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Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis to Myanmar and Bangladesh (26 November – 2 December 2017) – Interreligious and Ecumenical Meeting for Peace

Interreligious and Ecumenical Meeting for Peace

At 17.00 local time (12.00 in Rome), the Interreligious and Ecumenical Meeting for Peace was held in the garden of the Archbishopric of Dhaka.

The Holy Father, upon arrival, entered a traditional rickshaw and toured the garden, greeting the faithful.

After the performance of anthems and traditional dances, and the welcome address from the archbishop of Dhaka, Cardinal Patrick D’Rozario, C.S.C., five representatives of religious communities (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Catholic) and of civil society greeted the Holy Father Francis. Then, after a hymn for peace, the Pope addressed those present.

Subsequently the Anglican bishop of Dhaka, H.E. Msgr. Philip Sarka, recited the Ecumenical Prayer. At the end the Pope greeted onstage eighteen Rohingya people from Cox’s Bazar, accompanied by two Caritas translators. After the greeting, a group photograph was taken.

Finally, the Holy Father greeted another twenty members of the Organizing Committee. He then returned to the nunciature.

The following is Pope Francis’ address, pronounced during the Interreligious and Ecumenical Meeting for Peace:

Address of the Holy Father

Distinguished Guests,
Dear Friends,

Our meeting, which brings together representatives of the various religious communities present in this country, represents a highly significant moment in my Visit to Bangladesh. For we have gathered to deepen our friendship and to express our shared desire for the gift of genuine and lasting peace.

My thanks go to Cardinal D'Rozario for his kind words of welcome, and to those who have greeted me warmly on behalf of the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities, and in the name of civil society. I am grateful to the Anglican bishop of Dhaka for his presence, to the various Christian communities, and to all those whose help has made this gathering possible.

The words we have heard, but also the songs and dances that have enlivened our assembly, have spoken to us eloquently of the yearning for harmony, fraternity and peace embodied in the teachings of the world's religions. May our meeting this afternoon be a clear sign of the efforts of the leaders and followers of the religions present in this country to live together in mutual respect and good will. In Bangladesh, where the right to religious freedom is a founding principle, this commitment stands as a subtle yet firm rebuke to those who would seek to foment division, hatred and violence in the name of religion.

It is a particularly gratifying sign of our times that believers and all people of good will feel increasingly called to cooperate in shaping a culture of encounter, dialogue and cooperation in the service of our human family. This entails more than mere tolerance. It challenges us to reach out to others in mutual trust and understanding, and so to build a unity that sees diversity not as a threat, but as a potential source of enrichment and growth. It challenges us to cultivate an *openness of heart* that views others as an avenue, not a barrier.

Allow me to explore with you briefly some essential features of this "openness of heart" that is the condition for a culture of encounter.

First, it is a *door*. It is not an abstract theory but a lived experience. It enables us to embark on a dialogue of life, not a mere exchange of ideas. It calls for good will and acceptance, yet it is not to be confused with indifference or reticence in expressing our most deeply held convictions. To engage fruitfully with another means sharing our distinct religious and cultural identity, but always with humility, honesty and respect.

Openness of heart is also like a *ladder* that reaches up to the Absolute. By recalling this transcendent dimension of our activity, we realize the need for our hearts to be purified, so that we can see all things in their truest perspective. As with each step our vision becomes clearer, we receive the strength to persevere in the effort to understand and value others and their point of view. In this way, we will find the wisdom and strength needed to extend the hand of friendship to all.

Openness of heart is likewise a *path* that leads to the pursuit of goodness, justice and solidarity. It leads to seeking the good of our neighbours. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Saint Paul urged his hearers: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (*Rom 12:21*). This is a sentiment that all of us can echo. Religious concern for the welfare of our neighbour, streaming from an open heart, flows outward like a vast river, to quench the dry and parched wastelands of hatred, corruption, poverty and violence that so damage human lives, tear families apart, and disfigure the gift of creation.

Bangladesh's different religious communities have embraced this path in a particular way by their commitment to the care of the earth, our common home, and by their response to the natural disasters that have beset the nation in recent years. I think too of the common outpouring of grief, prayer and solidarity that accompanied the tragic collapse of Rana Plaza, which remains fresh in the minds of all. In these various ways, we see a clear confirmation that how the path of goodness leads to cooperation in the service of others.

A spirit of openness, acceptance and cooperation between believers does not simply contribute to a culture of harmony and peace; it is its beating heart. How much our world needs this heart to beat strongly, to counter the virus of political corruption, destructive religious ideologies, and the temptation to turn a blind eye to the needs of the poor, refugees, persecuted minorities, and those who are most vulnerable. How much, too, is such openness needed in order to reach out to the many people in our world, especially the young, who at times feel alone and

bewildered as they search for meaning in life!

Dear friends, I thank you for your efforts to promote the culture of encounter, and I pray that, by demonstrating the common commitment of believers to discerning the good and putting it into practice, they will help all believers to grow in wisdom and holiness, and to cooperate in building an ever more humane, united and peaceful world.

I open my own heart to all of you, and I thank you once more for your welcome. Let us remember one another in our prayers.
