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Audience with participants in the meeting promoted by the National Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the meeting promoted by the national Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you, and I thank Cardinal Bassetti for his kind words. He has regained his strength, thank you! I greet the secretary general, Bishop Russo, and all of you who support the commitment of the Italian Church in the field of catechesis. I am happy to share with you the memory of the 60th anniversary of the birth of the National Catechetical Office. Established even before the Episcopal Conference took shape, it was an indispensable instrument for catechetical renewal after the Second Vatican Council. This anniversary is a valuable occasion for remembering, giving thanks for the gifts received and renewing the spirit of proclamation. To this end, I would like to share three points that I hope will help you in your work over the next few years.

The first: catechesis and *kerygma*. Catechesis is the echo of the Word of God. In the transmission of the faith, Scripture - as the Basic Document recalls - is "the Book; not a subsidy, even if it were the first" (CEI, *Il rinnovamento della catechesi*, n. 107). Catechesis is therefore the "long wave" of the Word of God, to transmit the joy of the Gospel in life. Thanks to the narration of catechesis, Sacred Scripture becomes the "environment" in which we feel part of the same salvation history, encountering the first witnesses of faith. Catechesis is taking others by the hand and accompanying them in this history. It inspires up a journey, in which each person finds his or her own rhythm, because Christian life does not even out or standardise, but rather enhances the uniqueness of each child of God. Catechesis is also a mystagogical journey, which advances in constant dialogue with the liturgy, an environment in which symbols shine forth that, without imposing themselves, speak

to life and mark it with the imprint of grace.

The heart of the mystery is the *kerygma*, and the *kerygma* is a person: Jesus Christ. Catechesis is a special space for fostering a personal encounter with Him. Therefore it must be interwoven with personal relationships. There is no true catechesis without the testimony of men and women in flesh and blood. Who among us does not remember at least one of his catechists? I do: I remember the nun who prepared me for my First Communion and was so good to me. They are the first protagonists of catechesis, messengers of the Gospel, often lay people, who commit themselves with generosity to share the beauty of having met Jesus. "Who are catechists? They are people who keep the memory of God alive; they keep it alive in themselves" - they are "memorialists" of salvation history - "and they are able to revive it in others. A catechist is a Christian who puts this remembrance at the service of proclamation, not to seem important, not to talk about himself or herself, but to talk about God, about His love and fidelity" (*Homily for the "Day for Catechists" during the Year of Faith*, 29 September 2013).

In order to do this, it is good to remember that "the *kerygma* calls for stressing those elements which are most needed today: it has to express God's saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom, as Jesus did; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical. All this demands on the part of the evangeliser certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 165). Jesus had this. It is the entire geography of humanity that the *kerygma*, the infallible compass of faith, helps to explore.

And on this point - the catechist - I return to something that should also be said to parents, to grandparents: the faith should be transmitted "in dialect". A catechist who does not know how to explain in the "dialect" of young people, of children, of those who... But by dialect I am not referring to linguistic ones, in which Italy is so rich, no; I refer to the dialect of closeness, to the dialect that can be understood, to the dialect of intimacy. I am so touched by that passage from Maccabees, of the seven brothers (2 *Mac* 7). On two or three occasions it says that the mother supported them by speaking to them in dialect ["in the language of the fathers"]. It is important: the true faith must be transmitted in dialect. Catechists must learn to transmit it in dialect, that is, that language that comes from the heart, that is inherent, that is the most familiar, the closest to everyone. If there is no dialect, the faith is not passed on fully or well.

The second point: catechesis and the future. Last year was the 50th anniversary of the document *Il rinnovamento della catechesi* ("The renewal of catechesis"), with which the Italian Episcopal Conference acknowledged the indications of the Council. In this regard, I reiterate the words of Saint Paul VI, addressed to the first General Assembly of the CEI after Vatican II: "We must look to the Council with gratitude to God and with confidence for the future of the Church; it will be the great catechism of the new times" (23 June 1966). Returning to the theme, on the occasion of the first International Catechetical Congress, he added: "It is a task that is constantly being reborn and constantly renewed for catechesis to understand these problems that arise from the heart of man, in order to lead them back to their hidden source: the gift of love that creates and saves" (25 September 1971). Therefore, catechesis inspired by the Council is continually listening to the heart of man, always with an attentive ear, always seeking to renew itself.

