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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.00 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 recent journey to Kazakhstan, on the occasion of the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions.

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the faithful present. He then launched a first appeal on the occasion of World Alzheimer's Day, which is held today, and a second appeal for the situation in "martyred Ukraine", inviting prayer and closeness to the Ukrainian people.

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!

Last week, from Tuesday to Thursday, I traveled to Kazakhstan, a vast country in Central Asia, for the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. I renew my gratitude to the President of the Republic and the other Authorities of Kazakhstan for the cordial welcome I was given and for the generous efforts in organizing it. I also sincerely thank the Bishops and all the collaborators for the great work they have done, and especially for the joy they have given me in being able to meet and see them all together.

As I said, the main reason for the trip was to take part in the *Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions*. This initiative has been carried out for 20 years by the Authorities of the country, which presents itself to the world as a place of meeting and dialogue, in this case at the religious level, and thus as a leading player in

promoting peace and human brotherhood. It was the seventh edition of this congress. A country that has been independent for 30 years has already had seven editions of these congresses, one every three years. This means putting religions at the center of efforts to build a world where we listen to each other and respect each other in diversity. And this is not relativism, no, it is listening and respecting. And credit for this must be given to the Kazakh government, which, having freed itself from the yoke of the atheistic regime, now proposes... without confusing or separating them, while clearly condemning fundamentalism and extremism. It is a balanced position and one of unity.

The Congress discussed and approved the *Final Declaration*, which stands in continuity with the one signed in Abu Dhabi in February 2019 on human fraternity. I like to interpret this step forward as the fruit of a journey that starts from afar: I am thinking, of course, of the historic Interfaith Meeting for Peace convened by St. John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, much criticized by people who lacked vision; I am thinking of the far-sighted gaze of St. John XXIII and St. Paul VI; and also that of great souls of other religions – I limit myself to recalling Mahatma Gandhi. But how can we not remember so many martyrs, men and women of all ages, languages and nations, who paid with their lives for their fidelity to the God of peace and fraternity? We know: solemn moments are important, but then it is the daily commitment, it is the concrete witness that builds a better world for all.

In addition to the Congress, this trip gave me the opportunity to meet the Authorities of Kazakhstan and the Church living there.

After visiting the President of the Republic – who I thank again for his kindness – we went to the new Concert Hall, where I was able to speak to the political Leaders, representatives of civil society, and the Diplomatic Corps. I emphasized Kazakhstan's vocation to be a country of encounter: in fact, about one hundred and fifty ethnic groups – one hundred and fifty ethnic groups! – coexist there and more than eighty languages are spoken. This vocation, which is due to its geographical characteristics and history – this vocation of being a country of encounter, of culture, of language – has been welcomed and embraced as a path, which deserves to be encouraged and supported. I hoped as well that the construction of an increasingly mature democracy, capable of effectively responding to the needs of society as a whole, could continue. This is an arduous task, which takes time, but already it must be acknowledged that Kazakhstan has made very positive choices, such as saying “no” to nuclear weapons and making good energy and environmental policies. This was courageous. At a time when this tragic war brings us to the point where some people are thinking of nuclear weapons, that madness, this country says “no” to nuclear weapons from the very beginning

As for the Church, I was so glad to meet a community of happy, joyful people filled with enthusiasm. Catholics are few in that vast country. But this condition, if lived with faith, can bring evangelical fruits: first of all, the blessedness of littleness, of being leaven, salt, and light relying solely on the Lord and not on some form of human relevance. Moreover, numerical scarcity invites the development of relationships with Christians of other denominations, and also fraternity with all. So a small flock, yes, but open, not closed, not defensive, open and trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit, who blows freely where and how He wills. We also remembered that grey part, the martyrs, the martyrs of that holy People of God, because they suffered decades of atheistic oppression, until liberation thirty years ago, men and women who suffered so much for the faith during the long period of persecution. Murdered, tortured, imprisoned for the faith.

With this small but joyful flock, we celebrated the Eucharist, also at Nur-Sultan, in the Expo 2017 plaza, surrounded by ultra-modern architecture. It was the feast of the Holy Cross. And this leads us to reflect: in a world in which progress and regression are intertwined, the Cross of Christ remains the anchor of salvation: a sign of hope that does not disappoint because it is founded on the love of God, merciful and faithful. Our gratitude goes out to Him for this journey, as does our prayer that it will be rich in fruit for the future of Kazakhstan and for the life of the pilgrim Church in that land. Thank you.

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Denmark, Norway, Jerusalem and the United States of America. In a particular way my greeting goes to the new seminarians of the Venerable English College as they begin their priestly formation here in Rome. I invoke upon each of you, and your families, joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Appeals of the Holy Father

Today is World Alzheimer's Day, a disease that affects so many people, who are often pushed to the margins of society because of this condition. Let us pray for those suffering from Alzheimer's, for their families, and for those who lovingly care for them, that they may be increasingly supported and helped. In this prayer I also associate the men and women dealing with haemodialysis, dialysis, and transplantation who are represented here.

And also I would like to mention the terrible situation in tormented Ukraine. Cardinal Krajewski went there for the fourth time. Yesterday he telephoned me, he is spending time there, helping in the area of Odessa and bringing closeness. He told me about the pain of this people, the savagery, the monstrosities, the tortured corpses they find. Let us unite ourselves to this people who are so noble and martyred.
