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Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis in Colombia (6-11 September 2017) – Meeting with bishops in the Cardinal's Palace in Bogotá

At 11.15 this morning, the Holy Father Francis met with the bishops in the Cardinal's Palace in Bogotá.

At the entrance to the hall where around three hundred Colombian bishops were gathered, the Pope was welcomed by the President of the Colombian Episcopal Conference and Archbishop of Villavicencio, H.E. Msgr. Óscar Urbina Ortega.

Then, after the welcome addresses from the Primate of Colombian and Archbishop of Bogotá, Cardinal Rubén Salazar Gómez, and the President of the Colombian Episcopal Conference and Archbishop of Villavicencio, H.E. Msgr. Óscar Urbina Ortega, the Holy Father pronounced the following discourse:

Discourse of the Holy Father

Peace be with you

This was the greeting of the Risen Lord to His little flock after He triumphed over death. Let it be my own greeting to you at the beginning of my visit.

Thank you for your words of welcome. I am pleased that my first steps in this country have brought me to meet you, the Colombian bishops. Through you, I embrace the whole Church in Colombia; I hold all your people in my heart, the heart of the Successor of Peter. I am very grateful for your ministry as bishops, and I ask you to carry it out with renewed generosity. I offer a particular greeting to the retired bishops, and I ask them, by their prayers and their discreet presence, to continue to sustain the Bride of Christ to whom they devoted themselves so generously.

I have come to proclaim Christ, and to undertake a journey of peace and reconciliation in His name. Christ is our peace! He has reconciled us with God and with one another!

I am convinced that Colombia has one remarkable feature: something quite unique: it has never been a goal fully attained, a destiny completely achieved, or a treasure totally possessed. I think of the nation's human riches, its vast natural resources, its culture, its luminous Christian synthesis, the heritage of its faith and the memory of its evangelizers. I think of the irrepressible joy of its people, the unflinching smile of its youth, its characteristic fidelity to the Gospel of Christ and to His Church and, above all, its indomitable courage in resisting threats of death not merely proclaimed but often experienced at first hand. All this recedes like the modest mimosa flower in the garden; hidden, as it were, from those who come here as foreigners bent on domination, while offering itself freely to those who touch its heart with the meekness of a wayfarer. Such is Colombia.

For this reason, I have come to your Church as a wayfarer, a pilgrim. I am your brother, desirous of sharing the risen Christ for whom no wall is impenetrable, no fear insurmountable, no disease, no wound, incurable.

I am not the first Pope to speak to you here in your home. Two of my great predecessors were your guests here. Blessed Paul VI came immediately after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council to encourage the collegial realization of the mystery of the Church in Latin America, as did Saint John Paul II in his memorable Apostolic Visit of '86. The words of both are a lasting resource; the guidelines they set forth, and the marvellous synthesis that they proposed regarding your ministry as bishops, are a legacy to be treasured. They are not outdated words. I wish that everything I say to you may be received in continuity with their teachings.

Guardians and sacrament of the first step

"Let's take the first step". This is the theme of my visit and this is the first thing I would say to all of you. You know very well that God is the Lord of the first step. He constantly goes before us. Sacred Scripture everywhere speaks of God as exiled from Himself for love. So it was when there was only darkness, chaos, and God, going forth from Himself, brought all things into being (cf. *Gen 1:2.4*). So it was when He walked in the Garden and saw the nakedness of His creatures (cf. *Gen 3:8-9*). So it was when, as a pilgrim, He dwelt in the tent of Abraham, leaving him with the promise of an unexpected fertility (cf. *Gen 18:1-10*). So it was when He appeared to Moses herding the goats of his father-in-law and opened new horizons before him (cf. *Ex 3:1-12*). So it was when He refused to turn away from his beloved Jerusalem, even when she prostituted herself in the byways of infidelity (cf. *Ez 16:15*). So it was when he migrated with His glory towards His people exiled in slavery (cf. *Ez 10:18-19*).

