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Audience with a delegation of the Afghan community in Italy

This morning, before the General Audience, the Holy Father Francis received in audience a delegation of the Afghan community in Italy.

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

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends,

I am pleased to meet you who represent the Afghan Community Association in Italy.

In recent decades, Afghanistan has had a complicated and dramatic history, marked by a succession of wars and blood-stained conflicts, which have made it very difficult for people to lead peaceful, free and secure lives.

Instability, warfare with all its destruction and death, internal divisions and the barriers to respecting certain fundamental rights have pushed many to take the path of exile. I have met with a number of families from Afghanistan who have come here to Rome.

Another important characteristic of Afghan, and indeed of Pakistani society must also be remembered, namely that they are made up of many peoples, each proud of their culture, traditions and unique way of life. This clear diversity, instead of being an opportunity for promoting a basic common denominator for protecting the characteristics and rights of each group, is sometimes used as a reason for discrimination and exclusion, if not outright persecution. This seems to be a tragedy, indeed you have lived through a tragic period with so many

wars.

All of this takes on an even greater significance in the border area with Pakistan, where the intertwining of ethnic groups and the extremely “porous” borders lead to a complex situation where it is very difficult to ensure effectively the concrete adoption and application of legislation for all. In such contexts, processes can end up being triggered in which those parties that are or feel themselves to be stronger tend to go beyond the actual dictates of the law and take advantage of minorities, shielding themselves with an alleged right of force rather than relying on the force of law.

The religious factor, by its very nature, should help soften the harshness of contrasts and create space for everyone to be granted full citizenship rights on an equal footing and without discrimination. Yet oftentimes religion is manipulated and instrumentalized, and ends up being used for contrary ends. In such cases, religion becomes a factor of confrontation and hatred, which can lead to violent acts. And you have often seen this yourselves. I too have seen these difficult moments reported by the news; so much difficulty and pain!

It is imperative, then, that everyone accept the principle that one cannot invoke God’s name to foment contempt, hatred and violence towards others. Thus, I encourage you to continue in your noble endeavour to promote religious harmony and to strive to overcome misunderstandings between different religions in order to build paths of trusting dialogue and peace. This is no easy journey, which sometimes suffers setbacks; but, if you truly wish to do good for the community and foster peace, it is the only possible path and needs to be pursued with courage and perseverance. I remember when I was in the Central African Republic, visiting the Catholic community. I also went to visit the Islamic community, and prayed in their mosque. This included a meeting with the leaders, and the mosque was just in front of us, so I asked, “May I go and pray there?” They were not expecting it. They replied, “yes”, so I took off my shoes and went to pray there. Then the head of the community joined me in the Popemobile and we went to visit all the communities, Islamic, Protestant and Catholic. This is what brings unity, it unites us so much.

In this regard, I would like to recall what the Grand Iman of Al-Azhar and I stated in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019, namely that “religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood. These tragic realities are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings. They result from a political manipulation of religions and from interpretations made by religious groups who... have taken advantage of the power of religious sentiment in the hearts of men and women in order to make them act in a way that has nothing to do with the truth of religion”. We therefore asked everyone to “stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression”. Moreover, we did so precisely because of our faith in God, who created men and woman to live as brothers and sisters and “does not want His name to be used to terrorize people”.

What has been said about the role of religion can also be applied analogously to ethnic-linguistic-cultural differences, for in order to manage them well, it is equally necessary to adopt a “culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard” (*ibid.*).

Dear brothers, it is my fervent hope that these standards will become a common heritage and so influence people’s thinking and behaviour, so that the principles are not only appreciated and shared in an abstract way, but concretely and effectively applied. If this happens, the discrimination against the Pashtun ethnic group in Pakistan, which your Association has not failed to point out, will also come to an end. Likewise, a new era can begin, in which the power of law, compassion – this word, “compassion”, is key! – and cooperation in mutual respect will give rise to a more just and humane civilization. I have seen in some countries in Africa, for example, where there are two important religions – Islam and Catholicism – how, at Christmas time, Muslims go to greet Christians and bring lambs and other gifts. Then, for the Feast of the Sacrifice, Christians bring Muslims things for the feast. This is genuine fraternity, and it is beautiful. Strive for this.

May the almighty and merciful God assist government leaders and peoples in building a society where all are

accorded full citizenship with equal rights; where everyone can live according to their own customs and culture, within a framework that takes into account the rights of all, without abuses of power or discrimination.

Dear friends, thank you for your visit. I wish you well in your work and I invoke God's blessings upon you and your families. And please pray that God will bless me. Thank you.
