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Meeting of the Holy Father with the parish priests and clergy of the Diocese of Rome

At 11.00 this morning, in the Papal Basilica of Saint John Lateran, the Holy Father Francis met with the parish priests and clergy of the diocese of Rome for the traditional appointment at the beginning of Lent. Upon arrival in the Basilica, the Pope confessed some priests.

After the introductory greeting from His Eminence Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, vicar general of His Holiness for the diocese of Rome, the Holy Father pronounced the following meditation:

Meditation of the Holy Father

Good morning to you,

It is always good to find ourselves here, every year, at the beginning of Lent, for this liturgy of God's forgiveness. It is good for us – it is good also for me! – and I feel a great peace in my heart, now that each one of us has received God's mercy and has given it to others, our brothers. Let us live this moment for what it really is, as an extraordinary grace, a permanent miracle of divine tenderness, in which once again God's Reconciliation, sister of Baptism, moves us, washes us with tears, regenerates us, and restores to us the original beauty.

This peace and this gratitude that from our heart rise to the Lord help us to understand how the entire Church and each one of her children lives and grows thanks to God's mercy. The Bride of the Lamb becomes without "spot or wrinkle" (*Eph 5: 27*), by a gift of God, her beauty is at the point of arrival of a path of purification and transfiguration, that is, an exodus to which the Lord permanently invites us: "I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (*Hos 2: 14*). We must never cease to place ourselves reciprocally on guard against the temptation of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, almost as if we were the People of God by our own initiative or by our own merit. This self-centredness is very bad and always harms us: both self-sufficiency in doing or the sin of the mirror, self-satisfaction: "How beautiful I am! How good I am!" We are not the People of God by our own initiative, by our own merit; no, truly, we are and will always be the fruit of the mysterious action of the Lord: a People of the proud rendered small by God's humility, a People of the wretched – let us not be

afraid of saying this word: “I am wretched” – made rich by God’s poverty, a People of the accursed made righteous by He Who made Himself “accursed”, hanging on the wood of the cross (cf. *Gal* 3: 13). Let us never forget: “apart from me you can do nothing” (*Jn* 15: 5). I repeat, the Master said to us: “apart from me you can do nothing”! And in this way things change: it is not me looking at myself in the mirror, I am not the centre of activities, or even the centre of prayer, very often... No, no, He is the centre. I am in the periphery. He is the centre, it is He Who does everything, and this requires a holy passivity from us – that which is not holy is laziness, no, that no – a holy passivity before God, before Jesus above all; it is He Who does things.

This is why this time of Lent is truly a grace: it allows us to reposition ourselves before God, letting Him be everything. His love raises us up from the dust (*remember that without me you are dust*, the Lord said to us yesterday), His Spirit breathes once again on our nostrils, giving us the life of the risen. The hand of God, Who created us in the image and semblance of His Trinitarian Mystery, has made us many in unity, different but inseparable from each other. God’s forgiveness, which we have celebrated today, is a force that re-establishes communion at every level: between us priests in the single diocesan presbytery; with all Christians, in the sole body that is the Church; with all men, in the unity of the human family. The Lord presents us to each other and says: here is your brother “bone of my bones” (cf. *Gen* 2: 23), he with whom you are called to live the “love [that] never fails” (*1 Cor* 13: 8).

For these seven years of diocesan journey of pastoral conversion, that separate us from the 2025 Jubilee (we have arrived at the second), I have proposed to you the Book of Exodus as *paradigm*. The Lord acts, then as now, and transforms a “non-people” into the People of God. This is His desire, and His plan also for us.

So, what does the Lord do when He when he has to note with sadness that Israel is “stiff-necked” people (*Ex* 32: 9), “inclined to evil” (*Ex* 32: 22) as in the episode of the golden calf? A patient work of reconciliation begins, a wise pedagogy, in which He threatens and consoles, makes people become aware of the consequences of the evil done and decides to forget sin, punishes hitting the people and heals the wound He has inflicted. Precisely in the text of Exodus 32-34, which you will propose during Lent for the meditation of your communities, the Lord seems to have taken a radical decision: “I will not go with you” (*Ex* 33: 3). When the Lord finishes, He goes away. We have experience of this, in bad times, of spiritual desolation. If any of you do not know these moments, I advise him to go and talk to a good confessor, with a spiritual father, because something is missing in life; I don’t know what it is but don’t have desolation ... it is not normal, I would say that it is not Christian. We have these moments. I will no longer walk in front of you; I will send my angel (cf. *Ex* 32: 34) to precede you on the way, but I will not come. When the Lord leaves us alone, without His presence, and we are in the parish, we are working and we feel we are employed but without the presence of the Lord, in desolation ... Not alone in consolation, in desolation. Think about this.

