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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Cyprus and Greece – Visit to the Holy Father by the President of the Hellenic Parliament, Meeting with a group of young Syrian refugees and Meeting with young people at the Saint Dionysius School

Visit of the President of the Hellenic Parliament in the Apostolic Nunciature of Athens and meeting with a group of young Syrian Christian refugees

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass in private, the Holy Father Francis received a visit from the President of the Hellenic Parliament, His Excellency Mr. Konstantinos Tasoulas, in the representation hall of the apostolic nunciature in Athens.

The Pope went on to meet a group of young Syrian Christian refugees, currently hosted at the Armenian Catholic Ordinariate in Athens. The nine young Syrians wore a t-shirt bearing the text “*Gesù io credo in te. La mano del Signore ci ha salvati. Grazie, Santo Padre, tu sei la mano del Signore - Athena 06 dicembre 2021*” (“Jesus, I believe in you. The hand of the Lord has saved us. Thank you, Holy Father, you are the hand of the Lord – Athens, 6 December 2021”).

At the end of the meeting, after taking leave of the staff and benefactors of the nunciature, Pope Francis transferred by car to the Saint Dionysius School of the Ursuline Sisters in Maroussi for the meeting with young people.

Meeting with young people at the Saint Dionysius School of the Ursuline Sisters

This morning the Holy Father Francis met with young people at the Saint Dionysius School of the Ursuline Sisters in Maroussi.

Upon arrival, the Pope was received at the entrance to the multi-purpose hall of the School by the Head of Youth Ministry of Greece.

After the opening hymn, the greeting of the representative of the Youth Ministry, a traditional dance and the testimonies of a Filipino girl, a girl from Tinos and a Syrian boy, Pope Francis delivered his address.

At the end, after the prayer of the young people and the final blessing, a gift was offered to the Holy Father. He then transferred by car to Athens International Airport for the farewell ceremony from Greece.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the meeting with young people:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters, *kaliméra sas!* [Good morning!]

Thank you for coming here today, many of you from faraway places: *efcharistó!* [Thank you!]. I am happy to be with you as my visit to Greece draws to a close. I take this occasion to renew my gratitude for the welcome I have received and all the work done to organize this visit: *efcharistó!*

I was impressed by your very fine testimonies. I had already read them, and now I would like to reflect with you on some of the points you raised.

Katerina, you told us about your recurring doubts of faith. I want to say to you and to everyone here: don't be afraid of doubts, because they are not a sign of the lack of faith. Don't be afraid of doubts. On the contrary, doubts are "vitamins of faith": they help strengthen faith and make it more robust. They enable faith to grow, to become more conscious, free and mature. They make it more eager to set out, to persevere with humility, day after day. Faith is precisely that: a daily journey with Jesus who takes us by the hand, accompanies us, encourages us, and, when we fall, lifts us up. He is never afraid to do this. Faith is like a love story, where we press forward together, day after day. Like a love story too, there are times when we have to think, to face questions, to look into our hearts. And that is good, because it raises the quality of the relationship! This is very important for you, because you cannot travel the path of faith blind, no; instead, dialogue with God, with your conscience and with others.

In Katerina's experience, I would like to highlight something very important. There are times when, faced with misunderstanding or the difficulties of life, with loneliness or disappointment, doubt can come knocking on the door of our heart. We can think: "Maybe something is wrong with me... I think I may have made a mess of things..." That, my friends, is a temptation! A temptation to be rejected. The devil sows this doubt in our hearts in order to make us gloomy and depressed. What should we do? What can we do when that kind of doubt becomes stifling and persistent, when we lose confidence and no longer even know where to begin? We need to go back to the starting point. What is that starting point? To understand it, let us listen to what your great classical culture has to say. Do you know the starting point for all philosophy, but also for art, culture and science? Do you know what it was? All that began with a spark, a realization, captured in the magnificent word: *thaumàzein*. It began with *wonder*, with *amazement*. Philosophy emerged from the sense of wonder about things that exist, about our own lives, about the harmony of nature all around us, and about the mystery of life itself.

Wonder, amazement, is the beginning not only of philosophy, but also of our faith. Frequently the Gospel tells us that when people encountered Jesus, they were amazed. In the encounter with God, amazement is always present, for it is the beginning of dialogue with God. And the reason is because faith is not primarily about a list of things to believe and rules to follow. In the deepest sense, faith is not an idea or a system of morality, but a reality, a beautiful truth that does not depend on us and that leaves us amazed: *we are God's beloved children!* This is what faith is in its deepest sense: *we are God's beloved children!* We are beloved children because we have a Father who watches over us and who never stops loving us. Think about this: whatever you may think or do, even the worst things possible, God continues to love you. I want you to understand this well:

