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## Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas greetings

At 10.30 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Cardinals and Superiors of the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope addressed the following words to the Roman Curia:

### Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christmas is the feast of faith in the Son of God who became man in order to restore us to our filial dignity, lost through sin and disobedience. Christmas is the feast of faith in hearts that become a manger to receive him and souls that allow God to make a shoot of hope, charity and faith sprout from the stump of their poverty.

Today is once again a moment for exchanging Christmas greetings and for wishing a holy and joyful Christmas and a happy New Year to you and your co-workers, to the Papal Representatives, to all those persons who serve in the Curia, and to all your dear ones. May this Christmas open our eyes so that we can abandon what is superfluous, false, malicious and sham, and to see what is essential, true, good and authentic. My best wishes indeed!

Dear brothers and sisters,

I have already spoken of the Roman Curia *ad intra*. This year I would like to share with you some reflections on the Curia *ad extra*, that is, on its relationship with the nations, with the Particular Churches, with the Oriental Churches, with ecumenical dialogue, with Judaism, with Islam and other religions – in other words, with the outside world.

My reflections are based of course on the fundamental canonical principles of the Curia and on its own history, but also on the personal vision that I have sought to share with you in my addresses of recent years, within the

context of the *reform* currently under way.

Speaking of reform, I think of the amusing yet pointed remark of Archbishop Frédéric-François-Xavier de Mérode: “Making reforms in Rome is like cleaning the Sphinx with a toothbrush”.<sup>[1]</sup> His *mot* points to the patience, tenacity and sensitivity needed to attain that goal. For the Curia is an ancient, complex and venerable institution made up of people of different cultures, languages and mindsets, and bound, intrinsically and from the outset, to the primatial office of the Bishop of Rome in the Church, that is, to the “sacred” office willed by Christ the Lord for the good of the entire Church (*ad bonum totius corporis*).<sup>[2]</sup>

The universal nature of the Curia’s service thus wells up and flows out from the catholicity of the Petrine ministry. A Curia closed in on itself would betray its own *raison d’être* and plunge into self-referentiality and ultimately destroy itself. The Church, is by her very nature projected *ad extra*, and only to the extent that she remains linked to the Petrine ministry, the service of God’s word and the preaching of the Gospel. That Good News is that God is Emmanuel, who is born among us and becomes one of us in order to show to all his visceral closeness, his limitless love and his divine desire that all men and women be saved and come to enjoy the blessings of heaven (cf. *1 Tim 2:4*). He is the God who makes his sun rise on the good and evil alike (cf. *Mt 5:45*); the God who came not to be served but to serve (cf. *Mt 20:28*); the God who establishes the Church to be in the world but not of the world, and to be an instrument of salvation and service.

Recently, in greeting the Fathers and Heads of the Oriental Catholic Churches,<sup>[3]</sup> and reflecting on this ministerial, petrine and curial finality of service, I used the expression “*diaconal primacy*”, which immediately calls to mind the image of the *Servus servorum Dei*, so beloved of Saint Gregory the Great. This definition, in its Christological dimension, is above all the expression of a firm desire to imitate Christ, who took on the form of a servant (cf. *Phil 2:7*). Benedict XVI, in this regard, has said that on the lips of Gregory this phrase was “no mere pious formula, but a true manifestation of his way of living and acting. Gregory was deeply moved by the humility of God, who in Christ made himself our servant, who washed and continues to wash our dirty feet”.<sup>[4]</sup>

A similar *diaconal* attitude should characterize all those who in various ways work in the context of the Roman Curia. For the Curia, as the Code of Canon Law also states, “performs its function”, in the name and with the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, “for the good and service of the Churches” (can. 360; cf. CCEO, can. 46).

A *diaconal primacy* “with regard to the Pope”,<sup>[5]</sup> and consequently *diaconal* as well, is the work which is carried out within the Roman Curia *ad intra* and outside of it, *ad extra*. This theme of a *ministerial and curial diaconia* reminds me of a phrase in the ancient *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which states that “the deacon must be the ear and the mouth of the Bishop, his heart and his soul”.<sup>[6]</sup> For this agreement between the two is linked to communion, harmony and peace in the Church, inasmuch as “the deacon is the guardian of service in the Church”.<sup>[7]</sup> I do not believe that it is by chance that the ear is the organ of hearing but also of balance; and that the mouth is the organ of both taste and speech.

