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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Kingdom of Bahrain on the occasion of the “Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence” (3 to 6 November 2022) – Ecumenical Meeting and Prayer for Peace at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia

Ecumenical Meeting and Prayer for Peace at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia

At 17.45 this afternoon (15.45 in Rome), at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia, the Ecumenical Meeting and Prayer for Peace were held.

Upon arrival, the Holy Father Francis was received at the entrance to the Cathedral by Bishop Paul Hinder, O.F.M. Cap., apostolic administrator of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, and by the parish priest, who brought him the cross and the holy water for aspersion. The Pope then proceeded to the chapel dedicated to Our Lady, where three children offered him flowers, which he presented to the Virgin Mary. After a moment of silent prayer, the Pope signed the Book of Honour. The singing of the entrance hymn was then followed by the liturgical greeting, the oration and the reading. The Holy Father then delivered his address.

At the end, the Prayer of Peace of the various representatives of the Christian Churches and communities was read, and after the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer and the final blessing, the hymn of the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis was sung. After the group photograph with the religious leaders, the Holy Father returned by car to the papal residence, where he dined in private.

The following is the Holy Father’s address, delivered during the ecumenical meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Royal Highness,

Dear Mr Minister of Justice,

We feel grateful and honoured by your presence.

“We are Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabians, and we hear them telling in their own tongues the mighty works of God” (*Acts 2:9-11*).

Your Holiness, dear brother Bartholomew, dear brothers and sisters, these words seem written for us today: from many peoples and languages, from many places and different rites, we have all assembled here because of the mighty works accomplished by God! – May we live in peace, like on that Pentecost morning when no one knew what was happening. In Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, though they came from many places, all felt that they were united in one Spirit. Now as then, the variety of origins and languages is not a problem but a resource. As an ancient author wrote: “If someone should say to one of us: ‘You received the Holy Spirit, why then do you not speak in all languages?’, we should answer: ‘I do speak in all languages, for I am a member of the body of Christ, the Church, which speaks all languages’” (*Sermon by a sixth-century African author*. PL 65, 743).

Brothers and sisters, this also applies to us, for “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (*1 Cor 12:13*). Sadly, by our divisions, we have wounded the Lord’s holy body, yet the Holy Spirit, who joins all the members together, is greater than our divisions according to the flesh. Consequently it is right to say that what unites us far exceeds what divides us and that, the more we journey according to the Spirit, the more we will be led to desire and, with the help of God, restore full unity among us.

Let us return to the text about Pentecost. In meditating on it, I was struck by two things that appear helpful for our journey of communion. I would like to share them with you. They are *unity in diversity* and *witness of life*.

First, *unity in diversity*. At Pentecost, the Acts of the Apostles tell us, the disciples “were all together in one place” (2:1). We should notice how the Spirit, who rested on each one, nevertheless chose a moment when they were all together. They could also worship God and do good to others separately, but when they came together in unity, the doors to God’s work were opened wide. The Christian people are called to come together so that the marvellous works of God may be accomplished in our midst. Our presence here in Bahrain as a little flock of Christ, scattered in various places and confessions, helps make us feel the need for unity, for sharing the faith. Just as on this archipelago firm connections exist between the islands, may it be also among us so that we are not isolated but united in fraternal communion.

Brothers and sisters, I ask: How do we make unity grow if history, force of habit, commitments and distances seem to draw us elsewhere? What is the “gathering place,” the “spiritual cenacle” of our communion? It is *the praise of God*, which the Spirit stirs up in everyone. Prayer of praise does not isolate or close us in on ourselves and our own needs, but draws us into the heart of the Father and thus connects us to all our brothers and sisters. Prayer of praise and adoration is the highest form of prayer. Free and unconditional, it draws down the joy of the Spirit, purifies the heart, and restores harmony and unity. It is the antidote to sadness and the temptation to lament our interior inadequacy and our outwardly small numbers. Those who praise the Father are not disheartened by the smallness of the flock, but rejoice in the grandeur of being God’s children. Prayer of praise allows the Spirit to fill us with his consolation; it becomes a wondrous remedy for loneliness and homesickness. It allows us to feel the closeness of the Good Shepherd, even at times when we feel the absence of our pastors, as frequently happens in these lands. Precisely in our own deserts, the Lord loves to open up new and undiscovered paths and makes fountains of living water spring up (cf. *Is 43:19*). Praise and worship leads us there, to the fountains of the Spirit, bringing us back to the origins, to unity.

