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Apostolic Trip of Pope Francis to Bulgaria and North Macedonia (5 to 7 May 2019) – Holy Mass with First Communions in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Rakovsky

Homily of the Holy Father

Dialogue of the Holy Father with the children at the end of the homily

Words of the Holy Father before the distribution of the Eucharist

Final words of the Holy Father

At 9.20 (8.20 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis left Sofia International Airport on board an A319/State Flight for Plovdiv.

Upon arrival at the *Graf Ignatievo* Air Base at 9.40 (8.40 in Rome), the Pope transferred by car to the Church of the Sacred Heart of Rakovsky for the celebration of Holy Mass with First Communions. Before arrival at the Church of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Father left the vehicle and greeted the mayor of the city and his family.

After a tour among the faithful by popemobile, at 11.00 (10.00 in Rome), Pope Francis presided at the Eucharistic Celebration in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Rakovsky during which he administered the sacrament of First Communion to the 245 children present. It is the first time that the Holy Father has personally administered the First Communion to children during an apostolic trip.

At the end of the Holy Mass, H.E. Msgr. Gheorgi Ivanov Jovčev, bishop of Sofia and Plovdiv, addressed a brief greeting to the Pope. Then, before the final blessing, the Pope addressed some words of thanks to the approximately ten thousand people present in the surrounding area.

Straight afterwards the Holy Father transferred on foot to the Franciscan Convent for lunch with the bishops of

Bulgaria. Before leaving the Convent to transfer by car to the Church of Saint Michael the Archangel for the meeting with the Catholic Community, the Pope presented a gift to the eleven religious sisters of the house and, in the courtyard, he greeted the sick people assisted by them.

The following is the homily the Holy Father pronounced after the proclamation of the Gospel, the transcript of the dialogue with the children, the words addressed to the children before the distribution of the Eucharist and the final greeting addressed to those present at the end of the Holy Mass:

Homily of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters, *Christos vozkrese!*

I am pleased to greet the young boys and girls who will receive their First Communion and their parents, relatives and friends. To all of you, I offer the beautiful greeting exchanged in your country at Easter time: “*Christos voskrese!*” This greeting is the expression of our joy as Christians, as disciples of Jesus. We rejoice because for love of us, Jesus gave his life on the cross and destroyed sin. He rose again and made us adopted sons and daughters of God the Father. We are joyful because he is alive and present among us, today and always.

Dear boys and girls, you have come here from every corner of this “Land of Roses” to take part in a wonderful celebration. I am sure you will never forget this day: your first encounter with Jesus in the sacrament of the Eucharist. One of you might ask me: How can we meet Jesus? He lived a long time ago, but then he died and was laid in the tomb! It is true: Jesus carried out an immense act of love to save human beings of all times. He remained in the tomb for three days, but we know – the Apostles and many other witnesses who saw him alive have assured us – that God, his Father and ours, raised him up. Now Jesus is alive and is here with us. That is why we can encounter him today in the Eucharist. We do not see him with our physical eyes, but we do see him with the eyes of faith.

I am looking at you, dressed in your white robes. What a meaningful and beautiful sign. You are dressed for a celebration! First Communion is, above all, a celebration. We celebrate Jesus, who wants to remain always by our side. He will always be with us. This celebration was made possible also thanks to our parents and grandparents, our families and our communities, who have helped us to grow in the faith.

You have travelled a long way to come here to Rakovski. Your priests and catechists, who have accompanied you in your preparation for this day, have also accompanied you on the road that today leads you to meet Jesus and to receive him in your hearts.

As we heard in today’s Gospel (cf. *Jn* 6:1-15), Jesus one day miraculously multiplied five loaves and two fish, satisfying the hunger of the crowd that followed him and listened to him. Did you notice how the miracle began? It started with one child who offered all he had: five loaves and two fish (cf. *Jn* 6:9). Like that child, you too have helped a miracle to take place today. The miracle by which all of us older people have recalled our own first meeting with Jesus in the Eucharist, and are filled with gratitude for that day.