Another ancient text adds that deacons are called to be, as it were, the eyes of the Bishop.<sup>[8]</sup> The eye sees in order to transmit images to the mind, helping it to take decisions and to give direction for the good of the whole body.

The relationship that these images suggest is that of communion in filial obedience for the service of God’s holy people. There can be doubt, then, that such must be also the relationship that exists between all those who work in the Roman Curia. From the Dicastery heads and superiors to the officials and all others. Communion with Peter reinforces and reinvigorates communion between all the members.

Seen in this light, my appeal to the senses of the human body helps us have a sense of extroversion, of attention to what is outside. In the human body, the senses are our first connection to the world *ad extra*; they are like a bridge towards that world; they enable us to relate to it. *The senses help us to grasp reality and at the same time to situate ourselves in reality*. Not by chance did Saint Ignatius appeal to the senses for the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ and truth.<sup>[9]</sup>

This is very important for rising above that unbalanced and debased mindset of plots and small cliques that in fact represent – for all their self-justification and good intentions – a cancer leading to a self-centredness that also seeps into ecclesiastical bodies, and in particular those working in them. When this happens, we lose the joy of the Gospel, the joy of sharing Christ and of fellowship with him; we lose the generous spirit of our consecration (cf. *Acts* 20:35 and *2 Cor* 9:7).

Here let me allude to another danger: those who betray the trust put in them and profiteer from the Church's motherhood. I am speaking of persons carefully selected to give a greater vigour to the body and to the *reform*, but – failing to understand the lofty nature of their responsibility – let themselves be corrupted by ambition or vainglory. Then, when they are quietly sidelined, they wrongly declare themselves martyrs of the system, of a "Pope kept in the dark", of the "old guard" ..., rather than reciting a *mea culpa*. Alongside these, there are others who are still working there, to whom all the time in the world is given to get back on the right track, in the hope that they find in the Church's patience an opportunity for conversion and not for personal advantage. Of course, this is in no way to overlook the vast majority of faithful persons working there with praiseworthy commitment, fidelity, competence, dedication and great sanctity.

To return to the image of the body, it is fitting to note that these "*institutional senses*", to which we can in some way compare the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, must operate in a way befitting their nature and purpose: in the name and with the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, and always for the good and the service of the Churches.[10] Within the Church, they are called to be like faithful, sensitive antennae: *sending and receiving*.

Antennae that "*send*", inasmuch as they are capable of faithfully transmitting the will of the Pope and the Superiors. For those working in the Holy See, the word "fidelity"[11] is particularly important, "since they spend so much of their energy, their time and their daily ministry in the service of the Successor of Peter. This entails a serious responsibility but also a special gift, which as time goes by should lead to a relationship of closeness to the Pope, a closeness marked by interior trust, a natural *idem sentire*, which is expressed precisely by the word "faithfulness".[12]

Antennae too that "*receive*". This involves grasping the aspirations, the questions, the pleas, the joys and the sorrows of the Churches and the world, and transmitting them to the Bishop of Rome in order to enable him to carry out more effectively his task and his mission as "the lasting and visible source and foundation of unity both of faith and of communion".[13] By this receptivity, which is more important than their preceptive role, the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia enter generously into that process of hearing and *synodality* of which I have previously spoken.[14]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have used the expression "*diaconal primacy*" and the images of the body, the senses and antennae to make clear that, in order to reach the places where the Spirit speaks to the Churches (history, that is) and to achieve the aim of our work (*salus animarum*), it is necessary, indeed indispensable, to practice discernment of the signs of the times,[15] communion in service, charity in truth, docility to the Holy Spirit and trusting obedience to Superiors.

Here perhaps it is helpful to mention that the names of the different Dicasteries and Offices of the Roman Curia indicate the very realities that they are called to promote. Their work, if we think about it, is of fundamental importance for the entire Church and, I would say, for the whole world.

Since the work of the Curia is quite extensive, I would limit myself this time to speaking in general of the Curia *ad extra*, that is, of certain basic, select aspects from which it will not be difficult, in the near future, to set forth and examine more deeply the Curia's other areas of activity.

### **The Curia and its relations with the nations**

In this area, a fundamental role is played by Vatican diplomacy, as the sincere and constant effort to make the Holy See a builder of bridges, peace and dialogue between nations. As it is a diplomacy at the service of

humanity and the human person, of outstretched hand and open door, it seeks to listen, to understand, to help, to support and to intervene quickly and respectfully in any situation, for the sake of narrowing distances and building trust. Its only interest is to remain free of all worldly or material self-interest.

