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Letter of the Holy Father to the participants in the 36th General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) (9-12 May 2017, San Salvador)

The following is the letter sent by the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the 36th General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), taking place from 9 to 12 May in San Salvador on the theme: "A poor Church for the poor".

Letter of the Holy Father

To my brother Bishops at the CELAM Assembly

Dear brothers,

I wish to address you in these days of the Assembly, which has as its background music the celebration of the 300 years of Our Lady of Aparecida. And, with you, I would like to "visit" this Shrine. A visit of sons and disciples, a visit of brothers who, like Moses, wish to tread barefoot on this holy land that was the setting for the God's encounter with His people. Likewise, I would also like it to be our "visit" to the foot of the Mother, so that she may engender hope in us and temper our hearts as sons. It will be like "returning home" to look upon and contemplate, but above all to let ourselves be looked upon and to encounter He Who loved us first.

Three hundred years ago a group of fishermen went out as usual to cast their nets. They went out to earn a living, and were surprised by a discovery that changed their path: in their nets they found a small image, all covered in mud. It was Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, an image that for fifteen years remained in the house of one of them; the fishermen went there to pray and she helped them grow in faith. Today, three hundred years later, Our Lady of Aparecida makes us grow, and places us on the path of the disciple. Aparecida is above all a school of discipleship. And, in this respect, I would like to indicate three aspects.

The fishermen are the first. There were few of them, a little group of men who every day went out to face the day

and the uncertainty that the river held for them. Men who lived with the uncertainty of never knowing what the catch of the day would be; uncertainty that is not easy to deal with when it relates to bringing home food, and especially when there are children to feed. The fishermen are these men who know first-hand the ambivalence between the generosity of the river and the aggressiveness of its floods. Men accustomed to facing inclemency with the vigour and a certain holy obstinacy, of those who never fail to cast their nets, day by day, as they cannot do otherwise.

This image brings us to the centre of the life of many of our brothers. I see the faces of people who go out to earn a living from very early until well into the night. And they do so with the insecurity of not knowing what the result will be. And what hurts the most is seeing that, almost regularly, they go out to face the inclemency generated by one of the gravest sins that currently afflicts our Continent: corruption, that corruption that sweeps through lives, submerging them in the most extreme poverty. Corruption that destroys entire populations, subjecting them to precariousness. Corruption that, like a cancer, eats away at the daily life of our people. And there are many of our brothers who, in an admirable fashion, go out to fight against and face the excesses of many who have no need to do so.

A second aspect is the Mother. Mary knows first hand the life of her children. A mother who is attentive and accompanies the life of her children. She goes where she is not expected. In the account of Aparecida, we find her in the river, surrounded by mud. There she awaited her sons, there she stays with her sons in the midst of their struggles and their searches. She is not afraid to immerse herself with them in the vicissitudes of history and, if necessary, to “get dirty” in order to renew hope. Maria appears where the fishermen throw the nets, where those men try to make a living. She is there.

Finally, encounter. The nets filled not with fish, but with a presence that filled their life and gave them the certainty that in their endeavours, in their struggles, they were not alone. It was the encounter of these men with Mary. After cleaning and restoring the image, they took it to a house where it remained for a long time. That house, that home, was the place where the fishermen of the region went to encounter Our Lady of Aparecida. And that presence became community, Church. The nets were not filled with fish, they became a community.

In Aparecida, we encounter the dynamic of the believing people that confesses itself sinner and saved, a vigorous and obstinate people, aware that their nets, their life, is filled with a presence that encourages them not to lose hope; a presence that is concealed in the daily life of the home and families, in those silent spaces where the Holy Spirit continues to underpin our Continent. All this is presented to us by a beautiful icon that we pastors are invited to contemplate. We come as sons and as disciples to listen and to learn what today, three hundred years later, this event continues to tell us.

Aparecida (whether the apparition and, today, the experience of the Conference) does not bring us recipes, but rather keys, criteria, certainties both small and great to enlighten and, above all, to “ignite” the desire to remove all unnecessary baggage and to return to the roots, to the essential, to the attitude that planted the faith in the beginnings of the Church and has ever since made our Continent a land of hope. Aparecida seeks simply to renew our hope in the midst of so many “inclemencies”.

