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HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHL
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 160418e

Monday 18.04.2016

Conversation with the Pope on return flight from Lesbos

Vatican City, 18 April 2016 – As is customary following apostolic trips, Pope Francis answered questions from journalists during the return flight from Lesbos to Rome. This time the issues raised ranged from the refugee crisis, not only in Europe; the question of integration; the concept of austerity, and finally, various points linked to his recent apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, on love in the family. The following is a summary of the questions from journalists and the answers given by the Holy Father.

Question: This trip comes after the agreement between the European Union and Turkey, an attempt to resolve the issue of refugees in Greece. Do you think that this plan could work, or that it is a political question, to gain time and to see what happens? And secondly, this morning you met with the U.S. presidential candidate Bernie Sanders at Santa Marta. I would like to ask for a comment on this encounter and to know if this is your way of entering into North American politics.

Pope Francis: "No ... there is no political speculation. I do not know a lot about these agreements between Turkey and Greece. I have read something in the newspapers, but this [referring to the Vatican initiative of receiving a group of refugees, Ed.] is something purely human. It is a humanitarian issue. ... Everything has been done in good order; they come with their documents, and the three governments – Vatican City State, the Italian government and the Greek government – they have all inspected everything. They have been received by the Vatican; it will be duty of the Vatican, in collaboration with the Sant'Egidio Community, to find them work, if possible, or to maintain them. They are guests of the Vatican, along with the two Syrian families who have already been accommodated in the two Vatican parishes".

"Secondly, this morning, as I was leaving, I encountered Senator Sanders, who had come to the convention of the Centesimus Annus Foundation. He knew I was leaving at that time and kindly came to greet me. I greeted him, I shook hands with him, his wife and another couple who were with him ... as all the participants in the convention are lodging at Santa Marta, apart from the presidents who are staying in the embassies. It was a handshake and nothing more, a question of politeness, not attempting to get mixed up in American politics".

Question: You speak much about welcoming, but perhaps too little about integration. Seeing what is happening in Europe, as a result of this huge influx of immigrants, we see that there are many cities that suffer from ghetto

sectors ... in all of this, it emerges clearly that Muslim immigrants are those who have the greatest difficulty integrating with our values, Western values. Would it not be more useful to favour the immigration of non-Muslim immigrants? Why, by this gesture, did you favour three entirely Muslim families?

Pope Francis: "I did not make a choice between Christians and Muslims. These three families had their documents in order. For instance, there were two Christian families in the first list but their papers were not in order. It is not a privilege. All twelve of them are children of God. With regard to integration, you have said a word that seems to have been forgotten in our culture, since the war. ... Today ghettos exist. Some of the terrorists responsible for attacks – some of them – are sons and grandsons of people born in the country, born in Europe. What has happened? There has not been a policy of integration and this for me is fundamental, to the point that you can see in the post-Synodal apostolic exhortation on the family – even though this is another problem – one of the three pastoral dimensions for families in difficulty is integration in the life of the Church. Today, Europe must rediscover this capacity it has always had, to integrate. ... We are in need of instruction and education in integration".

Question: We hear about reinforcing the borders of various European countries, of controls, or indeed of deploying battalions along Europe's frontiers. Is this the end of Schengen, the end of the European dream?

Pope Francis: "I don't know. I understand the governments, and the people, have a certain fear. This I understand, and we take real responsibility for receiving people. One of the aspects of this responsibility is how we can integrate these people with us. I have always said that building walls is not a solution: we have already seen one come down, during the last century. Walls solve nothing. We must build bridges. But bridges are built intelligently, through dialogue and integration. So I understand this fear, but closing borders does not solve anything, because in the long term that closure hurts the people themselves. Europe must urgently adopt policies of reception and integration, of growth, of work, of economic reform. All these things are the bridges that lead us not to raise walls".

Question: Why do you not differentiate between those who flee war and those who flee hunger? Must Europe welcome all the world's miseries?

Pope Francis: "Both are the effects of exploitation, also of the earth. A head of government in Africa, about a month ago, said to me that the first decision of his government was to replant the forests, because the earth had become dead as a result of deforestation. It is possible to do good works with both. But some flee from hunger, and others from war. I would invite arms traffickers – those who deal in weapons to feed wars in various places, for example in Syria, those who provide arms to the different groups, to spend a day in the refugee camp. I think it would be salutary for them".

Question: This morning you said that your visit to Lesbos was a sad trip. But are you not happier after the gesture of bringing twelve people back with you?

Pope Francis: "I will answer with a phrase that is not mine. The same thing was asked of Mother Teresa. 'You spend so much effort, so much work, to help people to die, but what you do is not worth it ... the ocean is too great'. And she replied: 'It's a drop, it's a drop of water in the sea, but after that drop, the sea will never be the same'. This is how I would answer. It is a small gesture. But we must all make these little gestures, all men and women, to lend a hand to those in need".

Question: We have visited a country of migration, but also a country that is experiencing an economic policy of austerity. I would like to ask if you have any thoughts on the economics of austerity.

Pope Francis: "The word 'austerity' has different meanings depending on the point of view of who uses it: economically, it means a part of a programme; politically it means something else, spiritually and in a Christian sense it is something else again. When I speak about austerity, I refer to it in relation to waste. I have heard from the FAO – I think it was in a meeting of the FAO – that with the food we waste we could alleviate hunger all over the world. In our homes, how much we waste, even without wanting to. It is a throwaway culture, a culture of

waste. I speak about austerity in this sense, in the Christian sense. Let us stop here, and live in a more austere way".

Question: You have said that the current refugee crisis is the worst following the Second World War. What do you think of the crisis of immigrants arriving in the United States from Mexico, from Latin America?

Pope Francis: "It is the same. There they flee from hunger instead, but it is the same problem. ... They arrive in Mexico from Central America. Perhaps you remember, two months ago, a conflict with Nicaragua because they did not want migrants to pass through there: it has been resolved. They brought them by air to the other country, without passing through Nicaragua. It is a global problem. I spoke about it there, with Mexican bishops; I asked them to look after refugees".

Question: After the questions on immigration, one on the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*: some say that nothing has changed with regard to the rules on access to the sacraments for the divorced and civilly remarried, and that the law, pastoral praxis and obviously the doctrine remain the same; then there are those who say that much has changed and that there are many new openings and possibilities. Are there new concrete possibilities that did not exist before the publication of the exhortation, or not?

Pope Francis: "I could say 'yes', but it would be too brief an answer. I recommend to you to read the presentation by Cardinal Schönborn, who is a great theologian. He is a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and he knows the doctrine of the Church well. In that presentation your question will be answered".

Question: A complementary question. It is not clear why you wrote the famous Note in *Amoris Laetitia* on the problem of the divorced and remarried – note 351. Why is something so important included in a short note? Did you foresee opposition or did you want to say that the point was not that important?

Pope Francis: "One of the last Popes, speaking in the Council, said that there were two Councils: Vatican II, which took place in St. Peter's Basilica, and the 'media Council'. When I convoked the first Synod, the great concern of the majority of the media was whether divorced and remarried Catholics would have access to communion. And since I am not a saint, this bothered me, and also made me rather sad, because I thought, 'do you not realise that that is not the important problem? Don't you realise that instead the family throughout the world is in crisis? The family is the basis of society. Do you not realise that the young don't want to marry? Don't you realise that the falling birth rate in Europe is something to cry about? Don't you realise that the lack of work or the little work available means that a mother has to get two jobs and her children grow up alone? These are the big problems. I don't remember the footnote, but for sure if it's something general in a footnote it's because I spoke about it, I think, in *Evangelii Gaudium*."
