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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Cyprus and Greece – Official Welcome at Athens Airport, Welcome Ceremony, Courtesy Visit to the President of the Republic, Meeting with the Prime Minister and Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps

Official Welcome at Athens Airport

Welcome Ceremony, Courtesy Visit to the President of the Hellenic Republic and Meeting with the Prime Minister in the Presidential Palace of Athens

Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps

Official Welcome at Athens Airport

This morning, at 11.05 (10.05 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis arrived at Athens International Airport.

Upon arrival the Pope was received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Four children, two of whom were in traditional dress, gave him a floral tribute. Then, after the Guard of Honour and the presentation of the respective delegations, Pope Francis transferred by car to the Presidential Palace of Athens for the welcome ceremony in Greece.

Welcome Ceremony, Courtesy Visit to the President of the Hellenic Republic and Meeting with the Prime Minister in the Presidential Palace of Athens

Today at midday (11.00 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis arrived at the Presidential Palace of Athens, where the welcome ceremony in Greece took place.

Upon arrival, the Pope was received by the President of the Hellenic Republic, Her Excellency Ms. Katerina Sakellaropoulou. Then, after the official photo, the Guard of Honour and the anthems, the presentation of the respective delegations took place.

At the end, the Holy Father proceeded to the study of the President of the Republic for the courtesy visit. While the private visit took place, the Cardinal Secretary of State met with the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, His Excellency Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in the presence of the Substitute of the Secretariat of State, His Excellency Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, the Secretary for Relations with States, His Excellency Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, and the apostolic nuncio in Greece, His Excellency Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-Fai, S.D.B.

At the end of the meeting, the President of the Republic accompanied the Pope to the lift. The Holy Father was then received by the Prime Minister, and they proceeded together to the hall where the private meeting took place.

At the end of the meeting, the Pope and the Prime Minister went to the ground floor where they were awaited by the President of the Republic. They then proceeded to the hall where the meeting with the authorities, civil society and the Diplomatic Corps took place.

Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps

Today, at 12.45 (11.45 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met the political and religious authorities, members of the Diplomatic Corps and representatives of civil society in the Presidential Palace of Athens.

After the welcome address by the President of the Hellenic Republic, Her Excellency Ms. Katerina Sakellaropoulou, the Pope delivered his address.

At the end of the meeting, the Holy Father and the President of the Republic proceeded to the room where Pope Francis signed the Book of Honour. After the exchange of gifts, Pope Francis left the Presidential Palace and transferred by car to the apostolic nuncio of Athens where, upon arrival, he was received by the staff of the nunciature.

The following is the address given by the Holy Father during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Madam President of the Republic,

Members of Government and of the Diplomatic Corps,

Distinguished Religious and Civil Authorities,

Illustrious Representatives of Society and the World of Culture,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer you a most cordial greeting and I thank Madam President for her words of welcome in your name and that

of all the citizens of Greece. It is an honour to be in this glorious city. I make my own the words of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: "Golden Athens, patroness of all that is good... In seeking eloquence, I found happiness" (*Or.* 43, 14). I come as a pilgrim to this land rich in spirituality, culture and civilization, to find the same happiness that so thrilled the great Father of the Church: the joy of cultivating wisdom and sharing beauty. A happiness that is not private and solitary, but, born of wonder, yearns for the infinite and is open to community; a wisdom-filled happiness that from here spread everywhere. Without Athens and without Greece, Europe and the world would not be what they are. They would be less wise, less happy.

From this place, humanity's horizons expanded. I too feel invited to lift my gaze and let it rest on the highest part of the city, the Acropolis. Visible from afar to the travellers who over the millennia have arrived here, it inevitably bespoke the presence of the divine, the call to expand our horizons *to what is on high*. From Mount Olympus to the Acropolis to Mount Athos, Greece invites men and women of every age to direct their journey of life towards the heights. Towards God, for we need transcendence in order to be truly human. Today, in the West that emerged from here, there is a forgetfulness of our need for heaven, trapped as we are between the frenzy of a thousand earthly concerns and the insatiable greed of a depersonalizing consumerism. Yet places such as these invite us to feel wonder before the infinite, the beauty of being, and the joy of faith. Here were the paths travelled by the Gospel, uniting East and West, the Holy Places in Europe, Jerusalem and Rome. In order to bring to the world and the good news of God, lover of mankind, the Gospels were written in Greek, the undying language in which the Word – the Logos – expressed himself, the language of human wisdom which became the voice of divine Wisdom.

