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Press Conference of the Holy Father during the return flight from his apostolic trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh

Yesterday afternoon, during the return flight from Dhaka to Rome, following his apostolic trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Holy Father Francis spoke with journalists on board the flight during a press conference, the full transcript of which follows:

Press Conference of the Holy Father with journalists on board the papal flight

Greg Burke:

Thank you, Holy Father, first of all thank you. You chose two interesting countries to visit, two very different countries but which have something in common, which is a small Church, in each of these countries, but active, full of joy, full of young people and filled with a spirit of service to the whole society. We certainly saw a lot; we learned a lot; but we are also interested to know what you saw and learned.

Pope Francis:

Good evening, if we consider [the time] here, or good afternoon. Thank you very much for your work. As Greg said, they are two very interesting countries with very traditional, deep and rich cultures. For this reason I think that your work has been very intense. Thank you very much.

Sagrario Ruiz de Apodaca, «Radio Nacional de España»:

A large part of the journey was focused on the crisis of the Rohingya. Yesterday in Bangladesh you called them by name. Did you regret not doing the same in Myanmar, to have referred to them with this word, 'Rohingya'? And what were you feeling yesterday when you asked their forgiveness?

Pope Francis:

Yesterday was not the first time. Various times in public from Saint Peter's Square, at the Angelus or in audiences I have named them.

Sagrario Ruiz de Apodaca:

But on this trip....

Pope Francis:

Yes, however, I want to underscore that it was already known what I thought and have said. But your question is interesting because it leads me to reflect on how I try to communicate. To me, the most important thing is that the message gets across, and therefore to try to say things one step at a time and listen to the responses, until the message gets across. For example, an example from everyday life: a young man, a girl in a crisis of adolescence might say what he or she thinks, slamming the door in the other's face, and the message doesn't get across, it's closed. What interests me is that this message gets across. For this reason, I saw that in the official address [in Myanmar] had I said that word, I would have been slamming the door in someone's face. But I described the situations, the rights of citizenship, "no one excluded", to enable myself to go further in private meetings. I am very, very satisfied with the meetings that I was able to have, because it is true, I did not have – so to speak – the pleasure of slamming the door in someone's face, publicly, a condemnation, no. But I had the satisfaction of having a dialogue, of allowing the other person to speak, of saying what I had to say and in this way got the message across. And it got to that point, which continued and continued, and ended yesterday with that. And this is very important, in communication: concern that the message gets across. So often, there is condemnation, even in the media – I don't want to offend – with some dose of aggressiveness, closes the dialogue; it closes the door and the message doesn't get across. And you, who are specialists at getting messages across, understand this quite well.

You asked me what I was feeling yesterday. This had not been planned in that way. I knew that I would be meeting the Rohingya. I knew neither where nor how, but that this was a condition of the journey, for me, and the procedures were worked out. After a great deal of organizing, even with the government, with *Caritas*, the government permitted the travel of those who came yesterday. Because it happened through the government, which protects them and provides them hospitality, and this is great; it is an example of welcoming. A small, poor country that has received 700 thousand refugees.... I think about countries that close their doors.... We have to be grateful for the example they have given us. The government has to work through international relations with Myanmar regarding permits, dialogue.... Because they are in refugee camps, a special condition. But in the end they came. They were frightened, they didn't know.... Someone had told them: "You greet the Pope, don't say anything" - someone who was not in the Bangladesh government – people who were responsible for the contacts.... At a certain point, after the interreligious dialogue, the interreligious prayer - this prepared all of our hearts – we were religiously very open. I, at least, felt that way. And the moment arrived that they came to greet me. In a single file – I didn't like that, one after the other; but they wanted to get them off the stage immediately. And there I got angry and I complained a bit – I am a sinner – and repeated the word 'respect' several times, respect. I took care of the matter, and they stayed there. Then, after listening to them one by one with the interpreter who spoke their language, I began to feel something inside: "But I cannot leave them without saying a word", and I asked for the microphone. And I began to speak.... I don't remember what I said. I know that at a certain point I asked forgiveness. I think twice, I don't recall. But your question is "what was I feeling": at that moment, I was weeping. I did so quietly. They were weeping as well. And then, I thought that we were in an interreligious meeting, while the leaders of the other traditions were at a distance. [So I said:] "No, you come too: these Rohingya are all of ours". And they greeted them. I didn't know what more to say because I was looking at them, I greeted them.... And I thought: "We have all spoken, the religious leaders. But one of you, say a prayer, one from your group...". And I think perhaps it was an imam, a "cleric" of their religion, who offered that prayer, and they too prayed there with us. And considering all that went on, the whole journey, I felt that the message had gotten across. I don't know if I've answered your question. One part was planned but most happened spontaneously. Then, today there was – they told me – a programme made by one of you – I don't know if they are here or not – TG1: it's a long, long programme... who did it, do you know?