The Holy See is thus present on the world scene to cooperate with all peoples and nations of good will. It strives to reaffirm the importance of protecting “our common home” from all destructive forms of selfishness, to state that wars lead only to death and destruction, to draw from the past the lessons needed to help us live better in the present, and to build a solid and secure future for future generations.

Meetings with Heads of State and with various Delegations, together with the Apostolic Journeys, are its means and its goal.

For this reason, the Third Section of the Secretariat of State has been established. It is meant to show the concern and closeness of the Pope and of the Superiors of the Secretariat of State for diplomatic personnel and for the men and women religious and lay people serving in the Nunciatures. The Third Section will deal with issues involving persons working in the diplomatic service of the Holy See or preparing for this service, in close cooperation with the Section for General Affairs and the Section for Relations with States.[16]

This particular concern is based on the two-fold dimension of the service carried out by diplomatic personnel: as pastors and diplomats, in the service of the particular Churches and of the nations where they work.

### **The Curia and the particular Churches**

The relationship between the Curia and Dioceses and Eparchies is of paramount importance. In the Roman Curia these find whatever help and support they may need. This relationship is grounded in cooperation and trust, and never on superiority or conflict. The basis of this relationship is set forth in the conciliar Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, which explains at length that the work of the Curia is carried out “for the good of the Churches and in service of the sacred pastors”.[17]

The Roman Curia thus has as its point of reference not only the Bishop of Rome, from whom it receives its authority, but also the particular Churches and their Pastors throughout the world, for whose good it functions and acts.

In the first of these yearly encounters, I spoke of this characteristic of “service to the Pope and to the Bishops, to the universal Church, to the particular Churches and to the entire world”. I pointed out that: “in the Roman Curia, one learns – in a special way, “one breathes in” – this twofold aspect of the Church, this interplay of the universal and the particular”. And I went on to say: “I think that this is one of the finest experiences of those who live and work in Rome”.[18]

The Visits *ad Limina Apostolorum*, in this sense, represent a great opportunity for encounter, dialogue and mutual enrichment. I have preferred, when meeting with Bishops, to have an open and sincere conversation that remains private and goes beyond the formalities of protocol and the customary exchange of speeches and recommendations. Dialogue between the bishops and the various Dicasteries is also important. In the course of the Visits *ad Limina* that resumed this year after the Jubilee year, the Bishops told me that they were received well and listened to by all the Dicasteries. This makes me very happy., and I thank the Dicastery heads present.

Here allow me, at this particular moment of the Church’s life, to draw our attention to the forthcoming Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has as its theme *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. To call upon the Curia, the bishops and the entire Church to give particular attention to young people does not mean considering them alone. It also means focusing on a critical theme for a combination of relationships and pressing issues, such as intergenerational relationships, the family, pastoral work, social life, and so forth. The Preparatory Document makes this clear in its Introduction: “The Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world.

As in the days of Samuel (cf. *1 Sam* 3:1-21) and Jeremiah (cf. *Jer* 1:4-10), young people know how to discern the signs of our times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow".[19]

### **The Curia and the Oriental Churches**

The unity and the communion that prevail in the relationship of the Church of Rome and the Oriental Churches present a concrete example of richness in diversity for the whole Church. In fidelity to their own bi-millennial traditions and in *ecclesiastica communio*, they experience and realize the priestly prayer of Jesus (cf. *Jn* 17).[20]

In this regard, at my last meeting with the Patriarchs and Heads of the Oriental Churches, I spoke of the "*diaconal primacy*" and likewise stressed the importance of further study and review of the sensitive question of the election of new Bishops and Eparchs. This must correspond, on the one hand, to the autonomy of the Oriental Churches and, at the same time, to their spirit of evangelical responsibility and desire to strengthen constantly their unity with the Catholic Church. "Everything should be done with the thorough application of that authentic synodal praxis which distinguishes the Oriental Churches".[21] The election of each bishop must reflect and strengthen unity and communion between the Successors of Peter and the entire College of Bishops.[22]

The relationship between Rome and the East is one of mutual spiritual and liturgical enrichment. Indeed, the Church of Rome would not be truly catholic without the priceless riches of the Oriental Churches and lacking the heroic testimony of so many of our Oriental brothers and sisters who purify the Church by accepting martyrdom and offering their lives so as not to deny Christ.[23]

