



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 210914c

Tuesday 14.09.2021

Apostolic Journey of the Holy Father Francis in Budapest for the concluding Holy Mass of the 52nd International Eucharistic Congress, and in Slovakia (12-15 September 2021 – Meeting with the Roma Community in Luník IX, Košice

Meeting with the Roma Community in Luník IX, Košice

In the afternoon, the Holy Father Francis left the seminary in Košice bound for Luník IX, one of the 22 districts of the city, home to the largest Roma community in Slovakia.

Before leaving the seminary, the Pope gave a gift to the rector. He then transferred by car to Luník IX, where at 16.00 he met with the Roma community in the square next to the Salesian Centre.

Upon arrival he was welcomed at the entrance to the Centre by the director, three confreres and two Roma children. After a brief greeting from the director of the Centre and testimonies from a Roma man and a Roma family in employment, Pope Francis delivered his address.

At the end, after the recitation of the Our Father and the final blessing, the Holy Father transferred by car to the Lokomotiva Stadium of Košice for the meeting with young people.

The following is the address given by the Pope during his meeting with the Roma community:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good afternoon!

I thank you for your welcome and for your affectionate words of greeting. Ján reminded us of what Saint Paul VI once told you: “In the Church, you are not on the margins... You are in the heart of the Church” (*Homily*, 26 September 1965). In the Church, no one ought ever to feel out of place or set aside. This is not just a truism; it is

the reality of the Church, in which we live as a people called by God, each with his or her special role to play, all as members of the same team. That is how God wants us to be: each different, but all united around him. The Lord sees us *together*, all of us.

He also sees us as sons and daughters: he looks at us as a Father does, gazing with love on each of his children. If I let him see me that way, I will learn how to see others the same way: I will come to realize that I am surrounded by other children of God and recognize them as my brothers and sisters. That is what the Church is, a family of brothers and sisters with one Father, who gave us Jesus as our brother, to help us understand how much he loves fraternity. In fact, he wants all humanity to become one universal family. You possess a great love for the family, and so you view the Church from that experience. The Church is indeed a home; it is your home. So I would say to you with my whole heart: you are always welcome! Always feel at home in the Church, and don't ever worry about whether you will be at home there. Nobody ought ever keep you or anyone else away from the Church!

Ján, you greeted me with your wife Beáta: together you made the dream of a family more important than the differences in your backgrounds, cultures and customs. More than mere words, your marriage itself shows how the concrete experience of living together can overcome many stereotypes that might otherwise seem insurmountable. It is not easy to leave prejudice behind, even for Christians. It is not easy to value others, especially if we see them as problems or enemies; if we pass judgement without making any effort to get to know them and to listen to their stories.

Let us listen to what Jesus tells us in the Gospel: "Do not judge" (*Mt 7:1*). The Gospel must not be sweetened up or watered down. Do not judge, Christ tells us. How many times, on the other hand, do we not only pass along gossip or rumours, but consider ourselves justified when we are harsh in our judgement of others. We can be indulgent with ourselves, but inflexible with others. How often are our judgements really prejudices, pre-judgements? How often do we rest content with labels! In this way, we disfigure by our words the beauty of the children of God, who are our brothers and sisters. We cannot reduce the reality of others to fit our own pre-packaged ideas; people cannot be pigeonholed. Our *knowledge* and appreciation of others must be grounded in our *acknowledgement* that each of them possesses the inviolable beauty of a son or daughter of God, a reflection of the Creator's image.

Dear brothers and sisters, all too often you have been the object of prejudice and harsh judgements, discriminatory stereotypes, defamatory words and gestures. As a result, we are all poorer, poorer in humanity. Restoring dignity means passing from prejudice to dialogue, from introspection to integration. But how do we do this? Nikola and René, you have helped us in this regard: your love story was born here and it matured thanks to the closeness and encouragement you received. You felt empowered and you wanted a job; you felt loved and you grew in your desire to give something more to your children.

So you have left us with a precious message. Where there is concern for each person, where there is pastoral care, where there is patience and concrete efforts, all these things will bear fruit. Not immediately, but in due time those fruits will be seen. Judgement and prejudice only increase distances. Hostility and sharp words are not helpful. Marginalizing others accomplishes nothing. Segregating ourselves and other people eventually leads to anger. The path to peaceful coexistence is integration: an organic, gradual and vital process that starts with coming to know one another, then patiently grows, keeping its gaze fixed on the future. And what is the future? We can ask: What is the future? It is our children. The future belongs to them; they are the ones to guide us: their great dreams must not collide with barriers that we have erected. Our children want to grow together with others, without encountering obstacles and exclusion. They deserve a well-integrated and free life. They are the ones who should motivate us to make far-sighted decisions based not on hasty consensus, but on concern for our common future. Courageous decisions must be made on behalf of our children: to promote their dignity, to educate them in such a way that they can grow up solidly grounded in their own identity and be given every opportunity they desire.

I thank those who are engaged in this work of integration, which requires great effort, but at times also encounters misunderstanding and ingratitude, even within the Church. Dear priests, religious and laity, dear

friends who dedicate your time to offering an integral development to your brothers and sisters, I thank you! Thank you for all your work with the marginalized. Here I think also of refugees and prisoners. I express my closeness to them in particular and to all who are incarcerated. Thank you, Father Peter, for having told us about the pastoral centres, where you provide social services and practical assistance, but also personal accompaniment. Thank you to all the Salesians. Persevere on this path, which may not yield immediate results, but is nonetheless prophetic, for it embraces the least of our brothers and sisters, builds fraternity and sows seeds of peace. Do not be afraid to go out to encounter the marginalized. You will find that you are going out to meet Jesus. He awaits you wherever there is need, not comfort; wherever service rules, not power; wherever incarnation, not self-indulgence, is required. Those are the places where he will be found.

I ask all of you to overcome your fears and to leave behind past injuries, confidently, step by step: in honest work, in the dignity born of earning our daily bread, in fostering mutual trust and in praying for one another. That is what guides our steps and gives us strength. I encourage you, I bless you and I bring you the embrace of the whole Church. Thank you.
