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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Malta – Prayer meeting at the National Shrine of “Ta’ Pinu” in Gozo

In the afternoon, the Holy Father Francis left the apostolic nunciature of Malta and transferred by car to the Grand Harbour of La Valletta, where he boarded a catamaran to reach the port of Mgarr, Gozo.

Upon arrival he transferred by car to the *Ta’ Pinu* National Shrine for the prayer meeting. Before arriving at the Shrine, the Pope left the car and continued on board the popemobile.

At 17.30 Pope Francis arrived at the Shrine, where around 3,000 faithful were gathered in waiting in the forecourt. Before entering the Chapel of the Shrine with the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech, Metropolitan Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna of Malta, and Bishop Anthony Teuma of Gozo, the Holy Father was received by the rector of the Shrine, who brought him the cross.

After leaving a gold rose in front of the image of the Virgin, and after reciting the Hail Mary three times, the Pope proceeded to the central altar, and greeted and blessed the sick present inside the shrine. He then continued to the churchyard. After the initial hymn and the introductory greeting from Bishop Anthony Teuma of Gozo, four testimonies were given. After the proclamation of the Gospel, the Pope delivered his homily.

At the end, before the final blessing and the presentation of the gift to the Holy Father, Pope Francis transferred by car to the port of Mgarr, Gozo, where he boarded a ferry bound for the port of Cirkewwa, from where he subsequently returned by car to the apostolic nunciature of Malta.

The following is the homily delivered by the Pope during his prayer meeting at the National Shrine of *Ta’ Pinu*:

Homily of the Holy Father

Beneath the Cross of Jesus, stood Mary and John. The Mother who had given birth to the Son of God mourned

his death, even as darkness enveloped the world. The beloved disciple, who had left everything to follow him, now stood silent at the feet of the crucified Master. Everything seemed lost, finished, forever. Taking upon himself the woundedness of our humanity, Jesus prayed: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34*). This is also our prayer at times of suffering. It is the heartfelt prayer, Sandi and Domenico, which you make to God every day. Thank you for your persevering love, thank you for your witness of faith!

Yet Jesus’ “hour”, which in John’s Gospel is the hour of his death on the cross, does not represent the end of the story. Rather, it signals the beginning of a new life. Standing before the cross, we contemplate the merciful love of Christ, who opens wide his arms to embrace us and, by his death, invites us to the joy of eternal life. At that last hour, new life opens before us; from that hour of death, another hour, full of life, is born. It is the time of the Church. Starting with those two people standing beneath the cross, the Lord was to gather a people that continues to tread the winding paths of history, bearing in their hearts the consolation of the Spirit, with which to dry the tears of humanity.

Brothers and sisters, from this sanctuary of Ta’ Pinu we can contemplate together the new beginning that took place in the “hour” of Jesus. Here, in place of the splendid edifice we see today, there stood only a tiny chapel in a state of disrepair. Its demolition was decreed: it seemed to be the end. Yet a series of events would turn things around, as if the Lord wanted to say to this people too: “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight is in her, and your land Married” (*Is 62:4*). That little church became the national shrine, a destination for pilgrims and a source of new life. Jennifer, you reminded us of this: here, many people entrust their sufferings and their joys to Our Lady and all feel at home. Saint John Paul II – today is the anniversary of his death – also came here as a pilgrim. A place that once seemed forsaken now revitalizes faith and hope within the People of God.

In light of this, let us try to appreciate the meaning of Jesus’ “hour” for our own lives. That hour of salvation tells us that, in order to renew our faith and our common mission, we are called to return to the origins, to the nascent Church that we see beneath the cross in the persons of Mary and John. What does it mean to go back to those origins? What does it mean to go back to the beginning?

First, it means *rediscovering the essentials of our faith*. Going back to the early Church does not mean looking back and trying to replicate the ecclesial model of the first Christian community. We cannot “skip over history”, as if the Lord never said or accomplished great things in the life of the Church in later centuries. Nor does it mean being excessively idealistic, thinking that there were no difficulties in that community; on the contrary, we read that the disciples argued and even quarreled among themselves, and that they did not always understand the Lord’s teachings. Going back to the origins means, instead, recovering the spirit of the first Christian community, *returning to the heart and rediscovering the core* of the faith: our relationship with Jesus and the preaching of his Gospel to the whole world. Those are the essentials! This is the joy of the Church: to evangelize.

Indeed, after the “hour” of Jesus’ death, the first disciples, like Mary Magdalene and John, after seeing the empty tomb, with great excitement rushed back to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection. Their grief at the cross turned into joy as they proclaimed Christ risen. I think too of the Apostles, about whom it was written: “Every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (*Acts 5:42*). The chief concern of Jesus’ disciples was not the prestige of the community or its ministers, its social standing or the fine points of its worship. No. They were impelled to preach and bear witness to the Gospel of Christ (cf. *Rom 1:1*), for the joy of the Church is to evangelize.