Greg Burke:

TG1 is still in Bangladesh.

Pope Francis:

And then it was repeated on TG4.... I haven't seen it but some who are here have seen it. One reflection: the message didn't just get across here. You have seen the front page of the newspapers today: everyone got the message. And I haven't heard any criticism. Perhaps there may be some, but I haven't heard any.

George Abraham Kallivayalil, «Deepika Daily»:

We know that on this same occasion you would have liked to have gone to India. What exactly was the reason that the hypothesis of India was dropped? Might we expect you in India in 2018?

Pope Francis:

Yes, the first plan was to go to India and to Bangladesh; but then the procedures became protracted, and time was pressing, and I chose these two countries. Bangladesh remained, but with Myanmar. It was providential, because visiting India requires one journey: you must go to the south, to the centre, to the east, to the west, to the north ..., for the diverse cultures of India. I hope to be able to do so in 2018, if I'm still alive! But the idea was India and Bangladesh. Then time compelled us to make this choice. Thank you.

Etienne Lorailière, «KTO» (French Catholic Television): Some are opposed to interreligious dialogue and evangelization. During this journey, you spoke of dialogue for peacebuilding. But what is your priority: evangelization or a dialogue for peace?

Pope Francis:

Thank you. A first distinction: evangelizing is not proselytizing. The Church grows not through proselytizing but through attraction, that is, through witness. Pope Benedict XVI said this. What is evangelization? It is living the Gospel; it is witnessing to how one lives the Gospel: witnessing to the Beatitudes, witnessing to Matthew 25, witnessing to the Good Samaritan, witnessing to forgiveness seventy times seven. And in this witnessing, the Holy Spirit works and there are conversions. But we are not very enthusiastic about bringing about conversions straight away. If they come, they wait: you speak ..., your tradition..., you make sure that a conversion is the response to something that the Holy Spirit has moved in my heart before the testimony of a Christian. During the lunch I had with the young people on the Youth Day in Krakow – 15 or so young people from all over the world – one young man asked me this question: "What should I say to a university classmate, a friend, a good person, but who is atheist? What should I tell him in order to change him, to convert him? This was the response: "The last thing you should do is to say something. You live your Gospel, and if he asks you why you do this, you can explain to him why you do so. Let the Holy Spirit attract him". This is the power of the meekness of the Holy Spirit in conversions. We are witnesses to the Spirit, witnesses to the Gospel. 'Witness' is a word that, in Greek, means 'martyr': everyday martyrdom, also the martyrdom of blood, when it happens. Your question: what is the priority, peace or conversion? But, when you live with witness and respect, you make peace. Peace begins to be broken in this field when proselytism begins, and there are many types of proselytism, but this is not evangelical. I don't know if I've answered.

Joshua McElwee, «National Catholic Reporter»: During the cold war, John Paul II said that the global policy of nuclear deterrence was judged as morally acceptable. Last month, in a conference on disarmament, you said that the very possession of nuclear weapons is to be condemned. What has changed in the world that has led to making this change? What role have the insults and threats between President Trump and Kim Jong-un played in your decisions? What would you say to politicians who don't want to give up nuclear arsenals or even reduce them?

Pope Francis:

I would prefer that first you ask questions about the journey; I say this to everyone. But I'll make an exception since you asked the question.