The first invitation that this icon offers us as pastors is to learn to look at the People of God. To learn to listen and to know them, to give them their importance and place. Not in a conceptual or organizational way, nominative or functional. Although it is true that today there is greater participation of the lay faithful, we have often limited them to intra-ecclesial commitment alone, without giving a clear incentive for them to permeate the social, political, economic, and university environments with the force of the Gospel. Learning to listen to the People of God means to rid ourselves of our prejudices and rationalism, our functionalist mindsets, so as to understand how the Spirit acts in the hearts of so many men and women who with great zeal do not cease to throw nets and to fight to make the Gospel credible, to know how the Spirit continues to move the faith of our people; that faith that does not consider gain or pastoral successes, but rather solid hope. How much we have to learn from the faith of our people! The faith of mothers and grandmothers who are not afraid to “get dirty” to help their children move ahead. They know that the world they live in is plagued with injustice; everywhere they see and experience the shortcomings and fragility of a society that is increasingly fragmented every day, where

impunity for corruption continues to take lives and destabilize cities.

They not only know this – they live it. And they are the clear example of the second reality that as pastors we are invited to take on: let us not be afraid to get dirty for our people. Let us not be afraid of the mire of history, so that we can rescue and renew hope. Only the one who is not afraid to risk and commit to his own will catch the fish. And this is not born of the heroism or the kamikaze character of some, nor is it the individual inspiration of one who wishes to immolate himself. It is the whole community of believers that goes out in search of the Lord, because only by coming out and leaving behind securities (which are often “worldly”) does the Church find her focus. Only by ceasing to be self-referential are we able to re-focus on Him, He Who is the source of Life and Fullness. In order to live in hope it is crucial that we re-centre ourselves on Jesus Christ, Who already dwells at the centre of our culture and comes to us always new. He is the centre. This certainty and invitation helps us as pastors to focus on Christ and His People. They are not antagonistic. To contemplate Christ in His people is to learn to be a part of ourselves, to focus on the one Shepherd. To re-focus with Christ with His People is to have the courage to go to the peripheries of the present and the future, trusting in the hope that the Lord is still present and that His presence will continue to be a source of abundant life. From here will come the creativity and the strength to reach where there arise the new paradigms that are setting out the guidelines for the life of our countries and to reach, with the Word of Jesus, the deepest nuclei of the soul of the cities where the experience of feeling not like citizens but instead like “half-citizens” or “urban surplus” grows day by day (Cf. EG 74).

It is true, and we can not deny it, that reality is becoming more complicated and disconcerting, but we are called to live as disciples of the Master without allowing ourselves to be aseptic and impartial observers, but rather men and women passionate about the Kingdom, eager to infuse the structures of society with the Life and Love we have known. And we must do this not as colonizers or dominators, but rather by sharing the good odour of Christ; may it be this scent that continues to change lives.

I repeat to you, as a brother, what I wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium* (49): “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from cling to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).

This will help reveal the merciful dimension of the motherhood of the Church that, following the example of Aparecida, is between the “rivers and the mud of history”, accompanying and encouraging the hope that each person, wherever he is, may feel at home, can feel that he is a beloved, sought after and awaited son.

This look, this dialogue with the faithful People of God, offers the pastor two very beautiful attitudes to cultivate: courage to proclaim the Gospel, and endurance to overcome the difficulties and troubles that preaching itself causes. To the extent that we involve ourselves in the lives of our faithful people and feel the depths of their wounds, we can look without “clerical filters” at the face of Christ, turn to His Gospel to pray, think, discern and let ourselves be transformed, by His face, into pastors of hope. May Mary, Our Lady of Aparecida, continue to lead us to her Son so that our people may find life in Him ... and in abundance.

And, please, I ask you not to forget to pray for me. May Jesus bless you and the Blessed Virgin care for you. Fraternally.