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## The Pope answers questions from journalists on the return flight from Armenia

Vatican City, 26 June 2016 – During his return flight from Armenia to Italy, the Pope, as usual, responded to questions from some of the journalists who accompanied him on the aircraft, beginning with an Armenian reporter who wanted to know about the Holy Father's impressions, and his message and prayers for the Armenian people.

The Pope answered that he hoped for justice and peace for the Armenian people, a "courageous people": "I know that many work for this and I too was very glad, last week, when I saw a photograph of President Putin with the two presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan: at least they are talking. And also with Turkey: the president of the Republic, in his welcome address, spoke clearly. He had the courage to say 'let's agree, let's forgive each other and look to the future'. This takes great courage".

He then reiterated that the Armenian people have suffered greatly and that the icon of this is "a life of stone and a tenderness of a mother. It has carried crosses, but stone crosses - but it has not lost its tenderness, art, music, those 'suspended chords', so difficult to understand and with great geniality. A people who has suffered so much in its history and only faith ... has kept it on its feet. The fact is that it was the first Christian nation is not enough: it was the first Christian nation because the Lord blessed it, because it had the saints, martyrs, bishops ... and therefore, with her resistance Armenia has made herself a "stony skin", let's say, but has not lost the tenderness of a maternal heart. Armenia is also a mother".

The second question was again from an Armenian representative, regarding the Pope's upcoming visit to Azerbaijan, and what the Pope and the Holy See may do to promote reconciliation between this country and Turkey.

"I will speak to the Azerbaijanis of the truth of what I have seen, of what I have felt and I will also encourage them. I have met the Azerbaijani president and I have spoken with him. I will also say that not making peace over a little piece of land – which is not a big deal – is something dark, is it not? But I say this to all the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis... Possibly, they can't agree on the ways of making peace, and on this they need to work. But I don't know what else to say... I will say what comes to my heart at the time, but always in a positive way, seeking viable solutions that work.

A French journalist then asked why Francis had decided to add the word “genocide” to his address at the presidential palace, and whether he thought that touching on such a painful theme would be useful for peace in such a complicated region.

“In Argentina, when we spoke of the Armenian extermination, we always used the word ‘genocide’”, explained the Pope. “I didn’t know another. At the cathedral in Buenos Aires, we put a stone cross in the third altar on the left, in memory of Armenian genocide. Two Armenian archbishops, the Catholic and the Apostolic, came to inaugurate it. ... I do not know another word for it. ... When I arrived in Rome, I heard another expression: ‘The Great Evil’ or the ‘terrible tragedy’, but in Armenian, I don’t know how to say it... and they tell me that no, that the word genocide is offensive, and that you must say something else. I have always spoke of three genocides of the last century: the first was the Armenian, then that of Hitler, and finally that of Stalin ... there are smaller ones, another in Africa [Rwanda] but within the orbit of the two great wars there are these three... I’ve asked why... ‘Some feel like it’s not true, that there wasn’t a genocide’. A lawyer told me that the word ‘genocide’ is a technical term, that is has a technical definition and is not a synonym for ‘extermination’. ‘You can say extermination, but declaring a genocide implies reparation’. ... Last year, when I was preparing the speech, I saw that St John Paul II had used the word, that he used both: ‘Great Evil’ and ‘genocide’. I cited it in quotation marks and it was not well received. A statement was made by the Turkish government. A few days later Turkey withdrew its ambassador – a good person, a top ambassador – to Ankara; he returned three months ago. We had an ‘ambassadorial fast’. They had the right to do so, we all have the right to protest. It is true that in the beginning this word was not present in the address. I will answer as to why I added it. After having heard the tone of the president’s speech, and also with my past with this word, and having said this word last year in St. Peter’s publicly, it would have sounded strange not to say at least the same thing. But there, I wanted to underscore something else, and also said: ‘in this genocide, as in the other two, the great international powers looked in the other direction’. And this was the accusation. In the Second World War some powers, which had photographed the train lines that led to Auschwitz had the possibility to bomb and did not do so. An example: in the context of the First War, when there was the problem of the Armenians, and in the context of the Second War when was the problem of Hitler and Stalin and after Yalta of the lagers – no one speaks about it? We must underline this, and ask the historical question: why didn’t you do this, you, the powers? I do not accuse, I ask a question. It’s curious. We have spoken about the war, about many things... but not that people... and I don’t know if it is true, but I would like to know if it is true that when Hitler persecuted the Jews, one of the words, of the things he may have said was ‘Well, who remembers the Armenians today? Let’s do the same with the Jews’. I don’t know if it is true, perhaps it is hearsay. Perhaps historians will research this and see if it’s true. I think I have answered your question. But I never said this word with offensive intent, but rather objectively”.