God never tires of loving. Someone might say to me: “But if I slip into the worst of things, does God love me?” God loves you. “And if I am a traitor, a terrible sinner and end up badly, in drugs... does God love me?” God loves you. God always loves. He cannot stop loving. He loves always, without exception. He looks at your life and sees that it is good (cf. *Gen* 1:31). He never abandons us. If we stand before a mirror, we may not see ourselves the way we would like, because we are too concerned with the things we don’t like. But if we stand before God, the perspective changes. We cannot help but be amazed that, for all our sins and failings, for him we are, and always will be, his beloved children. So, instead of starting the day by looking in the mirror, why not open your bedroom window and focus on everything beautiful that exists, on the beauty that you see all around you? Go out of yourself. Dear young people, think about this: if nature is beautiful in our eyes, in God’s eye each of you is infinitely more beautiful! Scripture says: “He has wondrously made us” (cf. *Ps* 139:14). In God’s eyes we are a wonder. Allow yourself to be caught up in that wonder. Let yourself be loved by the One who always believes in you, by the One who loves you even more than you succeed in loving yourself. It is not easy to understand the breadth and depth of God’s love, it is not easy to grasp it, but it is like this: simply let yourself be gazed upon by the gaze of God.

When you feel sorrow for something you have done, you should feel another kind of wonder: *the wonder of forgiveness*. I want to be clear about this: God always forgives. We can grow tired of asking for forgiveness, but he always forgives. In that wonder of forgiveness, we rediscover the Father’s loving face and peace of heart. He gives us a new beginning and he pours out his love in an embrace that lifts us up, dispels the evil we have done, restores the irrepressible beauty that is within us as his beloved children, and enables it to shine forth. May we never let laziness, fear or shame rob the treasure of forgiveness. May we always be amazed by God’s love! We will rediscover ourselves: not what other people say about us, or where the whims of the moment may lead us, or the hype we are in advertisements, but our deepest reality, the truth that God sees, the one he believes in: our unique beauty.

Remember those famous words engraved on the pediment of the Delphi temple? *γνωθι σεαυτόν*, “Know thyself”. Nowadays, we risk forgetting who we are, becoming obsessed with appearances, bombarded with messages that make life depend on what we wear, the car we drive, how others see us... Yet those ancient words – *know thyself* – remain valid today. Realize that your worth is in who you are and not what you have. Your worth is not in the brand of the dress or shoes you wear, but because you are unique. Here I think of another ancient image, that of the sirens. Like Odysseus on his voyage home, in the course of this life, which is an adventure-filled journey to the Father’s House, you too will come across sirens. In mythology, the sirens by their songs enchanted sailors and made them crash against the rocks. Today’s sirens want to charm you with seductive and insistent messages that focus on easy gains, the false needs of consumerism, the cult of physical wellness, of entertainment at all costs... All these are like fireworks: they flare up for a moment, but then turn to smoke in the air. I understand, they are not easy to resist. Do you remember how Odysseus did it, threatened by the sirens? He had himself tied to the ship’s mast. Another ancient figure, Orpheus, teaches us a better way. He sang a more beautiful melody than that of the sirens, and thus reduced them to silence. That is why it is important to cherish the wonder, the amazement, the beauty of faith! We are Christians not out of duty, but out of beauty. And precisely because we want to cherish that beauty, we have to say no to anything that would mar it. The joy of the Gospel, the wonder of Jesus, makes our sacrifices and struggles fade into the background. Don’t you agree? Remember this: being a Christian is not essentially about doing this or that, about doing things. We must do things, but Christianity is not essentially that. In the end, being a Christian is about letting God love you and recognizing that you are a unique individual in the face of the love of God.

Let’s move on to another topic. *The faces of other people*. Ioanna, I liked how, in telling us about your life, you talked about other people. Above all, the two most important women in your life, your mother and grandmother, who “taught you to pray, to thank God every day”. In that way, you assimilated the faith naturally, genuinely. You made a very helpful suggestion: we need to turn to the Lord for everything, “to talk to him, to share our worries with him”. That is how Jesus became your friend. How happy he is when we open our hearts to him! That is how we come to know God. Because to know God, it is not enough to have clear ideas about him – this is a small part, yet it is not enough – but to bring your life before him. Maybe that is the reason why so many people do not know God: because all they hear are sermons and speeches. Jesus, on the other hand, makes himself known through real faces and real people. Pick up the Acts of the Apostles; there you will see how many different people, how many different faces, you come across. That is how our forebears in faith came to know Jesus. God

does not hand us a catechism; he makes himself present through people's life stories. He walks among us. God does not give us a book to learn things by heart, no. God makes himself understood with closeness, accompanying us on the path of life. Knowing Jesus is the real core of our faith.

