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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in South Sudan (Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace in South Sudan) (31 January to 5 February 2023) – Meeting with Bishops at the headquarters of the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (CENCO)

Meeting with Bishops at the headquarters of the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo (CENCO)

This morning, after celebrating Holy Mass privately, the Holy Father Francis took leave of the staff and benefactors of the apostolic nunciature of Kinshasa, and went to the headquarters of the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO), which brings together the bishops of the 48 ecclesiastical circumscriptions of the country and is a member of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, for a meeting with the Bishops.

At 8.30, introduced by the words of welcome from the President of the Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa, metropolitan of Kisangani, the Pope delivered his address. At the end of the meeting, after the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the blessing, the Holy Father posed for a group photo with the bishops.

The Pope then transferred by car to N'djili International Airport in Kinshasa, for the farewell ceremony from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father Francis during the meeting with bishops of the CENCO:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brother Bishops, good morning!

I am pleased to meet with you and I offer you my heartfelt gratitude for your warm welcome. I thank Archbishop

Utembi Tapa for his kind words of greeting in your name. I am grateful for the way in which you courageously proclaim the consolation of the Lord, walking in the midst of your people and sharing their hardships and their hopes.

It has been a joy for me to spend these days in your country which, with its large forest, represents the “green heart” of Africa, a lung for the whole world. The importance of this natural heritage reminds us that we are called to protect the beauty of creation and to defend it from the wounds inflicted by greed and selfishness. This immense verdant expanse that is your forest is also an image that speaks to our Christian life. As a Church we need to breathe the pure air of the Gospel, to dispel the tainted air of worldliness, to safeguard the young heart of faith. That is how I imagine the African Church and that is how I see this Congolese Church: a young, dynamic and joyful Church, motivated by missionary zeal, by the good news that God loves us and that Jesus is Lord. Yours is a Church present in the lived history of this people, deeply rooted in its daily life, and in the forefront of charity. It is a community capable of attracting others, filled with infectious enthusiasm and therefore, like your forests, with plenty of “oxygen”. Thank you, because you are a lung that helps the universal Church breathe!

It is not good to start a paragraph with the word “sadly”, but I have to do it! Sadly, I know that the Christian community of this land also has another face. Indeed, your young, shining and noble face also shows pain and weariness, and at times fear and discouragement. It is the face of a Church that suffers for its people, a heart in which the life of the people, with its joys and trials, beats anxiously. A Church that is a visible sign of Christ, who even today is rejected, condemned and reviled in the many crucified people of our world; a Church that weeps with their tears, and, like Jesus, also wants to dry those tears. A Church concerned to embrace people’s material and spiritual wounds and make the living and healing water from the side of Christ flow over them.

With you, dear brothers, I see Jesus suffering in the history of this people, a people crucified and oppressed, devastated by ruthless violence, marred by innocent suffering, forced to live with the tainted waters of corruption and injustice that pollute society, and to suffer poverty in so many of its children. Yet at the same time, I see a people that has not lost hope, but embraces the faith with enthusiasm and looks to its pastors. I see a people able to turn to the Lord and entrust themselves into his hands, so that the peace for which they long, although stifled by exploitation, partisan selfishness, the venom of conflict and the manipulation of truth, can finally come as a gift from on high.

This raises the question: how do we carry out our ministry in this situation? As I thought of you, the shepherds of God’s holy People, the story of Jeremiah came to mind. Jeremiah was a prophet called to carry out his own mission at a dramatic time in the history of Israel, amid injustices, detestable practices and sufferings. He spent his life proclaiming that God never abandons his people and pursues plans of peace even in situations that seem lost and irredeemable. Yet above all, Jeremiah experienced this consoling proclamation of faith personally; he was the first to experience *God’s closeness*. Only in this way was he able to bring to others a courageous *prophecy of hope*. Your episcopal ministry is also carried out between these two realities, about which I would now like to speak: the *closeness of God* and *prophecy for the people*.

