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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Cyprus and Greece – Welcome at Larnaca Airport and Meeting with the Catholic Community

Official welcome at Larnaca Airport

Meeting with Priests, Men and Women Religious, Deacons, Catechists, and Ecclesial Associations and Movements of Cyprus, in the Maronite Cathedral of Our Lady of Graces

Official welcome at Larnaca Airport

Upon arrival at Larnaca International Airport, the Holy Father Francis was received by the President of the House of Parliament. Three children in traditional dress presented a floral tribute to the Pope.

After the Guard of Honour and the presentation of the respective delegations, the Pope and the President of the House of Parliament proceeded to the VIP lounge. The Holy Father then transferred by car to the Maronite Cathedral of Our Lady of Graces in Nicosia for the meeting with priests, men and women religious, deacons, catechists, and ecclesial associations and movements of Cyprus.

Meeting with Priests, Men and Women Religious, Deacons, Catechists, and Ecclesial Associations and Movements of Cyprus, in the Maronite Cathedral of Our Lady of Graces

This afternoon, at 16.05 (15.05 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met with the priests, men and women religious, deacons, catechists, and ecclesial associations and movements of Cyprus in the Maronite Cathedral of Our Lady of Graces.

Upon arrival, the Pope was welcomed at the main entrance by the Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites, His

Eminence Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï, O.M.M., and by Archbishop Selim Jean Sfeir of Cyprus of the Maronites. They then entered the Cathedral together.

After the opening hymn, followed by greetings from the Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites, and the alternation of songs and testimonies from a Franciscan nun and a Josephine nun and the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Pope Francis delivered his address.

At the end, after the recitation of the litanies, the final blessing and the offering of a gift to the Holy Father, the Pope transferred by car to the Presidential Palace in Nicosia for the welcome ceremony, the courtesy visit to the President of the Republic and the meeting with the authorities, civil society and the Diplomatic Corps.

The following is the Holy Father Francis' address to the Catholic Community:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Beatitudes,

Dear Brother Bishops,

Dear Priests, Men and Women Religious, and Catechists,

Dear Brothers and Sisters, *Χαίρετε!* [Greetings!]

I am pleased to be here among you. I express my gratitude to Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï for his kind words, and I cordially greet Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa. I am grateful to all of you for your ministry and your service, especially to you, sisters, for the educational work you carry on in the schools, so well attended by the children of the island, and which are places of encounter, dialogue and instruction in the art of building bridges. Thank you all for your closeness to people, especially in social and work settings where it is more difficult.

I share with you my joy in visiting this land and journeying as a pilgrim in the footsteps of the great apostle Barnabas, a son of this people, a disciple who loved Jesus and a fearless herald of the Gospel. As he visited the emerging Christian communities, he saw the grace of God at work; he rejoiced and urged everyone "to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (cf. Acts 11:23). I come with the same desire: to see the grace of God at work in your Church and in your land, to rejoice with you at the wondrous things the Lord has done, and to urge you to persevere always, without growing weary or discouraged. God is greater! He is always greater than our own contradictions. Always persevere!

In looking out at you, I see the wealth of your diversity, each of you truly different, like a good "fruit salad"! I greet the Maronite Church, which arrived on the island in successive stages over the centuries and, frequently passing through many trials, has maintained the faith. When I think of Lebanon, I am greatly concerned for the crisis it is facing; I am sensitive to the sufferings of a people wearied and tested by violence and adversity. I carry in my prayer the desire for peace that rises from the heart of that country. I thank you for all that you are doing in the Church, and for Cyprus. The cedars of Lebanon are mentioned many times in Scripture as examples of beauty and grandeur. Yet even a great cedar rises from its roots and grows slowly. You are those roots, transplanted to Cyprus in order to spread the fragrance and beauty of the Gospel. Thank you!

I also greet the Latin Church, present here for more than a millennium, which over time has witnessed the enthusiasm of the faith increase, together with her children. Now, thanks to the presence of many of our migrant brothers and sisters, it appears as a "polychrome" people, a true point of encounter between different ethnicities and cultures. This face of the Church reflects Cyprus' own place in the European continent: it is a land of golden

fields, an island caressed by the waves of the sea, but above all else a history of intertwined peoples, a mosaic of encounters. The Church, as catholic, universal, is an open space in which all are welcomed and gathered together by God's mercy and invitation to love. Walls do not and should not exist in the Catholic Church. Let us never forget that! None of us has been called here to proselytize as preachers, never. Proselytism is sterile and does not give life. We have all been called by the mercy of God, who never tires of calling, never tires of being near, never tires of forgiving. Where do we find the roots of our Christian vocation? In God's mercy. We must never forget that. The Lord does not disappoint us; his mercy does not disappoint us. He is always waiting for us. Please remember, walls do not and should not exist in the Catholic Church. For the Church is a common home, a place of relationships and of coexistence in diversity, with a variety of rites. One person thinks this way, another sees things that way, this Sister sees things in a different way... This is the diversity of the whole; and there, in that diversity, is the richness of unity. Who makes this unity? The Holy Spirit. Who makes this diversity? The Holy Spirit. Whoever sees this will understand. The Holy Spirit is the author of diversity and the author of harmony. Saint Basil used to put it this way: "*Ipse harmonia est*". The Spirit is the one who gives the diversity of gifts and makes the harmonious unity of the Church.

