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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 Verona – Meeting with Priests and Consecrated Persons

At 6.30 this morning, the Holy Father Francis departed by helicopter from the Vatican heliport to begin his pastoral visit to Verona.

Upon arrival, at 7.55, after landing in the square adjacent to Bentegodi Stadium, the Holy Father was welcomed by Bishop Domenico Pompili of Verona; the president of the Veneto Region, the Honorable Lucia Zaia; the prefect of Verona, Dr. Demetrio Martino; and the mayor of the city, the Honorable Damiano Tommasi.

Pope Francis then transferred by car to the Basilica of San Zeno where, at 8.30, he met with priests and consecrated persons. Approximately eight hundred people were present inside the Basilica.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Good morning to you all!

I wanted to begin by greeting these women, who are cloistered nuns. Have you seen how they are all like this? [Gesture expressing joy]. Because in the cloister one does not lose joy, there is joy. And they are good! They never chatter, never, they are good. Thank you, sisters!

Dear priests,

Dear men and women religious, good morning!

I thank you for being here. I thank the Bishop for the welcome and for all the work he carries out together with you. It is good to find ourselves in this Romanesque Basilica, one of the most beautiful in Italy, which also inspired poets like Dante and Carducci. Being here together, the Bishop, priests, women and men religious, looking at this splendid keeled ceiling makes us feel like we are inside a great boat, and makes us think of the mystery of the Church, the Lord's boat that sails the sea of history to bring the joy of the Gospel to all.

This Gospel image reminds us of at least two things I would like to dwell upon with you: the first is *the call*, the call received and always to be *accepted*; and the second is the *mission*, to be carried out with *boldness*.

First, *welcome the call he received*: the first point of our reflection. At the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, Jesus passes along the lakeshore and sets his gaze on a boat and two pairs of brother fishermen, the first casting their nets and the other tidying them. He approaches and calls them to follow him (cf. Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20). Let us not forget this: at the origin of the Christian life is the experience of encountering the Lord, which does not depend on our own merits or commitment, but on the love with which He comes seeking us, knocking on the door of our heart and inviting us into a relationship with Him. I ask myself, and I ask you: have I encountered the Lord? Do I let myself be encountered by the Lord? Even more, at the origin of consecrated life and priestly life, it does not depend on us, on our gifts or some special merit, but there is the amazing call of the Lord, His merciful gaze that has bent over towards us and chosen us for this ministry, even if we are no better than others, we are sinners like the others. This, sisters and brothers, is pure grace, pure grace. I like what Saint Augustine said: look here and there, search for merit, and you will find nothing, only grace. It is pure grace, pure gratuity, an unexpected gift that opens our hearts to amazement before the condescension of God. Grace provokes this: wonder. "But I never imagined something like this!..." The wonder when we are opened to grace and let the Lord work within us.

Dear brother priests, dear religious sisters and brothers: let us never lose the wonder of the call! Remember the day when the Lord called us. Perhaps some of us remember well how the calling was, or at least the time of the calling: remember it, this brings us joy, even weeping with joy at the moment of the calling. "You, come!" "Who? That other person?" "No, you!" "Yes, no... that other?" "No, you, you!" "But Lord, that other is better than me..." "You, wretch, sinner, however you are, but you!". Let us never forget the time of the calling. This wonder, what a beautiful thing it is! And this is nourished by the memory of the gift received by grace: we must always have this memory within us.

