



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 220915a

Thursday 15.09.2022

Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Kazakhstan – Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated persons, Seminarians and Pastoral Workers at the Cathedral Meeting with Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated persons, Seminarians and Pastoral Workers at the Cathedral of Our Mother of Perpetual Help

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass privately, and after the private meeting with members of the Society of Jesus present in Kazakhstan, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to the Cathedral of Our Mother of Perpetual Help – seat of the archdiocese of Mary Most Holy in Astana – where at 10.30 (6.30 in Rome) he met with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians and pastoral workers.

On arrival he was welcomed in front of the parish church by three children accompanied by a religious sister, who gave him a floral tribute, while a family performed traditional music.

After the welcome greeting from Archbishop Tomash Bernard Peta, metropolitan of the archdiocese of Mary Most Holy in Astana, the auxiliary bishop, and the parish priest, the latter brought the cross and the holy water for aspersion. They proceeded together along the central nave up to the presbytery, while the choir sang a hymn.

During the liturgical greeting and address of homage, the President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Central Asia, Bishop José Luis Mumbiela Sierra of the diocese of the Most Holy Trinity in Almaty, a priest, a religious sister, a member of the faithful of the Greek-Catholic Church, and a pastoral worker gave their testimonies. The Pope then delivered his address.

At the end, after the prayer of entrustment to Mary Queen of Peace, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the final blessing, and before greeting the bishops individually and posing with them for the group photograph, the Holy Father blessed the icon of Mary Mother of the Great Steppe. He then returned by car to the apostolic nunciature where he lunched in private.

The following is Pope Francis' address to the bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians and pastoral workers:

Address of the Holy Father Dear brother bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers, good morning!

I am pleased to be with you, to greet the Bishops' Conference of Central Asia and to encounter a Church of so many different faces, histories and traditions, all united by our one faith in Christ Jesus. I thank Bishop Mumbiela Sierra for his kind words of greeting, in which he stated that "most of us are foreigners". That is true, since you come from various places and countries. Yet the beauty of the Church comes from the fact that we are one family, in which no one is a stranger. Let me repeat: in the Church, no one is a stranger! We are the one holy People of God, enriched by a multitude of peoples! The strength of this priestly and holy people lies precisely in its ability to draw richness from this diversity, by sharing with one another who we are and what we have. Indeed, our "littleness" is magnified when it is shared.

The biblical passage we just heard makes this very clear. Saint Paul tells us that the mystery of God has been revealed to all peoples. Not merely to the chosen people, or to a religious elite, but to everyone. Indeed, as the Apostle explains, each of us can now approach God, for all peoples "have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel" (*Eph 3:6*).

I would like to emphasize two words used by Paul: *heirs* and *promise*. On the one hand, each particular Church is *heir* to a prior history. It is always born of an initial proclamation of the Gospel, of a prior event, of the apostles and evangelizers who established it upon the living word of Jesus. On the other hand, every Church is also the community of those who have seen God's *promise* fulfilled in Jesus and who, as children of the resurrection, live in the hope of future fulfilment. We are destined for the promised glory that even now suffuses our journey with hope and expectation. *Heirs* and *promise*. The past we have inherited is our *memory*, and the promise of the Gospel is the *future* of God, who comes to meet us. This is what I would like to reflect on together with you: a Church that journeys through history between *memory* and *future*.

First, *memory*. If in this vast, multicultural and multi-religious country, we today see vibrant Christian communities and a religious sense coursing through the lives of its people, this is due above all to the rich history that preceded you. I think of the spread of Christianity in Central Asia, which had already begun in the first centuries, of the many evangelizers and missionaries who spent their lives spreading the light of the Gospel, founding communities, shrines, monasteries and places of worship. We need to honour and preserve this Christian and ecumenical heritage, this passing on of the faith, that took place thanks to many ordinary people, to so many grandparents, fathers and mothers. On our own spiritual and ecclesial journey, we should always remember those who first proclaimed the faith to us. Indeed, this act of remembrance inspires us to contemplate the wonders that God has worked in history, even amid life's hardships and our own personal and communal limitations.