Then, in the fullness of time, God chose to reveal to us the first step, the name of this first step. That name is Jesus, and that step is irreversible. It is born of the freedom of a love that precedes all else. For the Son is Himself the living expression of that love. Those who acknowledge and accept him receive the freedom always to take, in him, that first step. They have no fear of getting lost if they step out of themselves, for they have the down payment of the love coming from God's first step, a compass that keeps them from going astray.

Preserve, then, with holy fear and reverence, that first step which God has taken towards yourselves and, through your ministry, towards the people that He has entrusted to your care. Realize that you are a living sacrament of that divine freedom which is unafraid to go forth from itself out of love, that has no fear of being impoverished by surrendering itself and needs no strength other than that of love.

God goes before us. We are only branches, we are not the vine. So do not silence the voice of the One who has called you, or delude yourselves into thinking that the success of the mission entrusted to you depends on your own meagre virtues – your own – or the benevolence of the powers that be. Instead, pray fervently, indeed fervently, when you have so little to give, so that you will be granted something to offer to those who are close to your hearts as pastors. In the life of a bishop, prayer is the vital sap that passes through the vine, without which the branches wither and bear no fruit. So keep wrestling with God, even more so in the night of His absence, until He gives you His blessing (cf. *Gen 32:25-27*). The wounds of that important daily wrestling in prayer will be for you a source of healing. You will be healed by God, so that you can in turn bring healing to others.

Show clearly that you are a sacrament of God's first step

Indeed, showing clearly that you are sacraments of God's first step will demand a constant interior exodus. "There is no mightier invitation to love than to anticipate in loving" (Saint Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, I, 4.7, 26: PL 40). Consequently, every area of your episcopal ministry should be marked by the freedom to take the first step. The premise for the exercise of the apostolic ministry is a readiness to draw close to Jesus, leaving behind *all that we were, in order to become something we were not* (Saint Augustine, *In. Psal.*, 121, 12: PL 36).

I urge you to be vigilant not only as individuals but as a collegial body, ever docile to the Holy Spirit, with regard to this constant point of departure. Where it is lacking, the features of the Master fade from the faces of His disciples, the mission is blocked and there is a weakening of that pastoral conversion which is nothing other than a renewed impulse to preach the Gospel of joy *today, tomorrow and the day following* (cf. *Lk* 13:33). That same concern filled the heart of Jesus, leaving him *without a place to lay his head*, intent only on carrying out *to the end* the Father's will (cf. *Lk* 9:58.62). What other future do we have? To what other dignity can we aspire?

Do not use the yardstick of those who would have you be mere functionaries, bowing to the dictatorship of the present. Instead, keep your gaze fixed on the eternity of the One Who chose you, ever ready to accept His own decisive judgment, for it is the only one that matters.

While acknowledging the complex reality of the Colombian Church, it is important to preserve the uniqueness of its varied and legitimate strengths, its pastoral sensitivities, its regional peculiarities, its historical memories and its wealth of distinct ecclesial experiences. Pentecost means that everyone ought to be able to hear the message in his or her own language. So continue to seek communion among yourselves. Never tire of building it through frank and fraternal dialogue, avoiding – please – hidden agendas like the plague. Make every effort to take the first step, trying to understand each other's way of thinking. Allow yourselves to be enriched by what others can offer you and build a Church that can offer this country an eloquent witness of the progress that can be made when things are not left in the hands of a small group. The role of the Ecclesiastical Provinces in relation to the Gospel message is fundamental, for the voices that proclaim that message are diverse and concordant. So do not rest content with a watered-down compromise that leaves the minority quietly impotent while dampening those hopes that should be courageously entrusted to God's power rather than to our own weak efforts.

Show particular sensitivity towards the Afro-Colombian roots of your people, which have contributed so greatly to shaping the face of this land.