This is the first foundation of our consecration and ministry: to accept the call we have received, to welcome the gift with which God has surprised us. If we lose this consciousness and this memory, we risk putting ourselves at the centre, instead of the Lord; without this memory we risk getting agitated about projects and activities that serve our cause more than that of the Kingdom; we even risk living the apostolate in the logic of self-promotion and consensus-seeking, trying to advance our career, and this is very bad, instead of spending our lives for the Gospel and for free service to the Church. It is He who has chosen us (cf. Jn. 15:16), it is He, He is at the centre. If we remember this, that He has chosen us, even when we feel the weight of weariness and some disappointment, we will remain serene and confident, certain that He will not leave us empty-handed. Never. He will make us wait, this is true, but He will not leave us empty-handed. Like the fishermen, trained in patience, we too, in the midst of the complex challenges of our time, are called to cultivate the inner attitude of waiting. Patience: waiting and patience, as well as the ability to deal with the unexpected, to deal with changes, to deal with the risks associated with our mission, with openness but also with a wakeful heart, and to ask the Holy Spirit for that ability to discern the signs of the times: this no, this yes, this will not do. And we can only do all of this this because at the origin of our ministry is the call of the Lord, and He will not leave us alone. We can cast the net and wait with confidence. This saves us, even in the most difficult times; so, let us remember the call, accept it every day, and stay with the Lord. We all know that there are difficult moments, there are. Moments of darkness, moments of desolation... In these dark moments, remember the call, the first call, and take strength from there.

When this experience of remembering the first call is firmly rooted in us, *we can then be bold in the mission to be accomplished*. And I think again of the Sea of Galilee, this time after Jesus' resurrection. He, on the shore of that same lake, meets the disciples again and finds them disappointed, bitter with a sense of defeat, because they had gone out fishing "but that night they had caught nothing" (cf. Jn. 21:3) – and how many times does this

happen to us, in religious life, in apostolic life - then the Lord shakes them out of that resignation, spurs them to try again, to cast the net again; and they “cast it, and could not pull it up because of the great quantity of fish” (v. 6). In moments of disappointment, do not stop, resist. Resist. Many times, we forget this: the Lord did not say to any of us, when we set out on this road, that everything would be nice and comfortable. No. Life is made up of moments of joy, but also of dark moments. Resist. The ability, the courage to keep going and the courage to resist.

Boldness – apostolic boldness – is a gift that this Church knows well. For if there is one characteristic of Veronese priests and religious, it is precisely that of being enterprising, creative, capable of embodying the prophecy of the Gospel. Thank you, thank you for this. And this evangelical resourcefulness is a seal – let us call it - that has marked your history: just think of the imprint left by so many priests, religious and lay people in the 19th century, whom we can venerate today as Saints and Blesseds. Witnesses of the faith who were able to unite the proclamation of the Word with the generous and compassionate service of the needy, with a “social creativity” that led to the birth of training schools, hospitals, nursing homes, hospices and places of spirituality. This boldness of being creative for the people of God.

Many of these saints and holy men and women of the nineteenth century were among their contemporaries and, immersed in the turbulent history of their time, through the imagination of charity animated by the Holy Spirit, they succeeded in creating a kind of “holy fraternity,” capable of meeting the needs of the most marginalized and the poorest and caring for their wounds. Do not forget this: the wounds of the Church, the wounds of the poor. Do not forget the Good Samaritan, who stops and goes there to heal the wounds. A faith that was translated into the boldness of mission. We need this today as well: the boldness of witness and proclamation, the joy of an industrious faith in charity, the resourcefulness of a Church that knows how to grasp the signs of our times and respond to the needs of those who struggle the most. Boldness, courage, the ability to start over, the ability to risk. To all, I repeat, to all we must bring the caress of God's mercy. And in this regard, dear brother priests, I will dwell on something – I am addressing the priests, who are ministers of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Please, forgive everything, forgive everything. And when people come to confess, do not go and enquire: “But, how?”, nothing. And if you are not capable of understanding in that moment, go forward, the Lord has understood. But please, do not torture the penitent. A great Cardinal, who was penitentiary; he was quite conservative, but before penance, I heard him say, “When a person comes to me and I feel that they find it difficult to say something, I say, ‘I understand, move on’. I haven't understood, but God has understood”. This, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Please, may it not be a torture session. Please, forgive everything. Everything. And forgive without causing suffering, forgive opening your heart to hope. I ask this of you priests, The Church needs forgiveness and you are the tools to forgive. Everyone. We must bring to everyone the caress of God's mercy, especially to those who thirst for hope, to those who find themselves forced to live on the margins, wounded by life, or by some mistake made, or by the injustices of society, which always come at the expense of the most fragile. Have you understood? Forgive everyone.