Yet we need to be attentive. It is not about looking back with nostalgia, getting stuck in the past and letting ourselves be paralyzed and immobile. When we do that, we are tempted to take a step backwards. Instead, when Christians look back and remember the past, they marvel all the more at the mystery of God, their hearts filled with praise and gratitude for what the Lord has accomplished. Indeed, grateful hearts overflowing with praise harbour no regrets, but welcome each day as a grace. They are eager to set out, to move forwards, to spread the word about Jesus, like the women and the disciples of Emmaus on Easter day!

The living and awe-inspiring memory of Jesus, that we draw upon above all in the Eucharist, is the power of a love that impels us. It is our treasure. Without memory, we lack wonder. When we lose that living memory, our faith, our devotions and our pastoral activities risk dying slowly, disappearing like a flash in the pan, which burns bright but then quickly fades. When we lose our memory, joy disappears. Our gratitude to God and to our brothers and sisters also fades, because we fall into the temptation of thinking that everything depends on us. Father Ruslan reminded us of something important: that being a priest is already something great, because in the priestly life we realize that what takes place is not our work, but comes as a gift from God. And Sister Clara, speaking about her vocation, first of all wanted to thank those who shared the Gospel with her. Thank you for

these testimonies, which invite us to remember with gratitude what we have inherited.

If we look more closely at this inheritance, what do we see? That the faith was not passed down from generation to generation as a set of ideas to be understood and followed, as a fixed and timeless code. No, our faith was passed on *through life*, through witnesses who shed the light of the Gospel on different situations in order to illumine and purify them, and to spread the consoling warmth of Jesus, the joy of his saving love and the hope of his promise. By remembering, then, we learn that faith grows through witness. Everything else comes later. This is a call that is addressed to everyone. I want to repeat this: to everyone, to the lay faithful, bishops, priests, deacons, and the consecrated men and women working in various ways in the pastoral life of our communities. May we never grow weary of bearing witness to the very heart of salvation, to the newness of Jesus, to the newness that *is* Jesus! Faith is not a lovely exhibition of artefacts from a distant past or a museum, but an ever-present event, an encounter with Christ that takes place in the here and now of our lives. So we cannot pass it on by simply repeating the same old things, but by communicating the newness of the Gospel. In this way, faith remains alive and has a future. As I like to say, faith is transmitted through the “mother tongue”.

We thus come to the second word: *future*. Remembering the past does not make us close in on ourselves; it opens us up to the promise of the Gospel. Jesus assured us that he would remain with us always, so his is not merely a promise about the future. We are called *today* to embrace the renewal that the risen Jesus is bringing about in our lives. Despite our weaknesses, he never tires of being with us, of building together with us the future of his and our Church.

Naturally, in facing the many challenges to the faith – I think especially of those involving the participation of young people in the life of the Church, the problems and difficulties of life, and the limited numbers of those practising their faith in a vast country like this –, we may well feel “little” and inadequate. Yet, if we see things with the hope-filled gaze of Jesus, we make a surprising discovery: the Gospel says that being “*little*”, *poor in spirit, is a blessing*, a beatitude, and indeed the first of the beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:3). For once we acknowledge our littleness, we can humbly hand ourselves over to the power of God, who teaches us not to base our ecclesial activity on our own abilities. This is a grace! I repeat: there is a hidden grace in being a small Church, a little flock, for instead of showing off our strengths, our numbers, our structures and other things that are humanly important, we can let ourselves be guided by the Lord and humbly draw close to others. Rich in nothing and poor in everything, let us walk with simplicity alongside our sisters and brothers, bringing the joy of the Gospel into the situations of everyday life. Like the leaven in the dough and like the smallest of seeds sown in the earth (cf. *Mt* 13:31-33), may we immerse ourselves in the joyful and sorrowful events of the society in which we live, in order to serve it from within.

