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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.10 a.m. in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world. In his address in Italian the Pope focused on his Apostolic Trip to Bulgaria and North Macedonia, which came to an end yesterday evening (Bible passage: from the *Gospel according to Luke*, 12: 22.30-32)

After summarising his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful present.

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the Apostolic Blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I returned yesterday, late evening, from a three-day apostolic trip that led me to Bulgaria and North Macedonia. I thank God for having granted me these visits, and I reiterate my gratitude to the civil authorities of these two countries, who received me with great courtesy and willingness. My warmest thanks go to the bishops and respective ecclesial communities, for the warmth and devotion which accompanied my pilgrimage.

In Bulgaria, I was guided by the vivid memory of Saint John XXIII, who was sent to the country in 1925 as visitor, and then apostolic delegate. Inspired by his example of goodness and pastoral charity, I met that population, called to be a bridge between Central, Eastern and Southern Europe; with the motto "*Pacem in terris*" I invited all to journey on the way of fraternity; and on this path, in particular, I had the joy of taking a step ahead in the meeting with the Patriarch of the Orthodox Bulgarian Church, Neophyte, and the members of the Holy Synod. In effect, as Christians, our vocation and mission is to be a sign and instrument of unity, and we can do this with the help of the Holy Spirit, putting what unites us before what has divided or continues to divide us.

Present-day Bulgaria is one of the lands evangelized by Saints Cyril and Methodius, which Saint John Paul II added alongside Saint Benedict as Patrons of Europe. In Sofia, in the majestic Patriarchal Cathedral of Saint Aleksander Nevkij, I paused in prayer before the sacred image of the two holy brothers. Of Greek origin, from Salonika, they were able to use their culture with creativity to transmit the Christian message to the Slavic peoples; they created a new alphabet with which they translated the Bible and the liturgical texts into the Slavic language. Today too there is a need for passionate and creative evangelizers, so that the Gospel may reach those who do not yet know it and may irrigate the lands where the ancient Christian roots have dried up again. With this in mind, I celebrated the Eucharist twice with the Catholic community in Bulgaria and encouraged it to be hopeful and generative. I thank again those people of God who showed me so much faith and affection.

The final act of the trip to Bulgaria was carried out together with the representatives of the various religions: we invoked from God the gift of peace, while a group of children carried flaming torches, symbol of faith and hope.

In Northern Macedonia I was accompanied by the strong spiritual presence of Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was born in Skopje in 1910 and there, in her parish, received the sacraments of Christian initiation and learned to love Jesus. In this woman, petite but full of strength thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit in her, we see the image of the Church in that country and in other peripheries of the world: a small community that, with Christ's grace, becomes a welcoming home where many find refreshment for their life. At the Mother Teresa Memorial I prayed in the presence of other religious leaders and a large group of poor people, and I blessed the first stone of the shrine dedicated to her.

Northern Macedonia has been an independent country since 1991. The Holy See has sought to support its path from the beginning, and with my visit I wanted above all to encourage its traditional ability to host different ethnic and religious affiliations; as well as its commitment to welcoming and helping large numbers of migrants and refugees during the critical period of 2015 and 2016. There is a great welcome there: they have a big heart. Migrants create problems for them, but they welcome them and love them, and they solve problems. This is a great thing about this people. A round of applause to this people.

North Macedonia is a young country, from an institutional point of view; a small country which needs to open up to broad horizons without losing its roots. This is why it was significant that the meeting with young people took place there. Boys and girls of different Christian denominations and also of other religions – Muslims, for example – all united by the desire to build something beautiful in life. I urged them to dream big and get involved, like the young Agnese – the future Mother Teresa – listening to the voice of God Who speaks in prayer and in the flesh of needy brothers. I was struck when I went to visit the Sisters of Mother Teresa: they were with the poor, and I was struck by the evangelical tenderness of these women. This tenderness is born of prayer, of adoration. They welcome everyone, they seem like sisters, mothers to everyone, and they do this with tenderness. Very often we Christians lose this dimension of tenderness, and when there is no tenderness, we become too serious, acid. These sisters are sweet in tenderness and they offer charity, but charity as it is, without disguising it. Instead, when we give charity without tenderness, without love, it is as if we throw a glass of vinegar on the work of charity. No, charity must be joyful, it is not acid. These sisters are a beautiful example. May God bless them all.

In addition to the testimonies of the young, in Skopje I listened to those of the priests and consecrated persons. Men and women who have given their lives to Christ. For them, sooner or later, the temptation comes to say: "Lord, what is this little gift of mine in the face of the problems of the Church and the world?" So I reminded them that just a little yeast can make all the dough grow, and a little bit of perfume, pure and concentrated, makes all the surroundings smell good.

It is the mystery of Jesus-Eucharist, seed of new life for the whole of humanity. In the Mass we celebrated in the square of Skopje, we renewed, in a peripheral part of today's Europe, the miracle of God Who, with just a few loaves and fishes, broken and shared, sated the hunger of multitudes. To His inexhaustible Providence let us entrust the present and the future of the peoples I visited in this trip. And I invite you all to pray to Our Lady that she may bless these two countries: Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

During his greetings at the end of the catechesis, the Holy Father greeted English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, “especially those from England, Denmark, Nigeria, Kenya, India, South Africa, Australia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America. In the joy of the Risen Christ, I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you all!”

The Pope also mentioned that last Saturday, in Mexico City, Blessed Maria de la Concepción Cabrera was proclaimed blessed. A wife and mother who bore witness to the salvific value of the Cross of Christ, she inspired the foundation of various religious and lay institutions. The Holy Father asked for a round of applause for the new Blessed, “Conchita”.

To French pilgrims he mentioned Jean Vanier, who died yesterday. “A great man of the Church ... he worked for the poorest, for the most discarded, even for those who were condemned to death in the womb of their mother. Sometimes they try to convince parents to reject them and not let them be born. He welcomed them and gave them life. May Jean Vanier continue to be an example to all of us, a help from heaven!”

Today Poland celebrates its patron, Saint Stanislaus, bishop and martyr, and the Pope commented to Polish pilgrims that the value in the Lord of the saint “and his fidelity to evangelical moral and spiritual values” were for each of them and for his nation, “a point of reference, in decisions and in deeds, and in the face of the challenges of our times”.

Among the Italian pilgrims he greeted the Capitulars of the Capuchin Tertiaries, the new priests of the Legionaries of Christ, with their families, and the professors and students of the Pontifical University “Regina Apostolorum”. “Today”, he added, “we pray the supplication to the Virgin of Pompeii. We are in spiritual union with those who, in that Marian shrine, as in any other place, will meet at noon to pray with faith the supplication to Our Lady, so that she may return her gaze to the world and intercede for the whole Church and for those who suffer in body and in spirit”.

“And also today”, he added, “in my homeland, the Solemnity of Our Lady of Luján is celebrated. Let us all pray for Argentina”.
