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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Kingdom of Bahrain on the occasion of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence” (3 to 6 November 2022) – Private meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Meeting with the Members of the Muslim Council of Elders

Private meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Meeting with the Members of the Muslim Council of Elders at the Mosque of the *Sakhir Royal Palace*

This afternoon, shortly before 15.30 (13.30 in Rome), Pope Francis met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomew.

Then, at 16.00 (14.00 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met privately, in a hall in the papal residence, with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Chair of the Muslim Council of Elders. Then, at 16.30 (14.30), they transferred together to the Mosque of the Sakhir Royal Palace for the meeting with the members of the Muslim Council of Elders.

Upon arrival, the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar were welcomed at the entrance to the Mosque by the Chair of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs and the Muslim Council of Elders, and by the Secretary General, Counsellor Mohamed Abdelsalam.

After entry into the Mosque and the greeting to the respective delegations, two brief passages from the Koran and the Book of Genesis were read out. Then, after the introduction by the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Elders, the speeches from the representative of the Vatican delegation, His Eminence Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, M.C.C.J., prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, and the representative of the Muslim Council of Elders, Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the Pope delivered his address.

At the end of the meeting, after greeting the members of the Muslim Council of Elders, the Holy Father transferred by car to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia for the Ecumenical Meeting and the Prayer for Peace.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during the course of the meeting with the members of

the Muslim Council of Elders:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brother, Dr Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,

Dear Members of the Muslim Council of Elders,

Dear Friends,

As-salamu alaikum!

I offer you cordial greetings and I express my prayerful hope that the peace of the Most High may descend upon each of you: upon you, who desire to foster reconciliation in order to avoid divisions and conflicts in Muslim communities; upon you, who see in extremism a danger that corrodes genuine religion; upon you, who are committed to dispelling erroneous interpretations that through violence misconstrue, exploit and do a disservice to religious belief. May peace come down and remain upon you: upon you, who wish to spread peace by instilling within people's hearts the values of respect, tolerance and moderation; upon you, who seek to encourage friendly relations, mutual respect and trust with those who, like myself, are followers of a different religious tradition; upon you, brothers and sisters, who strive to provide young people with a moral and intellectual education that opposes all forms of hatred and intolerance. *As-salamu alaikum!*

God is the source of peace. May he enable us to be channels of his peace everywhere! Here, in your presence, I wish to state once more that the God of peace never brings about war, never incites hatred, never supports violence. We, who believe in him, are called to promote peace with tools of peace, such as encounter, patient negotiations and dialogue, which is the oxygen of peaceful coexistence. Among your objectives is the spread of a culture of peace based on justice. I want to tell you that this is indeed the path, the only path, to take, inasmuch as peace "is the effect of righteousness" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). Peace is born of fraternity; it grows through the struggle against injustice and inequality; it is built by holding out a hand to others" (*Address at the Reading of the Final Declaration and Conclusion of the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions*, 15 September 2022). Peace cannot simply be proclaimed; it must be helped to take root. And this is possible by eliminating the forms of inequality and discrimination that give rise to instability and hostility.

I thank you for your efforts in this regard, for the welcome you have offered me, and for the words you have spoken. I have come among you as a believer in God, as a brother and as a pilgrim of peace. I have come among you so that we can journey together, in the spirit of Francis of Assisi, who liked to say: "As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts" (*The Legend of Saint Francis by the Three Companions*, XIV, 58: FF 1469). I am impressed to see how in these lands it is customary, in welcoming guests, not only to shake their hand, but also to place your own hand on your heart as a sign of affection. As if to say: "You do not remain distant from me, you enter into my heart, into my life". I also place my hand on my heart with respect and affection, as I look out at each of you and bless the Most High for making it possible for us to encounter one another.

I believe that increasingly we need to encounter one another, to get to know and to esteem one another, to put reality ahead of ideas and people ahead of opinions, openness to heaven ahead of differences on earth. We need to put a future of fraternity ahead of a past of antagonism, overcoming historical prejudices and misunderstandings in the name of the One who is the source of peace. Indeed, how can believers of different religions and cultures live side-by-side, accept and esteem one another if we remain distant and detached? Let us be guided by the saying of Imam Ali: "People are of two types: they are either brothers and sisters in religion or fellow men and women in humanity", and so feel called to care for all those whom the divine plan has placed alongside us in the world. Let us encourage one another "to forget the past and sincerely achieve mutual

understanding, and, for the benefit of all, to preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (*Nostra Aetate*, 3). These are duties incumbent upon us as religious leaders: in a world that is increasingly wounded and divided, that beneath the surface of globalization senses anxiety and fear, the great religious traditions must be the heart that unites the members of the body, the soul that gives hope and life to its highest aspirations.