This is magisterium: the Council is the magisterium of the Church. Either you are with the Church and therefore you follow the Council, and if you do not follow the Council or you interpret it in your own way, as you wish, you are not with the Church. We must be demanding and strict on this point. The Council should not be negotiated in order to have more of these... No, the Council is as it is. And this problem that we are experiencing, of selectivity with respect to the Council, has been repeated throughout history with other Councils. It makes me think of a group of bishops who, after Vatican I, left, a group of lay people, groups, to continue the "true doctrine" that was not that of Vatican I: "We are the true Catholics". Today they ordain women. The strictest attitude, to guard the faith without the Magisterium of the Church, leads you to ruin. Please, no concessions to those who try to present a catechesis that does not agree with the Magisterium of the Church.

Just as in the post-Council period the Italian Church was ready and able to embrace the signs and sensibilities of the times, so too today she is called to offer a renewed catechesis that inspires every area of pastoral care: charity, liturgy, family, culture, social life, economics... From the root of the Word of God, through the trunk of pastoral wisdom, fruitful approaches to the various aspects of life flourish. Catechesis is thus an extraordinary adventure: as the “vanguard of the Church” it has the task of reading the signs of the times and accepting present and future challenges. We must not be afraid to speak the language of the women and men of today. To speak a language that is outside the Church, yes, we must be afraid of that. [But] we must not be afraid to speak the language of the people. We must not be afraid to listen to their questions, whatever they may be, to their unresolved issues, to listen to their frailties, their uncertainties: let us not be afraid of that. We must not be afraid to develop new tools: in the seventies the Catechism of the Italian Church was original and appreciated; today's times also require intelligence and courage to develop updated tools, which transmit to people today the richness and joy of the *kerygma*, and the richness and joy of belonging to the Church.

Third point: catechesis and community. In this year marked by the isolation and sense of loneliness caused by the pandemic, we have often reflected on the sense of belonging that underlies a community. The virus has burrowed into the living fabric of our territories, especially our existential ones, feeding fears, suspicions, mistrust and uncertainty. It has undermined established practices and habits and thus provokes us to rethink our community. We have realised, in fact, that we cannot get by alone, and that the only way to come out of crises better is to come out of them together - no one is saved alone, we come out of it together - re-embracing with more conviction the community in which we live. Because the community is not an agglomeration of individuals, but the family into which we integrate, the place where we take care of each other, the young of the elderly and the elderly of the young, we of today of those who will come tomorrow. It is only by rediscovering a sense of community that each person will be able to find his or her dignity to the full.

Catechesis and proclamation cannot but place this community dimension at the centre. This is not the time for elitist strategies. The great community: what is the great community? The holy faithful people of God. It is not possible to advance outside the holy faithful people of God, who - as the Council says - are infallible *in credendo*. Always with the holy people of God. Instead, seeking elitist affiliations distances you from the people of God, perhaps with sophisticated formulas, but you lose that belonging to the Church, which is the holy faithful people of God.

This is the time to be the artisans of open communities that know how to value the talents of each person. It is a time for free and disinterested missionary communities, which do not seek prominence and advantage, but rather walk the paths of the people of our time, stooping to tend to those on the margins. It is a time for communities that look disappointed young people in the eye, that welcome strangers and give hope to the disheartened. It is a time for communities that fearlessly engage in dialogue with those with different ideas. It is a time for communities that, like the Good Samaritan, know how to approach those wounded by life, to bind their wounds with compassion. Do not forget this word: *compassion*. How many times in the Gospel does it say of Jesus: “And he had compassion”, “he had compassion”? As I said at the ecclesial conference in Florence, I want a Church “ever closer to the abandoned, the forgotten, the imperfect. I would like a glad Church with a mother's face, that understands, accompanies, caresses”. What I referred to then as Christian humanism also applies to catechesis: it “radically affirms the dignity of every person as a Child of God, it establishes among all human beings a fundamental fraternity, teaches one to understand work, to inhabit creation as a common home, to furnish reasons for optimism and humour, even in the middle of a life many times more difficult” (*Address at the Fifth National Conference of the Italian Church*, Florence, 10 November 2015).

I mentioned the Florence Convention. Five years on, the Italian Church must return to the Florence Convention, and must begin a national Synod process, community by community, diocese by diocese: this process too will be a form of catechesis. In the Florence Convention there is precisely the intuition of the road to be taken in this Synod. Now, set out on it again: it is time. And start walking.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for what you are doing. I invite you to continue to pray and to think creatively about a catechesis centred on the *kerygma*, which looks to the future of our communities, so that they may be ever more rooted in the Gospel, as fraternal and inclusive communities. I bless you, I accompany you. And you, please, pray for me, I need it. Thank you!

