

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 171201d

Friday 01.12.2017

Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis to Myanmar and Bangladesh (26 November – 2 December 2017) – Visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Visit to the Cathedral of Dhaka and Meeting with the Bishops of Bangladesh in the Archbishopric

Visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in the Apostolic Nunciature of Dhaka

Visit to the Cathedral of Dhaka

Meeting with the Bishops of Bangladesh in the Archbishopric of Dhaka

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Visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in the Apostolic Nunciature of Dhaka

At 15.20 local time (10.20 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Ms. Shekh Hasina, in the apostolic nunciature of Dhaka. He then transferred by car to the archbishopric for the visit to the Cathedral.

Visit to the Cathedral of Dhaka

At 16.00 local time (11.00 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis arrived at the Cathedral of Dhaka, which forms part of the complex of the archbishopric. Upon arrival, the Pope was welcomed in the courtyard of the archbishopric by Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario, C.S.C., archbishop of Dhaka, and together they proceeded to the Cathedral. Along the way, the Holy Father blessed the commemorative plaques of the papal visits to Dhaka (Paul VI on 27 November 1970; John Paul II on 19 November 1986; Francis, 1 December 2017) and of the two buildings for the elderly and for priests. He then greeted twenty members of the Organizing Committee. The Holy Father and the archbishop entered the Cathedral, where seven hundred faithful and benefactors were gathered, whom the Pope greeted and blessed.

After silent prayer in the Chapel of the Most Holy, the Holy Father left the church to pray at the tomb of the three previous Ordinaries of Dhaka. He then transferred on foot to the house for elderly priests, in the complex of the archbishopric, for the meeting with the bishops of Bangladesh.

Meeting with the Bishops of Bangladesh in the Archbishopric of Dhaka

At 16.15 local time (11.15 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met with the bishops of Bangladesh at the home for elderly priests in the complex of the archbishopric of Dhaka, where ten priests and various members of the papal entourage gathered.

After the welcome address from the archbishop of Dhaka, Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario, C.S.C., president of the Episcopal Conference of Bangladesh, the Pope gave a speech.

At the end of the meeting, Pope Francis blessed seven priests who were in ill health. He then entered the garden of the archbishopric for the Interreligious and Ecumenical Meeting for Peace.

The following is the address given by the Holy Father during the meeting with bishops:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,

How good it is for us to be together! I thank Cardinal Patrick [D'Rozario] for his words of introduction, which presented the varied spiritual and pastoral works of the Church in Bangladesh. I particularly appreciated his reference to the farsighted Pastoral Plan of 1985, which laid out the evangelical principles and priorities that have guided the life and mission of the ecclesial community in this young nation. My own experience of Aparecida, which launched the continental mission in South America, has convinced me of the fruitfulness of such plans, which engage the entire people of God in an ongoing process of discernment and action.

I am also pleased at the long life this pastoral plan has had, since one of the "diseases" of pastoral plans is that they die young. This one has lasted since 1985: congratulations! Clearly, it was well done, and reflects the reality of the country and its pastoral needs. It also reflects the perseverance of the bishops.

The reality of *communion* was at the heart of the Pastoral Plan, and it continues to inspire the missionary zeal that distinguishes the Church in Bangladesh. Your own episcopal leadership has traditionally been marked by a spirit of collegiality and mutual support. This is no small thing! This spirit of affective collegiality is shared by your priests, and through them, has spread to the parishes, communities and manifold apostolates of your local Churches. It finds expression in the seriousness with which you, in your dioceses, engage in pastoral visitations and demonstrate practical concern for the welfare of your people. I ask you to persevere in this *ministry of presence*. I would stress what that involves: it is not only about being seen – that you can do on television – but about being present in the way that God is present to us. He came among us, He drew near to us in the incarnation of the Word, in "condescension", the condescension of the Father who sent His Son to become one of us. I like this expression: "ministry of presence". The bishop is one who is present, always close and at hand. Always! Let me say it again: persevere in this ministry of presence, which can only strengthen the bonds of communion uniting you to your priests, who are your brothers, sons and co-workers in the Lord's vineyard, and to the men and women religious who make so crucial a contribution to Catholic life in this country.

I would also make a point about men and women religious. We are used to saying that there are two paths to holiness in the Church: the priesthood and the lay vocation. But the Sisters, what are they? Laypersons? No. Please, we need to promote the idea that there is a third path to holiness: the path of consecrated life. That is

not an adjective, as in “He or she is a consecrated lay person”. It is a noun: “He is a consecrated person; she is a consecrated person”. Just as we say, “He or she is a lay person”, or “He is a priest”. This is important.

