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Apostolic Trip of His Holiness Francis to Thailand and Japan (19 to 26 November 2019) – Meeting with Priests, Men and Women Religious, Seminarians and Catechists in the Parish of Saint Peter

Meeting with Priests, Men and Women Religious, Seminarians and Catechists in the Parish of Saint Peter

This morning, at 9.00 local time (3.00 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis left the apostolic nunciature and transferred by car to the Shrine of Blessed Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung in the Catholic village of Wat Roman in Tha Kham.

Upon arrival, after changing vehicle, the Pope toured among the faithful in the popemobile. At 10.00 local time (4.00 in Rome), in the parish of Saint Peter, in front of the Shrine, the Pope met with priests, men and women religious, seminarians and catechists.

Pope Francis was received at the entrance of the Church of Saint Peter by the parish priest, and then proceeded along the central nave up to the altar, where a priest, a woman religious, a seminarian and a catechist offered the flowers which the Pope placed at the feet of Saint Peter. He then briefly paused in silent prayer before the Sacrament before reaching the podium.

Introduced by a brief welcome greeting from Bishop Jose Pradhan Sridarunsil, S.D.B., of Surat Thani, responsible for Religious, and by a hymn and a brief testimony from a woman religious, the Holy Father gave his address.

At the end, after the prayer for vocations, the blessing and the final hymn, the Pope left by the central nave and proceeded to the Church of the Shrine dedicated to the Blessed Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung for the meeting with the bishops of Thailand and of the Federation of Asian Episcopal Conferences (FABC).

The following is Pope Francis' address to priests, men and women religious, seminarians and catechists:

Address of the Holy Father

I thank Bishop Joseph [Pradhan Sridarunsil] for his words of welcome in your name. I am happy to see all of you, to listen to you, to share in your joy and to sense how the Spirit is at work in our midst. I thank all of you: catechists, priests, consecrated men and women and seminarians, for the gift of this time together.

Thanks too to Benedetta for sharing her life and her testimony. As I listened to her, I felt gratitude for the lives of all those missionaries, men and women, whose lives of service left their mark. Benedetta, you told us about the Daughters of Charity. And I would like first to express gratitude for all those consecrated persons who, by the silent martyrdom of fidelity and daily commitment, have borne great fruit. I do not know if they were able to appreciate or taste the fruits of their commitment, but without a doubt their lives were capable of bringing about much good. They were a promise of hope. For this reason, at the beginning of our meeting, I would ask you especially to keep in mind all those catechists and elderly consecrated men and women who drew us into the love and friendship of Jesus Christ. Let us give thanks for them and for the elderly members of our communities who could not be present today. Tell the elderly ones who could not be here today that the Pope sends them a grateful blessing, and in turn asks for their blessing.

I believe that the history of each of our vocations is marked by those people who helped us discover and discern the fire of the Spirit. It is so good and at the same time important to be thankful. "Gratitude is always a powerful weapon. Only if we are able to contemplate and feel genuine gratitude for all those ways we have experienced God's love, generosity, solidarity and trust, as well as his forgiveness, patience, forbearance and compassion, will we allow the Spirit to grant us the freshness that can renew (and not simply patch up) our life and mission" (*Letter to Priests*, 4 August 2019). So let us think of them with gratitude, and, standing on their shoulders, may we too feel called to be men and women who help bring about the new life the Lord bestows on us. As those called to apostolic fruitfulness, called to struggle valiantly for the things that the Lord loves and for which he gave his life, let us ask for the grace for our hearts to beat in unison with his own. I would even ask you to be wounded by that same love; to have that same passion for Jesus and for his kingdom.

Here we can all ask ourselves: how can we cultivate apostolic fruitfulness? This is a good question, that each of us can ask ourselves, and can answer from our hearts.

Sister is translating what is not in the text because it is not easy for me to communicate with you through this device; it's not easy. But you have good will. Thank you.

Benedetta, you spoke of how the Lord first attracted you to himself by beauty. It was the beauty of an image of Our Lady, whose special gaze pierced your heart and made you want to know her better. Who is that woman? It had nothing to do with words, or abstract ideas or cold syllogisms. It all started with a look, a beautiful look that captivated you. What great wisdom was hidden in your words. Let us be alert to beauty, alert to a sense of wonder capable of opening up new horizons and raising new questions. A consecrated life incapable of openness to surprises is only half a life. I want to say this again. A consecrated life incapable of openness to surprises each day – open to joy and to sadness, but open to surprises – is only half a life. The Lord did not call us and send us forth into the world to impose obligations on people, or to lay heavier burdens than those they already have, which are many, but rather to share joy, a beautiful, new, surprising horizon. I really like the words of Benedict XVI, which I consider not only true but also prophetic for our times: the Church does not grow by proselytizing but by attraction (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 14). "Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful – lovely – capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties" (ibid., 167).

