market. You were created for something greater. The Virgin Mary understood this and said, “Let it be done!” Erika and Rogelio understood this and said, “Let it be done!” Alfredo understood this and said, “Let it be done!” Nirmeen understood this and said, “Let it be done!” We heard it here. Young friends, I ask you: Are you willing to say “yes”? [“Yes!”] Now you are learning how to reply and I like it more! The Gospel teaches us that the world will not be better because there are fewer sick, weak, frail or elderly people to be concerned about, or because there are fewer sinners. No, the world will not be better on account of this. It will be better when more people, like these friends who have spoken to us, are willing and enthused enough to give birth to the future and believe in the transforming power of God’s love. To you, young people, I ask: are you willing to be an “influencer” like Mary? [“Yes!”] She dared to say, “Let it be done”. Only love makes us more human, not fights, not bullying, not studies on their own: only love makes us more human and fulfilled; everything else is a pleasant but useless placebo.

In a few moments, we will encounter Jesus, the living Jesus, in the Eucharistic. You will surely have many things to say to him, many things to tell him about the different situations in your lives, families and countries.

Face to face with Jesus, have courage and don't be afraid to open your heart to him so that he may renew the fire of his love, so that you can embrace life with all its frailty and flaws, but also with its grandeur and beauty. May Jesus help you to discover the beauty of being alive and awake. Alive and awake.

Do not be afraid to tell Jesus that you too want to be a part of his love story in this world, that you are ready for something greater!

Friends: when you meet Jesus face to face, be good and ask him for me, that I too will be unafraid to embrace life, so that I will be able to care for its roots and to say, like Mary, "Let it be done, according to your word!".