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Press Conference with Pope Francis during the return flight from his trip to Egypt

In the evening of 29 April, during the return flight from Cairo to Rome following his trip to Egypt, Pope Francis spoke with journalists on board the aircraft in a press conference, the transcript of which is given below:

Greg Burke, director of the Holy See Press Office: Thank you, Holy Father. Some of the journalists are making a trip for the first time and there are some who have made almost a hundred trips – some more than a hundred! I do not know if you are aware of how many international trips you have made...

Pope Francis: Eighteen.

Greg Burke: Eighteen. And the nineteenth is right around the corner, so now you also have a good number of papal trips. Thank you for taking this moment, which is always an important one, for us. We will begin with the Italian group: Paolo Rodari... I do not know, Holy Father, if you would like to say something before we begin...

Pope Francis: Yes. Good evening! I thank you for your work, because there have been twenty-seven hours straight, I believe, of hard work. Thank you so much for all you have done. Thank you. I am happy to take your questions.

Greg Burke: Thank you, Holy Father.

Paolo Rodari (La Repubblica): Holy Father, thank you. I wanted to ask you about your meeting yesterday with President Al Sisi: what did you speak about? Did you discuss human rights and, in particular, did you have a chance to speak about Giulio Regeni, and do you think we will find out the truth about his case?

Pope Francis: I will give a general response and then get into the particulars. Generally, when I meet with a Head of State, for a private conversation, it remains private. Unless we agree and say to one another: "We will make public what we have discussed about this issue". During this trip I had four private conversations: with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, with President Al Sisi, with Patriarch Tawadros, and with Patriarch Ibrahim. I believe that, if it is private, out of respect the confidentiality should be maintained. It is private. You also asked about Giulio Regeni. I am concerned. From the Holy See I have looked into this situation, also because Giulio's

parents asked me to do so. The Holy See has taken some steps. I will not say how or where, but we have taken some steps.

Greg Burke: Darío Menor Torres, the Spanish newspaper El Correo:

Darío Menor Torres (El Correo): Thank you, Holiness. You said yesterday that peace, prosperity and development are worth every sacrifice, and afterwards you highlighted the importance of respecting inalienable human rights. Does this indicate your support for the Egyptian Government and that you recognize its role in the Middle East, as well as support for the way it is trying to protect Christians despite the lack of democratic safeguards?

Pope Francis: No, no. They must be understood literally as values in themselves. I said this: defending peace, defending harmony between peoples, defending the equality of all the population, whatever religion one professes, these are values. I spoke of values. If a government official only protects [the values of] one person or another, that is another problem. I have made eighteen visits to various countries. At times I have heard: "By going there, the Pope is supporting that government..." Because governments always have their weaknesses and political adversaries, one says one thing and another says something else... I do not get involved in that. I speak of values, and everyone can see and judge if this government or state, or that one or other, promotes those values.

Darío Menor Torres: Did you still want to visit the Pyramids?

Pope Francis: Did you know that today at 6:00 a.m. two of my assistants went to visit the Pyramids?

Darío Menor Torres: Really? Would you have liked to have gone with them?

Pope Francis: Yes, really, yes...

Darío Menor Torres: Thank you very much.

Greg Burke: If we can stay focused on the theme of the trip... Virginie Riva of the French group, "Radio Europe 1":

Virginie Riva (Radio Europe 1): Holy Father, a question, beginning with the trip but expanding to France, if you will. You spoke at Al-Azhar University of demagogic forms of populism. French Catholics right now are being forced to vote for either a populist or an extremist, and they are divided and confused. What would be the elements for discerning that you could provide for these Catholic voters?

Pope Francis: Excellent. There is a dimension of "populism" – I put this word in quotes, because you know that I had to relearn this word in Europe, because in Latin America it has a different meaning. There is the problem with Europe and the problem with the European Union. I will not repeat here what I have previously said about Europe. I have already spoken about it four times: twice in Strasbourg, once during my speech for the Charlemagne Prize, and at the beginning of the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary [of the Treaty of Rome]. Everything I have said about Europe is in those speeches. Every country is free to make the choices it believes are right for itself. I cannot judge if it is making this choice for this reason or another, because I do not know its internal politics. It is true that Europe is in danger of coming undone; this is true. I expressed it delicately in Strasbourg, more strongly in relation to the Charlemagne Prize, and most recently without any nuance. We only have to reflect on this: the Europe which runs from the Atlantic to the Urals... There is a problem that frightens Europe and perhaps increases populism: the problem of migration. This is true. But let us not forget that Europe is made of migrants: centuries and centuries of migrants... that's us! But it is a problem that must be studied well, and we must also respect people's opinions, honest opinions of a political discussion with a capital "P": great Politics, not the small national politics that eventually end up falling down. Regarding France: to tell you the truth, I do not understand French internal politics. I have worked to have good relations, including with

the current president, with whom there was a difficulty once, but afterwards I was able to speak clearly with him about the issue, while respecting his viewpoint... I do not know the history of the two candidates [Le Pen e Macron], I do not know where they are from... Yes, I do know that one is a representative of the far right, but the other candidate, I truly do not know where he is from. For this reason, I cannot offer a clear view on France. But speaking of Catholics: here in Egypt, during one of the gatherings, while I was greeting the people, someone said to me: "Why do you not think big about politics?" - "What does that mean?". And this person said to me, as if asking for help: "Create a party for Catholics". This man is good, but he is living in the last century! Concerning populism, it is related to migrants, but this is not part of my trip. If there is time, I can come back to this. If there is time, I'll return to this.