Touching the flesh of Christ's body

I would ask you not to be afraid to touch the wounded flesh of your own history and that of your people. Do so with humility, without the vain pretension of self-serving activism, and with a heart undivided, free of compromise and servility. God alone is Lord; since we are His shepherds, our hearts must not be subservient to any other cause.

Colombia needs that watchfulness, proper to you as bishops, to sustain its courage in taking the first step towards definitive peace and reconciliation, towards abdicating the method of violence and overcoming the inequalities at the root of so much suffering. That watchfulness is needed for renouncing the easy yet irreversible path of corruption and for patiently persevering in the construction of a *res publica* capable of combatting poverty and inequality.

This is, naturally, an arduous but necessary task; the path is steep and the solutions are not easy to find. From the height of God, which is the cross of His Son, you will receive strength; with the kindly gaze of the Risen Lord, you will make your way forward; attentive to the voice of the Bridegroom whispering in your hearts, you will find the criteria to discern anew, at every moment of uncertainty, the right road to take.

One of your distinguished writers said of a certain fictional character of his that, "He did not realize that it is easier to begin a war than to end one" (Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*, Chapter 9). All of us know that peace calls for a distinct kind of moral courage. War follows the basest instincts of our heart, whereas peace forces us to rise above ourselves. The same author then went on to say: "He did not understand that many words were needed to explain what war was like, if one alone was enough: fear" (ibid., Chapter 15). I need not speak to you about this fear, a poisoned root, a bitter fruit and a painful legacy of every conflict. I would only encourage you not to stop believing that there is another way. Know that you have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; the Spirit himself bears witness that you are children, destined for an inheritance of glorious freedom (cf. *Rom* 8:15-16).

With your own eyes you see, and you are aware as are few others, how marred is the face of this country. You are guardians of the basic parts that make the nation one despite all its wounds. For this very reason, Colombia has need of you, so that it can show its true face, filled with hope despite its imperfections. So that it can engage in mutual forgiveness despite wounds not yet completely healed. So that it can believe that another path can be taken, even when force of habit causes the same mistakes to be constantly repeated. So that the courage can be found to overcome everything that generates misery in the midst of so many treasures.

I confess that I feel duty-bound, speaking to you from the heart, to exhort you: take courage! Please know how much I want you to be encouraged. I encourage you to strive to make your Churches wombs of light, capable of giving birth, even amid great poverty, to the new children that this land needs. Find shelter in the humility of your people, and recognize their hidden resources of humanity and faith. Listen to how greatly their ravaged humanity yearns for the dignity that only the Risen Lord can give. Do not be afraid to abandon your apparent certitudes to seek the true glory of God, which is the living man. Be of good cheer! I encourage you in this journey.

The word of reconciliation

Many people can help with the challenges facing this nation, but your mission is unique. You are not mechanics or politicians, but pastors. Christ is the word of reconciliation written on your hearts. You have the power to preach that word not only in pulpits, in ecclesial documents or newspaper articles, but also in the hearts of individual men and women. You have the power to proclaim it in the inner sanctum of their consciences, where they hope to hear the heavenly voice that proclaims: "Peace to those whom God loves" (*Lk* 2:14). You must speak that word with the frail, lowly yet invincible resource of God's mercy, which is capable of averting the pride and cynicism of selfish hearts.

The Church seeks only the freedom to speak that word. To be free to speak that word. She has no need for alliances with this or that party, but only the freedom to speak to the heart of every man and woman. Precisely there is found the freedom and impetus to stir consciences, to support a conversion of life.

The human heart, so often misled, wants to see life as a vast warehouse for depositing everything it accumulates. This is a lie. For this very reason, the question needs to be put: What does it profit a man to gain the entire world, if his soul remains empty? (cf. *Mt* 16:26).

From your lips as rightful shepherds, Colombia has a right to be challenged by the truth of God, who never ceases to ask: "Where is your brother?" (cf. *Gen* 4:9). That question may not be silenced, even if those who hear it can do no more than lower their gaze in embarrassment and stammer in shame that they sold him, perhaps for the price of a fix of narcotics or for some misguided notion of reasons of state, or even for the false belief that the end justifies the means.