On the other hand, the people, perhaps out of impatience or feeling abandoned (because Moses was late coming down from the mountain), had set aside the prophet chosen by God and asked Aaron to build an idol, a silent image of God, to walk before them. The people do not tolerate the absence of Moses, they are in desolation and do not tolerate, and immediately seek another God to be comfortable. Sometimes, when we do not have desolation, it may be that we have idols. “No, I’m fine, with this, I can manage...”. The sadness of God’s abandonment never comes. What does the Lord do when we “cut him off” – with idols – from the life of our communities, because they are convinced that they are enough for ourselves? At that moment, the idol is me: “No, I can manage ... Thanks ... Don’t worry, I can manage”. And you don’t feel that need of the Lord, you don’t feel the desolation of the Lord’s absence.

But the Lord is clever! The reconciliation that He wants to offer to the people will be a lesson that the Israelites will remember forever. God behaves like a rejected lover: if you really don’t want me, then I’m leaving! And He leaves us alone. It is true, we can get by alone, for a little while, six months, a year, two years, three years, even more. At some point this explodes. If we go on alone, this self-sufficiency explodes, this self-satisfaction of solitude. And it breaks out badly, it breaks out badly. I am thinking of a case of a good, good, priest, religious, I knew him well. He was brilliant. If there was a problem in a community, the superiors thought of him to solve the problem: in a college, a university, he was good, good. But he was devoted to the “holy mirror”: he looked at himself so much. And God was good to him. One day he made him feel that he was alone in life, that he had lost so much. And he did not dare to say to the Lord: “But I sorted out this thing, that other thing, that other one ...”.

No, he immediately noticed that he was alone. It is the greatest grace that the Lord can give, it is the greatest grace: that man wept. The grace of crying. He cried for the time he had lost, he cried because the holy mirror had not given him what he expected of himself. And he started again from the beginning, humbly. When the Lord goes away, because we chase Him away, we must ask for the gift of tears, and mourn the absence of the Lord. "You don't want me, so I'm leaving", says the Lord, and in time what happens to this priest happens to us.

Let us return to Exodus. The effect is what was hoped for: "When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments" (Ex 33: 4). It did not escape the Israelites that no punishment was as heavy as that divine decision that contradicts His holy name: "I am who I am" (Ex 3: 14): an expression that has a concrete meaning, not abstract, translatable perhaps as "I am He who is an who will be here, beside you". When you realize that He has gone, because you banished Him, it is a grace to hear this. If you do not realize, there is suffering. The angel is not a solution, but rather would be a permanent witness to the absence of God. This is why the reaction of the people is sadness. This is another dangerous thing, because there is good sadness and bad sadness. There it is necessary to discern, in moments of sadness: how is my sadness, where does it come from? And at times it is good, it comes from God, from the absence of God, as in this case; at other times it is self-satisfaction, this too, isn't it?

What would we feel if the Risen Lord were to say to us: continue your ecclesial activities and your liturgies, but it will no longer be I who is present or who acts in your sacraments? From the moment that, when you take your decisions, you base them on worldly rather than evangelical criteria (*tamquam Deus non esset*) then I will totally stand aside... Everything will be empty, without meaning, it would be nothing other than "dust". God's thread opens up the way to the intuition of what our life would be like without Him, if truly He were to remove His face from it for ever. It is death, desperation, hell: *apart from me you can do nothing*.

The Lord shows us once again, on the living flesh of the unmasking of our hypocrisy, what His mercy truly is. To Moses, God reveals on the mount His glory and His holy name: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex 34: 6). In the "game of love" carried on by God, made up of the threat of absence and presence given once again – "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33: 14) – God achieves reconciliation with His people, Israel comes out of this painful experience, which will mark it for ever, with a new maturity: it is more conscious of who is the God Who freed it from Egypt, more lucid in understanding the true dangers of the journey (we could say: it has more fear of itself than of the snakes in the desert!). This is good: to have a little fear of ourselves, of our omnipotence, of our cunning, of our concealments, of our dual games... A little fear. If it were possible, to be more afraid of this than of the snakes, because this is a true venom. And the people, in this way, are more united around Moses and the Word of God he announces. The experience of sin and God's forgiveness is what enables Israel to become, a little more, the People who belong to God. We have performed this penitential liturgy and we have had the experience of our sins; and to say sin is something that opens us up to God's mercy, because usually sin is hidden. We hide sin not only from God, not only from our neighbour, not only from the priest, but from ourselves. "Cosmetics" are very advanced in this: we are specialists in beautifying situations. "Yes, but it is not much, you understand...". And a little water to wash away this make-up is good for us all, to see that we are not so beautiful; we are ugly, ugly also in our things. But without despairing, because there is God, clement and merciful, Who is always behind us. There is His mercy that accompanies us.