What has changed? Irrationality has changed. The Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, custody of the universe, of creation. From the time in which Pope John Paul II said this until today many years have passed.... How many? Do you have the date?

Joshua McElwee:

1982.

Pope Francis:

Thirty-four years. In 34 years, nuclear [development] has gone further and further and further. Today we are at the limit. This can be argued; it is my opinion, but my staunch opinion: I am convinced of it. We are the limit of what's licit in regard to having and using nuclear weapons. Why? Because today, with so sophisticated a nuclear arsenal, we risk the destruction of humanity, or at least of a large part of humanity. For this reason I refer to *Laudato Si'*. What has changed? This. The development of nuclear weaponry. What has also changed.... They are sophisticated and also cruel [weaponry]; they are also capable of destroying people without touching the structures.... We are at the limit, and since we are, I ask myself this question – not as papal Magisterium, but it is the question a Pope asks – today is it licit to maintain nuclear arsenals, as they are, or today, to save creation, to save humanity, is it not necessary to go back? I'll turn to something I've said, which is from Guardini, it isn't mine. There are two forms of a "lack of culture": the first is the lack of culture that God gave us in order to create culture, through work, through investigation [research] and so on, to create culture. Let's consider the medical sciences, so much progress, so much culture; mechanics, so many things. And man's mission is to create culture starting from the uncultivated nature we received. But we are reaching a point at which man has in hand, with this culture, the capacity to create another form of *lack of culture*: let's think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And this was sixty, seventy years ago. Destruction. And this also happens with atomic energy when we aren't able to have complete control: think about the incidents in Ukraine. For this, getting back to weapons, which are to win by destroying, I say that we are at the limit of what's licit.

Greg Burke:

Now they've signalled me that the questions have veered from the trip to other things, so if you would like to say something about the journey....

Pope Francis

I would like some more about the journey, because it would seem as if it hadn't been very interesting, wouldn't it?

Delia Gallagher, «CNN»: I am very curious about your meeting with General Hein. What kind of encounter was it and how does one speak with him?

Pope Francis:

Clever question, good. I would distinguish between two types of meetings. The encounters in which I went to visit people and the encounters in which I have received people. In the case of this general, he asked to speak: I received him. I never close the door. Do you ask to speak? Come. You lose nothing by speaking; you always win. It was a nice conversation. I couldn't say, because it was private, but I did not negotiate the truth, I assure

you. But I spoke in such a way that he understood somewhat that one road, as it was in bad times and seen again today, cannot be travelled. It was a nice meeting, civil; and there too, the message got across.

Gerry O'Connell, «America Magazine»:

You met Aung San Suu Kyi, the president, the military, the monk who created a bit of difficulty...; and then you went to Bangladesh and also met the prime minister, the president...; the Islamic leaders there and the Buddhist leaders in Myanmar. What do you take away from all this? What is your analysis of all these encounters. What prospects for better future development for these two countries, also considering the situation of the Rohingya?

Pope Francis:

It won't be easy to move forward in a constructive development, and it won't be easy for someone who would want to go backwards. We are at a point in which things must be studied. Someone told me – I don't know if it's true – that the Rakhine State is a State very rich in precious stones and that perhaps there might be interest that the land be somewhat uninhabited in order to work. But I don't know if it's true; these are some of the hypotheses that are made; they also say a lot about it in Africa.... But I think we are at a point where it won't be easy to go forward, in the positive sense, and it won't be easy to go back, because the awareness today of humanity... the fact – to return to the Rohingya - that the United Nations have said that the Rohingya are the most persecuted religious and ethnic minority in the world today; this is a point that those who want to go backwards must consider. We are at a point at which, with dialogue, we can start, one step and another step; perhaps half a step backwards and two forward, but as human things are done: with benevolence, with dialogue, never with aggression, never with war. It's not easy. But it is a turning point: is this turning point made for the good, or is this turning point made in order to go backwards? Ah yes, I have not lost hope, because, sincerely, if the Lord has allowed what we experienced yesterday and what we experienced in a more reserved way, beyond the two [official] addresses [to the authorities], the Lord permits one thing in order to promise another. I have this Christian hope: one never knows....