Vera Shcherbakova (Itar-Tass): Holy Father, I thank you, first of all for your blessing: you blessed me, I had knelt down a few minutes ago, here in the front. I am Orthodox and I do not see any contradiction... I wanted to ask you: what are the prospects for relations with the Orthodox – obviously Russian, but also, yesterday, in the Common Declaration with the Orthodox Coptic Patriarch – there is the date of Easter in common, and it also speaks about the recognition of Baptism... At what point are we? And one more thing: how do you evaluate the relations between the Vatican and Russia, as a State, also in light of the defence of the values of Middle Eastern Christians, especially in Syria?

Greg Burke: This is Vera Shcherbakova from Itar-Tass, the Russian agency.

Pope Francis: *Christòs anèstì!* [Christ is Risen] Since Buenos Aires, I have always had a great friendship with the Orthodox. For example, every 6 January I would go to Vespers, in your Cathedral, to Patriarch Plato – who now is in the area of Ukraine, he is the archbishop – two hours and forty minutes in a language that I did not understand, but I was able to pray well! And then there was dinner with the community, three hundred people, a Christmas Eve dinner – not Christmas dinner but for the Vigil – they were still not able to eat dairy products or meat, but it was a wonderful meal... And then bingo and games... friendship. Also the other Orthodox. At times they needed legal assistance: they would come to the Catholic Chancery, because their community was small, and they came to see the lawyers... I always had a fraternal relationship: we are sister Churches. I have a special friendship with Patriarch Tawadros: for me he is a great man of God. Tawadros is a Patriarch, a Pope who will take the Church forward, the name of Jesus forward... He has great apostolic zeal. He is one of the most, allow me to use the word but in inverted commas, "fanatical" in finding a fixed date for Easter. Me too but... we're trying to find a way. He says "we struggle on, we struggle on!" He is a man of God. He is a man who, as a bishop far away from Egypt, used to go and give food to disabled persons; he is a man who was sent to a diocese with five churches and he left twenty-five, with I'm not sure with how many Christian families, and he did this with apostolic zeal. You know how their election works; they find three, they are chosen, and then their names are put into a bag, a child is called up, blindfold, and picks out a name... and the Lord is there! Clearly he is a great Patriarch. The unity of baptism moves forward. The responsibility, regarding baptism, has historical roots, because during the time of the first Councils baptism was shared. Afterwards, because the Coptic Christians baptized children in sanctuaries, when they wanted to get married and came to us to marry a Catholic, they were asked for proof of baptism, which they didn't have, and so they were baptized conditionally: we therefore started this practice, not them. But now the door has been opened and we are on the right path to address this problem, to overcome it. In the Common Declaration, the penultimate paragraph speaks about this.

The Russian Orthodox recognize our baptism and we recognize theirs. I was very friendly with the bishop in Buenos Aires, with the Russians. Also with the Georgians, for example. The Patriarch of the Georgians is a man of God, Ilia II, a mystic! We Catholics must learn also from this tradition of mysticism in the Orthodox Churches. On this trip we had an ecumenical meeting: and Patriarch Bartholomew was also present, the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch was present, and there were other Christians: Anglicans, and the Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva... Everything that contributes to ecumenism is in motion. Ecumenism is achieved by moving forward, with acts of charity, with the commitment to help, doing things together when things can be done together... There is no such thing as a static ecumenism. It is true that the theologians must study and agree amongst themselves, but this will never have a successful outcome unless we move forward. What can we do now? We must do what is possible: pray together, work together, perform acts of charity together... But together! This is what it means to move forward. Relations with Patriarch Kirill are good, they are good. The Metropolitan Archbishop Hilarion has also come on several occasions to speak to me, and we have a good

relationship.

Vera Shcherbakova: And with the Russian state? Christians, common values?

Pope Francis: Yes, I know that the Russian state speaks about this, about defending Christians in the Middle East. I know this and I believe it to be a good thing, to speak, to fight against persecution. Today there are more martyrs than in the first centuries, in the Middle East above all.

Greg Burke: Phil Pulella.

Phil Pulella (Reuters): You spoke yesterday, in your first address, of the danger of unilateral actions and that all persons should be artisans of peace. You have spoken much of a “third world war fought piecemeal”. But it would seem that today this fear and anxiety is centred on what is happening around North Korea.

Pope Francis: Yes, it is the focal point.

Phil Pulella: Exactly: it is the focal point. President Trump has sent a fleet of military vessels towards the coast of North Korea; the leader of North Korea has threatened to bomb South Korea, Japan and even the United States if they can build long range missiles; people are frightened and there is talk of the possibility of a nuclear war, as if it were nothing. If you see President Trump, and also other persons, what would you want to tell these leaders who have responsibility for the future of humanity? Because we are at a rather critical moment...

