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**Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Luxembourg and Belgium (26 to 29 September 2024)
– Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Men and Women, Seminarians and
Pastoral Workers in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Koekelberg**

This morning, at 10.00, the meeting with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers took place in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Koekelberg.

Upon arrival, the Pope was welcomed at the main entrance of the Basilica by the president of the Episcopal Conference of Belgium, Archbishop Luc Terlinden of Malines-Bruxelles, and the rector of the Basilica who brought him the cross and holy water for aspersion. Two children offered him a floral tribute. Pope Francis then crossed the central nave up to the altar, while the choir sang a hymn.

After the welcome greeting from the president of the Episcopal Conference of Belgium, testimonies were given by a priest, a pastoral worker, a theologian, a representative of a support centre for victims of abuse, a religious sister and a prison chaplain, interspersed with the singing of hymns. The Holy Father then delivered his address, and at the end of the meeting, after the blessing and the final hymn, he greeted some disabled people and proceeded to the entrance of the Basilica for the greeting with the local authorities and the priests.

Pope Francis then went to the royal crypt, beneath the Church of Our Lady of Laeken, where the tombs of many members of the Royal House of Belgium are located. He was welcomed by the King and Queen, then paused before the tomb of King Baudouin in silent prayer. Subsequently, before the King and those present, he praised King Baudouin's courage when he chose to "leave his role as King in order not to sign a murderous law". Finally, the Pope urged the Belgians to look to him at this time when criminal laws are being made, wishing that his cause for beatification would proceed.

He then returned by car to the Apostolic Nunciature.

The following is the address the Holy Father delivered during the meeting with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am happy to be here with you. I thank Archbishop Terlinden for his words and for reminding us of the importance of proclaiming the Gospel. Thanks to all of you.

Belgium is very much a crossroads, and you are a Church “on the move”. Indeed, for some time you have been trying to transform the presence of the parishes in this region, and to reinvigorate the formation of the laity. Above all, you strive to be a community that is close to the people, and that accompanies them, bearing witness through works of mercy.

Prompted by your questions, I would like to offer a brief reflection on three words: *evangelization*, *joy* and *mercy*.

The first path to follow is *evangelization*. The changes in our time and the crisis of faith we are experiencing in the West have impelled us to return to what is essential, namely the Gospel. The good news that Jesus brought to the world must once again be proclaimed to all and allowed to shine forth in all its beauty. This present crisis, like every crisis, is a time given in order to shock us, to make us question and to change. It is a valuable opportunity, referred to in biblical language as *kairòs*, a special occasion, as happened to Abraham, Moses and the prophets. Indeed, when we experience desolation, we must always ask ourselves what message the Lord wishes to convey to us. And what does this crisis show us? It demonstrates that we have moved from a Christianity located within a welcoming social framework to a “minority” Christianity, or better, a Christianity of witness. This requires the courage to undertake an *ecclesial conversion* for enabling those pastoral transformations that concern our habitual ways of doing things, and the language in which we express our faith, so that they are truly directed to evangelization (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27).

Here, I would like to say to Helmut: priests also need this courage in order to be priests who are not just preserving or managing a past legacy, but pastors who are in love with Christ and who are attentive to responding to the often implicit demands of the Gospel as they walk with God’s holy people. In doing so, pastors walk sometimes ahead of their people, sometimes in their midst and sometimes behind them. I think of what Yaninka told us, that when we share the Gospel the Lord opens our hearts to encounter those who are different from us. It is good, indeed necessary, that there are different dreams and spiritualities among young people. This must be so, because there can be many personal or community paths, yet leading us towards the same goal, to encounter the Lord. There is room for everyone – everyone! – in the Church and no one should be a mere copy of anyone else. Unity in the Church is not uniformity, but rather finding harmony within diversity! And to Arnaud I would say: the synodal process must involve returning to the Gospel. It is not about prioritizing “fashionable” reforms, but asking, how can we bring the Gospel to a society that is no longer listening or has distanced itself from the faith? Let us all ask ourselves this question.