Dear brothers and sisters, I want to reflect with you about Saint Barnabas, your brother and patron, using two words that describe his life and mission.

The first word is *patience*. Of Barnabas, it was said that he was a great man of faith and wisdom chosen by the Church in Jerusalem – the Mother Church, we could say – as the person best suited to visit a new community, that of Antioch, made up of a number of recent converts from paganism. He was sent to go and see what was happening, to scout things out. There he found people coming from another whole world, another culture, another religious sensibility. They were people who had just had a life-changing experience; theirs was a faith full of enthusiasm, yet still fragile, like at the beginning. In this situation, Barnabas' attitude was one of utmost *patience*. He knew how to wait for the tree to grow. This is the patience to keep moving forward; the patience to enter into the lives of hitherto unknown individuals; the patience to accept what was new without rushing to judgement. His was the patience of discernment that is capable of perceiving the signs of God's work in every place, the patience to "study" other cultures and traditions. Above all else, Barnabas had the *patience of accompaniment*: he knew how to accompany and allow growth to occur. He did not overwhelm the fragile faith of the newcomers by taking a rigorous and inflexible approach, or by making excessive demands about the observance of precepts. No. He allowed them to grow. He accompanied them, taking them by the hand and dialoguing with them. Barnabas was not scandalized; he was like mothers and fathers who are not scandalized by their children, who accompany them and help them to grow. Bear this in mind: divisions and proselytism within the Church are not right. Accompany others, allowing them to grow. And if you need to correct someone, do it with love, with peace. Barnabas is the man of patience.

Dear brothers and sisters, we need a *patient Church*. A Church that does not allow itself to be upset and troubled by change, but calmly welcomes newness and discerns situations in the light of the Gospel. The work you are carrying out on this island, as you welcome new brothers and sisters arriving from other shores of the world, is precious. Like Barnabas, you too are called to foster a patient and attentive outlook, to be visible and credible signs of the patience of God, who never leaves anyone outside the home, never leaves anyone bereft of his loving embrace. The Church of Cyprus has these same open arms: it welcomes, integrates and accompanies. This is also an important message for the Church throughout Europe, marked by the crisis of faith. It does little good to be impulsive and tempestuous, nostalgic or querulous; instead, we do well to march forward, reading the signs of the times as well as the signs of the crisis. We need to start proclaiming the Gospel anew, patiently, closely following the Beatitudes, above all proclaiming them to the next generation. I would ask you, my brother Bishops, to be pastors patient in closeness. Be tireless in seeking God in prayer, in encountering your priests, in encountering with respect and kindness your brothers and sisters of other Christian confessions, in encountering the faithful wherever they may be. To you, dear priests, I would say: be patient with the faithful, always ready to encourage them; be untiring ministers of God's forgiveness and mercy. Never be harsh judges, but loving fathers.

When I read the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother was a harsh judge, but the father was merciful, the image of the Father who always forgives; indeed, the Father who is always waiting to forgive us. Last year, a group of young people who put on pop music performances wanted to perform the Parable of the Prodigal Son,

with music and dialogue... Wonderful! Yet the most beautiful part was the final conversation, when the prodigal son went to a friend and said: "I can't go on like this. I want to go back home, but I'm afraid my father will close the door in my face and throw me out. I'm afraid and I don't know what to do". "But your father is a good man!" "Yes, but you know... my brother is there, who is a hothead". Towards the end of this performance about the prodigal son, his friend tells him: "Do this one thing: write to your father and tell him that you want to come home but that you're afraid he won't welcome you. Say to your father that if he wants to welcome you, he should put a handkerchief on the highest window of the house. In that way, your father will tell you first whether he will welcome you or chase you away". That act ends. In the next act, the son is on his way to his father's house. And when he is on his way, he turns, and you see his father's house: it was full of white handkerchiefs! Full! This is what God is like for us. This is God for us. He never tires of forgiving. And when the son begins to speak: "Father, I did...", the father says, "Hush" and covers his mouth.

Dear priests: please, do not be strict in confession. When you see that someone is in difficulty, say: "I understand, I understand". This does not mean being "over-indulgent", no. Yet it does mean having the heart of a father, like the heart of the father who is God. The work that the Lord accomplishes in each person is a "sacred history": let us be enthused about it. Given the multifaceted variety of your people, patience also means having open ears and hearts for different spiritual sensibilities, different ways of expressing the faith, different cultures. The Church does not want to reduce everything to uniformity, far from it, but to integrate all cultures, all the mentalities of people with maternal patience, for the Church is a mother. This is what, with the grace of God, we want to achieve on the synodal path, through patient prayer and patient listening, for a Church docile to God and open to humanity. This is patience, one of the aspects of Barnabas.

