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Audience with participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I address a cordial greeting to you all, participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, as well as all the staff and collaborators. I fraternally and gratefully greet Cardinal Ravasi, who led the Pontifical Commission with wisdom from 2007 to 2022. And I greet the current President, Msgr. Pasquale Iacobone, former expert secretary. I appreciate the commitment to involving the new generations of students and scholars of Christian archaeology for maintaining the high quality of protection, research, restoration and enhancement of the Christian catacombs of Italy.

In this regard, the creation of the *Catacombs Days*, with the involvement of families and young people in educational workshops; the presentation of the various catacombs both in television programmes and on social media; the granting of scholarships; the annual archaeological research sites in collaboration with various universities; all of these initiatives - all of them - contribute to fostering knowledge of the catacombs and their qualified attendance.

The Plenary Meeting has proposed for your attention, first and foremost, the various projects underway in several Italian regions, which are leading to continual and interesting discoveries, documented both by publications and interventions at numerous scientific conferences.

But it is above all the theme of the upcoming Jubilee that occupies your reflection. In this great event, the

Christian catacombs will naturally be one of the most significant destinations.

Indeed, the theme of the Jubilee, “Pilgrims of hope”, finds a unique and evocative expression precisely in the catacomb routes. There we find the many signs of the early Christian pilgrimage: I think, for example, of the very important graffiti of the so-called *triclia* of the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian, the *Memoria Apostolorum*, where the relics of the Apostles Peter and Paul were venerated together. We then discover, in these routes, the most ancient Christian symbols and depictions, bearing witness to Christian hope. *In the catacombs, everything speaks of hope*, everything: it speaks of life beyond death, liberation from danger and from death itself through the work of God, who in Christ, the Good Shepherd, calls us to participate in the bliss of Paradise, evoked with figures of lush plants, flowers, verdant meadows, peacocks and doves, grazing sheep... Everything speaks of hope and life!

In themselves, the catacombs, as “cemeteries”, or “dormitories”, bear witness to the wait, the hope of the Christian, who believes in the resurrection of Christ and in the resurrection of the flesh.

The pilgrimage in the catacombs is therefore configured as an itinerary in which to experience the meaning of Christian expectation and hope; it reminds us that we are all pilgrims, on our way to the goal of the encounter with God, who in the Risen Christ calls us to share his bliss and peace. The first Christian generations communicate and express this faith through the augural words and prayers that continually return in the epitaphs carved on the tombs of their loved ones: “*Vivas in pace - Vivas in Deo, Vivas in Christo!*”

Christian hope is witnessed above all by the *Martyrs*, whose memorials are dotted along the catacomb paths. For this reason, I warmly congratulate you on your proposal to highlight, in view of the Jubilee, the tombs of the martyrs, proposing them to pilgrims and significant stops along their itineraries. To pause before them brings us face to face with the courageous example of these Christians, always topical, and invites us to pray for the many brothers and sisters who suffer persecution for their faith in Christ today.

Therefore, the decision to expand the number of catacomb sites accessible to pilgrims, in order to allow a greater number to visit them and thus be strengthened in faith and hope, seems timely.

Dear brothers and sisters, you are, in the name of the Holy See and of the whole Church, custodians of the patrimony of faith and art of the Christian catacombs of Italy, as the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (cf. art. 245) reaffirms. I thank you for your service and I urge you to continue it always with competence and passion. It is a service to memory and to the future; a service to the roots and to evangelization. Because the message of the catacombs speaks to all, to pilgrims and also to distant visitors; it speaks from an experience of faith.

I invoke upon you all the protection and support of Mary Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs. I bless you from my heart and bless your work and your loved ones. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!