Brothers and sisters, the Maltese Church can vaunt a rich history from which great spiritual and pastoral treasures can be drawn. However, the life of the Church – let us always keep this in mind – is never merely “a past to remember”, but a “great future to build”, always in docility to God’s plans. A faith made up of received traditions, solemn celebrations, popular festivals and powerful and emotional moments cannot be enough; we need a faith built upon and constantly renewed in the personal encounter with Christ, in daily listening to his word, in active participation in the life of the Church and in authentic popular piety.

The crisis of faith, apathy in religious practice, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, and indifference shown by many young people towards the presence of God: these are not issues that we should “sugarcoat”, thinking that, all things considered, a certain religious spirit still endures, no. At times, structures can be religious, yet beneath outward appearances, faith is fading. An elegant repertoire of religious traditions does not always correspond to a vibrant faith marked by zeal for evangelization. We need to ensure that religious practices do not get reduced to relics from the past, but remain the expression of a living, open faith that spreads the joy of the Gospel, for the joy of the Church is to evangelize.

I know that, with the Synod, you have undertaken a process of renewal and I thank you for this. Brothers and sisters, now is the time to go back to the beginning, to stand beneath the cross and to look to the early Christian community. The time to be a Church concerned about friendship with Jesus and the preaching of his Gospel, not about importance and image. To be a Church centred on witness, and not certain religious customs. To be a Church that seeks to go out to meet everyone with the burning lamp of the Gospel, not to be a closed circle. Do not be afraid to set out, as you have already done, on new paths, perhaps even risky paths, of evangelization and proclamation that change lives, for the joy of the Church is to evangelize.

So let us look once more to the origins, to Mary and John at the foot of the cross. At the very source of the Church is the act of their entrustment to one another. The Lord entrusts each of them to the care of the other: John to Mary and Mary to John, with the result that, “from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (*Jn 19:27*). Going back to the beginning also means *developing the art of welcoming*. Jesus’ words from the cross, spoken to his Mother and to John, summon us to make welcome the hallmark of our discipleship. Indeed, this was no simple act of piety, whereby Jesus entrusted his Mother to John so that she would not remain alone after his death. Instead, John’s welcoming of Mary into his home was a concrete sign of how we should live the supreme commandment of love. The worship of God takes place through closeness to our brothers and sisters.

How important in the Church is fraternal love and the welcome we show to our neighbour! The Lord reminds us of this at the “hour” of the cross, in entrusting Mary and John to each other’s care. He urges the Christian community of every age not to lose sight of this priority: “Behold, your son”, “Behold, your Mother” (vv. 26.27). It is as if he said, “You have been saved by the same blood, you are one family, so welcome each other, love one another, heal each other’s wounds”. Leaving behind suspicions, divisions, rumours, gossip and mistrust. Brothers and sisters, be a “synod”, in other words, “journey together”. For God is present wherever love reigns!

Dear brothers and sisters, mutual welcome, not out of pure formality but in the name of Christ, remains a perpetual challenge. A challenge, first for our ecclesial relationships, since our mission will bear fruit if we work together in friendship and fraternal communion. You are two beautiful communities, Malta and Gozo – I don’t know which is the most important or the first – just as Mary and John were two! May the words of Jesus on the cross, then, be the polar star guiding you to welcome one another, to foster familiarity and to work in communion! Go forward, always together! Go forward, always evangelizing, for the joy of the Church is to evangelize.

Welcome is also the litmus test for assessing to what extent the Church is truly evangelical. Mary and John accept one another not in the comfortable shelter of the Upper Room, but at the foot of the cross, in that grim place where people were condemned and crucified as criminals. Nor can we accept each other only in the shelter of our beautiful churches, while outside so many of our brothers and sisters suffer, crucified by pain, poverty and violence. Yours is a crucial geographical position, overlooking the Mediterranean; you are like a magnet and port of salvation for people buffeted by the tempests of life who, for various reasons, land on your shores. It is Christ himself, who appears to you in the faces of these poor men and women. That was the experience of the Apostle Paul who, after a terrible shipwreck, was kindly welcomed by your ancestors. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “the natives... kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold” (*Acts 28:2*).

This is the Gospel we are called to put into practice: welcoming others, being “experts in humanity” and kindling fires of tender love for those who know the pain and harshness of life. In Paul’s case too, something important was born of that dramatic experience, for here Paul preached the Gospel and thereafter many preachers,

priests, missionaries and witnesses followed in his footsteps. They were moved by the Holy Spirit to evangelize and to promote the joy of the Church, which is to evangelize. I want to add a special word of gratitude to them: to the many Maltese missionaries who spread the joy of the Gospel throughout the world, to the many priests, women and men religious, and to all of you. As Bishop Teuma said, you are a small island, but one with a great heart. You are a treasure in the Church and for the Church. I repeat: You are a treasure in the Church and for the Church. To preserve that treasure, you must return to the essence of Christianity: the love of God, the driving force of our joy, which sends us forth to the world; and the love of our neighbour, which is the simplest and most attractive witness we can give before the world. In this way, you keep going forward in the journey of life, for the joy of the Church is to evangelize.

May the Lord accompany you on this path and the Holy Virgin guide your steps. May Our Lady, who asked us to pray three "Hail Marys" to remind ourselves of her maternal heart, rekindle in us, her children, the fire of mission and the desire to care for one another. May Our Lady protect and support you in the work of evangelization.
