



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to Venice – Meeting with Artists

After the meeting with detainees in the internal courtyard of the prison, the Holy Father Francis proceeded to the Church of La Maddalena (Prison Chapel) for the meeting with artists, where he was welcomed by His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education and Commissioner of the Holy See Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale.

After the greeting from His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, the Holy Father delivered his address.

At the end, after greeting the authorities and the artists participating in the exhibition, Pope Francis left the island of Giudecca and transferred by motorboat to the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute for the meeting with young people.

The following is the Holy Father's address to those present during the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies,

Mr. Minister,

Mr. President,

Distinguished Curators,

Dear Artists!

I very much wanted to come to the Venice Art Biennale to return a visit, as is the good custom among friends. Last June, in fact, I had the joy of welcoming a large group of artists to the Sistine Chapel. Now I am coming “to your home” to meet you personally, to feel even closer to you and, in this way, to thank you for what you are and what you do. And at the same time, at the outset, I would like to send everyone this message: the world needs artists. This is demonstrated by the multitude of people of all ages who frequent art venues and events; I like to remember among them the *Vatican Chapels*, the first Pavilion of the Holy See built six years ago on the Island of San Giorgio, in collaboration with the Cini Foundation, as part of the Biennale of Architecture.

I confess that, beside you, I do not feel like a stranger: I feel at home. And I think that, in reality, this applies to every human being, because, to all intents and purposes, art has the status of a “*city of refuge*”, an entity that disobeys the regime of violence and discrimination in order to create forms of human belonging capable of recognizing, including, protecting and embracing everyone. Everyone, starting from the last.

The *city of refuge* is a biblical institution, already mentioned in the Deuteronomic code (cf. *Dt* 4:41), intended to prevent the shedding of innocent blood and to temper the blind desire for revenge, to guarantee the protection of human rights and to seek forms of reconciliation. It would be important if the various artistic practices could establish themselves everywhere as a sort of *network of cities of refuge*, cooperating to rid the world of the senseless and by now empty oppositions that seek to gain ground in racism, in xenophobia, in inequality, in ecological imbalance and aporophobia, that terrible neologism that means “fear of the poor”. Behind these oppositions there is always refusal of the other. There is the selfishness that makes us function as solitary islands rather than collaborative archipelagos. I beg you, fellow artists, to imagine cities that do not yet exist on the maps: cities where no human being is considered a stranger. This is why when we say “foreigners everywhere”, we are proposing to be “brothers everywhere”.

The title of the pavilion is “*With my eyes*”. We all need to be looked at and to dare to look at ourselves. In this, Jesus is the perennial Teacher: He looks at everyone with the intensity of a love that does not judge, but knows how to be close and to encourage. And I would say that art educates us in this type of outlook, not possessive, not objectifying, but neither indifferent nor superficial; it educates us in a contemplative gaze. Artists are part of the world, but are called to go beyond it. For example, it is more urgent now than ever to know how to distinguish clearly art from the market. Certainly, the market promotes and canonizes, but there is always the risk of preying on creativity, stealing innocence and, finally, coldly instructing on what is to be done.

Today we have all chosen to meet together here, in the Giudecca women’s prison. It is true that no-one has a monopoly on human suffering. But there are joy and suffering that unite in the feminine in a unique form and which we must listen to, because they have something important to teach us. I am thinking of artists such as Frida Khalo, Corita Kent or Louise Bourgeois, and many others. I hope with all my heart that contemporary art can open our eyes, helping us to value adequately the contribution of women, as co-protagonists of the human adventure.

Dear artists, I remember the question Jesus addressed to the crowd, concerning John the Baptist: “What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see?” (*Mt* 11:7-8). Let us preserve this question in the heart, in our heart. It impels us towards the future.

Thank you! I keep you in my prayer. And please, pray for me. Thank you.