The first thing I would say is, let yourselves be touched and consoled by the *closeness of God*. He is close to us. The first thing that the Lord told Jeremiah was this: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (*Jer 1:5*). This is a declaration of love that God writes upon the heart of each of us, one that no one can erase and that, amid the storms of life, proves a source of comfort. It is important for us, who have been called to be shepherds of God’s People, to rely on this closeness of the Lord, “to form ourselves in prayer”, and to *spend a good deal of time in his presence*. Only in this way do the people entrusted to us draw closer to the Good Shepherd and only in this way do we ourselves become shepherds, for without him we can do nothing (cf. *Jn 15:5*). Otherwise we would be entrepreneurs, “masters”, but not following the Lord’s call. Without Him we can do nothing. May we never think of ourselves as self-sufficient, much less see in the episcopate an opportunity to advance in society and to exercise power. That is the ugly spirit of “careerism”. Above all else, may we never open the door to the spirit of worldliness, for this makes us interpret ministry according to the criteria of our own advantage. It makes us become cold and detached in administering what is entrusted to us. It leads us to use our role to serve ourselves instead of serving others, and to neglect the one relationship that matters, that of humble and daily prayer. Let us remember that worldliness is the worst thing that can happen to the Church, the worst. I have always been moved by the end of Cardinal De Lubac’s book on the Church, the last three or four pages, where

he puts it like this: spiritual worldliness is the worst thing that can happen, even worse than the time of Popes who were worldly and had concubines. It is the worst thing. And worldliness is always lurking. So let us be careful!

Dear brother Bishops, let us cherish our closeness to the Lord, in order to be credible and eloquent witnesses to him and his love in the midst of our people. It is through us that he wants to anoint them with the oil of consolation and of hope! You are the voice with which God wants to say to the Congolese people: "You are a people holy to the Lord your God" (*Deut 7:6*). Proclaiming the Gospel, enlivening pastoral life and exercising leadership cannot become ideas having little to do with the reality of daily life. Instead, they must touch wounds and communicate God's closeness, so that people can realize their dignity as his beloved children and learn to walk with their heads held high, never lowering them in the face of humiliation and oppression. Through you, this people has the grace of hearing, now addressed to them, the same words that the Lord spoke to Jeremiah: "You are a blessed people: before I formed you in the womb, I thought of you, knew you and loved you". When we cherish our closeness to God, we feel drawn towards our people and will always feel compassion for those entrusted to our care. The attitude of compassion is not an emotion; it is *suffering with* them. Encouraged and strengthened by the Lord, let us become in turn channels of consolation and reconciliation for others, to heal the wounds of those who suffer, to ease the pain of those who weep, to lift up the poor and to set individuals free from manifold forms of slavery and oppression. In a word, our closeness to God makes us *prophets for the people*, sowers of his saving word in the wounded history of their country.

To consider the second point, *prophecy for the people*, let us look once again at the experience of Jeremiah. After receiving God's loving and consoling word, he was called to become a "prophet to the nations" (cf. *Jer 1:5*), sent to bring light into the darkness, to bear witness in an environment of violence and corruption. Jeremiah, who devoured the word of the Lord, which became the joy and the delight of his heart (cf. *Jer 15:16*), tells us that the same word awakened within him an unbridled restlessness and led him to reach out to others so that they too would be touched by God's presence. He writes: "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (*Jer 20:9*). We cannot keep God's word to ourselves, we cannot restrict its power: it is a fire that burns away our apathy and kindles in us the desire to enlighten those in darkness. The word of God is a fire that *burns within* and impels us to *go forth!* This, then, is what we are as bishops: men set afire by the word of God, sent forth with apostolic zeal towards the People of God!

Yet – we can ask ourselves – what does this prophetic proclamation of the word, this fiery passion, entail? The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (*Jer 1:9-10*). Those are powerful verbs: *to pluck up and to break down*, and then *to build and to plant*. They have to do with cooperating in a new chapter of history that God desires to bring about in the midst of a world of perversity and injustice. You are called to keep making your prophetic voice heard, so that consciences can feel challenged and each person can take an active and responsible role in building a different future. We are called, then, to *pluck up* the poisonous plants of hatred and selfishness, anger, resentment and violence; to *break down* the altars erected to money and corruption; to *build* a coexistence based on justice, truth and peace; and finally, to *plant* the seeds of rebirth, so that tomorrow's Congo will truly be what the Lord dreams of: a blessed and happy land, no longer exploited, oppressed and drenched in blood.