Dear brothers, this is the meaning of the Lent we will live. In the spiritual exercises that you will preach to the people in your communities, in the penitential liturgies you will celebrate, have the courage to propose the reconciliation of the Lord, of proposing His impassioned and jealous love.

Our role is like that of Moses: a generous service to God's work of reconciliation, a "staying in the game" of His love.

It is good, the way in which God involves Moses – He treats him truly like His friend. He prepares him before he comes down from the mount, warning him of the perversion of the people, accepting that he will be an intercessor for his brothers; He listens to him while he recalls the oath that He, God, made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We can imagine that God smiled when Moses invited Him not to contradict him, not to look bad in

the eyes of the Egyptians and not to be lesser than their gods, to have respect for His holy name. He provokes him with the dialect of responsibilities: “Your people, that you, Moses, have brought out from Egypt”, so that Moses answers by underlining that no, the people belong to God, it is He Who led them out of Egypt... and this is a mature dialogue, with the Lord. When we see that the people we serve in the parish, or everywhere, distance themselves, we have this tendency to say: “They are my people, my population” Yes, they are your people, but vicariously, let us say: the people are His! And so go ahead and rebuke Him: “Look at your people, what they are doing”. This dialogue with the Lord.

But God’s heart leapt with joy when He heard Moses’ words: “But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written” (*Ex 32: 32*). And this is one of the most beautiful things of the priest who goes before the Lord and presents his face for his people. “They are your people, not mine, and you must forgive them”. “No, but...”. “I will go! I can no longer speak with you. Blot me out”. It takes courage to speak in this way with God! But we must speak like this, like men, not like cowards, like men! Because this means that I am aware of the place that I have in the Church, that I am not an administrator, placed there to carry something out in an orderly way. It means that I believe, that I have faith. Try to speak like this, with God.

To die for a people, to share the destiny of a people whatever may happen, up to death. Moses did not accept God’s proposal, he did not accept corruption. God pretends to want to corrupt him. He did not accept: “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (*Ex 32: 10*) – here is the “corruption”. But what? God is the corrupter? He is trying to see the heart of his pastor. Moses does not want to save himself; by now he is at one with his brothers. If only every one of us could arrive at that point, if only! It is bad when a priest goes to the bishop to complain about his people: “Ah, it’s impossible, these people don’t understand anything, and this, and that... It is a waste of time...”. It is bad! What is lacking in that man? Many things are lacking, in that priest! Moses does not do this. He does not want to save himself, because he is at one with his brothers. Here the Father has seen the face of the Son. The light of the Spirit of God has invaded the face of Moses and has drawn on his face the features of the Risen Christ, making it luminous. And when we go there to fight with God – even our father Abraham did this, that fight with God – when we go there we show that we resemble Jesus, Who gives life for His people. And the Father smiles: He sees in us the gaze of Jesus Who went to His death for us, for the people *of the Father*, us. The heart of the friend of God always expands, becoming larger – Moses, the friend of God – similar to God’s heart, much greater than the human heart (cf. *1 Jn 3: 18*). Truly Moses became the friend who speaks with God face to face (cf. *Ex 33: 11*). Face to face! This is when the bishop or the spiritual father asks a priest if he prays: “Yes, yes, I... yes, I get by with my ‘mother-in-law’ – the ‘mother-in-law’ is the breviary – yes, I get by, I do Lauds, then...”. No, no. If you pray, what does it mean? If you place yourself face to face with your people before God. If you go to fight for your people with God. This is praying, for a priest. Not carrying out prescriptions. “Ah, Father, but then the breviary is no longer any use?” No. the breviary is fine, but with this attitude. You are there, before God, and with your people behind you. And Moses is also the custodian of the Glory of God, of God’s secrets. He contemplated Glory, he heard His true Name on the mountain, he understood his Father’s love.

