



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO BULGARIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

[5-7 MAY 2019] **MEETING WITH PRIESTS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND RELIGIOUS ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS**

Cathedral (Skopje)

Tuesday, 7 May 2019

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to meet you. I am particularly grateful for this moment, in which I can see the Church breathing fully with both her lungs – the Latin rite and the Byzantine rite – and taking in the ever new and renewing air of the Holy Spirit. Two lungs that are necessary and complementary, that help us better to taste the beauty of the Lord (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 116). Let us give thanks for this chance to breathe deeply, as one, and to sense how good the Lord has been with us.

I thank you for your testimonies, which I would now like to take up. You mentioned the fact that you are few in number and risk giving into a certain inferiority complex. While I was listening to you, I thought of Mary, who took a pound of pure nard, anointed the feet of Jesus and then wiped them dry with her hair. The Evangelist concludes his description of the scene by saying: “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (*Jn* 12:3). That nard was able to permeate everything, leaving an unmistakable impression.

In more than a few situations, we feel the need to “take stock” and see where things stand. We can begin by looking at our numbers... we are few; the means at our disposal... and they are not many. Then we look at the number of houses and apostolates we have to support... they are too many. We could go on to list all those many situations in which we experience how precarious are the resources we have for carrying out the missionary mandate with which we have been entrusted. Whenever we do this, it can seem that our bottom line is “in the red”.

True, the Lord told us: if you want to build a tower, calculate the costs, lest once you have laid the foundations, you are unable to complete the work (cf. *Lk* 14:29). But “taking stock” of things can lead us into the temptation of putting too much trust in ourselves, falling back on our own abilities and our shortcomings. In this way, we might almost end up like the disciples of Emmaus, proclaiming the kerygma with our lips, while our heart is sunken in a silence marked by a subtle frustration that prevents it from listening to the One who walks at our side and is a source of joy and gladness.

Brothers and sisters, “taking stock” of things is always necessary, when it can help us to understand and draw near to all those persons who daily struggle to make ends meet. Families that fail to grow, the elderly and abandoned, the sick and bedridden, young people frustrated and without a future, and the poor who remind us what we truly are: a Church of beggars in need of the Lord’s Mercy. It is legitimate to “take stock” of things, only if it enables us once more to become fraternal and attentive to others, to show understanding and concern as we draw near to the frustrations and the uncertainties felt by so many of our brothers and sisters who yearn for an anointing that can lift them up and heal their hope.

It is legitimate to take stock of things, but only in order to speak out all the more forcefully and to pray together with our people: “Come, Lord Jesus!” I would like to repeat this with you: “Come, Lord Jesus!” [They repeat this prayer].

I need only say that this land was able to give to the world and to the Church in Mother Teresa just that kind of concrete sign of how one small person, anointed by the Lord, could permeate everything, once the fragrance of the Beatitudes was spread over the weary feet of our humanity. How many people were put at ease by the tenderness of her glance, comforted by her caress, sustained by her hope and nourished by the courage of her faith, which could make even the most forgotten in our midst realize that they are not forgotten by God! History is written by people like this, people unafraid to offer their lives for love: whenever you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me (cf. *Mt* 25:40). How much wisdom do we find in the words of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross: “Certainly, the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed” (*Vorgebenes Leben und Epiphanie*: GW XI, 145).

All too often we let ourselves think that things might be different if we were strong, powerful and influential. But isn’t it the truth that the secret of our strength, power and influence, and even of our youthfulness, comes from somewhere else, and not from the fact that our “accounts are in order”? I ask you this, because I was struck by Davor’s testimony, when he shared with us what really touched his heart. You were quite clear: what saved you from careerism was returning to your first vocation, your first calling, and setting out to seek the risen Lord where he is to be found. You set out, leaving behind your forms of security, to walk the streets and squares of the city. There you

felt that your vocation and your life were renewed. Bending over the daily life of your brothers and sisters to share with them and to anoint them with the fragrance of the spirit, your priestly heart began to beat anew and with greater intensity.

