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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Cyprus and Greece – Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious, Seminarians and Catechists in the Cathedral of Saint Dionysius in Athens

Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious, Seminarians and Catechists in the Cathedral of Saint Dionysius in Athens

This afternoon, the Holy Father Francis met with bishops, priests, men and women religious, seminarians and catechists in the Cathedral of Saint Dionysius in Athens.

Upon arrival the Pope was received at the main entrance of the Cathedral by Archbishop Theodoros Kontidis, S.J., of Athens, and by the parish priest who brought him the cross and the holy water. They then entered the Cathedral together. After the opening hymn, Archbishop Sevastianos Rossolatos, emeritus of Athens and president of the Episcopal Conference of Greece, addressed a welcome greeting to the Holy Father. Following the testimonies of a religious sister of the Institute of the Incarnate Word and a layperson, Pope Francis delivered his address.

After the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, introduced by a catechist, and the final blessing, a gift was offered to the Pope. After the final hymn, the Holy Father greeted the bishops individually and then posed with them for a group photo. Following the meeting with the Catholic community he returned by car to the apostolic nunciature, where he met privately with members of the Society of Jesus.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Priests, Religious and Seminarians

Dear Sisters and Brothers, *kalispera sas!* (Good evening!)

I thank you from the heart for your warm welcome and for the kind words of greeting addressed to me by Archbishop Rossolatos. Thank you, Sister, for your own witness: it is important that men and women religious carry out their service in this spirit, with an impassioned love that becomes a gift for the communities to which they are sent. Thanks! Thank you too, Rokos, for your fine testimony of faith lived in the family, in daily life, together with children who, like so many young people, at a certain point begin to ask, to wonder, and become a bit critical about certain things. But that too is not bad, for it helps us as a Church to reflect and to change.

I am happy to meet you in a land that is a gift, a patrimony of mankind, on which the foundations of the West have been built. All of us are sons and daughters of your country, and in her debt: without the poetry, literature, philosophy and art that developed here, we would not be familiar with many aspects of human existence, or be able to respond to many profound questions regarding life, love, suffering and also death.

At the dawn of Christianity, this rich heritage gave rise to an inculturation of the faith, carried out, as if in a “laboratory”, thanks to the wisdom of many of our Fathers in the faith, who by their holiness of life and their writings remain a beacon of light for believers in every age. But if we ask ourselves who inaugurated this encounter between early Christianity and Greek culture, we think immediately of the Apostle Paul. He began this work of synthesizing those two worlds. He did it in this very place, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles. He came to Athens, began to preach in the city squares and was brought by some philosophers to the Areopagus (cf. *Acts* 17:16-34), the assembly of elders and learned men whose task was to pass judgement on matters of public interest. Let us stop and reflect on this episode. We can be guided in our journey as Church by two attitudes demonstrated by the Apostle Paul that can prove helpful for our contemporary efforts to *inculturate the faith*.

The first attitude is *confident trust*. As Paul preached, some philosophers began to wonder what this “charlatan” was trying to say (v. 18). They called him a charlatan: one who makes things up, taking advantage of the good faith of his listeners. So they brought him to the Areopagus. We should not imagine that they were simply offering him a platform. On the contrary, they brought him there to interrogate him: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean” (vv. 19-20). In a word, Paul was being put to the test.

This part of Paul’s mission in Greece can teach us an important lesson today. The Apostle was hard pressed. Shortly before, in Thessalonica he had been prevented from preaching; due to the turmoil stirred up by his opponents, he had to flee the city at night. Now, upon arriving in Athens, he had been taken for a charlatan and brought to the Areopagus as an unwelcome guest. This was not a moment of triumph for Paul. He was carrying out his mission in a difficult situation. Perhaps, many times along the way, we too feel weary and even frustrated at being a small community, a Church with few resources operating in a climate that is not always favourable. Think about Paul in Athens. He was alone, in the minority, unwelcome and with little chance of success. But he did not allow himself to be overcome by discouragement. He did not give up on his mission. Nor did he yield to the temptation to complain. This is very important: beware of complaining. That is the attitude of a true apostle: to go forward with confidence, preferring the uncertainty of unexpected situations to the force of habit and repetition. Paul had that courage. Where does it come from? From confident trust in God. His was the courage born of trust in God, who always loves to accomplish great things through our lowliness.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us have that same confident trust, for being a small Church makes us an eloquent sign of the Gospel, of the God proclaimed by Jesus who chooses the poor and the lowly, who changes history by the simple acts of ordinary people. As Church, we are not called to have the spirit of conquest and victory, impressive numbers or worldly grandeur. All this is dangerous. It can tempt us to triumphalism. We are asked to take our inspiration from the mustard seed, which appears insignificant, but grows slowly and quietly. “It is the smallest of all seeds” – Jesus tells us – “but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree” (*Mt* 13:32). We are asked to be yeast, which rises patiently and silently, hidden within the dough of the world, thanks to the constant work of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Mt* 13:33). The secret of the Kingdom of God is in the little things, often quiet and unseen. The Apostle Paul, whose very name means “little”, lived in confident trust,

because he welcomed those words of the Gospel into his heart and made them a lesson for the faithful of Corinth: “the weakness of God is stronger than men”; “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor1:25, 27).