Being little also reminds us that *we are not self-sufficient*: we need God. We also need others, *all* others: our Christian sisters and brothers of other confessions, those who hold other religious beliefs than our own, all men and women of good will. May we realize, in a spirit of humility, that only together, in dialogue and mutual acceptance, can we truly achieve something good for the benefit of all. That is the special task of the Church in this country: not to be a group bogged down in the same old way of doing things, or withdrawn into its shell since it feels small, but a community open to God’s future, afire with his Spirit. A community that is alive, filled with hope, open to the newness of the Spirit and to the signs of the times, inspired by the Gospel’s example of the little seed that grows and bears fruit in humble and creative love. For in this way, the promise of life and blessing that God the Father pours out on us through Jesus not only grows in our lives, but also comes to fulfilment in the lives of others.

This happens whenever we live in *fraternity* with one another, whenever we care for the poor and those who suffer, whenever we bear witness to justice and truth in our individual and social relationships, rejecting corruption and falsehood. Christian communities, and seminaries in particular, should be “schools of sincerity”, not places of rigidity and formality, but training grounds in truth, openness and sharing. Let us remember that in our communities we are all disciples of the Lord. We are all disciples: each of us is essential, and all of equal dignity. Not just bishops, priests and consecrated persons, but each of the baptized. We have been immersed in the life of Christ and, as Saint Paul reminded us, each is called to inherit and embrace the promise of the Gospel. We must make room for the laity, then, and this is a good thing, lest our communities become rigid or clerical. A synodal Church, journeying towards the future of the Spirit, is a Church that embraces participation

and shared responsibility. A Church that, formed in communion, can go forth to encounter the world. I was struck by a recurring theme in all the testimonies we heard. Kirill, the father of a family, as well as Father Ruslan and the Sisters reminded us that, in the Church, shaped by the Gospel, we learn to pass from selfishness to unconditional love. This means going out of ourselves. Each of us constantly needs to do that. All of us need to nurture the gift we received at our Baptism. That gift inspires us, wherever we are – in our ecclesial meetings, in families, at work, in society – to become *men and women of communion and of peace*, sowing seeds of goodness wherever we go. Openness, joy and sharing are signs of the nascent Church, and of the Church of tomorrow. Let us dream and, with God's grace, work for a Church increasingly filled with the joy of the risen Lord, fearless and uncomplaining, rejecting rigidity, dogmatism and moralizing.

Dear brothers and sisters, may all this come about through the intercession of this country's great witnesses to the faith. Here, I think of Blessed Bukowiński, a priest who spent his life caring for the sick, the outcast and those in need, and paid for fidelity to the Gospel with imprisonment and hard labour. I am told that even before his beatification there were always fresh flowers and a lighted candle on his tomb. This is a confirmation that the People of God can recognize holiness, and a pastor in love with the Gospel. Here, I would say a special word to bishops, priests and seminarians: our mission is not to be administrators of the sacred or enforcers of religious rules, but pastors close to our people, living icons of the compassionate heart of Christ. I would recall too the blessed Greek-Catholic martyrs – Bishop Budka, Father Zaryczyj, and Gertrude Detzel – whose beatification process has now begun. As Miroslava told us, they brought the love of Christ to the world. You are their heirs, so be the promise of a new flowering of sanctity!

Please know that I am close to you. I encourage you to embrace your spiritual inheritance with joy and to bear generous witness to it, so that all whom you meet may realize that there is a promise of hope meant for them as well. I accompany all of you with my prayers. And now, let us commend ourselves in a particular way to the Heart of Mary Most Holy, whom you greatly venerate as Queen of Peace. I have learned of a beautiful sign of her maternal love that took place at a time of hardship when many people were deported and others forced to starve and to freeze. As a tender and caring Mother, she listened to the prayers that her children offered to her. In the midst of a bitterly cold winter, the snow quickly melted to reveal a lake full of fish, which fed many famished people. May Our Lady similarly melt cold hearts, fill our communities with a renewed fraternal warmth, and grant us new hope and enthusiasm for the Gospel! I thank each of you and with great affection I give you my blessing. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.