You drew near to anoint the weary feet of the Master, the weary feet of concrete individuals, there where they were to be found, and the Lord was waiting for you, to anoint you anew in your vocation. This is very important. In order to renew ourselves, we must frequently turn back and meet the Lord, revisiting the memories of our first calling. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says to the Christians: “Remember the first days”. Remember the beauty of that meeting with Jesus who called us, and from that meeting, with the eyes of Jesus, receive the strength to move forward. Never lose your memory of the first call! Remembering the first call is a “sacramental”. The difficulties of apostolic labours can really exhaust us, and we can lose enthusiasm. We can also lose the desire to pray, to meet the Lord. If you find yourself in this position, stop! Turn back and meet the Lord of your first calling. This memory will save you.

How often do we expend our energies and resources, in meetings, discussions and programmes, on preserving approaches, methods and goals that not only excite no one, but prove incapable of bringing even a glimmer of that evangelical fragrance that can offer comfort and open paths of hope, while depriving us of personal encounter with others? How right Mother Teresa was, when she said: “Everything useless weighs me down!” (A. COMASTRI, *Mother Teresa, Una goccia di acqua pulita*, 39). Let us leave behind all the burdens that keep us from the mission and prevent the fragrance of mercy from being breathed in by our brothers and sisters. A pound of nard was able to permeate everything and leave behind an unmistakable impression.

Let us not deprive ourselves of the best of our mission; let us not stifle the heartbeat of the spirit.

Thank you, Father Goce and Gabriella: you have been courageous in life. And thank you to your children Filip, Blagoj, Luca and Ivan, for having shared with us your joys and concerns, both in ministry and in family life. But also the secret of how to keep going during the times of difficulty that you had to endure. The union of marriage, the grace of marriage in the life of ministry has helped you to walk together in this way, as a family.

Your testimony has that “Gospel fragrance” of the first communities. Let us remember that “the New Testament speaks of ‘churches that meet in homes’ (cf. *1 Cor* 16:19; *Rom* 16:5; *Col* 4:15; *Philem* 2). A family’s living space could turn into a domestic church, a setting for the Eucharist – how many times have you celebrated the Eucharist in your home – the presence of Christ seated at its table. We can never forget the image found in the Book of Revelation, where the Lord says: ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me’ (3:20). This is the image of a home filled with the presence of God, common prayer and every blessing” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 15). In this way, you give a vivid witness of how “faith does not remove us from the world, but draws us more deeply into it”

(*ibid.*, 181). The world may not be the way we would like it, nor are we ourselves “perfect” or spotless. But we are drawn into it in the precariousness of our lives and of our families, anointed each day with trust in God’s unconditional love for us. A trust that leads us, as you have clearly reminded us, Father Goce, to develop certain aspects of life that are as important as they are overlooked in a society frayed by frenetic and superficial relationships: the aspects of tender love, patience and compassion towards others. And I would like to stress here the importance of *tenderness* in priestly ministry as too in the witness of religious life. There is the danger that when we don’t live in family, when there isn’t a need to caress our own children, as Father Goce does, the heart becomes somewhat “bachelor or spinster” in character. There is also the danger that the vow of chastity of religious sisters and celibate priests actually turns into a vow of “entrenched spinsters or bachelors”. How much harm comes from a sister or a priest who lives like this! Thus I stress the importance of tenderness. Today I received the grace of observing sisters who show much tenderness: when I went to the Mother Theresa memorial I saw the religious sisters there and the way they cared for the poor with profound tenderness. Please: tenderness. Never raise your voice. Blessed water, not vinegar! Always with that sweetness of the Gospel that knows how to caress souls. Recalling a word mentioned by our brother: he spoke of *careerism*. When careerism enters priestly ministry and religious life, the heart becomes hardened and bitter and it loses tenderness. The priest or sister who is careerist has lost the ability to caress.

I like to think of each family as an “icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 20). Through the faith built up by daily struggles, they are able “to turn a stable into a home for Jesus, with poor swaddling clothes and an abundance of love” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 286). Material things are needed, they are necessary, yet they are not the most important thing. For this reason, we must never lose the ability to caress, never lose the ministerial tenderness and the tenderness of religious consecration.

Thank you for having shown the familiar face of the *God with us*, the God who never ceases to surprise us amid the pots and pans!

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you again for this ecclesial opportunity to take a deep breath with both lungs. Let us ask the Spirit to keep renewing us in our mission, with the confidence of knowing that he wants to permeate everything with his presence.

And here too, I want to thank – and you will be embarrassed now – I want to thank one of you priests, a father of a family, who has accepted to be the interpreter [applause].

[Our Father is sung]

[The Blessing]

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