During these days, I have spoken about the power of life, which survives in the driest deserts by drawing upon the waters of encounter and peaceful coexistence. Yesterday I did so by referring to the remarkable “Tree of Life” found here in Bahrain. In the reading from the Bible that we have just heard, the tree of life is placed in the centre of the original garden, at the heart of God’s magnificent plan for humanity, a harmonious design meant to embrace all creation. Human beings, however, turned their back on the Creator and the order he established, and that was the beginning of the problems and imbalances that, according to the biblical account, followed in quick succession. Quarrels and murder between brothers (cf. *Gen 4*); environmental upheavals and disasters (cf. *Gen 6-9*), pride and social conflict (cf. *Gen 11*)... In a word, a flood of evil and death burst forth from the human heart, from the malign spark unleashed by the evil that crouches at the door of our hearts (cf. *Gen 4:7*), to destroy the harmonious garden of the world. All this evil is rooted in the rejection of God and of our brothers and sisters, in our losing sight of the Author of life and no longer seeing ourselves as our brothers’ keepers. As a result, the two questions we heard remain ever valid. Whatever religious tradition a person may profess, those two questions remain a challenge for every life and for every age: “Where are you?” (*Gen 3:9*); “Where is your brother?” (*Gen 4:9*).

Dear friends, brothers in Abraham and believers in the one God: social, international, economic and individual evils, as well as the dramatic environmental crisis of our time on which we have reflected here today, ultimately derive from estrangement from God and our neighbour. Ours, then, is a unique and inescapable duty: to help humanity to rediscover the forgotten sources of life, to lead men and women to drink from the wellsprings of ancient wisdom, and to bring the faithful closer to worship of the God of heaven and closer to our brothers and sisters for whom he created the earth.

And how can we do this? In essence, there are two means: *prayer and fraternity*. These are our weapons, modest but effective. We must not let ourselves be tempted by other means, by shortcuts unworthy of the Most High, whose name of Peace is dishonoured by those who put their trust in power and nurture violence, war and the arms trade, the “commerce of death” that, through ever increasing outlays, is turning our common home into one great arsenal. How many obscure intrigues and disturbing inconsistencies lie behind all this! Let us think, for example, of all those people forced to migrate from their own lands due to conflicts subsidized by the purchase of outdated weapons at affordable prices, only to be then identified and turned away at other borders through increasingly sophisticated military equipment. In this way, their hope is killed twice! Amid these tragic scenarios, while the world pursues the illusions of strength, power and money, we are called to proclaim, with the wisdom of our elders and fathers, that God and neighbour come before all else, that transcendence and fraternity alone will save us. It is up to us to uncover these wellsprings of life; otherwise, the desert of humanity will be increasingly arid and deadly. Above all, it is up to us to bear witness, more by our deeds than merely by our words, that we believe in this, in these two truths. Our responsibility before God and before humanity is great. We must be exemplary models of what we preach, not only in our communities and in our homes – for this is no longer enough – but also before a world now unified and globalized. We who are descended from Abraham, the father of peoples in faith, cannot be concerned merely with those who are “our own” but, as we grow more and more united, we must speak to the entire human community, to all who dwell on this earth.

All men and women, if only in the depths of their heart, ask the same great questions. Who does it mean to be human? Why is there suffering, evil, death and injustice? What awaits us after this life? For many people, immersed in a world of practical materialism and paralyzing consumerism, these questions lie dormant. For others, they are suppressed by the dehumanizing scourges of hunger and poverty. Let us look at the hunger and poverty of today. Among the reasons for this forgetfulness of the things that really matter, we should include our own negligence, the scandal of our being caught up in other things and not in proclaiming the God who gives peace to life and life-giving peace to men and women. Brothers and sisters, let us support one another in this regard; let us follow up on our meeting today; let us journey together! We will be blessed by the Most High and by the smallest and vulnerable creatures for whom he has a preferential love: the poor, children and the young,

who after so many dark nights await the rising of a dawn of light and peace. Thank you.