Valentina Alazraki, «Televisa»: Did you want to go to the Rohingya refugee camp? Why didn't you go?

Pope Francis:

It's true, I would have liked to go. But it wasn't possible. Things were studied, but it wasn't possible. For various factors, including time, and distance, but also other factors. Yet the refugee camp "came", as representatives. I would have like to; this is true, but it wasn't possible.

Enzo Romeo, «Rai»:

We've seen that Bangladesh is a country trying to overcome poverty, but with systems that seem really harsh to us. From what you have seen and heard, is it possible to escape this mechanism? And one other thing: on the Rohingya issue, there seemed to be a willingness to intervene even from the part of jihadist groups, al Qaeda, ISIS, who are seeking to become supporters of this people. It is interesting that the leader of Christianity should be seen as more of a friend, in some ways, regarding these extremist groups: is this sensation correct?

Pope Francis:

I'll start with the second. There were terrorist groups who were trying to take advantage of the situation of the Rohingya, who are peaceful people. As in all ethnicities and all religions, there is always also a fundamentalist group. Even we Catholics have them. The military justify their intervention through these groups. I did not decide to speak with these people I chose to speak with the victims of these people. Because the victims were the Rohingya people, who on the one hand have been suffering that discrimination and on the other have been defended by terrorists. But the poor souls! The government of Bangladesh has a very strong campaign – so the ministers told me – of zero tolerance to terrorism, not only regarding this issue, but also to prevent other forms of

it. These people who have joined ISIS, although they be Rohingya, are a small extremist fundamentalist group. But extremists do this: they justify the intervention that has destroyed good and bad [people].

Greg Burke:

And with regard to globalization, the first question?

Pope Francis:

It's one of the most serious problems. I spoke about this in the personal encounters. They are conscious of this, they are also conscious of the fact that freedom up to a certain point is conditioned, not only by the military but by large international trusts. And they focused on education, and I think it was a wise choice. There are educational plans.... They showed me the percentages of recent years, how lack of education has decreased quite a bit. This is their choice, and hopefully it will do well, because they maintain that with education the country will improve.

Jean-Marie Guénois, «Le Figaro»:

Is a journey to China being organized? And what have you learned from this journey in regard to the Asian mindset and also in view of this China project? What has been the lesson for you?

Pope Francis:

Please repeat, what have I learned on this journey regarding ...?

Jean-Marie Guénois:

What have you learned about Asia, this time? Because you give the impression that you would take a trip to China, but China is still closed, for the moment....

Pope Francis:

"Sticking my nose" in China.... Today Madam State Counsellor of Myanmar went to Beijing: we see that there are dialogues.... Beijing has a great influence in the region, because it's natural: I don't know how many kilometres of border Myanmar has there: even in the Masses there were Chinese people who had come. I think that these countries that surround China, also Laos, Cambodia, need good relations; they are neighbours. And I find this wise, politically constructive if they want to move forwards. However, it's true that China today is a world power: if we look at it from this side, it can change the panorama. But the political experts will have to explain it: I cannot, I don't know. But it seems natural to me that they have a good relationship. The journey to China is not being organized, rest assured. For the moment, it is not being planned. But turning to Korea, when they told me that we were flying over Chinese territory, and whether I wanted to say something, [I said] that I would really like to visit China. I would like to; it is no secret.

Negotiations with China are of a high cultural level: today, for example, in these days, there is a Vatican Museums exhibit in China, then there will be one – or there has been one, I'm not sure – of the Chinese museums in the Vatican.... There are cultural, scientific relations, professors, priests who teach at the Chinese state university. This is one thing. Then there is political dialogue, above all about the Chinese Church, with that history of the patriotic Church and of the clandestine Church, which must be done one step at a time, with sensitivity, as is being done. Slowly. I think that in these days, today or tomorrow, a session of the Joint Commission will begin in Beijing. And this, with patience. But the doors of the heart are open. And I think this will be good for everyone, a journey to China. I would like to do this....

