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The Pope receives Civil Aviation chaplains from around the world

At 11.40 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the international meeting of civil aviation chaplains, on the occasion of the 17th international seminar, organized by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, on the theme: “Catholic civil aviation chaplains and members of the airport chaplaincy at the service of integral human development” (Rome, 10 to 13 June 2019).

The following is the Pope’s address to those present at the meeting:

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Address of the Holy Father

I offer all of you a cordial welcome at the start of this International Seminar on the theme: “Catholic Civil Aviation Chaplains and Members of the Airport Chaplaincy at the Service of Integral Human Development”. I thank Cardinal Turkson for his kind words of introduction.

In the course of my Apostolic Journeys, I have passed through many airports, where you, dear chaplains and pastoral workers, provide pastoral care in complex and very particular situations. Technological advances, a frenzied pace of activity and a constant flow of people all tend to create an atmosphere of anonymity and indifference in airports, making them great human outposts. Millions of people of different nationalities, cultures, religions and languages daily cross paths with one another. Each has his or her own story, known only to God, with its joys and sorrows, its hopes and troubles. In this setting, you are called to bring the message and presence of Christ, who alone knows what lies hidden in the heart of each person, and to bring to everyone, whether Christian or not, the Good News of God’s tender love, hope and peace. How much peace can be sown with just a sign, a word, a look!

In airports, yours is primarily a presence of availability. You represent God’s ever-present love in an environment crowded with people at work or travelling for a variety of reasons. Sadly, airports do not have that kind of culture, a culture of gratuity, not at all. So you open the doors to spaces and encounters of availability and gratuity. You

are present in their midst to offer, respectfully and discreetly, a chance for them to encounter the “now” of God. For that one day, that single hour of transit, is unique and unrepeatable. You are creative in finding constantly new ways to show pastoral charity to all, whether managers, employees or passengers. Your witness, and the message you communicate in that particular moment, can leave a life-long impression. Availability is itself a powerful form of witness.

Let me relate a story I was told. A businessman, concerned about his business affairs, was in the airport. He went into the chapel looking for an electric outlet to recharge his computer. He found one. So he sat there for a whole, waiting for the computer to recharge, taking his time... Then a lay chaplain came up to him and said, “Do you need anything?” He said no, but the chaplain went on to say, “You did the right thing, because electrical energy is like God’s energy, it available to all” The chaplain started off that way, and one word led to another, and that man felt deep down that something changed. He told me himself: “At that moment, I met Jesus”. And immediately he went off to buy a copy of the Gospel and from that moment on – this was years ago – up to the present time, each day he reads the Gospel, in order to meet anew that Jesus he met in the airport. A true story, told to me by the person himself.

I am pleased to see that concern for integral human development is at the heart of your deliberations in these days. I would like to share some thoughts with you on this important subject.

In the context of your pastoral outreach, integral human development embraces a variety of particular concerns: concern for the whole person; concern for work, culture and family life; concern for religion, the economy and politics. I urge you to carry out your ministry with commitment and enthusiasm, gazing with the heart of Christ upon the thousands of faces passing by, so that everyone can sense God’s presence. In this way, airports can become “doorways” and “bridges” for an encounter with God, but also with one another, as children of the one Father. An airport can even become a privileged place where lost sheep can rediscover and follow once more their true Shepherd. Indeed, in these places of departure and arrival, a kind of “free zone” often opens up, a space of anonymity where people can feel at ease in opening their hearts, entering into a process of healing and making their way back to the house of the Father, which for various reasons they may have long since left behind.

We know too that it is not easy for pilots and cabin crew to balance their work with their personal and family life. Your presence and attentive ear is also important for them. Friendship, closeness, and the time you devote to them and their families, whether directly or indirectly, can be of great help to them.

I am also aware of your concern that airports always provide an opportunity for people to encounter God in prayer and in the sacraments. I share your desire, your pastoral “dream”, that even in an airport a community of believers can take shape and become leaven, salt and light in that unique human setting.

Here I cannot fail to mention the migrants and refugees who arrive at major airports in the hope of seeking asylum or finding shelter, or who are stopped in transit. I continue to urge the local Churches to show them due welcome and concern, even though this is the direct responsibility of the civil authorities. It is also part of your pastoral care to ensure that their human dignity is always protected and their rights safeguarded, in respect for the dignity and beliefs of each. Works of charity carried out on their behalf are a testimony to God’s closeness to all his children.

Some of you, perhaps all of you, are called in addition to serve in your parishes and communities. This can prove physically and spiritually draining, and perhaps even lead to discouragement, dissatisfaction or despondency. It would be good, then, in agreement with your bishops, to involve others in your mission, whether members of the airport staff or of local church communities, and to ensure that they receive proper formation. I am very happy to see here many lay people and religious with whom you are already working. I encourage all of you to join in seeking new paths of pastoral outreach, sharing one another’s burdens and above all the joy of evangelizing. I want to emphasize this. I am pleased at the involvement of so many lay people. Please, don’t fall into the temptation of “clericalizing” the laity. Lay people are messengers, missionaries, in their own right.

The quality of your pastoral service – and mine! – is proportionate to the quality of your spiritual life and prayer, but also to your sense of being part of the mission of the universal Church. Missionary spirit must be the inspiration and guide of all our activity. May the Risen Lord help you to keep it ever alive and renewed, by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have just celebrated the feast of Pentecost. May the Holy Spirit give you his light and fill you with his gifts, so that you can take up your ministry with fresh energy and vigour. I entrust all of you to Mary, Mother of the Church, whose feast we celebrate today. In a particular way, let us invoke her under the title of Our Lady of Loreto, Patroness of Civil Aviation. May she help you to hold out the flame of faith to all whom you meet in your daily work, so that salvation can indeed extend to the ends of the earth. Thank you.