In this city, our gaze is directed not only to what is on high, but also *towards others*. We are reminded of this by the sea, which Athens borders and which has shaped the vocation of this land, set in the heart of the Mediterranean, to be a bridge connecting different peoples. Here, great historians sought to recount the histories of peoples near and far. Here, according to the celebrated words of Socrates, people began to view themselves as citizens not only of a single city, or a single country, but of the entire world. Citizens. Here man first became conscious of being "a political animal" (cf. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, I, 2) and, as members of the community, began to see others not subjects but as fellow citizens, with whom to work together in organizing the *polis*. Here democracy was born. That cradle, thousands of years later, was to become a house, a great house of democratic peoples. I am speaking of the European Union and the dream of peace and fraternity that it represents for so many peoples.

Yet we cannot avoid noting with concern how today, and not only in Europe, we are witnessing *a retreat from democracy*. Democracy requires participation and involvement on the part of all; consequently, it demands hard work and patience. It is complex, whereas authoritarianism is peremptory and populism's easy answers appear attractive. In some societies, concerned for security and dulled by consumerism, weariness and malcontent can lead to a sort of skepticism about democracy. Yet universal participation is something essential; not simply to attain shared goals, but also because it corresponds to what we are: social beings, at once unique and interdependent.

At the same time, we are also witnessing a skepticism about democracy provoked by the distance of institutions, by fear of a loss of identity, by bureaucracy. The remedy is not to be found in an obsessive quest for popularity, in a thirst for visibility, in a flurry of unrealistic promises or in adherence to forms of ideological colonization, but in good politics. For politics is, and ought to be in practice, a good thing, as the supreme responsibility of citizens and as *the art of the common good*. So that the good can be truly shared, particular attention, I would even say priority, should be given to the weaker strata of society. This is the direction to take. One of Europe's founding fathers indicated it as an antidote to the polarizations that enliven democracy, but also risk debilitating it. As he said: "There is much talk of who is moving left or right, but the decisive thing is to move forward, and to move forward means to move towards social justice" (A. DE GASPERI, *Address in Milan*, 23 April 1949). Here, a change of direction is needed, even as fears and theories, amplified by virtual communication, are daily spread to create division. Let us help one another, instead, to pass from *partisanship to participation*; from committing ourselves to supporting our party alone to engaging ourselves actively for the promotion of all.

From partisanship to participation. This what should motivate our actions on a variety of fronts. I think of the climate, the pandemic, the common market and, above all, the widespread forms of poverty. These are

challenges that call for concrete and active cooperation. The international community needs this, in order to open up paths of peace through a multilateralism that will not end up being stifled by excessive nationalistic demands. Politics needs this, in order to put common needs ahead of private interests. It might seem a utopia, a hopeless journey over a turbulent sea, a long and unachievable odyssey. Yet, as the great Homeric epic tells us, travelling over stormy seas is often our only choice. And it will achieve its goal if it is driven by the desire to come to home port, by the effort to move forward together, by *nóstos álgos*, homesickness. Here I would like to renew my appreciation for the perseverance that led to the Prespa Agreement signed between this Republic and that of North Macedonia.

Looking once more to the Mediterranean, the sea that opens us to others, I think of its fertile shores and the tree that can serve as its symbol: the olive, whose yield has just been collected. The olive tree unites the different lands bordering this one sea. It is sad to see how, in recent years, many age-old olive trees have been burned, consumed by fires often caused by adverse weather conditions provoked in turn by climate changes. Against the scarred landscape of this marvellous country, the olive tree can symbolize the determination to tackle the climate crisis and its devastation. After the primordial cataclysm related by the Bible, the great Flood, a dove returned to Noah, carrying “in its beak a freshly plucked olive leaf” (*Gen 8:11*). That was the symbol of recovery, of the strength to begin anew by changing our way of life, renewing our proper relationship with the Creator, other creatures and all creation. It is my hope, in this regard, that the commitments assumed in the fight against climate changes may be more fully shared and seriously implemented, rather than remaining a mere façade. May words be followed by deeds, lest children once more have to pay for the hypocrisy of their fathers. We are reminded of the words Homer placed on the lips of Achilles: “Hateful in my eyes, even as the gates of Hades, is that man who hides one thing in his heart and says another” (*Iliad*, IX, 312-313).

