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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 160416a

Saturday 16.04.2016

The Pope in Lesbos: we have come to draw the world's attention to this grave humanitarian crisis

Vatican City, April 2016 – Pope Francis reached the island of Lesbos at 9.20 this morning, and was received upon arrival at the airport of Mytilene by the president of the Greek Council of Ministers, Alexis Tsipras. The Holy Father was welcomed by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, and the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Ieronymos. During the flight, along with all those who accompanied him on his visit to Lesbos – both his entourage and journalists – conveyed to Pope emeritus Benedict XVI his affectionate and cordial wishes on the occasion of his 89th birthday, asking the Lord to continue to bless his valuable service of closeness and prayer for all the Church.

Speaking with journalists on the outward journey, the Holy Father remarked that the visit to Lesbos was different to previous trips. "In apostolic trips, we do many things: we see people, we talk ... we are happy about these encounters. This is a trip marked by sadness; this is important. It is a sad trip. We are going to encounter the greatest human catastrophe since the Second World War. We are going to meet, and we will see, many people who are suffering, who do not know where to go, who have had to flee. And we are also going to a cemetery: the sea. So many people have drowned there. I say this not to be sour, not out of bitterness, but rather so that in your work today you can convey the state of mind in which I make this trip. Thank you for accompanying me".

Following a brief private meeting with the prime minister Tsipras, Pope Francis, Archbishop Jerome and the Patriarch Bartholomew transferred by minibus to the Mòria refugee camp, which accommodates around 2,500 people seeking asylum. The three religious leaders were awaited by 150 minors currently residing in the camp, whom they greeted with great affection before proceeding to the courtyard where refugees are registered. There, in a large tent, the Pope, the Patriarch and the Archbishop personally greeted 250 men and women living in Mòria.

After this encounter, Archbishop Jerome was the first to address those present, expressing his hope that the island of Lesbos be the origin of "a worldwide movement of awareness in order for this current course to be changed by those who hold the fate of nations in their hands, and bring back peace and safety to every home, to every family, and to every citizen. ... We do not need to say many words. Only those who see the eyes of those small children that we met at the refugee camps will be able to recognise, in its entirety, the 'bankruptcy' of humanity and solidarity that Europe has shown these last few years to these, and not only these, people. ... The Church of Greece and myself, personally, mourn the many souls lost in the Aegean. We have already done a

great deal, and we will continue to do so, as much as our abilities allow for us to undertake in handling this refugee crisis. I would like to close this declaration by making one request, a single call, a single provocation: for the agencies of the United Nations to finally, using the great experience that they offer, address this tragic situation that we are living. I hope that we never see children washing up on the shores of the Aegean. I hope to soon see them there, untroubled, enjoying life".

Patriarch Bartholomew, in his discourse, exclaimed that "the Mediterranean Sea should not be a tomb. It is a place of life, a crossroads of cultures and civilisations, a place of exchange and dialogue. In order to rediscover its original vocation, the Mare Nostrum, and more specifically the Aegean Sea, where we gather today, must become a sea of peace. We pray that the conflicts in the Middle East, which lie at the root of the migrant crisis, will quickly cease and that peace will be restored. We pray for all the people of this region. We would particularly like to highlight the dramatic situation of Christians in the Middle East, as well as the other ethnic and religious minorities in the region, who need urgent action if we do not want to see them disappear".

Finally, Pope Francis addressed those present with the following words:

"I have wanted to be with you today. I want to tell you that you are not alone. In these weeks and months, you have endured much suffering in your search for a better life. Many of you felt forced to flee situations of conflict and persecution for the sake, above all, of your children, your little ones. You have made great sacrifices for your families. You know the pain of having left behind everything that is dear to you and – what is perhaps most difficult – not knowing what the future will bring. Many others like you are also in camps or towns, waiting, hoping to build a new life on this continent.

"I have come here with my brothers, Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos, simply to be with you and to hear your stories. We have come to call the attention of the world to this grave humanitarian crisis and to plead for its resolution. As people of faith, we wish to join our voices to speak out on your behalf. We hope that the world will heed these scenes of tragic and indeed desperate need, and respond in a way worthy of our common humanity.

"God created mankind to be one family; when any of our brothers and sisters suffer, we are all affected. We all know from experience how easy it is for some to ignore other people's suffering and even to exploit their vulnerability. But we also know that these crises can bring out the very best in us. You have seen this among yourselves and among the Greek people, who have generously responded to your needs amid their own difficulties. You have also seen it in the many people, especially the young from throughout Europe and the world, who have come to help you. Yes, so much more needs to be done! But let us thank God that in our suffering He never leaves us alone. There is always someone who can reach out and help us.

"This is the message I want to leave with you today: do not lose hope! The greatest gift we can offer one another is love: a merciful look, a readiness to listen and understand, a word of encouragement, a prayer. May you share this gift with one another. We Christians love to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, a foreigner who saw a man in need and immediately stopped to help. For us, it is a story about God's mercy which is meant for everyone, for God is the All-Merciful. It is also a summons to show that same mercy to those in need. May all our brothers and sisters on this continent, like the Good Samaritan, come to your aid in the spirit of fraternity, solidarity and respect for human dignity that has distinguished its long history.

"Dear brothers and sisters, may God bless all of you and, in a special way, your children, the elderly and all those who suffer in body and spirit! I embrace all of you with affection. Upon you, and those who accompany you, I invoke His gifts of strength and peace".