Dear brothers, yours is an enormous privilege! God knows your “shameful nakedness”. It struck me so much when I saw the original of the [Virgin] Hodegetria of Bari: it is not like now, dressed a little in the robes the Eastern Christians put on the icon. It is Our Lady with the naked child. I liked it so much that the bishop of Bari gave me one of these [images], he gave it to me, and I put it there, in front of my door. And I like it – I say this to share an experience – I like it in the morning, when I get up, when I pass by, to say to Our Lady that she is guarding my nakedness: “Mother, you know all my nakedness”. This is a great thing: to ask the Lord – from my nakedness – to ask that He guard my nakedness. She knows them all. God knows our “shameful nakedness”, yet He never tires of using us to offer reconciliation to man. We are very poor, we are sinners, yet God takes us to intercede for our brothers and to distribute to men, through our hands which are by no means innocent, the salvation that regenerates.

Sin disfigures us, and we know the humiliating experience when we ourselves or one of our brother priests or bishops falls into the bottomless abyss of vice, corruption or, even worse, of the crime that destroys the lives of others. I wish to share with you the unbearable pain and suffering caused in us and in all the ecclesial body by the wave of scandals which by now fill newspapers around the entire world. It is evident that the true meaning of what is happening is to be sought in the spirit of evil, in the Enemy, which acts with the claim of being the master

of the world, as I said in the Eucharistic liturgy at the end of the meeting on the protection of minors in the Church (24 February 2018). And yet, let us not be discouraged! The Lord is purifying His Bride and is converting us all to Himself. He is making us experience the test because we understand that without Him we are dust. He is saving us from hypocrisy, from the spirituality of appearances. He is blowing His Spirit to restore beauty to His Bride, caught in flagrant adultery. It will do us good to take Ezekiel's Chapter 16 today. This is the history of the Church. This is my story, everyone can say. And in the end, but through your shame, you will continue to be the pastor. Our humble repentance, which remains silent amid tears in the face of the monstrosity of sin and the unfathomable greatness of God's forgiveness, this, this humble repentance is the beginning of our holiness.

Let us not be afraid of staking our life on the service of reconciliation between God and men: no other secret greatness is given to us than this giving of life so that men may know His love. The life of a priest is often marked by incomprehension, silent sufferings, at times persecutions. And also sins that only He knows. The lacerations between brothers of our community, the non-acceptance of the Gospel word, disdain for the poor, resentment fomented by reconciliations that never occurred, the scandal caused by the shameful behaviour of some brethren, all this can leave us sleepless and powerless. Let us instead believe in the patient guidance of God, Who does things in His time, let us expand our hearts, and place ourselves at the service of the Word of reconciliation.

What we have lived in this Cathedral, let us propose in our communities. In the penitential liturgies we will experience in the parishes and in the prefectures, in this Lenten time, each one of you will ask God and our brothers for forgiveness for the sin that has undermined the ecclesial community and has suffocated missionary dynamism. With humility – which is a characteristic proper to the heart of God – but which we find so difficult to make our own – let us confess to each other that we need God to reshape our life.

Be the first to ask your brothers for forgiveness. "Accusing oneself is a wise beginning, linked to the fear of God" (*ibid*). It will be a good sign if, as we have done today, each one of you were to confess as a confrere also in the penitential liturgies in the parish, before the eyes of the faithful. We will have a luminous face, like Moses, if with moved eyes we speak to others of the mercy that has been used to us. It is the way, there is no other. In this way we will see the demon of pride fall like lightning from the sky, if the miracle of reconciliation takes place in our communities. Let us feel that we are the People who belong to the Lord, in whose midst God walks. This is the way.

And I wish you a good Lent!

Now I would like to add something I was asked to do. One of the concrete ways of living a Lent of charity is to contribute generously to the "Come in cielo, così in strada" ("As in heaven, on the road"), with which our diocesan Caritas intends to respond to all forms of poverty, welcoming and supporting those in need. I know that every year you respond generously to this call, but this year I ask you for greater commitment so that all the community, and all communities, may be truly involved directly.

Cardinal De Donatis:

A word for the consignment, now, of this little book. Pope Francis is giving it to us. It is the small volume that will accompany us during Lent, as a second reading, like we did last year: the same size as the breviary, which will help us to keep it near us. And so the prefects will distribute these books to you all, and perhaps you can take it also for those who are not present. Thank you.

I, on behalf of everyone, wish to say a heartfelt thank you to you for coming today, as every year. What I can say to you, on behalf of everyone, besides thank you, is that we will continue to support you with our daily prayer.

Pope Francis:

I need this, I need your prayer. Pray for me. One of the things that I like about this [book] is the richness of the

Fathers: returning to the Fathers. A short while ago, in a parish in Rome, a book was presented, "Bisogno di paternità" ("Need for fatherliness") I think it is called; they are all texts of the Fathers according to various themes: virtue, the Church... returning to the Fathers helps us greatly because it is a great wealth. Thank you.