In Scripture, the olive is also associated with the call to fellowship, especially with regard to those who do not belong to one’s own people. “When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien”, the Bible tells us (*Deut 24:20*). This country, naturally welcoming, has seen on some of its islands the arrival of numbers of our migrant brothers and sisters greater than the number of their native inhabitants; this has heightened the difficulties still felt in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Yet Europe also continues to temporize: the European Community, prey to forms of nationalistic self-interest, rather than being an engine of solidarity, appears at times blocked and uncoordinated. In the past, ideological conflicts prevented the building of bridges between Eastern and Western Europe; today the issue of migration has led to breaches between South and North as well. I would like to encourage once again a global, communitarian vision with regard to the issue of migration, and to urge that attention be paid to those in greatest need, so that, in proportion to each country’s means, they will be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated, in full respect for their human rights and dignity. Rather than a present obstacle, this represents a guarantee for a future marked by peaceful coexistence with all those who increasingly are forced to flee in search of a new home and new hope. They are the protagonists of a horrendous modern Odyssey. I like to recall that when Odysseus landed in Ithaca he was recognized, not by the local lords, who had usurped his house and goods, but by the person who cared for him, his old nurse. He recognized him by seeing his wounds. Sufferings bring us together; realizing that we are all part of the same frail humanity will help us to build a more integrated and peaceful future. Let us turn what seems only a tragic calamity into a bold opportunity!

The pandemic is itself the great calamity. It has made us rediscover our own weakness and our need for others. In this country too, it poses a challenge that calls for suitable interventions by the authorities – I think of the necessary vaccination campaign – and not a few sacrifices on the part of citizens. Amid great hardship, there has also been a remarkable growth in solidarity, to which the local Catholic Church is happy to continue to contribute, in the conviction that it represents a benefit not to be lost once the storm gradually subsides. Some words of the oath of Hippocrates seem written for our own time, such as the commitment to “follow that regimen I judge best for the benefit of the sick” and “to abstain from whatever is harmful and offensive” to others, to safeguarding life at every moment, particularly in the mother’s womb (cf. *Hippocratic Oath*, ancient text). The right of all to care and treatment must always be respected, so that those most vulnerable, particularly the elderly, may never be discarded: that the elderly may not be subject to a “throwaway culture”. The elderly are the sign of a people’s wisdom. For life is a right, not death. Death is to be accepted, not administered.

Dear friends, some Mediterranean olive trees are so ancient that they predate the coming of Christ. Age-old,

enduring, resistant to the ravages of time, they remind us of the importance of preserving deep roots, fortified by memory. This country can rightly be called *the memory of Europe* – you are the memory of Europe – and I am happy to visit twenty years after the historic visit of Pope John Paul II, and in this year that marks the bicentenary of its independence. I think of the well-known words of General Kolokotronis: “God has set his signature on the freedom of Greece”. God readily sets his signature on human freedom, always and everywhere. It is his greatest gift to us, the gift that, in turn, he values most from us. For God created us to be free, and what most pleases him is that, in freedom, we love him and our neighbour. Laws exist to help make this possible, but also training in responsibility and the growth of a culture of respect. Here I would again express my gratitude for the public recognition of the Catholic community, and I assure you of its desire to promote the common good of Greek society, directing to that end its innate universality, in the hope that in practice the conditions needed to carry out its service effectively will always be guaranteed.

Two hundred years ago, the provisional government of this country addressed Catholics in these touching words: “Christ has commanded us to love our neighbour. Yet who among our neighbours is closer than you, our fellow citizens, despite certain ritual differences? We have the same fatherland, we are one people, we Christians are brethren – brethren in our roots, our growth and our fruits – under the Holy Cross”. To be Christians under the sign of the cross, in this country blessed by faith and by its Christian traditions, spurs all believers in Christ to cultivate communion at every level, in the name of the God who embraces all with his mercy. Brothers and sisters, I thank you for your commitment in this regard and I encourage you to guide this country in the ways of openness, inclusion and justice. From this city, from this cradle of civilization, may there ever continue to resound a message that lifts our gaze both on high and towards others; that democracy may be the response to the siren songs of authoritarianism; and that individualism and indifference may be overcome by concern for others, for the poor and for creation. For these are essential foundations for the renewed humanity which our time, and our Europe, has need. [In Greek:] May God bless Greece!
