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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in South Sudan (Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace in South Sudan) (31 January to 5 February 2023) – Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, and Seminarians at Saint Theresa Cathedral, Juba

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass in private, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to Saint Theresa Cathedral in Juba for the meeting with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and seminarians.

Upon arrival at 9.10 (8.10 in Rome), the Pope was received by Archbishop Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba, and by the parish priest who brought him the cross and holy water. They proceeded along the central nave together, up to the altar. Then, after the entrance hymn and a greeting from the President of the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference, Bishop Yunan Tombe Trille Kuku Andali of El Obeid, a priest and a religious sister offered their testimonies. Pope Francis then delivered his address.

At the end, after the blessing and the final hymn, the Holy Father posed for a group photograph with the bishops. According to the local authorities, around 5000 faithful were present at the meeting, of whom 1000 were inside the Church.

The Pope then returned by car to the apostolic nunciature of Juba where, at 11.00 (10.00 in Rome), he met privately with members of the Society of Jesus present in the country. At the end of the meeting, he lunched in private.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during the meeting with the bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and seminarians:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brother Bishops, priests and deacons,

Dear consecrated brothers and sisters,
 Dear seminarians, novices and aspirants, good morning to all of you!

I have been looking forward to meeting you, and I want to thank the Lord for this occasion. I am grateful to Bishop Tombe Trille for his words of greeting and to all of you for your presence today and also for your greeting; some of you travelled for days to be here today! Several of our previous experiences have a special place in my heart: the celebration in Saint Peter's in 2017, when we prayed together for the gift of peace, and the spiritual retreat in 2019 with the political leaders, who were asked to embrace, through prayer, the firm resolve to pursue reconciliation and fraternity in this country. Indeed, all of us need to embrace Jesus, our peace and our hope.

In my address yesterday, I drew upon the image of the waters of the Nile, which flows through your country, as if it were its backbone. In the Bible, water is often associated with God's activity in creation, his compassion in quenching our thirst when we wander through the desert, and his mercy in cleansing us when we are mired in sin. In baptism, he sanctified us "through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (*Titus* 3:5). From the same biblical perspective, I would like to take another look at the waters of the Nile. Merged with those waters are the tears of a people immersed in suffering and pain, and tormented by violence, who can pray like the psalmist, "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept" (*Psalms* 137:1). Indeed, the waters of that great river collect the sighs and sufferings of your communities, they collect the pain of so many shattered lives, they collect the tragedy of a people in flight, the sorrow and fear in the hearts and eyes of so many women and children. We can see this fear in the eyes of children. At the same time, though, the waters of the Nile remind us of the story of Moses and thus they also speak of liberation and salvation. From those waters, Moses was saved and, by leading his own people through the Red Sea, he became for them a means of liberation, an icon of the saving help of God who sees the affliction of his children, hears their cry and comes down to set them free (cf. *Exodus* 3:7). Remembering the story of Moses, who led God's people through the desert, let us ask ourselves what it means for us to be ministers of God in a land scarred by war, hatred, violence, and poverty. How can we exercise our ministry in this land, along the banks of a river bathed in so much innocent blood, among the tear-stained faces of the people entrusted to us? This is the question. And when I speak of ministry, I do so in the broad sense: priestly and diaconal ministry and also catechetical ministry, the ministry of teaching, which so many consecrated men and women, as well as the lay faithful, carry out.

To try to answer this, I would like to reflect on two aspects of Moses' character: his *meekness* and his *intercession*. I think these two aspects concern our lives here.

The first thing that strikes us about the story of Moses is his meekness, his docile response to God's initiative. We must not think, though, that it was always this way: at first, he attempted to fight injustice and oppression on his own. Saved by Pharaoh's daughter in the waters of the Nile, he then discovered his identity and was moved by the suffering and humiliation of his brothers, so much so that one day he decided to take justice into his own hands: he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. As a result, he had to flee to the desert, where he remained for many years. There he experienced a kind of interior desert. He had thought he could confront injustice on his own and now he found himself a fugitive, alone and in hiding, experiencing a bitter sense of failure. I wonder: What was Moses' mistake? He had put himself at the centre, and relied on his strength alone. Yet in this way, he remained trapped in the worst of our human ways of doing things: he had responded to violence with violence.