Pope Francis: I call on them: I call on them and will call on them, just as I have done with leaders of various places, to work to resolve the problems through the path of diplomacy. And there are so many facilitators in the world, mediators who offer themselves: there are countries, like Norway, for example. No one can accuse Norway of being a dictatorial country. Norway is always ready to help... to mention one example, but I'm sure that there are so many others... But the path is a path of negotiation, the path of the diplomatic solution. This “world war fought piecemeal” which I began speaking about two years ago, more or less, is “piecemeal” but the pieces have got larger, and they have become more concentrated. They are concentrated in areas which were already “hot zones”, because this situation of the Korean missiles has been going on for a year, but now it seems that the situation has heated up too much. In every instance my call is to solve problems by means of diplomacy, through negotiation... Because the future of humanity is at play. Today a prolonged war will destroy, I won't say half of humanity, but a good part of humanity and of culture... everything, everything. It would be terrible. I think that today humanity would not be able to sustain this. Let us look at those countries who are suffering due to internal conflict, where we see the fires of war: the Middle East, for example, but also in Africa... Yemen... We must stop this! Let us find, let us find a diplomatic solution. And on this point I think that the United Nations has the duty to reclaim somewhat their leadership, because it has been watered down: it has, to an extent, been watered down.

Phil Pulella: Do you want to meet President Trump when he comes to Europe? Has there been a request for this meeting?

Pope Francis: I haven't been informed, as yet, by the Secretary of State, that a request has been made; but I receive every Head of State who asks for a meeting.

Greg Burke: I think that the questions about the visit have finished. Is there one? And then we must go to dinner, at 18:30. There is Antonio Pelayo, from Antena 3, whom you know...

Antonio Pelayo (Antena 3): Holy Father, the situation in Venezuela has gravely deteriorated recently and there have been many deaths. I would like to ask you if the Holy See, and you personally, are thinking of renewing the peaceful intervention, and what forms would such action take?

Pope Francis: There was the intervention of the Holy See at the insistent request of the four presidents who

were working as facilitators, and... it did not succeed. It was left there. It did not succeed because the proposals were not acceptable, or were diluted, or it was a “yes, yes” but then a “no, no”... We all know this difficult situation in Venezuela, which is a country I love very much. And I am aware that they are now insisting; I am not sure of the source, I believe it to be the four presidents, they are insisting on the renewal of this work of facilitating, and seeking a place. I think that this must be with conditions now. Very clear conditions. Part of the opposition does not want this. Interesting, the opposition itself is divided and, on the other hand, it seems that the conflicts are increasingly escalating. But there is something happening. There is something moving forward, and I have been informed of this, but it is still very much in the air so far. Everything that can be done for Venezuela must be done, and with the necessary guarantees. Otherwise we are just playing childish games that lead nowhere. Thank you.

Greg Burke: Thank you Holy Father. And now we must go...

Pope Francis: One more.

Greg Burke: One more. There is the German... Jörg Bremer from the Frankfurter Allgemeine:

Jörg Bremer (Frankfurter Allgemeine): A few days ago, you spoke about the issue of refugees in Greece, Lesbos, and you used the term “concentration camp”, because they are overfilled with people. For us Germans this is obviously a term which is very serious and very close to the term “extermination camp”. Some say that it was a *lapsus linguae* on your part: what did you mean?

Pope Francis: First, you all should read carefully everything I said. I said that the most generous in Europe were Italy and Greece: it is true, they are the closest to Libya and Syria... With regard to Germany, I have always admired the capacity for integration. When I studied there, there were many Turkish people, integrated, in Frankfurt, so many. Integrated, and leading a normal life. It wasn't a *lapsus linguae*: there are refugee camps that are true concentration camps. There may be one in Italy, one elsewhere... Not in Germany, certainly. But think of this: what do people do who are closed in a camp and unable to leave? Think of what happened in northern Europe when they wanted to cross the sea to reach England: they were closed in!

I was amused, and this is a little bit of Italian culture, I was amused to learn about a refugee camp in Sicily – and I've been told this by the delegate from Catholic Action in Agrigento – in that area there are two or three such camps, I don't know in which diocese. The authorities of the city which houses the camps spoke to the people in one refugee camp and said: “You staying in here inside will affect your mental health; you must come out. But please, don't get up to any rough stuff. We can't open the door, but we'll make a small hole behind. You go out, have a nice walk...”. In this way the refugees struck up relationships with the people living around the area, good relationships... These refugees do not commit acts of delinquency or crime. But the fact of being shut in, with nothing to do, this is a *lager*, is it not? But it has nothing to do with Germany, no, no. Thank you.

Greg Burke: Thank you Holy Father...

Pope Francis: Thank you for this work you do which helps so many people. You do not know the good that your editorials can do, your articles, your reflections... We must help people and offer assistance in the field of communication, so that communication and the media direct us to good things, not to things which disorientate and never help us. Thank you. Thank so much. Have a nice dinner and pray for me!
