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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Malta – Meeting with migrants at the Hal Far “John XXIII Peace Lab” Centre for Migrants

This afternoon, after taking leave of the staff and benefactors of the apostolic nunciature of Malta, the Holy Father Francis travelled by car to the “John XXIII *Peace Lab*” Centre for Migrants in Hal Far.

Upon arrival, the Pope was received by the director of pastoral care for migrants, the director and the Franciscan founder of the Centre. They then went towards the open-air theatre where they were awaited by around 200 migrants.

After the welcome greeting from the founder of the Centre, Fr. Dionisio Mintoff, two guests offered their testimony. The Holy Father then delivered his address.

At the end, after the lighting of the candles before the image of Our Lady, together with a migrant family, the recitation of the Universal Prayer, the exchange of gifts and the signing of the Book of Honour, Pope Francis greeted the migrants present, pausing to speak with many of them.

After leaving the “John XXIII *Peace Lab*” Centre for Migrants, the Pope transferred by car to the International Airport for the farewell ceremony.

The following are the Pope’s address and the prayer he recited at the end of the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet all of you with great affection, and I am very happy to end my visit to Malta by spending some time here with you. I thank Father Dionisio for his welcome. I am also very grateful to Daniel and to Siriman for their

testimonies: you opened your hearts and shared your lives, and at the same time gave a voice to so many of our brothers and sisters who were constrained to leave their homelands in search of a secure refuge.

Let me repeat what I said some months ago in Lesvos: “I am here... to assure you of my closeness... I am here to see your faces and look into your eyes” (*Address in Mytilene*, 5 December 2021). Since the day I visited Lampedusa, I have not forgotten you. You are always in my heart and in my prayers.

This meeting with you, dear migrants, makes us think of the significance of the logo chosen for my Journey to Malta. That logo is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, which relates how the people of Malta welcomed the Apostle Paul and his companions, shipwrecked nearby. We are told that they were treated with “*unusual kindness*” (*Acts 28:2*). Not merely with kindness, but with rare humanity, a special care and concern that Saint Luke wished to immortalize in the Book of Acts. It is my hope that that is how Malta will always treat those who land on its shores, offering them a genuinely “safe harbour”.

Shipwreck is something that thousands of men, women and children have experienced in the Mediterranean in recent years. Sadly, for many of them, it ended in tragedy. Just yesterday we received news of a rescue off the coast of Libya, of only four migrants from a boat that was carrying about ninety people. Let us pray for these our brothers and sisters who died in the Mediterranean Sea. Let us also pray that we may be saved from another kind of shipwreck taking place: the *shipwreck of civilization*, which threatens not only migrants but us all. How can we save ourselves from this shipwreck which risks sinking the ship of our civilization? By conducting ourselves with *kindness and humanity*. By regarding people not merely as statistics, but, as Siriman told us, for what they really are: people, men and women, brothers and sisters, each with his or her own life story. By imagining that those same people we see on crowded boats or adrift in the sea, on our televisions or in the newspapers, could be any one of us, or our sons or daughters... Perhaps at this very moment, while we are here, there are boats heading northwards across the sea... Let us pray for these brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives at sea in search of hope. You too experienced this ordeal and you arrived here.

Your experiences make us think too of the experiences of all those thousands and thousands of people who in these very days have been forced to flee Ukraine because of the unjust and savage war. But also the experiences of so many others in Asia, Africa and the Americas; I also think of Rohingya... All of them are in my thoughts and prayers at this time.

Some time ago, I received from your Centre another testimony: the story of a young man who told me about the sad moment when he had to take leave of his mother and his family of origin. His story moved me and made me think. But you, Daniel, and you, Siriman, each had that same experience of *having to leave by being separated from your own roots*, of being uprooted. And that experience of being uprooted leaves its mark. Not just the pain and emotion of that moment, but a deep wound affecting your journey of growth as a young man or woman. It takes time to heal that wound; it takes time and most of all it takes experiences of human kindness: meeting persons who accept you and are able to listen, understand and accompany you. But also the experience of living alongside other traveling companions, sharing things with them and bearing your burdens together... This helps heal the wounds.