### **The Curia and ecumenical dialogue**

There are also areas to which the Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council, is particularly committed. Among these is Christian unity, which is "an essential requirement of our faith, a requirement that flows from the depth of our being believers in Jesus Christ".[24] It involves a "journey", yet, as was also stated by my predecessors, it is an irreversible journey and not a *going back*. "Unity is made by walking, in order to recall that when we walk together, that is, when we meet as brothers, we pray together, we collaborate together in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the service to the least, we are already united. All the theological and ecclesiological differences that still divide Christians will only be surmounted along this path, although today we do not know how and when [it will happen], but that it will happen according to what the Holy Spirit will suggest for the good of the Church".[25]

The work of the Curia in this area is aimed at fostering encounter with our brothers and sisters, untying the knots of misunderstanding and hostility, and counteracting prejudices and the fear of the other, all of which have prevented us from seeing the richness in diversity and the depth of the Mystery of Christ and of the Church. For that mystery is always greater than any human words can express.

The meetings between Popes, Patriarchs and Heads of the different Churches and Communities have always filled me with joy and gratitude.

### **The Curia, Judaism, Islam and other religions**

The relationship of the Roman Curia to other religions is based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the need for dialogue. "For the only alternative to the civility of encounter is the incivility of conflict".[26] Dialogue is grounded in three fundamental lines of approach: "The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions. The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. The courage to accept differences, because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travellers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. Sincerity of intentions, because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation".[27]

My meetings with religious leaders during the various Apostolic Visits and here in the Vatican, are a concrete proof of this.

These are only some aspects, important but not comprehensive, of the work of the Curia *ad extra*. Today I chose these aspects, linked to the theme of “*diaconal primacy*”, “*institutional senses*”, and of “*faithful antennae that transmit and receive*”.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I began our meeting by speaking of Christmas as the Feast of Faith. I would like to conclude, though, by pointing out that Christmas reminds us that a faith that does not trouble us is a troubled faith. A faith that does not make us grow is a faith that needs to grow. A faith that does not raise questions is a faith that has to be questioned. A faith that does not rouse us is a faith that needs to be roused. A faith that does not shake us is a faith that needs to be shaken. Indeed, a faith which is only intellectual or lukewarm is only a notion of faith. It can become real once it touches our heart, our soul, our spirit and our whole being. Once it allows God to be born and reborn in the manger of our heart. Once we let the star of Bethlehem guide us to the place where the Son of God lies, not among Kings and riches, but among the poor and humble.

As Angelus Silesius wrote in *The Cherubic Wanderer*: “It depends solely on you. Ah, if only your heart could become a manger, then God would once again become a child on this earth”. [28]

With these reflections, I renew my personal best wishes for Christmas for you and your dear ones. Thank you!

As a Christmas gift, I would like to leave you this Italian version of the work of Blessed Father Marie-Eugène de l'Enfant Jésus, *Je veux voir Dieu* (“I want to see God”). It is a work of spiritual theology, and it will do us all some good. Maybe not by reading it completely, but by looking in the index for the thing that most interests us, or we think we most need. I hope it will benefit all of us.

Then too, Cardinal Piacenza has been very generous; with the work of the Apostolic Penitentiary, and also Monsignor Nykiel, he has given us this book: *La festa del perdono* (“The Feast of Forgiveness”) as a fruit of the Jubilee of Mercy. He even wanted to give it to us for free. Thank you, Cardinal Piacenza and the Apostolic Penitentiary. This book will be given to you as you leave.

Thank you!

[Blessing]

And, please, prayer for me

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[1] Cf. GIUSEPPE DALLA TORRE, *Sopra una storia della Gendarmeria Pontificia*, 19 October 2017.

[2] “In order to ensure that the people of God would have pastors and would enjoy continual growth, Christ the Lord set up in his Church a variety of offices whose aim is the good of the whole body” (SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 18).

[3] Cf. *Greeting to the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops*, 9 October 2017.

[4] *Catechesis*, General Audience of 4 June 2008.

[5] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Plenary Meeting of the Sacred College of Cardinals*, 21 November 1985, 4.

[6] 2, 44: Funk, 138-166. Cf. W. RORDORF, *Liturgie et eschatologie*, in *Augustinianum* 18 (1978), 153-161; ID., *Que savons-nous des lieux de culte chrétiens de l'époque pré-constantinienne?*, in *L'Orient Syrien* 9 (1964), 39-60.

[7] Cf. *Meeting with Priests and Consecrated Men and Women*, Milan Cathedral, 25 March 2017.