The second path is *joy*. We are not talking here about passing joys, nor about indulging in patterns of escapism or consumerist amusement. We are talking about a greater joy that accompanies and sustains our lives, even in dark or painful moments. This is a gift that comes from above, from God. It is the joy of hearts kindled by the Gospel. It is knowing that we are not alone on our journey and that even in situations of poverty, sin, and affliction, God is near. He cares for us and will not allow death to have the last word. God is close. Long before he became pope, Joseph Ratzinger wrote that one particular rule of discernment is, “Where joy is lacking, and humour dies, not even the Holy Spirit remains [...] and vice versa: Joy is a sign of grace” (*The God of Jesus Christ*, Brescia 1978, 129). How beautiful! Thus, I would like to say to you: let your preaching, your celebrations, your service and apostolates radiate the joy of your hearts, for this will stir up questions and attract even those who are far away. The joy that comes from the heart, not a fake smile that is fleeting, rather the joy that comes from the heart. I would like to thank Sister Agnes and say to her: joy is the way. When fidelity seems difficult, we must show, as you said Agnese, that it is the “path to happiness”. Then, by focussing on where the road leads, we are more willing to begin the journey.

The third path is *mercy*. The Gospel, embraced and shared, received and given, leads us to joy because it

makes us discover that God is the Father of mercy, who is moved to compassion for us, who lifts us up when we fall and who never withdraws his love from us. It should be fixed in our hearts that *God never withdraws his love from us*. “But is he Father even when I have done something serious?”. God never withdraws his love from you. This can sometimes seem “unjust”, when we are faced with the experience of evil. This is because we simply apply an earthly justice that says, “Whoever does wrong must pay”. Yet God’s justice is greater: those who have done wrong are called to right their wrongs. But they need God’s merciful love to heal their hearts. Do not forget, God forgives everything. God always forgives and it is through his mercy that God justifies us; he makes us righteous by giving us a new heart, a new life.

This is why I would say to Mia: thank you for the great effort you make to transform anger and pain into help, closeness and compassion. Abuse generates atrocious suffering and wounds, undermining even the path of faith. And there is a need for a great deal of mercy to keep us from hardening our hearts before the suffering of victims, so that we can help them feel our closeness and offer all the help we can. We must learn from them, as you said, to be a Church at the service of all without belittling anyone. Indeed, one of the roots of violence stems from the abuse of power when we use the positions we have to crush or manipulate others.

Moreover, thinking of Pieter’s service, mercy is a key word for prisoners. When I enter a prison, I ask myself: why them and not me? Jesus shows us that God does not distance himself from our wounds and impurities. He knows that we can *all make mistakes*, but that *no one is a mistake*. No one is lost forever. It is certainly right to follow all the paths of earthly justice and the relevant human, psychological and criminal processes; but punishment must be a medicine; it must lead to healing. People must be helped to get back on their feet and find their way in life and in society. In our lives, it is only permissible to look down on someone when we are helping them to get back up. It is only permissible in those moments. Let us remember: we can all make mistakes, but no one is a mistake, no one is lost forever. Mercy, always mercy.

In thanking and greeting all of you, sisters and brothers, I would like to refer to a work of art by René Magritte, your distinguished painter, entitled *L’acte de foi* [The Act of Faith]. It depicts a closed door viewed from the inside of a room, a door that has been broken through, thus showing us the open sky. The image invites us to go beyond, to direct our gaze forward and upward and never to close in on ourselves, never. It is an image I leave with you as a symbol of a Church that never closes its doors – please, never close the doors! – a Church that offers everyone an opening to the infinite, and that knows how to look beyond. This is the Church that evangelizes, that lives the joy of the Gospel and practises mercy.

Sisters and brothers, walk together, all of you, with the Holy Spirit, practice mercy; be this type of Church. Without the Spirit, nothing Christian can take place. The Virgin Mary, our Mother, teaches us this. May she protect you and guide you. I bless all of you from my heart. And, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!