I think of these reception centres, and how important it is for them to be *places marked by human kindness*! We know how difficult that can be, since there are always things that create tensions and difficulties. Yet, on every continent, there are individuals and communities who take up the challenge, realizing that migrations are a sign of the times, where civility itself is in play. For us Christians too, in play is our fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus, who said: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (*Mt 25:35*). None of this can be accomplished in a day! It takes time, immense patience, and above all a love made up of closeness, tenderness and compassion, like God’s love for us. I think we should say a big word of thanks to all those who took up this challenge here in Malta and established this Centre. Let us do that with a round of applause, all of us together!

Allow me, brothers and sisters, to express a dream of my own: that you, who are migrants, after having received a welcome rich in human kindness and fraternity, will become in turn *witnesses and agents of welcome and fraternity*. Here, and wherever God wants, wherever his providence will lead you. That is the dream I want to

share with you and which I place in God's hands. For what is impossible for us is not impossible for him. I believe it is most important that in today's world migrants become witnesses of those human values essential for a dignified and fraternal life. They are values that you hold in your hearts, values that are part of your roots. Once the pain of being uprooting has subsided, you can bring forth this interior richness, this precious patrimony of humanity, and share it with the communities that will welcome you and the environments of which you will be a part. This is the way! *The way of fraternity and social friendship*. Here is the future of the human family in a globalized world. I am happy to be able to share this dream with you today, just as you, in your testimonies, have shared your dreams with me!

Here, I think, is also the answer to a question at the heart of your own testimony, Siriman. You reminded us that those forced to leave their country leave with *a dream in their hearts*: the dream of freedom and democracy. This dream collides with *a harsh reality*, often dangerous, sometimes terrible and inhuman. You gave voice to the stifled plea of those millions of migrants whose fundamental rights are violated, sadly at times with the complicity of the competent authorities. That is the way it is, and I want to say it the way it is: Sadly, at times with the complicity of the competent authorities. And you drew our attention to the most important thing: *the dignity of the person*. I would reaffirm this in your own words: you are not statistics but flesh and blood people with faces and dreams, dreams that are sometimes dashed.

From there, from the dignity of persons, we can and must start anew. Let us not be deceived by all those who tell us that "nothing can be done"; "these problems are too big for us"; "let others fend for themselves while I go about my own business". No. Let us never fall into this trap. Let us respond to the challenge of migrants and refugees with *kindness and humanity*. Let us light fires of fraternity around which people can warm themselves, rise again and rediscover hope. Let us strengthen the fabric of social friendship and the culture of encounter, starting from places such as this. They may not be perfect, but they are, truly, "laboratories of peace".

Since this Centre bears the name of Saint John XXIII, I would like to recall the hope that Pope John expressed at the end of his famous encyclical on peace: "May [the Lord] banish from the souls of men and women whatever might endanger peace. May he transform all of us into witnesses of truth, justice and brotherly love. May he illumine with his light the minds of rulers, so that, in addition to caring for the material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the fairest gift of peace. Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all men and women to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong. Through his power and inspiration may all peoples see one another as brothers and sisters, and may the peace for which they long always flourish and reign among them" (*Pacem in Terris*, 171).

Dear brothers and sisters, soon I will join some of you in lighting a candle before the image of Our Lady. It is a very simple yet meaningful gesture. In the Christian tradition, that little flame is a symbol of our faith in God. It is also a symbol of *hope*, a hope that Mary, our Mother, keeps alive even at most difficult moments. It is the hope that I have seen in your eyes today: the hope that has made your journey meaningful and the hope that keeps you pressing forward. May Our Lady help you never to lose this hope! To her, I entrust each of you and your families. I will carry you with me in my heart and in my prayers. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. Thank you!

Prayer

Lord God, Creator of the universe,

source of all freedom and peace,

love and fraternity,

you created us in your own image,
breathed in us the breath of life
and made us sharers in your own life of communion.

Even when we broke your covenant
you did not abandon us to the power of death,
but continued, in your infinite mercy,
to call us back to you,
to live as your sons and daughters.

Pour out upon us your Holy Spirit
and grant us a new heart,
sensitive to the pleas, often silent,
of our brothers and sisters who have lost
the warmth of their homes and homeland.

Grant that we may give them hope
by our welcome and our show of humanity.

Make us instruments of peace
and practical, fraternal love.

Free us from fear and prejudice;
enable us to share in their sufferings
and to combat injustice together,
for the growth of a world in which each person
is respected in his or her inviolable dignity,
the dignity that you, O Father, have granted us
and your Son has consecrated forever.

Amen.

