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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to L'Aquila – Greeting to the victims' families, the authorities and the faithful in Piazza Duomo

At 7.50 this morning, the Holy Father Francis departed from the Vatican heliport to make a pastoral visit to L'Aquila.

Upon arrival at the athletics field in Piazza D'Armi, which took place privately, the Pope transferred by car to Piazza Duomo where he was received by His Eminence Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, metropolitan archbishop of L'Aquila, Dr. Marco Marsilio, president of the Abruzzo region, and Dr. Cinzia Teresa Torracco and Dr. Pierluigi Biondi, respectively the prefect and mayor of L'Aquila.

At 9.00, on the parvis of the Duomo, Pope Francis met with family members of the victims of the earthquake of 6 April 2009, and the authorities and citizens present addressed a greeting to him.

At the end of the meeting, accompanied by Cardinal Petrocchi, the Holy Father entered the Duomo for a private visit. He then transferred by car to the Basilica of Saint Mary in Collemaggio for the celebration of Holy Mass, the Angelus prayer, and the rite of the opening of the Holy Door.

The following is the Holy Father's greeting to those present at the meeting in Piazza Duomo:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning, and blessed Sunday!

I am pleased to be here among you, and I thank the Cardinal Archbishop for the greeting he addressed to me on behalf of you all. Together with those of you present here, I affectionately embrace all the city and diocese of L'Aquila. I thank you for your presence, and also that of the authorities, prisoners, children, everyone: the people of God.

At this time of meeting with you, in particular the relatives of the earthquake victims, I want to express my closeness to their families and to your entire community, which has faced the consequences of that tragic event with great dignity.

Firstly, I thank you for your witness of faith: despite the pain and bewilderment, which are part of our faith as pilgrims, you kept your eyes on Christ, crucified and risen again, who with his love redeemed the meaninglessness of pain and death. And I think of one of you, who wrote to me some time ago, telling me that he had lost his only two teenage children. And so, so many like this. Jesus has restored you to the arms of the Father, who does not let a single tear fall in vain, not even one! but collects them in his merciful heart.

In that heart are inscribed the names of all your loved ones, who passed from time to eternity. The communion with them is more alive than ever. Death cannot break love, the liturgy of the dead reminds us: "For your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended" (Preface I). But the pain is there, and beautiful words help, but the pain remains. And pain does not go away with words. Only proximity, friendship, affection: walking together, helping each other as brothers, and going forward. Either we are people of God, or we do not resolve painful problems such as this.

I congratulate you for the care with which you have built the Memorial Chapel. Memory is the strength of a people, and when this memory is enlightened by faith, the people do not remain prisoners of the past, but rather they journey, and they walk in the present towards the future, always staying attached to their roots, cherishing past experiences, good and bad. And with this treasure and these experiences, they go forward. You, people of L'Aquila, have demonstrated a resilient character. Rooted in your Christian and civic tradition, it has enabled you to withstand the impact of the earthquake and to undertake immediately the courageous and patient work of reconstruction.

Everything had to be rebuilt: houses, schools, churches. But, as you well know, this is done alongside the spiritual, cultural and social reconstruction of the civic and ecclesial community.

Personal and collective rebirth, after a tragedy, is a gift of Grace and also the fruit of the commitment of each person and of everyone together. I underline this "together": not in small groups, no, together, all together. It is fundamental to activate and strengthen the organic collaboration, in synergy, of institutions and associative bodies: a diligent concord, far-sighted commitment, because we are working for the children, grandchildren, for the future.

In the work of reconstruction, churches deserve particular attention. They are an asset to the community, not only in a historic or cultural sense, but also in terms of identity. Those stones are imbued with the faith and values of the people; and temples are also places that provide a driving force for its life, its hope.

And speaking of hope, I would like to greet and thank the delegation from the prisons of Abruzzo, present here. In you too I greet a sign of hope, because also in the prisons there were many, too many victims. Today here you are a sign of hope in human and social reconstruction.

I reiterate my greeting to you all, and I heartily bless you, your families and the entire citizenry. *Jemonnanzi!*
