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Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with teenagers from Italian dioceses on their pilgrimage to Rome

This afternoon, in Saint Peter's Square, Pope Francis met with teenagers from Italian dioceses on the occasion of their pilgrimage to Rome, organized by the National Service for Youth Pastoral Care of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), on the theme *#Seguimi (Follow me)*.

At 17.30, Pope Francis entered the square by popemobile and toured at length among the approximately 100,000 teenagers from all over Italy, led by their bishops and accompanied by priests, men and women religious, teachers and heads of associations, movements and communities.

After the greeting from the president of the CEI, His Eminence Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, archbishop of Perugia-Città della Pieve, the prayer vigil commenced with the reflection on and listening to the narrations by young people commenting on Chapter 21 of the Gospel of John, in the light of their experience of life.

At the end of their testimonies, the Pope delivered his address.

Pope Francis' meeting with teenagers participating in the pilgrimage concluded with a prayer for peace before the image of Our Lady *Salus Populi Romani*, the profession of faith and the Holy Father's final blessing.

The following is the Pope's address to those present in Saint Peter's Square during the prayer vigil:

Address of the Holy Father

Thank you for being here! This square has been waiting a long time to be filled with your presence, your faces, your enthusiasm. Two years ago, on 27 March, I came here alone to present to the Lord the plea of the world stricken by the pandemic. Perhaps that evening you were also in your homes in front of the television, praying together with your families. Two years have passed with the square empty, and what has happened to the

square is what happens to us when we fast: we feel like eating and, when we go to eat after fasting, we eat more; that is why it has filled up more: the square has also suffered from the fast and now it is filled with you! Today, all of you are together, coming from Italy, in the embrace of this square and in the joy of the Easter we have just celebrated.

Jesus has overcome the darkness of death. Unfortunately, the clouds that obscure our time are still thick. In addition to the pandemic, Europe is experiencing a terrible war, while injustices and violence that destroy man and the planet continue in so many regions of the earth. Often it is your peers who pay the highest price: not only is their existence compromised and made insecure, but their dreams for the future are trampled underfoot. So many brothers and sisters are still waiting for the light of Easter.

The Gospel passage we have just heard begins in the darkness of the night. Peter and the others take their boats and go fishing — and they catch nothing. What a disappointment! When we put so much energy into fulfilling our dreams, when we invest so much, like the apostles, and nothing comes of it.... But something surprising happens: at daybreak, a man appears on the shore, who was Jesus. He was waiting for them. And Jesus says to them: “There on the right side are the fish”. And the miracle of many fish takes place: the nets are filled with fish.

This can help us to think about certain moments in our lives. Life sometimes puts us to the test, makes us experience our fragility, makes us feel naked, helpless, alone. How many times in this period have you felt lonely, far from your friends? How many times have you been afraid? You should not be ashamed to say: “I am afraid of the dark!”. We are all afraid of the dark. Fears must be voiced, fears must be expressed, so that they can be driven away. Remember this: fears must be spoken. To whom? To the father, to the mother, to the friend, to the person who can help you. They must be brought to light. And when fears, which are in the darkness, go into the light, the truth breaks out. Don't be discouraged: if you are afraid, bring it into the light and it will do you good!

Darkness puts us in crisis; but the problem is how I manage this crisis: if I keep it to myself, to my heart, and don't talk about it with anyone, it doesn't work. In a crisis you have to talk, talk to a friend who can help me, to dad, mum, grandpa, grandma, to the person who can help me. Crises must be illuminated in order to overcome them.

Dear boys and girls, you don't have the experience of adults, but you do have something that we adults have sometimes lost. For example: as we get older, we adults need glasses because we have lost our sight, or sometimes we become a little deaf, we have lost our hearing.... Or, many times, the routine of life makes us lose 'our nose'; you have 'a keen nose'. Do not lose this, please! You have a keen nose for reality, and that is a great thing. The instinct that John had: as soon as he saw that gentleman there who said: “Cast the net on the right”, his instinct told him: “It is the Lord!”. He was the youngest of the apostles. You have the instinct: do not lose it! The instinct to say “this is true — this is not true — this is not right”; the instinct to find the Lord, the instinct for truth. I wish you to have John's instinct, but also Peter's courage. Peter was a bit “special”: he denied Jesus three times, but as soon as John, the youngest, said: “It is the Lord!”, he jumps into the water to meet Jesus.

Do not be ashamed of your outbursts of generosity: let your instinct lead you to generosity. Throw yourselves into life. “Eh, Father, but I don't know how to swim, I am afraid of life!”: you have someone to accompany you, look for someone to accompany you. But do not be afraid of life, please! Be afraid of death, of the death of the soul, of the death of the future, of the closure of the heart: be afraid of this. But not of life: life is beautiful, life is for living it and for giving it to others, life is for sharing it with others, not for locking it up in oneself.

I do not want to say too much, I just want to say that it is important that you move forward. Fears? Shine a light on them, voice them. Discouragement? Overcome it with courage, with someone to give you a helping hand. And you have a nose for life: do not lose it, because it is a beautiful thing.

And in times of difficulty, children call their mothers. We also call our mother, Mary. She — take note — was almost your age when she accepted her extraordinary vocation to be Jesus' mother. Nice: your age, more or

less... May she help you to answer with confidence: "Here I am!" to the Lord: "I am here, Lord: what am I to do? I am here to do good, to grow well, to help others with my insight". May Our Lady, the mother who was almost your age when she received the Angel's announcement and became pregnant, may she teach you to say: "Here I am!". And not to be afraid. Courage, and onward!

After the Blessing

May the risen Jesus be the strength of your lives: go in peace and be happy, all of you!