There is a second important aspect in Barnabas' history that I want to highlight: his encounter with Paul of Tarsus and their fraternal friendship, which led them to carry out their mission together. After Paul's conversion, "they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple" (*Acts 9:26*), since he had previously been a ruthless persecutor of Christians. Here the Acts of the Apostles tells us something very touching: "Barnabas took him" (v. 27), brought him to the community, recounted what had happened to him and vouched for him. Let us listen to those words, "*he took him*". They evoke Jesus' own mission, for he took the disciples with him through the streets of Galilee and took upon himself our humanity wounded by sin. His was an approach of friendship and sharing of life. "Taking with oneself", "taking upon oneself" means taking up the history of others, taking the time to get to know them without labeling them – the sin of labeling people! – bearing them on our shoulders when they are tired or wounded, as the good Samaritan did (cf. *Lk 10:25-37*). This is *fraternity*, and these are the words I want to say to you: the first is *patience*, the second *fraternity*.

Barnabas and Paul, as brothers, journeyed together to proclaim the Gospel, even amid persecution. At Antioch, "for a whole year they met with the Church and taught a large number of people" (*Acts 11:26*). Later, by the will of the Holy Spirit, both were set apart for a much greater mission, and so "they sailed to Cyprus" (*Acts 13:4*). The word of God sped along and grew, not only because of their human qualities, but above all because they were brothers in the name of God, and their fraternity radiated the commandment of love. They were brothers who were different – like the fingers on our hands, each different – yet with the same dignity. Brothers. Later, as happens in life, an unexpected event occurred: the Acts of the Apostles tell us that the two had a sharp disagreement and they went their separate ways (cf. *Acts 15:39*). Brothers can argue and at times fight. Yet Paul and Barnabas did not go their separate ways for personal reasons, but because they disagreed about their ministry, about how to carry out their mission, and in this regard they had different ideas. Among other things, Barnabas wanted to bring the young Mark on their mission, but Paul did not. They argued, yet from some later letters of Paul, we see that there was no rancour between the two of them. Paul even wrote to Timothy, who had to join him shortly after: "Do your best to come to me soon... Get Mark [Mark!] and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me" (*2 Tim 4:9, 11*). This is what fraternity in the Church means: we can argue about visions, points of view – and we do well to do so, for a little disagreement does us good – perceptions and differing ideas, because it is not good never to argue. When there is too strict a peace, God is not present. In a family, brothers and sisters argue and exchange points of view. I am suspicious of those who never argue, because they always have hidden agendas. Fraternity in the Church means that we can argue about visions, perceptions, differing ideas and in certain cases, saying things frankly to each other can help, not saying them behind someone's back, with gossip that benefits no one. Arguing can be an opportunity for growth and change. Yet let us always remember: we argue not for the sake of fighting or imposing our own ideas, but in order to

express and live the vitality of the Spirit who is love and communion. We may argue, yet we remain brothers and sisters. I remember, growing up, there were five of us. We argued among ourselves, strongly at times, yet not every day. Later at table we were all together. In the family that has a mother, Mother Church, there are arguments: her children argue.

Dear brothers and sisters, we need a *fraternal Church*, one that is an agent of fraternity in our world. Here in Cyprus there are many spiritual and ecclesial sensibilities, different backgrounds and histories, different rites and traditions. Yet we should not experience diversity as a threat to identity; we should not be jealous or defensive. If we fall into this temptation, then fear grows, and fear gives rise to distrust, distrust leads to suspicion and then, sooner or later, to conflict. We are brothers and sisters, loved by a single Father. You are immersed in the Mediterranean, a sea rich in history, a sea that has been the cradle of many civilizations, a sea from which today many individuals, peoples and cultures from every part of the world still disembark. By your spirit of fraternity, you can remind everyone, and Europe as a whole, that we need to work together to build a future worthy of humanity, to overcome divisions, to break down walls, to dream and work for unity. We need to welcome and integrate one another, and to walk together as brothers and sisters, all of us!

I thank you for what you are and what you do, for the joy with which you proclaim the Gospel and for the effort and sacrifice with which you strive patiently to embody and spread its message. This was the path traced out for you by the holy Apostles Paul and Barnabas. It is my hope that you will always be a patient Church that discerns, that is never frightened, but discerns, accompanies and integrates, a fraternal Church that makes room for others, and can disagree while always remaining united and that grows through such disagreements. I bless each of you and I ask you, please, to continue to pray for me, for I am in great need! *Efcharistó!* [Thank you!]