In this regard, Ioanna, you mentioned a third person who was very important in your life: a religious sister who showed you the joy "of seeing life as service". I want to stress this: seeing life as service. How true it is: serving others is the path to true joy! Helping others is not for losers, but for winners; it is the way to bring about something truly new in history. I am told that in Greek, the same word can mean "new" and "young". Service is the newness of Jesus; service, dedication to others is the newness that makes life ever youthful. Do you want to do something new in life? Do you want to stay youthful? Then don't settle for posting a few tweets. Don't settle for virtual encounters; look for real ones, especially with people who need you. Don't look for visibility, but for those who are invisible in our midst. That is new, even revolutionary. Going out of ourselves to encounter others. For if you live imprisoned within yourself, you will never encounter others, you will never know what it means to serve. Service is the noblest kind of act, greater than an individual: serving others. Many people today are constantly using social media, but are not themselves very social: they are caught up in themselves, prisoners of the cell phone in their hand. What appears on the screen is not the reality of other persons: their eyes, their breath and their hands. The screen can easily become a mirror, where you think you are looking at the world, but in reality you are all alone before a virtual world full of appearances, of photos dressed up to look always beautiful and acceptable. Yet how beautiful it is simply to be together with other people, to discover the newness of others! Speak with others, cultivate the mystique of togetherness, the joy of sharing, the enthusiasm of serving!

In my meeting with young people in Slovakia last September, some of them waved a banner with only two words: "*Fratelli Tutti*", "brothers and sisters all". I liked that: often in stadiums, in demonstrations, in the streets, people display banners to support their side, their ideas, their team, their rights. Yet that banner said something new: that it is wonderful for everyone to be brothers and sisters, to think of others as part of ourselves, not people to keep at a distance. I am happy to see you all here together, united, despite the fact that you come from such different countries and histories! Keep dreaming of fraternity!

In Greek, there is an illuminating saying: *o fillos ine allos eaftos*, "a friend is another self". Yes, other people are the path to discovering ourselves. Not a mirror, but other people. Naturally, it isn't easy to get out of your comfort zone; it's easier to sit on the couch in front of the TV. But that is for old people, not for the young. Look: a young person on the couch – what an old thing that is! Young people react: when you feel lonely, you open up; when you are tempted to close in on yourself, you look for others. You practice a kind of "spiritual gymnastics". This country gave birth to the greatest sporting events: the Olympics, the marathon... In addition to athletics that are good for the body, there is also a kind of athletics good for the soul. Training yourselves to be open to others, taking a few extra steps so as to shorten your distance from others, vaulting with your heart over obstacles; lifting one another's burdens... This kind of training will make you happy, keep you young and help you feel the adventure of living!

Speaking of adventure, Aboud, all of us were struck by the story of your escape, together with your family, from beloved war-torn Syria, after facing more than once the risk of being killed in the conflict. Then, after so many refusals and a thousand difficulties, you landed in this country in the only way possible, by boat, remaining "on a rock without water and without food, waiting for dawn and a coast guard ship". A true modern-day odyssey. It occurred to me that, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the first hero to appear is not Odysseus, but a young man: Telemachus, his son, who embarks upon a great adventure.

Telemachus had never known his father; he was distressed and disheartened because he did not know where Odysseus was or even if he was still alive. He felt rootless and found himself at crossroads. Should he stay at home waiting, or go off on a wild search? Various voices, including that of the goddess Athena, urged him to find the courage to set out. And so he does: he gets up, secretly equips a ship and, once the sun rises, he sails away on his adventure. The meaning of life is not found by staying on the beach waiting for the wind to bring something new. Salvation lies in the open sea, in setting sail, in the quest, in the pursuit of dreams, real dreams, those we pursue with eyes open, those that involve effort, struggles, headwinds, sudden storms. Please don't be paralyzed by fear: dream big! And dream together! As with Telemachus, there will always be those who try to

stop you. There will always be those who tell you: "Forget it, don't risk it, it's useless". They are the destroyers of dreams, the slayers of hope, incurably stuck in the past.

As for you, please, nourish the *courage of hope!* The kind of hope that you had, Aboud. How do you do this? By your choices, your decisions. Choosing is a challenge. It involves facing the fear of the unknown, emerging from the chaos of uniformity, deciding to take your life in hand. To make right choices, you should remember one thing: good decisions are always about others, not just about ourselves. Those are the decisions that are worth making, the dreams worth striving to accomplish, those that require courage and involve others.

As I leave you, this is my wish for you: the courage to go forward, the courage to take a risk and not remain on the couch. The courage to take a risk, to go out towards other persons, never in isolation but always with others. And with this courage, each of you will discover yourselves, others and the meaning of life. My wish for you is that you will discover this, with the help of God who loves you all. God loves you, so take courage and keep moving forward! [In Greek]: Together, keep moving forward!