At times, something similar can happen in our own lives as priests, deacons, religious, seminarians, consecrated men and women, all of us: deep down, we can think that we are at the centre of everything, that we can rely, if not in theory at least in practice, almost exclusively on our own talents and abilities. Or, as a Church, we think we can find an answer to people's suffering and needs through human resources, like money, cleverness or power. Instead, everything we accomplish comes from God: he is the Lord, and we are called to be docile instruments in his hands. Moses learned this when, one day, God appeared to him "in a flame of fire out of a bush" (*Exodus* 3:2). Moses found himself drawn to this sight; he was open to being amazed and so, in meekness, he approached that strange blazing fire. He thought: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up" (v. 3). This is the kind of meekness that we need in our ministry: a readiness to approach God in wonder and humility. Sisters and brothers, do not lose the wonder of the encounter with God! Do not lose

the wonder of contact with the word of God. Moses let himself be drawn to God and guided by him. The primacy is not ours, the primacy is God's: entrusting ourselves to his word before we start using our own words, meekly accepting his initiative before we get caught up in our personal and ecclesial projects.

By allowing ourselves, in meekness, to be shaped by the Lord, we experience renewal in our ministry. In the presence of the Good Shepherd, we realize that we are not tribal chieftains, but compassionate and merciful shepherds; not overlords, but servants who stoop to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters; we are not a worldly agency that administers earthly goods, but the community of God's children. Dear sisters and brothers, let us do, then, what Moses did in God's presence. Let us remove our sandals with humble awe (cf. v. 5) and divest ourselves of our human presumption. Let us allow ourselves to be drawn to the Lord and spend time with him in prayer. Let us daily approach the mystery of God, so that he can astonish us and burn away the dead wood of our pride and our immoderate ambitions, and make us *humble travelling companions of all those entrusted to our care*.

Purified and enlightened by the divine fire, Moses became a means of salvation for his suffering brothers and sisters. His meekness before God made him capable of interceding for them. This is the second aspect of his character that I would like to discuss today: Moses was an intercessor. He experienced a God of compassion, who hears the cry of his people and comes down to deliver them. This phrase is beautiful: he *comes down*. God comes down to deliver them. In his "condescension", God comes down among us, even taking on our flesh in Jesus, experiencing our death and our most hellish moments. He constantly *comes down in order to raise us up*. *Those who experience him are led to imitate him*. Like Moses, who "came down" to be in the midst of his people a number of times during the sojourn in the desert. Indeed, at the most important and trying moments, he would ascend the mountain of God's presence to *intercede for the people*, that is, *to stand in their place* in order to bring them closer to God, and then come down. Brothers and sisters, interceding "does not mean simply 'praying for someone', as we so often think. Etymologically it means 'to step into the middle', to be willing to walk into the middle of a situation" (C.M. MARTINI, *Un grido di intercessione*, Milan, 29 January 1991). Sometimes we do not obtain much, but we need to offer a cry of intercession. To intercede is thus to come down and place ourselves in the midst of our people, to act as a bridge that connects them to God.

It is precisely this art of "stepping into the middle" of our brothers and sisters that the Church's pastors need to cultivate; this must be their specialty: the ability to step into the middle of their sufferings and tears, into the middle of their hunger for God and their thirst for love. Our first duty is not to be a Church that is perfectly organized – any company can do this – but a Church that, in the name of Christ, stands in the midst of people's troubled lives, a Church that is willing to dirty its hands for people. We must never exercise our ministry by chasing after religious or social prestige – the ugliness of careerism – but rather by walking in the midst of and alongside our people, learning to listen and to dialogue, cooperating as ministers with one another and with the laity. Let me repeat this important word: *together*. Let us never forget it: *together*. Bishops and priests, priests and deacons, pastors and seminarians, ordained ministers and religious – always showing respect for the marvelous specificity of religious life. Let us make every effort to banish the temptation to individualism, to partisan interests. How sad it is when the Church's pastors are incapable of communion, when they fail to cooperate, and even ignore one another! Let us cultivate mutual respect, closeness and practical cooperation. If we fail to do this ourselves, how can we preach it to others?

Let us now go back to Moses, and reflect on the art of intercession, let us look at his hands. Scripture offers us three images in this regard: Moses with staff in hand, Moses with outstretched hands, Moses with his hands raised to heaven.

