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Address of the Holy Father to the heads of Commissions for Catechesis of the European Episcopal Conferences

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the meeting promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation.

The following is his address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

It is with pleasure that I welcome you to this occasion, on which you have had the opportunity to discuss, as those responsible for catechesis for the particular Churches in Europe, the reception of the new Directory for Catechesis, published last year. I thank His Excellency Archbishop Rino Fisichella for this initiative, which I am sure will also be extended to the Bishops' Conferences of the other continents, so that the common catechetical journey may be enriched by the many local experiences.

I have just returned from the celebration of the International Eucharistic Congress, held in Budapest in recent days, and the occasion is favourable for confirming how the great effort of catechesis can be effective in the work of evangelisation if it keeps its gaze fixed on the Eucharistic mystery. We cannot forget that the privileged place of catechesis is precisely the Eucharistic celebration, where brothers and sisters come together to discover ever more the different forms of God's presence in their lives.

I like to think of that passage in the Gospel of Matthew where the disciples ask Jesus: "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" (26,17). Jesus' reply clearly shows that He had already prepared everything: He knew the route a man would take with the water jar, He knew about the great hall already furnished on the upper floor of the house (cf. *Lk 22:10-12*); and, without saying so, He fully sensed what was in the hearts of His friends for what was to happen in the following days.

The initial words with which he sends them are: "Go into the city" (*Mt 26:18*). This detail - thinking of you and your service - makes us reread the path of catechesis as a moment through which Christians, who are preparing to celebrate the culmination of the mystery of faith, are invited to go first "into the city", to meet people busy with their daily commitments. Catechesis - as the new Directory emphasises - is not an abstract communication of theoretical knowledge to be memorised as like mathematical or chemical formulas. It is rather the mystagogical experience of those who learn to encounter their brothers and sisters where they live and work, because they themselves have met Christ, who has called them to become missionary disciples. We must insist on indicating the heart of catechesis: the risen Jesus Christ loves you and never abandons you! We can never tire or feel we are being repetitive about this first proclamation in the various stages of the catechetical process.

This is why I instituted the ministry of catechist. They are preparing the rite for the, I quote, "creation" of catechists. So that the Christian community may feel the need to awaken this vocation and to experience the service of some men and women who, living the celebration of the Eucharist, may feel more vividly the passion to transmit the faith as evangelisers. The catechist and the catechist are witnesses who place themselves at the service of the Christian community, to support the deepening of the faith in the reality of everyday life. They are people who tirelessly proclaim the Gospel of mercy; people who are capable of creating the necessary bonds of acceptance and closeness that make it possible to better appreciate the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharistic mystery by offering the fruits of good works.

I remember lovingly the two catechists who prepared me for First Communion, and I continued my relationship with them as a priest and also, with one of them who is still alive, as a bishop. I felt a great respect, even a feeling of thanksgiving, without making it explicit, but it felt like veneration. Why? Because they were the women who had prepared me for my First Communion, together with a nun. I want to tell you about this experience because it was a beautiful thing for me to accompany them to the end of their lives, both of them. And also the nun who prepared me for the liturgical part of Communion: she died, and I was there, with her, accompanying her. There is a closeness, a very important bond with catechists...

As I said last Monday in Bratislava Cathedral, evangelisation is not a mere repetition of the past, never. The great evangelising saints, like Cyril and Methodius, like Boniface, were creative, with the creativity of the Holy Spirit. They beat new paths, invented new languages, new "alphabets", to transmit the Gospel, for the inculturation of the faith. This requires knowing how to listen to the people, to listen to the peoples to whom one is proclaiming: listening to their culture, their history; listening not superficially, already thinking of the pre-packaged answers we carry in our briefcase, no! To truly listen, and to compare those cultures, those languages, even and above all the unspoken, the unexpressed, with the Word of God, with Jesus Christ, the living Gospel. And I repeat the question: is this not the most urgent task of the Church among the peoples of Europe? The great Christian tradition of the continent must not become a historical relic, otherwise it is no longer "*tradition*"! Tradition is either alive or it is not. And catechesis is tradition, it is *trador*, to hand down, but as living tradition, from heart to heart, from mind to mind, from life to life. Therefore: passionate and creative, with the impetus of the Holy Spirit. I used the word "pre-packaged" for language, but I fear catechists whose heart, attitude and face are "pre-packaged". No. Either the catechist is free, or he or she is not a catechist. The catechist lets her- or himself be struck by the reality he or she finds, and transmits the Gospel with great creativity, or is not a catechist. Think about this well.

Dear friends, through you I would like to convey my personal thanks to the thousands of catechists in Europe. I am thinking in particular of those who, starting in the coming weeks, will devote themselves to children and young people who are preparing to complete their journey of Christian initiation. But I am thinking of each and every one. May the Virgin Mary intercede for you, so that you may always be assisted by the Holy Spirit. I accompany you with my prayers and my Apostolic Blessing. And you too, please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!

[Blessing]

