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Message to the 41st Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples (Rimini, 18-23 August 2020)

On the occasion of the 41st Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples, beginning tomorrow in Rimini on the theme “Devoid of wonder, we remain deaf to the sublime”, the Holy Father Francis has sent to Bishop Francesco Lambiasi, through Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, the following Message:

Message

From the Vatican, 5 August 2020

To His Excellency

Bishop Francesco Lambiasi of Rimini

Your Excellency,

The Holy Father wishes to convey through you his wishes for the success of the 41st edition of the Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples, which will take place primarily in digital form. Pope Francis assures his closeness and prayer to the organisers and those who will participate.

Who has not discovered that the dramatic experience of the pandemic is common to all? “We have realised that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented. ... The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we are constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities” (Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer before Saint Peter’s Basilica*, 27 March 2020).

The title this year: “Devoid of wonder, we remain deaf to the sublime” (A.J. Heschel, *God in search of man*, Turin 1969, 274), offers a precious and original contribution to a vertiginous moment in history. In the search for goods rather than goodness, many had focused exclusively on their own strengths, on the capacity to produce and to earn, renouncing that attitude that in the child constitutes the fabric of his or her outlook on reality: wonder. In this regard, G.K. Chesterton wrote: “The most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common-sense” (*The Defendant*, Turin 2011, 113).

Jesus' invitation to become like children (cf. *Mt 18:3*) comes to mind, but also the wonder at being, which was the principle of philosophy in ancient Greece. It is this amazement that sets life in motion, allowing it to start again in any circumstance: “Amazement is what we should feel ... for life is a gift that constantly gives us a chance to make a new start, even from the most lowly of circumstances”, said Pope Francis, insisting on the need to renew wonder in order to live. “Without amazement, life becomes dull and routine, and so it is with faith. The Church too needs to renew her amazement at being the dwelling place of the living God, the Bride of the Lord, a Mother who gives birth to her children” (*Homily*, 1 January 2019).

In recent months we have experienced that dimension of wonder that assumes the form of compassion in the presence of suffering, of the fragility and vulnerability of existence. This noble human sentiment drove doctors and nurses to face the grave challenge of the coronavirus with strenuous dedication and admirable commitment. The same sentiment, rich in affection for their students, permitted many teachers to face the difficulties of distance learning, ensuring the conclusion of the school year. Likewise it enabled many people to find, in the faces and presence of their relatives, the strength to face hardships and fatigue. In this sense, the theme of the upcoming Meeting constitutes a powerful call to descend into the depths of the human heart through the rope of wonder. How can one not feel a basic sense of wonder before the spectacle of a mountain landscape, or listening to music that moves the soul, or simply when faced with the existence of one who loves us and the gift of creation? Indeed, “not only the heart of man presents itself as a sign, but also the whole of reality. To question oneself in the face of signs requires an extremely human capacity, the first we have as men and women: astonishment, the capacity to wonder, as Giussani calls it. Only wonder knows” (J.M. Bergoglio, in A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani*, Milan 2014, 1034). This is why J.L. Borges was able to say, “All emotions pass, only wonder abides” (*The Desert and the Labyrinth*).

If such an outlook is not cultivated, one becomes blind to existence: wrapped up in oneself, one is attracted to the ephemeral and ceases to question reality. Even in the desert of the pandemic, often-dormant questions have re-emerged: what is the meaning of life, of pain, of death? “Man cannot be satisfied with reduced or partial answers, obliging the censure or forgetting of some aspect of reality. Within him, he possesses a yearning for the infinite, an infinite sadness, a nostalgia that is satisfied only with an equality infinite response. Life would be an absurd desire, if this answer did not exist” (J.M. Bergoglio, in *Life of don Giussani*, cit., 1034).

Many people are driven to the search for answers or even just questions on the meaning of life, to which we all aspire, even without being aware of it. And so something apparently paradoxical has happened: instead of eliminating their deepest thirst, confinement has awakened in some people the ability to wonder at people and facts they took for granted before. Such a dramatic circumstance has restored, at least for a little while, a more genuine way of appreciating existence, without that complex of distractions and preconceptions that pollute the eye, blur things out, empty us of wonder and distract us from asking ourselves who we are.

In the midst of the health emergency, the Pope received a letter signed by several artists who thanked him for praying for them during a Mass in Santa Marta. On that occasion he said: “Artists enable us to understand what beauty is, and the Gospel cannot be understood without beauty” (Morning Meditation, 7 May 2020). The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, among others, showed how decisive the experience of beauty is in reaching the truth: “In a world without beauty even good has lost its power of attraction, the evidence of its need to be fulfilled; and man remains perplexed before it and wonders why he should not prefer evil. This, too, is a possibility, even more exciting. In a world which no longer believes itself capable of affirming beauty, the arguments in favour of truth have exhausted their power of logical conclusion: the process leading to conclusion is a mechanism which no longer nails anyone, and the same conclusion no longer concludes” (*The Glory of the*

Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 1).

This is why the theme of the Meeting launches a decisive challenge to Christians, called to bear witness to the profound attraction that faith exercises by virtue of its beauty: “the attraction of Jesus” according to an expression dear to the Servant of God Luigi Giussano. The Holy Father wrote about it, with regard to education in faith, in what is often regarded as the programmatic document of his papacy: “Every expression of true beauty can be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus. ... If, as Saint Augustine says, we love only that which is beautiful, the incarnate Son, as the revelation of infinite beauty, is supremely lovable and draws us to himself with bonds of love. So a formation in the *via pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 167).

The Pope therefore invites you to continue to collaborate with him in bearing witness to the experience of the beauty of God, who made Himself man so that our eyes might wonder at seeing His face, and that our gaze might find in Him the wonder of living. It is what Saint John Paul II, the centenary of whose birth we commemorated recently, once said: “It is worth being human, because You, Jesus, have been a man” (*Homily*, 15 April 1984). Is not this astonishing discovery, perhaps, the greatest contribution that Christians might offer to sustain the hope of humanity? It is a task we cannot escape, especially in this dark chapter of our history. It is a call to reveal the beauties that have changed our life, concrete witnesses to the love that saves, especially with regard to those who suffer the most now.

With these sentiments, the Holy Father sends his heartfelt Apostolic Blessing to Your Excellency and to the entire community of the Meeting, asking that you continue to remember him in prayer. I add my warm greeting, and remain yours devotedly in the Lord.

Pietro Cardinal Parolin

Secretary of State