The first image, Moses with staff in hand, tells us that he intercedes *with prophecy*. With that staff, he works wonders, signs of God's presence and power; he speaks in God's name, forcefully denouncing the oppression that the people are suffering, and demanding Pharaoh to let them depart. Brothers and sisters, we too are called to intercede for our people, to raise our voices against the injustice and the abuses of power that oppress and use violence to suit their own ends amid the cloud of conflicts. If we want to be pastors who intercede, we cannot remain neutral before the pain caused by acts of injustice and violence. To violate the fundamental rights of any woman or man is an offence against Christ himself. I was happy to hear in Father Luka's testimony that the Church tirelessly carries out a ministry that is both prophetic and pastoral. Thank you! Thank you because, if

there is one temptation against which we must guard, it is that of leaving things as they are and not getting involved in situations for fear of losing privileges and benefits.

The second image is that of Moses with outstretched hands. Scripture tells us that he “stretched out his hand over the sea” (*Ex 14:21*). His extended hands are the sign that God is about to show his power. Later, Moses will hold the tablets of the Law in his hands (cf. *Ex 34:29*) and show them to the people; his upraised hands demonstrate *the closeness of God who is ever active* in accompanying his people. Of itself, prophecy does not suffice for deliverance from evil: it is necessary to extend our arms to our brothers and sisters, to support them on their journey; to caress God’s flock. We can imagine Moses pointing the way and taking people by the hand to encourage them to persevere. For forty years, in his old age, he remained at their side: that is what closeness means. It was no easy task: often he had to lift the spirits of a people who were discouraged and weary, hungry and thirsty, and sometimes even wayward and prone to grumbling and lethargy. In doing so, Moses also had to struggle with himself, for at times, he too experienced moments of darkness and desolation, as when he said to the Lord: “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ... I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me” (*Num 11:11, 14*). Look at how Moses prayed: he was tired. Yet, he did not step back: ever close to God, he did not turn his back on his people. This is also our job: to stretch out our hands, to rouse our brothers and sisters, to remind them that God is faithful to his promises, to urge them on. Our hands were “anointed with Spirit” not only for the sacred rites, but also to encourage, help and accompany people to leave behind whatever paralyzes them, keeps them closed in on themselves, and makes them fearful.

Finally – the third image – Moses with his hands raised to heaven. When the people fell into sin and made a golden calf for themselves, Moses went up the mountain once again – think of what great patience he must have had! – and said a *prayer*, which shows him wrestling with God, begging him not to abandon Israel. He went so far as to say: “This people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written” (*Ex 32:31-32*). Moses stood with the people to the very end, raising his hands on their behalf. He did not think of saving himself alone; he did not sell out the people for his own interests! He interceded, he wrestled with God; he kept his arms raised in prayer while his brethren battled in the valley below (cf. *Ex 17:8-16*). Bringing the struggles of the people before God in prayer, obtaining forgiveness for them, administering reconciliation as channels of God’s mercy: this is our task as intercessors.

Beloved, these prophetic hands, outstretched and raised, demand great effort, which is not easy. To be prophets, companions and intercessors, to show with our life the mystery of God’s closeness to his people, can cost us our lives. Many priests and religious – as Sister Regina told us of her own sisters – have been victims of violence and attacks in which they lost their lives. In a very real way, they offered their lives for the sake of the Gospel. Their closeness to their brothers and sisters is a marvellous testimony that they bequeath to us, a legacy that invites us to carry forward their mission. Let us think of Saint Daniele Comboni, who with his missionary brothers carried out a great work of evangelization in this land. He used to say that a missionary must be ready to do anything for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. We need courageous and generous souls ready to suffer and die for Africa.

I would like to thank you, then, for everything that you do amid so many trials and tribulations. Thank you, on behalf of the entire Church, for your dedication, your courage, your sacrifices and your patience. Thank you! Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that you will always be generous pastors and witnesses, armed only with prayer and love; pastors and witnesses allowing yourselves, in meekness, to be constantly surprised by God’s grace; and that you may become a means of salvation for others, pastors and prophets of closeness who accompany the people, intercessors with uplifted arms. May the Blessed Virgin Mary protect you. At this moment, let us recall in silence those brothers and sisters of ours who have given their lives in pastoral ministry here, and let us thank the Lord because he has been close. Let us thank the Lord for the closeness of their “martyrdom”. Let us pray in silence.

Thank you for your witness. And, if you have a little time, please pray for me. Thank you.