[8] “As for the Church’s deacons, let them serve as the eyes of the bishop, looking all around and investigating the actions of each in the Church, in case anyone is about to sin. In this way, admonished beforehand by the presider, perhaps that person will not commit [his or her sin]” (*Letter of Clement to James*, 12: Rehm 14-15, in *I Ministeri nella Chiesa Antica. Testi patristici dei primi tre secoli a cura di Enrico Cattaneo*, Edizione Paolina, 1997, 696).

[9] Cf. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, No. 121: “The fifth contemplation will be to apply the five senses the first and the second contemplation”.

[10] In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Saint Jerome makes a curious comparison between the five bodily senses and the virgins of the Gospel parable, who become foolish when they no longer act in accordance with their assigned purpose (*Comm. in Mt XXV*: PL 26, 184).

[11] The concept of fidelity is quite demanding and eloquent, since it also brings out time involved in living out the commitment assumed; it refers to a virtue which, as Benedict XVI noted, “expresses the unique bond existing between the Pope and his direct collaborators, both in the Roman Curia and in the Papal Representations”. *Address to the Community of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy*, 11 June 2012.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 18.

[14] “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that ‘listening is more than simply hearing’. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other and listening to the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of truth” (*Jn 14:17*), in order to know what “he says to the Churches” (*Rev 2:7*). *Address for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

[15] Cf. *Lk 12:54-59*; *Mt 16:1-4*; SECOND VATICAN ECUCMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 11: “The people of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole world. Impelled by that faith, they try to discern the true signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, the needs and the desires that it shares with the rest of humanity today. For faith casts a new light on everything and makes known the full ideal which God has set for humanity, thus guiding the mind towards solutions that are fully human”.

[16] Cf. *Papal Letter*, 18 October 2017; *Communiqué of the Secretariat of State*, 21 November 2017.

[17] *Christus Dominus*, 9.

[18] *Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2013; cf. PAUL VI, *Homily for his Eightieth Birthday*, 16 October 1977: “I have loved Rome, and have constantly sought to reflect on and understand its transcendent mystery, certainly without being able to penetrate it and experience it fully. Yet I have always been, and still am, passionately concerned to understand how and why ‘Christ is Roman’ (DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Divine Comedy*, *Purg. XXXII*, 201)... Whether the “sense of being Roman” comes from being a native citizen of this fateful City, or from long residence here, or an experience of its hospitality, that sense, that “Roman consciousness”, has the power to grant those capable of imbibing it a sense of universal humanism” (*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, XV [1977], 1957).

[19] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, FIFTEENTH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY: *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, Introduction.

[20] On the one hand, the unity that responds to the gift of the Spirit finds natural and full expression in “indefectible union with the Bishop of Rome” (BENEDICT XVI, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 40). On the other hand, being inserted in the communion of the entire Body of Christ makes us conscious of the duty to strengthen union and solidarity within the various Patriarchal Synods themselves, and to “recognize the need to consult one another in matters of great importance for the Church prior to taking a unified collegial action” (*ibid.*).

[21] *Meeting with the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops of the Oriental Catholic Churches*, 21 November 2013.

[22] Together with the Heads and Fathers, and the Oriental Archbishops and Bishops, in communion with the Pope, with the Curia and among themselves, all of us are called “always to seek righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness (cf. *1 Tim 6:11*), and to adopt a modest manner of life in imitation of Christ, who became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. *2 Cor 8:9*)... [to] transparency in the administration of temporal goods, and [to] understanding in every weakness and need”. *Meeting with the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops of the Oriental Catholic Churches*, 21 November 2013.

[23] “We see great numbers of our Christian brothers and sisters of the Oriental Churches experiencing dramatic persecutions and an ever more troubling diaspora” (*Homily for the Centenary of the Congregation for Oriental Churches and of the Pontifical Oriental Institute*, Basilica of Saint Mary Major, 12 October 2017. “No one can turn a blind eye to this situation” (*Message for the Centenary of the Foundation of the Pontifical Oriental Institute*, 12 October 2017).

[24] *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity*, 10 November

2016.

[25] Ibid.

[26] *Address to Participants at the International Peace Conference*, Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo, 28 April 2017.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Edizione Paolina, 1989, 170 [234-235]: *“Es mangelt nur an dir: Ach, könnte nur dein Herz zu einer Krippe werden, Gott würde noch einmal ein Kind auf dieser Erden”*.

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