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**Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Luxembourg and Belgium (26 to 29 September 2024)
– Courtesy Visit to the King of the Belgians and Meeting with the Authorities and Civil Society in
the Castle of Laeken**

Courtesy Visit to the King of the Belgians

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass privately, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to the Castle of Laeken for the courtesy visit to the King of the Belgians, His Majesty Philippe Leopold Lodewijk Maria and Queen Mathilde d'Udekem d'Acoz.

Upon arrival, at 9.30, a Guard of Honour on horseback accompanied him to the main entrance of the Castle, where he was welcomed by the Belgian Royals.

After the official photographs and the signing of the Book of Honour, the private meeting took place, followed by the exchange of gifts.

At the end of the visit, the Pope, the King and the Queen transferred to the *Grande Galerie* of the Castle of Laeken for the meeting with the authorities and civil society.

Meeting with the Authorities and Civil Society

At 10.15, in the *Grande Galerie* of the Castle of Laeken, the Holy Father Francis met with political and religious authorities, businesspeople and representatives of civil society and culture.

After the speeches of the King of Belgium and the Prime Minister, the Holy Father delivered his address.

At the end of the meeting, after taking leave of the Royals and before returning to the Apostolic Nunciature, Pope Francis visited the *Home Saint-Joseph* in Brussels, a residence for elderly people in financial difficulty,

where the Little Sisters of Charity are working.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during his meeting with the authorities and civil Society:

Address of the Holy Father

*Your Majesty,
Mr Prime Minister,
Brother Bishops,
Distinguished Authorities,
Ladies and Gentlemen!*

I thank Your Majesty for your cordial welcome and kind words of greeting. I am very pleased to be visiting Belgium. When I think of this country, what comes to mind is something small yet great; a country in the west that at the same time is also at the centre, as if Belgium were the beating heart of an enormous organism.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to judge the quality of a country by its geographical size. Belgium may not be a large state, yet its particular history has been impactful. Immediately after the Second World War, the exhausted and downhearted peoples of Europe, in beginning a profound process of peace, cooperation and integration, looked to your country as a natural location to establish key European institutions. This was because Belgium was on the fault line between the Germanic and Latin worlds, sandwiched between France and Germany, two countries that had most embodied the opposing nationalistic ideals underlying the conflict.

We could describe Belgium as a bridge between the continent and the British Isles, between the Germanic and French-speaking regions, between southern and northern Europe. A bridge enabling concord to spread and disputes to abate. A bridge where all people, with their own languages, ways of thinking and beliefs can meet others and choose conversation, dialogue and sharing as the means of mutual interaction. A bridge where all can learn to make their own identity not an idol or barrier, but a welcoming place, from which to begin and then return; a place for promoting valuable personal exchanges, seeking together new social stability and building new agreements. Belgium is a bridge that promotes trade, connects and brings cultures into dialogue. An indispensable bridge, then, for rejecting war and building peace.

It is thus easy to see how great little Belgium really is! How Europe needs Belgium to remind it that its history comprises peoples and cultures, cathedrals and universities, achievements of human ingenuity, but also many wars and the will to dominate that sometimes led to colonialism and exploitation.

Europe needs Belgium in order to continue along the path of peace and of fraternity among its peoples. Indeed, Belgium is a reminder to all others that when nations disregard borders or breach treaties by employing the most varied and untenable excuses, and when they use weapons to replace actual law with the principle of "might is right", then they open Pandora's box, unleashing violent storms that batter the house, threatening to destroy it. At this moment in history, I think Belgium plays a very important role. It seems we are close to a world war.

Moreover, peace and harmony are never won once and for all. On the contrary, they are a duty and a mission – concord and peace is a task and a mission – one that needs to be undertaken unceasingly, with great care and patience. For when human beings forget the memory of the past and its valuable lessons, they run the dangerous risk of once again falling backwards, even after having moved on, forgetting the suffering and appalling costs paid by previous generations. Human beings forget the past, but it is curious as there are other forces, both in society and in individuals, that make us fall repeatedly into the same mistakes.

In this regard, Belgium is more essential than ever for keeping alive the memory of the European continent.

Indeed, it provides an irrefutable argument for developing a timely and continuous cultural, social and political movement that, at the same time, is both courageous and prudent. A movement that excludes from the future the idea and practice of war as a viable option with all its catastrophic consequences.

