APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO KENYA, UGANDA AND THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
(25-30 NOVEMBER 2015)

OPENING OF THE HOLY DOOR AT THE CATHEDRAL OF BANGUI AND HOLY MASS WITH PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS, CATECHISTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Cathedral of Bangui (Central African Republic)
First Sunday of Advent, 29 November 2015

[Multimedia]

WORDS OF THE HOLY FATHER BEFORE OPENING THE HOLY DOOR

Today Bangui becomes the spiritual capital of the world. The Holy Year of Mercy starts early in this land of Africa. A land which has suffered for years from war and hatred, lack of understanding, lack of peace; in this land of sufferings there are many countries bearing the cross of war. Bangui now becomes the spiritual capital of prayer for the Father's mercy. Let us all implore peace, mercy, reconciliation, forgiveness and love. For Bangui, for the entire Central African Republic, for the whole world, for those countries experiencing war, let us ask for peace! Now, all together, let us ask for love and peace. All together: *Doyé Siriri!*

And with this prayer we now inaugurate the Holy Year, here, today, in this spiritual capital of the world!

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

On this first Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season of joyful expectation of the Saviour and a symbol of Christian hope, God has brought me here among you, in this land, while the universal Church is preparing for the opening of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which we inaugurated here today. I am especially pleased that my pastoral visit coincides with the opening of this Jubilee Year in your country. From this cathedral I reach out, in mind and heart, and with great affection, to all the priests, consecrated men and women, and pastoral workers of the nation, who are spiritually

united with us at this moment. Through you, I would greet all the people of the Central African Republic: the sick, the elderly, those who have experienced life's hurts. Some of them are perhaps despairing and listless, asking only for alms, the alms of bread, the alms of justice, the alms of attention and goodness. All of us are looking for God's grace, for the alms of peace.

But like the Apostles Peter and John on their way to the Temple, who had neither gold nor silver to give to the paralytic in need, I have come to offer God's strength and power; for these bring us healing, set us on our feet and enable us to embark on a new life, to "go across to the other side" (cf. *Lk* 8:22).

Jesus does not make us cross to the other side alone; instead, he asks us to make the crossing with him, as each of us responds to his or her own specific vocation. We need to realize that making this crossing can only be done with him, by freeing ourselves of divisive notions of family and blood in order to build a Church which is God's family, open to everyone, concerned for those most in need. This presupposes closeness to our brothers and sisters; it implies a spirit of communion. It is not primarily a question of financial means; it is enough just to share in the life of God's people, in accounting for the hope which is in us (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15), in testifying to the infinite mercy of God who, as the Responsorial Psalm of this Sunday's liturgy makes clear, is "good [and] instructs sinners in the way" (*Ps* 24:8). Jesus teaches us that our heavenly Father "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good" (*Mt* 5:45). Having experienced forgiveness ourselves, we must forgive others in turn. This is our fundamental vocation: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt* 5:48).

One of the essential characteristics of this vocation to perfection is the love of our enemies, which protects us from the temptation to seek revenge and from the spiral of endless retaliation. Jesus placed special emphasis on this aspect of the Christian testimony (cf. *Mt* 5:46-47). Those who evangelize must therefore be first and foremost practitioners of forgiveness, specialists in reconciliation, experts in mercy. This is how we can help our brothers and sisters to "cross to the other side" – by showing them the secret of our strength, our hope, and our joy, all of which have their source in God, for they are grounded in the certainty that he is in the boat with us. As he did with the apostles at the multiplication of the loaves, so too the Lord entrusts his gifts to us, so that we can go out and distribute them everywhere, proclaiming his reassuring words: "Behold, the days are coming when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (*Jer* 33:14).

In the readings of this Sunday's liturgy, we can see different aspects of this salvation proclaimed by God; they appear as signposts to guide us on our mission. First of all, the happiness promised by God is presented as justice. Advent is a time when we strive to open our hearts to receive the Saviour, who alone is just and the sole Judge able to give to each his or her due. Here as elsewhere, countless men and women thirst for respect, for justice, for equality, yet see no positive signs on the horizon. These are the ones to whom he comes to bring the gift of his justice (cf. *Jer*

33:15). He comes to enrich our personal and collective histories, our dashed hopes and our sterile yearnings. And he sends us to proclaim, especially to those oppressed by the powerful of this world or weighed down by the burden of their sins, that "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it shall be called, 'The Lord is our righteousness'" (*Jer* 33:16). Yes, God is righteousness; God is justice. This, then, is why we Christians are called in the world to work for a peace founded on justice.

The salvation of God which we await is also flavoured with love. In preparing for the mystery of Christmas, we relive the pilgrimage which prepared God's people to receive the Son, who came to reveal that God is not only righteousness, but also and above all love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8). In every place, even and especially in those places where violence, hatred, injustice and persecution hold sway, Christians are called to give witness to this God who is love. In encouraging the priests, consecrated men and woman, and committed laity who, in this country live, at times heroically, the Christian virtues, I realize that the distance between this demanding ideal and our Christian witness is at times great. For this reason I echo the prayer of Saint Paul: "Brothers and sisters, may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men and women" (*1 Th* 3:12). Thus what the pagans said of the early Christians will always remain before us like a beacon: "See how they love one another, how they truly love one another" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, 7).

Finally, the salvation proclaimed by God has an invincible power which will make it ultimately prevail. After announcing to his disciples the terrible signs that will precede his coming, Jesus concludes: "When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (*Lk* 21:28). If Saint Paul can speak of a love which "grows and overflows", it is because Christian witness reflects that irresistible power spoken of in the Gospel. It is amid unprecedented devastation that Jesus wishes to show his great power, his incomparable glory (cf. *Lk* 21:27) and the power of that love which stops at nothing, even before the falling of the heavens, the conflagration of the world or the tumult of the seas. God is stronger, more powerful, than all else. This conviction gives to the believer serenity, courage and the strength to persevere in good amid the greatest hardships. Even when the powers of Hell are unleashed, Christians must rise to the summons, their heads held high, and be ready to brave blows in this battle over which God will have the last word. And that word will be one of love and peace!

To all those who make unjust use of the weapons of this world, I make this appeal: lay down these instruments of death! Arm yourselves instead with righteousness, with love and mercy, the authentic guarantors of peace. As followers of Christ, dear priests, religious and lay pastoral workers, here in this country, with its suggestive name, situated in the heart of Africa and called to discover the Lord as the true centre of all that is good, your vocation is to incarnate the very heart of God in the midst of your fellow citizens. May the Lord deign to "strengthen your hearts in holiness, that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (*1 Th* 3:13). Reconciliation, forgiveness, love and peace! Amen.

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