At the same time, let us be careful: we are not talking about political activity. Christian prophecy becomes incarnate in a wide variety of political and social activities, yet that is not generally the task of Bishops and pastors, which is to proclaim the word, awakening consciences, denouncing evil and encouraging those who are broken-hearted and lacking hope. "Comfort, comfort my people: this theme that appears again and again is an invitation from the Lord: Comfort the people. "Comfort, comfort my people". It is a proclamation made not only in words but also through closeness and personal witness. Closeness, above all, to priests, for priests are those closest to the Bishop, concern for pastoral workers and encouragement to work together in a synodal spirit. And witness, since the Church's pastors must first and foremost be credible, particularly in their work of fostering communion, in their moral life and in their administration of goods. In this regard, it is essential to create harmony, without standing on a pedestal or showing harshness, but by setting a good example in mutual support and forgiveness, and working together as models of fraternity, peace and evangelical simplicity. May it never be the case that, while others are suffering from hunger, it could be said of you: "they didn't care; some went to their

fields, and some about their own business” (cf. *Mt 22:5*). No, please, let us leave business affairs out of the Lord’s vineyard! A shepherd cannot be an entrepreneur, he cannot! Let us be shepherds and servants of the people of God, not administrators of things, not entrepreneurs but pastors! The governance of the Bishop must be that of a pastor; in front of the flock, in the midst of the flock, and behind the flock. In front of the flock to point out the way; in the midst of the flock to have the smell of the sheep and not to lose it; behind the flock to help those who are going more slowly, and also to leave the flock alone for a bit to see where it finds good pasture. The shepherd must move in these three directions.

Dear brother Bishops, I have shared with you what I felt in my heart. Foster your own closeness to the Lord so that you can be prophetic signs of his compassion for your people. I urge you not to neglect dialogue with God or to let the flame of prophecy be extinguished by an ambiguous relationship to the powers that be, or by a complacent and routine life. In situations of injustice and suffering, the Gospel demands that we raise our voices. We take a risk when we raise our voices in response to what God asks of us. One of your brothers did so, the Servant of God Archbishop Christophe Munzihirwa, a courageous shepherd and prophetic voice, who defended his people by offering his life. The day before he died, he released a radio message to everyone, saying: “What can we still do these days? Let us remain firm in faith. We trust that God will not abandon us and that a small ray of hope will arise for us somewhere. God will not abandon us if we are committed to respecting the life of our neighbours, whatever their ethnicity”. The next day he was killed in a city square, yet the seeds he planted in this land, along with many others, will bear fruit. It is good to remember with gratitude the great pastors who marked the history of your country and your Church, those who preached the Gospel to you and went before you in faith. Dear brothers, they are the solid roots that strengthen you in evangelical zeal. Here I think of the benefit I personally derived from knowing Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya.

Dear brothers, do not be afraid to be *prophets of hope for the people*, concordant voices of the Lord’s consolation, witnesses and joyful heralds of the Gospel, apostles of justice, Samaritans of solidarity. Be witnesses of mercy and reconciliation amid the violence unleashed not only by the exploitation of resources and by ethnic and tribal conflicts, but also and above all by the dark power of the evil one, the enemy of God and humanity. At the same time, never grow discouraged: *the crucified Lord is risen*, Jesus has triumphed and has already overcome the world (cf. *Jn 16:33*). He now wants to shine forth in you, in your precious work, in your fruitful sowing of peace! Dear brothers, I want to thank you for your ministry, your pastoral zeal and your witness.

And now, at the end of my journey, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to you and to all those who worked to prepare for it. You have had the patience to wait for a new year, you are good! Thank you for this! You had to work twice as hard, because the first visit was cancelled, but I know that you will forgive the Pope! Thank you for everything! Next June, you will celebrate the National Eucharistic Congress at Lubumbashi. Jesus is truly present and active in the Eucharist; there he reconciles and heals, consoles and unites, enlightens and transforms; there he inspires and sustains your ministry and makes it fruitful. May the presence of Jesus, the Shepherd who is meek and humble of heart, the victor over evil and death, transform this great country and always be your joy and your hope! I bless you with all my heart.

I want to add one more thing: I said “be merciful”. Mercy. Always forgive. When a member of the faithful comes for confession, he or she comes to seek forgiveness, to seek the Father’s caress. And we, pointing an accusatory finger, say: “How many times? And how did you do it?...”. No, not this. Forgive. Always. “But I don’t know..., because the code tells me...”. We have to observe the code, because it is important, yet the heart of the shepherd goes beyond! Take a risk. Take a risk on the side of forgiveness. Always. Always forgive in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this way, you will sow forgiveness for society as a whole.

I bless you with all my heart. And I ask you, please, to continue to pray for me, because this job is a bit difficult! But I entrust myself to your prayers. Thank you.