James Longman, «ABC News»: Did you notice how much criticism was directed at Aung San Suu Kyi? And what do you think of the criticism that was directed at her for not having expressed herself in an explicit manner regarding the Rohingya issue?

Pope Francis:

I heard all this; I also heard the criticism, I heard the criticism for not going to the Rakhine Province. Then, she went: she went for half a day, more or less. In Myanmar it's difficult to judge a criticism without asking: "was it possible to do this?" Or "how will it be possible to do this?" With that, I don't want to say that it wasn't a mistake not to go; but in Myanmar the political situation.... It's a developing nation, politically developing; it's a nation in transition which has many cultural values in its history, but politically it is in transition. And for this reason, the possibilities must be evaluated from this perspective. In this moment of transition, would it have been possible or not to do this or that? And to see whether it was a mistake or wasn't possible. Not only for Madame State Counsellor, also for the President, Deputies, Parliament.... In Myanmar you must always bear in mind the construction of the country. And there it's done as I said at the start: two steps forward, one step back, two forward, one back ... history has taught us this. I don't know how to respond otherwise, with the little knowledge I have of the place. And I wouldn't want to lapse into what an Argentinian philosopher did, who was invited to give conferences in Asian countries: [he spent] a week, and when he returned he wrote a book about the reality of those countries. This is presumptuous.

Phil Pulella, «Reuters»: The meeting with the General was originally planned, I believe, for Thursday morning; instead, you had to see Aung San Suu Kyi first. When the General asked to see you first, in your opinion was it a way of saying: "I'm in charge here, you must see me first"? And at that moment there, did you feel perhaps that he or they wanted to manipulate you?

Pope Francis:

I understand. The request was because he had to go to China, and when these things happen, if I can shift the appointment, I do so. I don't know what the intentions were. But what interested me was the dialogue. A dialogue requested by them and for which they came to me: my visit had not been foreseen. And I think the dialogue was more important than the suspicion, which would have been just what you are saying: "We are in charge here; we come first".

[Phil Pulella]:

During that meeting with the General did you use the word 'Rohingya'?

Pope Francis: I used words to get the message across, and when I saw that the message had been received, I dared to say all that I wanted to say. *Intelligenti pauca*. [Few words are needed for one who understands]

Alicia Romay, «Gestiona Radio»:

Yesterday, when we were with the priests who were ordained, I wondered whether they aren't afraid to be Catholic priests at this moment of Catholic life in this country, and if they asked you what to do when fear comes and they don't know what to do.

Pope Francis:

It's my custom, always, five minutes before ordination, to speak with them in private. They seemed at peace to me, calm, aware they were conscious of the mission, poor, normal. The one question I asked was: "Do you play football?" – They said "Yes!", all of them. This is important. A theological question! But this business of fear, I didn't perceive it. They know that they have to be very close to their people; they feel that they must be attached to the people, and I liked this; this pleased me. Then I spoke with the formators, several bishops, who told me:

before entering the seminary, they do a pre-seminar such that they may learn many things, habits, and also learn English perfectly. This, to say something practical: if they don't know English, they begin in the seminary, to the extent that ordination is not at 23, 24, but at 28, 29 years old, more or less. They seem like children because they all seem young, everyone, even the older ones. I saw them sure of themselves. But this, yes; they got it: to be close to their people. This yes. And they hold this dear! Because each of them belongs to an ethnic group, and they hold this dear. Thank you.

I thank you, because they tell me that the time is up. Thank you for your questions; thank you for all that you have done.

And what does the Pope think about his journey? To me the journey is good for me when I manage to meet the people of the country, the People of God. When I am able to speak or encounter them or greet them: encounters with the people. We spoke about encounters with politicians.... Yes, it's true, it must be done; with priests, with bishops ... but with the people, them, the people. The people are really the heart of a country. The people. And when I find them, when I am able to meet them, then I am happy. I thank you very much for your help. Thank you so much.

And thank you for the questions, too, for the things I have learned from your questions. Thank you. Enjoy your dinner.