The boldness of an industrious faith in charity, you have inherited from your history. And so, I would like to say to you with St. Paul, “Do not be discouraged in doing good” (2 Thess 3:13). Do not give in to discouragement: be bold in your mission, know how to still be a Church that makes itself close, that approaches crossroads, that heals wounds, that bears witness to God's mercy. It is in this way that the Lord's boat, in the midst of the storms of the world, can bring to safety so many who otherwise risk being shipwrecked. Storms, as we know, are not lacking in our day; there are many of them, there is no shortage. Many of them have their root in avarice, greed, the unbridled pursuit of self-satisfaction, and are nurtured in an individualistic, indifferent and violent culture. The storms, for the most part, come from this.

And so timely in this regard are the words of St. Zeno, who states, “It is not an isolated fault - beloved brethren - to let oneself be ensnared by the shackles of covetousness. [...] But since the whole world has been burned by the fire of this unquenchable plague, avarice, by all accounts, has ceased to be a guilt, because it has left no one to move to reproach it. Everyone throws himself headlong into vile gain, and no one has been found to impose the bite of justice on it. [...] Therefore it happens that all nations fall moment by moment as a result of each other's injuries” (Sermon 5 [I, 9], On Avarice).

The risk is this, even for us: that evil becomes “normal,” – “This is normal, this is normal...”. No. It is a risk, this.

Evil is not normal; it must not be normal. In hell yes, but here no. Evil must not be normal. That we become accustomed to bad things: “The whole world does it, so I will too”. And so, we become accomplices! Instead, speaking to the people of Verona, St. Zeno says: “Your houses are open to all wayfarers, under you no one either living or dead was long seen naked. Now our poor are ignorant of what it is to beg for food” (Sermon 14 [I, 10], On Avarice). May these words be true for you today!

Brothers and sisters, thank you! Thank you for giving your lives to the Lord and for your commitment to the apostolate. A few days ago I met with “retired” priests, with forty or more years in the priesthood, and I saw those priests who have given their life to the Lord, and they have that wisdom of the heart; I said the same to them: thank you for your commitment to the apostolate. Go forward with courage. Better: let us move forward with courage, everyone! We have the grace and joy of being together on the ship of the Church, amidst wonderful horizons and alarming storms, but without fear, because the Lord is always with us, and it is He who has the rudder, who guides us, who sustains us. And I say this not only to the priests, but also to you, men and women religious. Go forward with courage! It is up to us to accept the call and be bold in our mission. As one of your great saints, Daniele Comboni, said, “Holy and capable. [...] The one without the other is worth little to those who beat the apostolic career. The missionary, male and female cannot go alone to heaven. Alone they will go to hell. The missionary and the missionary woman must go to heaven accompanied by the saved souls. So, first: saints, [...] but it is not enough: it takes charity” (Writings, 6655), both things.

This I wish for you and your communities: a “capable holiness,” a living faith that with bold charity sows the Kingdom of God in every situation of daily life. And if Shakespeare's genius was inspired by the beauty of this place to tell us the tormented stories of two lovers, hindered by the hatred of their respective families, let us Christians, inspired by the Gospel, commit ourselves to sow love everywhere: where there is hatred, may I place love, where there is hatred may I be capable of sowing love. A love stronger than hatred – today there is so much hatred in the world – sow a love stronger than hatred and stronger than death. Dream of it thus: dream of Verona as the city of love, not only in literature, but in life. And may God's love accompany you and bless you. And please, I ask you to pray for me. But pray for, not against! Thank you!