So, dear friends, I would tell you this: consider your smallness a blessing and accept it willingly. It disposes you to trust in God and in God alone. Being a minority – and do not forget that the Church throughout the world is a minority – does not mean being insignificant, but closer to the path loved by the Lord, which is that of littleness: of *kenosis*, of abasement, of meekness, of the *synkatábasis* of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus came down even to becoming hidden in the weakness of our humanity and the wounds of our flesh. He saved us by serving us. As Paul tells us, “He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (*Phil 2:7*). How often we can be obsessed with external appearances and visibility, yet “the Kingdom of God does not come with signs that can be observed” (*Lk 17:20*). It comes in a hidden, slow way like the rain does on the ground. Let us help one another to renew our trust in God’s work, and not to lose the enthusiasm of service. Take heart, persevere on this way of humility and of smallness!

I would now like to highlight a second attitude shown by Paul before the Areopagus, and that is *acceptance*, the interior disposition essential for evangelization. An attitude of acceptance does not try to occupy the space and life of others, but to sow the good news in the soil of their lives; it learns to recognize and appreciate the seeds that God already planted in their hearts before we came on the scene. Let us remember that God always precedes us, God always sows before we do. Evangelizing is not about filling an empty container; it is ultimately about bringing to light what God has already begun to accomplish. And this was the remarkable pedagogy that the Apostle adopted with the Athenians. He did not tell them: “You have it all wrong”, or “Now I will teach you the truth”. Instead, he began by accepting their religious spirit: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (*Acts 17:22-23*). He draws from the rich patrimony of the Athenians. The Apostle dignified his hearers and welcomed their religiosity. Even though the streets of Athens were full of idols, which had made him “deeply distressed” (v. 16), Paul acknowledged the desire for God hidden in the hearts of those people, and wanted gently to share with them the amazing gift of faith. He did not impose; he proposed. His “style” was never based on proselytizing, but on the meekness of Jesus. This was possible because Paul had a spiritual outlook on reality. He believed that the Holy Spirit works in the human heart above and beyond religious labels. We heard this in the witness given by Rokos. At a certain point, children fall away from religious practice, yet the Holy Spirit continues to do his work, and so they believe in unity, in fraternity with others. The Holy Spirit always does more than what we can see from the outside. Let us not forget this. In every age, the attitude of the apostle begins with accepting others. For “grace presupposes culture, and the gift of God is embodied in the culture of those who receive it” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 115). There is no abstract grace flying above our heads; grace is always incarnated in a culture.

Reflecting on Paul’s visit to the Areopagus, Pope Benedict XVI noted that we must have at heart those who are agnostics or atheists, but take care that, when we speak of a new evangelization, they not be put off. “They do not want to see themselves as a target of the mission, nor do they want to give up their freedom of thought and will” (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2009). Today we too are asked to cultivate an attitude of welcome, a style of hospitality, a heart desirous of creating communion amid human, cultural or religious differences. The challenge is to develop a passion for the whole, which can lead us – Catholics, Orthodox, brothers and sisters of other creeds, and also our agnostic brothers and sisters, everyone – to listen to one another, to dream and work together, to cultivate the “mystique” of fraternity (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 87). Past hurts remain on the path towards such a welcoming dialogue, but let us courageously embrace today’s challenge!

Dear brothers and sisters, here on Greek soil, Saint Paul showed his serene trust in God and this made him open and accepting towards the Areopagites who were suspicious of him. In this spirit, Paul proclaimed the God unknown to his hearers. He thus was able to present the face of a God, who in Jesus Christ sowed in the heart of the world the seed of resurrection, the universal right to hope, which is a human right – the right to hope. When Paul proclaimed this good news, most of them laughed at him and went their way. However, “some joined him and became believers: among these also Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris and others” (*Acts 17:34*). The majority left; a small remnant joined Paul, including Dionysius, after whom this

Cathedral is named. A small remnant, yet that is how God weaves the threads of history, from those days until our own. It is my fervent desire that you continue the work in your historic “laboratory” of faith, and do it with the help of these two ingredients, confident trust and acceptance, in order to savour the Gospel as an experience of joy and also as an experience of fraternity. I am close to you in affection and prayer. And I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. [In Greek: God bless you!].