Today you have made it possible for us to relive that joy and to celebrate Jesus, present in the Bread of Life. Some miracles can only take place if we have a heart like yours: a heart capable of sharing, dreaming, feeling gratitude, trusting and respecting other people. Making your First Communion shows that you want to be closer to Jesus every day, to grow in friendship with him and to lead other people to share in the joy he wants us to feel. The Lord needs you, because he wants to work the miracle of bringing his joy to many of your friends and family members.

Dear boys and girls, I am happy to share this great moment with you and help you meet Jesus. For you, this is a

day to be celebrated in a spirit of friendship, a spirit of joy and fraternity. In a spirit also of communion among yourselves and with the whole Church, which, especially in the Eucharist, expresses the communion that makes all of us brothers and sisters. This is our identity card: *God is our Father, Jesus is our brother, the Church is our family. All of us are brothers and sisters, and our law is love.*

I ask you always to pray with the same enthusiasm and joy that you feel today. Remember that this is the sacrament of your first Communion, but not your last Communion! Today remember too that Jesus is always there, waiting for you. I hope that today will be the beginning of many Communion, so that your hearts may always, like today, be festive, full of joy and, above all else, gratitude.

Dialogue of the Holy Father with the children at the end of the homily

Pope Francis: Dear boys and girls, welcome! I'm happy to see you here making your First Communion. I'll ask you a question: Are you happy to make your First Communion?

Children: Yes!

Pope Francis: Are you sure?

Children: Yes!

Pope Francis: Why are you happy? Because Jesus is coming! Let's all say together: "I am happy because Jesus is coming".

Children: I am happy because Jesus is coming!

Pope Francis: To all of you gathered here to receive Jesus – I'll ask a question – Are you all the same family?

Children: Yes!

Pope Francis: What is our family called?

Children: The Church.

Pope Francis: Our family name is: Christian.

Children: Yes!

Pope Francis: What is our family name?

Children: Christian.

Pope Francis: Good! In my homily I said something that I want you always to remember. I spoke about the "identity card" of a Christian, and I said: "This is our identity card: *God is our Father, Jesus is our brother, the Church is our family. All of us are brothers and sisters, and our law is love*". Now let's repeat it together. I will say it again, the interpreter will say it, and we will all repeat it together. God is our Father.

Children: God is our Father.

Pope Francis: Jesus is our brother.

Children: Jesus is our brother.

Pope Francis: The Church is our Mother and our family.

Children: The Church is our Mother and our family.

Pope Francis: We are enemies...

Children: We are...

Pope Francis: Is that true? Are we enemies?

Children: No!

Pope Francis: We are friends! We are friends, all of us! We are brothers and sisters.

Children: We are brothers and sisters.

Pope Francis: Our law is love. Everybody!

Children: Our law is love!

Pope Francis: Now Jesus will speak to each one of us. Today, you will pray to Jesus for your family, parents and grandparents, catechists, priests and friends. Will you pray to Jesus for all these people?

Children: Yes!

Pope Francis:Very good! Now we continue with the Mass and prepare ourselves to receive Jesus.

Words of the Holy Father before the distribution of the Eucharist

Dear boys and girls, now you are about to receive Jesus. There is no need to be distracted, thinking of other things. Think only of Jesus. Come to the altar to receive Jesus in silence. Be silent in your heart and consider that this is the first time that Jesus comes to you. Later, he will come many other times. Think of your parents, catechists, grandparents and friends. If you have quarrelled with someone, forgive him or her from your heart before coming forward. In silence, let us draw near to Jesus.

Final words of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Before concluding this celebration, I would like to thank all of you, beginning with my brother Bishops present, the priests, the religious men and women, and the many families. I heartily thank everyone involved in its preparation and organization, and those who were unable to take part but joined us in prayer, especially the ill

and the elderly.

I take this occasion to express my deep gratitude to the Authorities of the country and to all those who in any way cooperated to ensure the happy outcome of my visit.