I ask you to keep your gaze ever fixed on concrete men and women. Do not talk about "man", but about human persons, loved by God and composed of flesh and bones, history, faith, feelings, disappointments, frustrations, sorrows and hurts. You will see that this concrete approach will unmask cold statistics, twisted calculations, blind strategies and falsified data, and remind you that "only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

A Church on mission

While acknowledging the generous pastoral work that you continue to carry out, let me now share with you some of my heartfelt concerns as a Pastor who wants to encourage you to be more and more a Church on mission. My predecessors have already insisted on a number of these challenges: the family and life, young people, priests, vocations, laity and formation. Despite the enormous efforts that have been made, in recent decades it has become perhaps even harder to find effective ways to express Church's maternity in begetting, nourishing and accompanying her children.

I think of Colombia's families, of the defence of life from the maternal womb to its natural conclusion, of the scourge of violence and alcoholism that often affect entire households, of the weakening of the marriage bond and the absence of fathers, with the tragic effects of insecurity and a sense of abandonment. I think of young people threatened by spiritual emptiness and seeking to escape through drug use, frivolous lifestyles and a rebellious spirit. I think of your many generous priests and the challenge of supporting them in their daily decision to remain faithful to Christ and the Church, while some few continue to propose the easy way out, avoiding genuine commitment and remaining isolated and self-centred. I think of the lay faithful throughout your local Churches who continue to gather together in response to the call of God, who is communion, even as many people are proclaiming the new dogma of selfishness and the death of solidarity, a word that they want to remove from the dictionary. I think of the immense efforts made by so many people to grow in faith, providing a radiant light for hearts, and a lamp to guide the first step.

I offer you no recipes, much less do I intend to leave you a list of things to do. Still, I would ask you, as you carry out in communion your demanding mission as the bishops of Colombia, to maintain your serenity. And I am not sure to tell you now, indeed it's just occurred to me, and you must forgive me if I exaggerate somewhat, but I think that this is one of the virtues you need most: to maintain your serenity. Not because you don't have it, but because this present moment increasingly demands it. Although you know very well that, during the night, the evil one continues to sow weeds, imitate the patience of the Lord of the harvest and trust in the good quality of his grain. Learn from His patience and generosity. He takes His time, because His loving gaze sees far into the distance. If love grows weak, the heart becomes impatient, anxious to be busy about many things, hounded by the fear of failure. Believe above all in the smallness of God's seeds. Trust in the power hidden in His yeast. Let your hearts be drawn to the great beauty that leads us to sell everything we have, in order to possess that divine treasure.

Indeed, what more powerful gift can you offer to the Colombian family than the quiet strength of the Gospel of love, that generous love which unites a man and a woman, and makes them an image of Christ and his Church, givers and guardians of life? Families need to know that in Christ they can once more become a luxuriant tree capable of providing shade and bearing fruit in every season, sheltering nests of life in its branches. Nowadays so many people glorify trees that offer no shade, trees that bear no fruit, branches bare of nests. May your own starting point be a joyful witness to the fact that happiness is to be found elsewhere.

What can you offer to young people? They love to feel loved; they distrust those who write them off; they look for integrity and they want to be involved. Accept them with the heart of Christ and make room for them in the life of your Churches. Do not undersell their hopes and expectations. Be fearless in clearly and calmly reminding everyone that a society under the spell of drugs suffers a moral metastasis that peddles hellfire, sows rampant corruption and creates fiscal paradises.

What can you give to your priests? The first gift is to be fathers to them, assuring them that the hand that begot and anointed them continues to be part of their lives. In this digital age, it is not hard for us to reach our priests instantly. Yet the paternal heart of a bishop cannot be content with an occasional, impersonal and formal communication with his priests. A bishop has to have a healthy restlessness for how and where his priests are living. Are they truly living as Jesus' disciples? Or have they found other forms of security, like financial stability, moral ambiguity, a double life, or the myopic illusion of a career? Priests have a vital and urgent need for the physical and affective closeness of their bishop. Priests need to know that they have a father.

