



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to Venice – Meeting with Detainees

At 6.32 this morning, the Holy Father Francis departed by helicopter from the Vatican heliport to begin his pastoral visit to Venice.

Upon arrival, at 7.55, after landing in the internal courtyard of the Venice-Giudecca Women's Prison, the Holy Father was received by the Patriarch of Venice, Msgr. Francesco Moraglia, by the Minister of Justice Carlo Nordio, the Commissioner Rosella Santoro, the Prison Director Mariagrazia Felicita Bregoli, and the Prison Police Chief Lara Boco.

In the internal courtyard of the prison, the Pope met with the detainees. The administrative staff, prison police officers and some volunteers were also present.

After greeting the detainees individually, Pope Francis delivered his address.

At the end of the meeting, before leaving the internal courtyard of the prison to proceed to the Church of La Maddalena for the meeting with artists, the Holy Father offered the gift of a picture depicting the Madonna and Child, and the detainees gave the Pope some items they had produced in the prison workshops. Three women then addressed to Pope Francis some words of thanks and gratitude for his visit.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the course of the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear sisters, dear brothers! We are all brothers and sisters, all of us, and no-one can disown the other, no-one!

I greet you all affectionately, especially you sisters, detainees in the Giudecca Women's Prison. I very much wanted to meet you at the beginning of my visit to Venice to tell you that you have a special place in my heart.

I would like, therefore, for us to experience this moment not so much as an “official visit”, but rather as an encounter in which, thanks be to God, we can give each other time, prayer, closeness and fraternal affection. Today we will all leave this courtyard richer – perhaps I am the one who will leave the richer - and the good we will exchange will be precious.

It is the Lord who wants us to be together at this moment, having arrived by different paths, some very painful, also because of mistakes for which, in various ways, each person bears wounds and scars, every person bears scars. And God wants us together because He knows that each of us, here, today, has something unique to give and to receive, and that we are all in need of it. Each one of us has his or her own uniqueness, he or she has a gift and this is to be offered, to be shared.

Prison is a harsh reality, and problems such as overcrowding, the lack of facilities and resources, and episodes of violence, give rise to a great deal of suffering there. But it can also become a place of rebirth, of moral and material rebirth, where the dignity of women and men is not “placed in isolation”, but promoted through mutual respect and the nurturing of talents and abilities, perhaps dormant or imprisoned by the vicissitudes of life, but which can re-emerge for the good of all and which deserve attention and trust. No-one can take away a person’s dignity, no-one!

So, paradoxically, a stay in prison can mark the beginning of something new, through the rediscovery of the unsuspected beauty in us and in others, as symbolized by the artistic event you are hosting and the project to which you actively contribute; it can become a building site for reconstruction, in which to courageously look at and evaluate one’s own life, remove what is not needed, what is cluttering, harmful or dangerous, draw up a plan, and then start again by digging foundations and going back, in the light of experience, to putting brick upon brick, together, with determination. Therefore, it is fundamental also for the prison system to offer detainees the tools and room for human growth, for spiritual, cultural and professional growth, creating the conditions for their healthy reintegration. Please, do not “isolate dignity”, do not isolate dignity, but give new possibilities!

Let us not forget that we have all made mistakes to be forgiven, and have wounds to heal, myself included; and that we can all become the healed who bring healing, the forgiven who bring forgiveness, the reborn who bring rebirth.

Dear friends, let us renew today, you and I, together, our trust in the future: do not close the window, please; always look at the horizon, always look to the future, with hope. I like to think that hope is like an anchor, you know, which is anchored in the future, and we have the rope in our hands and go forward with the rope anchored in the future. Let us propose to begin each day by saying, “now is the right time”, today, “today is the right day” today, (cf. *2 Cor 6:2*), “today I will start again”, always, for the rest of my life!

Thank you for this meeting, and I assure every one of you of my prayer. And you, pray for me, but please, not against me!

And this is the gift I will leave you. Look, it has something of the tenderness of the mother, and Mary has this tenderness with all of us, with all of us, she is the mother of tenderness. Thank you.

[Exchange of gifts and greetings with the detainees]

And now they are sending me away! Thank you, thank you very much, I will remember you! And keep going forward, bravely, don’t give up – onward with courage!