Furthermore, history is the often unheeded *magistra vitae* and Belgium's history calls Europe to return to its path, rediscover its true identity, and invest once again in the future by opening itself to life and hope by overcoming the demographic winter and the torments of war! These are the two calamities we face right now. We are seeing the nightmare of war, which can still turn into a world war. And the demographic winter; that is why we have to be pragmatic and have more children!

In bearing witness to its faith in the Risen Christ, the Catholic Church wishes to be a presence offering individuals, families, societies and nations a hope both ancient and ever new. A presence helping everyone to face challenges and difficulties, not with frivolous enthusiasm or bleak pessimism, but with the certainty that humanity, loved by God, is not destined to collapse into nothingness, but is eternally called to goodness and peace.

Fixing her gaze on Jesus, the Church always recognizes herself as the disciple who follows her Master with fear and trembling. While she knows that she is holy, for she has been founded by the Lord, she experiences at the same time the fragility and shortcomings of her members; saints and sinners who are never fully up to the task entrusted to them since it is always beyond their capacity.

The Church proclaims the good news that can fill our hearts with joy. Through works of charity and countless examples of love for our neighbour, the Church seeks to offer concrete and trusted signs of the love that motivates her. Yet, she always lives in a specific culture, within the thinking of a given age that she sometimes helps to shape and to which at other times she is subjected; and her members do not always understand and live the message of the Gospel in all its purity and fullness. The Church is holy but has sinful members.

In this perennial coexistence of sanctity and sin, light and shadow, the Church carries out her mission, often with examples of great generosity and heartfelt dedication, but sadly, at times, with the emergence of painful counter-testimonies. I refer to the tragic instances of child abuse – also referenced by the King and the Prime Minister – which is a scourge that the Church is addressing firmly and decisively by listening to and accompanying those who have been wounded, and by implementing a prevention programme throughout the world.

Brothers and sisters, it is shameful! It is a shame that we have to address this situation, ask for pardon and solve the problem: the shame of child abuse. We think of the time of the Holy Innocents and say, "Oh what a tragedy, what did King Herod do!" but today there is this crime in the Church. The Church must be ashamed, ask for pardon and try to solve this situation with Christian humility and by putting in all the measures necessary to ensure that it does not happen again. Someone might say to me, "Your Holiness, according to the statistics, the vast majority of abuse are in the family, in the neighbourhood, in the world of sport or in school. Yet, even one case is enough for us to be ashamed! In the Church we must ask pardon for this; others can ask forgiveness for their part. This is our shame and humiliation.

In this regard, I was saddened to learn about the practice of "forced adoptions" that also took place here in Belgium between the 1950s and the 1970s. In those poignant stories, we see how the bitter fruit of wrongdoing and criminality was mixed in with what was unfortunately the prevailing view in all parts of society at that time. This was so much the case that many believed in conscience that they were doing something good for both the child and the mother.

Frequently, the family and other actors in society, including within the Church, thought that in order to avoid the stigma that unfortunately fell upon unmarried mothers in those times, it would be preferable for the good of both the child and the mother that the child be given up for adoption. There were even cases in which some women were not given the possibility of choosing between keeping their children or giving them up for adoption. This is actually happening today in some cultures and countries.

As the successor of the Apostle Peter, I pray to the Lord that the Church will always find within herself the strength to bring clarity and never conform to the predominant culture, even when that culture uses, in a manipulative way, values derived from the Gospel, drawing from it inauthentic conclusions that cause suffering and exclusion.

I pray that the leaders of the nations, by looking at Belgium and its history, will be able to learn from it. In this way, they can spare their peoples endless misfortunes and sorrow. I likewise pray that those in government will know how to take up the responsibility, the risk and the honour of peace, knowing how to avoid the danger, disgrace and absurdity of war. I pray too that they will fear the judgment of conscience, of history and of God, so that their hearts and minds will be converted so as always to put the common good first. At this time when the economy has developed so much, I would like to point out that in some countries the most profitable investments are in arms manufacturing.

Your Majesty, Ladies and Gentlemen, the motto of my visit to your country is "*En route, avec Espérance*". The fact that *Espérance* is written with a capital letter leads me to reflect that hope is not merely something to be carried in our luggage on a journey. Instead, hope is a gift from God, perhaps the most humble virtue – the writer said – and the one that never fails, never disappoints. Hope is a gift from God to be carried in our hearts. I would like to leave you, then, with the following wish for you and for all those living in Belgium: may you always ask this gift of hope from the Holy Spirit, and welcome it in order to walk together with hope along the path of life and history. Thank you!