It is good for you to persevere in the praise of God, so as to be all the more a sign of unity for all Christians! Maintain the fine habit of making your church buildings available also to other communities for the worship of the one Lord. For not only here on earth, but also in heaven, there is a song of praise that brings us together, sung by the many Christian martyrs of various denominations. How many of them have there been in these recent years, in the Middle East and throughout the world, how many! They now make up a single starry sky, guiding

our way as we journey through the deserts of history. We have the same goal: all of us are called to the fullness of communion in God.

Let us remember, though, that the unity to which we are journeying is a unity *in diversity*. It is important to keep this in mind: Unity is not “sameness”, no, it is unity in diversity. The Pentecost account relates that each person heard the Apostles speak “in his or her own language” (Acts 2:6): the Spirit does not invent a new language for everyone, but allows each to speak in other languages (cf. v. 4), so that everyone can hear his or her own language spoken by others (cf. v. 11). In a word, he does not imprison us in uniformity, but disposes us to accept one another in our differences. That happens when people live by the Spirit. They learn to encounter each of their brothers and sisters in faith as a part of the body to which they themselves belong. That is the spirit of the ecumenical journey.

Dear friends, let us ask ourselves how we are advancing on this journey. As a pastor, a minister, a member of the Christian faithful, am I open to the action of the Spirit? Do I see ecumenism as a burden, as a further commitment, as an institutional obligation, or as the heartfelt desire of Jesus that all be “one” (Jn 17:21), a mission that springs from the Gospel? Specifically, what do I do for those brothers and sisters who believe in Christ and are not “mine”? Do I get to know them, do I seek them out, do I show interest in them? Do I keep my distance and stand on formality, or do I try to understand their history and appreciate their distinctiveness, without considering it an insurmountable obstacle?

After *unity in diversity*, we now turn to the second element: *the witness of life*. At Pentecost, the disciples are “opened up”, transformed, and go forth from the Upper Room. They will then go out to all the world. Jerusalem, which had seemed their point of arrival, becomes the starting point of an extraordinary adventure. The fear that had kept them at home now becomes a distant memory: henceforth they go everywhere, not to stand out from others, much less to revolutionize the order of society and the world, but by their lives to radiate everywhere the beauty of God’s love. Our message is not so much an address made with words, but a witness offered by deeds. The faith is not a privilege to be claimed, but a gift to be shared. As an ancient text put it: Christians “do not live in particular cities, they do not use some strange language, and they do not adopt a special way of life... Every foreign region is their homeland... They live on earth but have their citizenship in heaven. They observe established laws, but with their way of life, they are above the laws. They love everyone” (*Epistle to Diognetus*, V). *They love everyone*: this is the badge of Christians, the essence of our witness. Living here in Bahrain has enabled many of you to rediscover and practise the utter simplicity of charity. I think of the assistance you provide to our brothers and sisters who arrive from elsewhere, of your humble Christian presence and the witness you daily bear in the workplace by your understanding and patience, joy and meekness, kindness and a spirit of dialogue. In a word: peace.

It will also do us good to take a look at the way we bear witness, since with the passage of time we can weaken in our enthusiasm for reflecting Jesus through the spirit of the Beatitudes, the consistency and goodness of our lives, and our peaceful conduct. Let us ask, now that we are praying together for peace: are we truly people of peace? Do we desire to make the meekness of Jesus present everywhere, asking nothing in return? Do we make our own, bearing them in our hearts and in our prayers, the struggles, hurts and conflicts that we see all around us?

Brothers and sisters, I wanted to share with you these thoughts on unity, which praise strengthens, and on witness, which charity confirms. Unity and witness are both essential. We cannot truly witness to the God of love unless we are united among ourselves in accordance with his will, and we cannot be united by remaining apart, without openness to witness, without expanding the boundaries of our interests and of our communities in the name of the Spirit who embraces every language and reaches out to everyone. Permit me to say one more thing: the Holy Spirit created a great diversity that seemed like a great chaos. Yet the same Spirit that gives different kinds of gifts also creates unity, but unity in the sense of harmony. “The Spirit is harmony”, said one of the great Fathers of the Church: “*Ipse harmonia est*”, he himself is harmony. We pray that this harmony may dwell among us. The Spirit unites us and sends us; he gathers us in communion and sends us on mission. Let us entrust to him in prayer our shared journey, and beg the outpouring of his grace upon us, in a new Pentecost that will open new horizons and quicken the pace of our journey of unity and peace.