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Video Message of the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the national Meeting of Bishops and Priests of Venezuela

The following is the text of the video message sent by the Holy Father, on the occasion of the inauguration, to the participants in the online national meeting of the Bishops and Priests of Venezuela, promoted by the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, taking place from 19 to 20 January 2021 on the theme *Nuestros presbíteros en la pandemia: Su vivencia y ejercicio ministerial durante este tiempo*:

Video Message of the Holy Father

Dear brother bishops and priests,

I thank the Lord for the opportunity to be able to address you in these days in which you begin a virtual meeting, taking into account the difficulties that also oppress many of our brothers and sisters in Venezuela and throughout the world. This is an opportunity to share, in a spirit of ministerial fraternity, your priestly experiences, your labours, your uncertainties, as well as your longings and your conviction to carry on the work of the Church, which is the work of the Lord.

In these difficult moments I am reminded of the passage in the Gospel of Mark (cf. 6:30-31) which tells how the Apostles, on returning from the mission to which Jesus had sent them, gathered around him. They told him all that they had done, all that they had taught. Then Jesus invited them to go, alone with him, to a deserted place to rest for a while.

Our being Pastors of the Church, even in the present context, requires us to act in this way. We cannot act alone, isolated, self-sufficient, with hidden agendas. It is essential that we always return to Jesus, that we gather in sacramental fraternity, to tell him and each other “all that we have done and taught”, with the conviction that it is not our work but God's. It is he who saves us, we are the ones who are saved. It is he who saves us, we are merely instruments in his hands.

This assembly, which is being held virtually because of the Covid-19 pandemic, aims to allow the meeting of those who have received the mission to witness to and extend the Lord's paternity among God's holy faithful people. In this regard, I would like to point out to you two principles we should never lose sight of, and which guarantee the growth of the Church if we are faithful: love of neighbour and service to one another. These two principles are anchored in two institutive acts that Jesus performed at the Last Supper, and which are the foundation, so to speak, of his message: the Eucharist, to teach love, and the washing of the feet, to teach service. Love and service together, otherwise it does not work.

This is how the Lord wants us to be: experts in the task of loving others and capable of showing them, in the simplicity of small daily gestures of affection and attention, the caress of divine tenderness. He also wants us to be servants of our brothers, but humble servants, because it is Jesus who sends us and reminds us that the servant is not greater than his Lord, nor is the one sent greater than the one who sent him. We need to revive in our lives the desire to imitate the Good Shepherd, and to learn to be "servants" to everyone, especially our less fortunate and often rejected brothers and sisters, and to ensure that, in this time of crisis, they feel accompanied, supported and loved.

Dear brother bishops and priests, I invite you to go forward, working joyfully and decisively in your pastoral work, to renew the gift of yourselves to the Lord and to his holy people. I thank you for your witness of love and service to your Venezuelan brothers and sisters, manifested in your attention to the sick, to whom you have brought the strength of the word of God and the Eucharist; manifested in your accompaniment of medical and paramedical personnel and volunteers who are assisting patients in this pandemic; in your zeal in helping the poor and excluded, and those who lack the bare necessities to survive and carry on with dignity. Thank you, thank you for all this!

With gratitude, I assure you of my closeness and my prayers to all of you who carry out the mission of the Church in Venezuela, in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the numerous charitable initiatives towards your brothers and sisters who are exhausted by poverty and the health crisis. I entrust you all to the intercession of Our Lady of Coromoto and of Saint Joseph.

And may the Lord bless you and accompany you. May he bless and accompany your work, your heart, your hands, your knees when you pray. May he bless and accompany your hopes, your good intentions and, above all, may he bless and accompany your unity. Do not be divided, brothers! Do not be divided. There is always a possibility of unity. Just as there is always a possibility of isolating oneself and creating a sectarian attitude within the heart, far from the unity of the Church.

May the Lord bless you and accompany you! And please, I ask you to pray for me. Thank you!