And this means we are not afraid to look for new symbols and images, for that particular music which can help awaken in the Thai people the amazement that the Lord wants to give us. *Let us not be afraid to continue inculturating the Gospel*. We need to seek new ways of transmitting the word, ways that are capable of mobilizing and awakening a desire to know the Lord. Who is that man? Who are these people who follow a man

who was crucified?

As I prepared for this meeting, I read, with some pain, that for many people Christianity is a foreign faith, a religion for foreigners. This should spur us to find ways to profess the faith “in dialect”, like a mother who sings lullabies to her child. With that same intimacy, let us give faith a Thai face and flesh, which involves much more than making translations. It is about letting the Gospel be stripped of fine but foreign garb; to let it “sing” with the native music of this land and inspire the hearts of our brothers and sisters with the same beauty that set our own hearts on fire. I encourage you to pray to Our Lady, to the one who by the beauty of her gaze first captivated Benedetta, and to say with childlike confidence: “Obtain for us now a new ardor born of the resurrection, that we may bring to all the Gospel of life which triumphs over death. Give us a holy courage to seek new paths, that the gift of unfading beauty may reach every man and woman” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 288).

Mary’s gaze impels us to look where she looks, to turn our eyes to that other gaze and to do whatever he tells us (cf. *Jn 2:1-12*). His is a gaze that captivates because it is able to penetrate appearances to find and celebrate the authentic beauty present in every person. It is a gaze that, as the Gospel teaches us, shatters all determinisms, fatalisms and standards. Where many saw only a sinner, a blasphemer, a tax collector, an evildoer or even a traitor, Jesus was able to see apostles. Such is the beauty that his gaze invites us to proclaim, a gaze that enters in, transforms and brings out the best in others.

As for the first stirrings of your vocation, many of you in your early years took part in the activities of young people who wanted to put the Gospel into practice and to go out into the cities to visit the needy, the neglected and even the despised, orphans and the elderly. Surely many of you were in turn visited by the Lord, who made you see that he was calling you to give everything away, to leave yourselves behind and, in that very movement, to find yourselves. In the faces of those we encounter on the street, we can discover the beauty of being able to treat one another as brothers and sisters. We see them no longer as orphans, derelicts, outcasts or the despised. Now each of them has the face of “a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 98). I would like to encourage all those among you who, on a daily basis, spend your lives serving Jesus in your brothers and sisters, as Bishop Joseph proudly pointed out when introducing you. So many of you manage to see beauty where others see only contempt, or abandonment or an object of sexual gratification. In this way, you are a concrete sign of the Lord’s mercy, alive and at work: a sign of the anointing of the Holy One in these lands.

Such anointing calls for prayer. Apostolic fruitfulness requires and is sustained by fidelity to deep prayer. Deep prayer like that of those elderly people who constantly pray the rosary. How many of us have received the faith from our grandparents, from seeing them doing their household chores, rosary in hand, sanctifying their entire day. This is contemplation in action, making God part of the little things of each day. It is vital that the Church today be able to proclaim the Gospel to all, in all places, on all occasions, without hesitation and without fear (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 23); as a people who every morning, in their face to face conversation with the Lord, are sent forth anew. Without prayer, our life and mission loses all its meaning, loses strength and fervor. If you are missing out on prayer, any work you do will not make sense, will have no strength, no value. Prayer is the center of everything.

Saint Paul VI said that one of the worst obstacles to evangelization is the lack of fervor (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80). Do read that number 80 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. For religious, for priests and for catechists, that fervor is nurtured by a double encounter, with the face of the Lord and with the faces of their brothers and sisters. We too need to find the space to be able to return to the source and drink of its life-giving waters. Immersed in myriad responsibilities, may we always seek that quiet place where we can remember, in prayer, that the Lord has already saved the world and that we are asked, in union with him, to make this salvation felt by all.

Once again, I thank you for your lives, I thank you for your witness and your generous commitment. I ask you, please, not to yield to the temptation of thinking that you are few in number. Instead, think of yourselves as little, little tools in the Lord’s creative hands. And he will be writing with your lives the finest pages of the history of salvation in these lands.

Please remember to pray for me, and to ask others to do the same.

Thank you.