Priests frequently shoulder the burden of the Church's daily activity. They are in the front lines, continually surrounded by persons with difficulties who look to them for pastoral assistance. People approach them and appeal to their hearts. Priests have to feed the crowds, but God's food is never something to be merely handed out. On the contrary, it can only come from our own poverty, which encounters God's bounty. To dismiss the crowds and to feed oneself on the little that one can unduly appropriate is a constant temptation (cf. *Lk 9:13*).

So be vigilant for the spiritual grounding of your priests. Keep leading them to that *Caesarea Philippi* where each of them, from his own *Jordan* experience, can hear Jesus ask once more: *Who do you say that I am?* The reason for the gradual decay that often leads to the death of discipleship is always to be found in a heart no longer able to answer: *"You are the Christ, the Son of God"* (cf. *Mt 16:13-16*). The result is seen in a loss of the courage to give freely of oneself, in interior confusion, and in the weariness of a heart no longer capable of accompanying the Lord on his way to Jerusalem.

Please show particular concern for the ongoing formation of your priests, from the first moment they hear God's call in their hearts. The recently published *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* is a valuable resource whose implementation will help the Church in Colombia in her efforts to respond to the gift of God, who never ceases to call so many of her sons to the priesthood.

I ask you also to show concern for the lives of consecrated men and women. They represent an evangelical rebuke to worldliness. They are called to purify every residue of worldly values in the fire of the Beatitudes lived *sine glossa* and in total self-abnegation for the service of others. Do not look upon them, please, as "useful resources" for the works of the apostolate, but hear in them the Bride's cry of consecrated love: "Come, Lord Jesus" (*Rev 22:20*).

Be concerned too for the formation of your laity, who are responsible not only for the strength of their faith communities, but in great part for the Church's presence in the area of cultural, political and economic life. Formation in the Church involves coming into contact with the living faith of the ecclesial community and appropriating the treasure of experiences and responses that the Holy Spirit awakens, for he is the one who teaches all things (cf. *Jn 14:26*).

Before concluding – I've been speaking for a while – I want to offer my thoughts concerning the challenges facing the Church in Amazonia, a region of which you are rightly proud, because it is an essential part of the remarkable biodiversity of this country. Amazonia is for all of us a decisive test whether our society, all too often prey to materialism and pragmatism, is capable of preserving what it freely received, not to exploit it but to make it bear fruit. I think particularly of the profound wisdom of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region, and I ask myself if we are still capable of learning from them the sacredness of life, respect for nature, and the recognition that technology alone is insufficient to bring fulfilment to our lives and to respond to our most troubling questions.

For this reason, I encourage you not to abandon the Church in Amazonia to itself. Creating an "Amazonian face" for the pilgrim Church in this land is a challenge for all of you; and it calls for an increasingly conscious missionary support on the part of all the dioceses and the entire clergy of the nation. I am told that in some native Amazon languages the idea of "friend" is translated by the words, "my other arm". May you be the other arm of Amazonia. Colombia cannot amputate that arm without disfiguring its face and its soul.

Dear brothers:

Let us now turn in spirit to *Our Lady of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá*, whose image you were thoughtful enough to bring from her Shrine to the magnificent Cathedral of this city, so that I too might venerate her.

As you well know, Colombia cannot achieve that true *renewal* to which she aspires, unless it is granted from on high. Let us ask this of the Lord through the Blessed Virgin.

Just as in Chiquinquirá God renewed the splendour of the countenance of his Mother, may He continue to shine

His heavenly light on the face of this entire country and accompany the Church in Colombia with His gracious blessings. May God bless you. I am grateful for all that you do. Thank you.