At the same time, I would ask you to show ever greater pastoral closeness to the lay faithful. They need to grow. There is a need to promote their effective participation in the life of your particular Churches, not least through the canonical structures that provide for their voices to be heard and their experiences acknowledged. Recognize and value the charisms of lay men and women, and encourage them to put their gifts at the service of the Church and of society as a whole. I think here of the many dedicated catechists in this country; they are the pillars of evangelization and their apostolate is essential for the growth of the faith and for the Christian formation of the next generation. They are true missionaries and leaders of prayer, especially in the more remote areas. Be concerned for their spiritual needs and for their continuing education in the faith.

Catechists... but also the lay people who assist you at close hand as consultors: pastoral advisors, consultors in financial matters. In a meeting six months ago, I heard it said that perhaps a few more than half of the dioceses, half or a few more, have the two advisory boards called for by canon law: pastoral and financial. And the other half? It is not only a law, not only a help, it is a space for the laity.

In these months of preparation for the next assembly of the Synod of Bishops, all of us are challenged to think about how best to share with our young people the joy, the truth and the beauty of our faith. Bangladesh has been blessed with vocations to the priesthood – today we saw this! – and to the religious life; it is important to ensure that candidates be well-prepared to communicate the richness of the faith to others, particularly to their own contemporaries. In a spirit of communion that bridges the generations, help them to take up with joy and enthusiasm the work others have begun, knowing that they themselves will one day be called to pass it on in turn.

This interior sense of having received a legacy that needs to be enriched and passed on: this is the apostolic spirit of a presbyterate. Young people need to know that the world did not begin with them, that they have to find their roots, their historical and religious roots... and to let those roots grow and bear fruit. Teach the young not to be rootless; teach them to talk with the elderly. When I came here today, the minor seminarians were here to greet me. I should have asked them two quick questions, but I only asked one, the first and most natural one: “Do you play soccer?” Everyone said, “Yes!”. But the second would have been: “Do you go and visit your “grandparents”, your elderly priests? To listen to the story of their lives and their apostolate?”. Seminary formators should train young seminarians to listen to elderly priests: that is where their roots are; that is where the wisdom of the Church is found.

An impressive outreach of the Church in Bangladesh is directed to assisting families and, in a specific way, working for the advancement of women. The people of this country are known for their love of family, their sense of hospitality, the respect they show to parents and grandparents, and the care they give to the aged, the infirm and the vulnerable. These values are confirmed and elevated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A special word of gratitude is due to all those who work quietly to support Christian families in their mission of bearing daily witness to the Lord’s reconciling love and in making known its redemptive power. As *Ecclesia in Asia* pointed out, “the family is not simply the object of the Church’s pastoral care; it is one of the Church’s most effective agents of evangelization” (No. 46).

A significant goal set out in the Pastoral Plan, and one that has indeed proved prophetic, is the *option for the poor*. The Catholic community in Bangladesh can be proud of its history of service to the poor, especially in remote areas and tribal communities; it continues this outreach daily through its educational apostolates, its hospitals, clinics and health centres, and the variety of its organized charitable works. Yet, especially in light of the present refugee crisis, we see how much more needs to be done! The inspiration for your works of assistance to the needy must always be that pastoral charity which is quick to recognize human woundedness and to respond with generosity, one person at a time. By working to create a “culture of mercy” (cf. *Misericordia et Misera*, 20), your local Churches demonstrate their option for the poor, reinforce their proclamation of the Father’s infinite mercy, and contribute in no small measure to the integral development of their homeland.

An important part of my pastoral visit to Bangladesh is the interreligious and ecumenical encounter that will take place immediately following our meeting. Yours is a nation where ethnic diversity is mirrored in a diversity of religious traditions. The Church's commitment to pursuing interreligious understanding through seminars and educational programmes, as well as through personal contacts and invitations, contributes to the spread of good will and harmony. Work unremittingly to build bridges and to foster dialogue, for these efforts not only facilitate communication between different religious groups, but also awaken the spiritual energies needed for the work of nationbuilding in unity, justice and peace. When religious leaders speak out with one voice against the violence that parades as religion and seek to replace the culture of conflict with the culture of encounter, they draw from the deepest spiritual roots of their various traditions. They also provide an inestimable service to the future of their countries and our world by educating the young in the way of justice, "helping them along the path to maturity, and teaching them to respond to the incendiary logic of evil by patiently working for the growth of goodness" (*Address to the International Peace Conference, Al-Azhar, Cairo, 28 April 2017*).

Dear brother bishops, I am grateful to the Lord for these moments of conversation and fraternal sharing. I am also happy that this Apostolic Journey, which has brought me to Bangladesh, has enabled me to witness the vitality and missionary fervour of the Church in this country. In offering up the joys and difficulties of your local communities to the Lord, let us together ask for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to grant us "the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness – *parrhesía* – in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition" (*Evangelií Gaudium*, 259). May the priests, religious, consecrated men and women, and the lay faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, find ever renewed strength in their efforts to be "evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence" (*ibid.*). To all of you, with great affection, I give you my blessing, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