An Argentine journalist asked whether it was true that at this time there is a shared Petrine ministry, with one active Pope and one contemplative Pope.

The Holy Father, laughing, commented that there was a time in the Church when there were three Popes, but that Pope Benedict is an Emeritus, as he had clearly affirmed on 11 February 2013 when he announced his resignation so as to retire and help the Church with prayer, as he continues to do in the monastery. “For me he is the Pope Emeritus. He is a wise grandfather. He is the man that protects my back with his prayer”. In this regard he noted that on one occasion he publicly thanked Benedict XVI for having opened the door to Popes emeriti, recalling that even just seventy years ago bishops emeriti did not exist. “Courageously, and with prayer and also with science and theology he decided to open this door and I believe that this is good for the Church”. However, he added that there is only one Pope, although they could eventually become like bishops emeriti.

The next question, posed by a Russian correspondent, concerned his opinion of the Pan-Orthodox Council.

“A positive judgement”, he replied. “A step was made forward, not one hundred percent, but a step forward. ... The mere fact that these autocephalous Churches have gathered in the name of Orthodoxy to look upon each others' faces, to pray together and speak and maybe even joke together ... that is extremely positive. I thank the Lord. At the next one there will be more of them”.

A US journalist, after noting that like St. John Paul II, Francis seemed to be a supporter of the European Union,

asked if he was concerned that the result of the recent UK referendum on the so-called “Brexit” could bring about the disintegration of Europe and eventually war.

“There is already war in Europe. Moreover, there is a climate of division, not only in Europe, but in its own countries. If you remember Catalonia, last year Scotland. These divisions... I don’t say that they are dangerous, but we must study them well, and before taking steps towards a division, to speak well amongst ourselves, and seek out viable solutions... Decisions regarding independence are made for the purpose of emancipation. For instance, all our Latin American countries sought to emancipate themselves from the crown, from Madrid, from Lisbon; even in African countries, to emancipate themselves from Paris, London, Amsterdam; Indonesia especially. This emancipation is more understandable because behind it there is a culture, there is a way of thinking. Instead, in the secession of a country – I am still not speaking of Brexit; let us think of Scotland for instance ... It is something that has been given a name, and this I say without offending, it is a word which politicians use: Balkanisation, without speaking ill of the Balkans. It is something of a secession, it is not emancipation. Behind this there are histories, cultures, misunderstandings, and also a great deal of good will in other cases. This must be clear. For me, unity is always better than conflict, but there are different forms of unity, and even fraternity, and here I speak of the European Union; fraternity is better than animosity and distance. Fraternity is better and bridges are better than walls. This must all make us reflect. The step that the European Union must offer to rediscover the strength it had from its roots is a step of creativity, and also of ‘healthy disunity’ to give more independence, more liberty to countries of the Union, to think of another form of Union, to be creative. Creative in the workplace, in the economy. There is a liquid economy in Europe. For instance, in Italy 40 percent of young people aged 25 and younger do not have work. There is something that is not working in this ‘solid’ Union, but we should not throw the baby out with the bath water. Let us look to redeem things and to recreate, because the recreation of human things, and also our personality, is a journey, which one must always be taken. ... And this I would underline: the two key words for the European Union, today are creativity and fruitfulness. This is the challenge”.

A German radio reporter asked the Pope about the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and whether the moment had arrived to recognise not only its errors but also its gifts.

“I believe that Martin Luther’s intentions were not mistaken”, Francis replied. “He was a reformer. Perhaps some methods were not correct, but at that time ... the Church was not exactly a model to imitate. There was corruption in the Church, worldliness, attachment to money, to power, and for this reason he protested. He was intelligent and took a step forward, justifying what he did. And today Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, we all agree on the doctrine of justification. On this very important point he was not mistaken. He made a medicine for the Church, but then this medicine consolidated into a state of things, into a state of a discipline, into a way of believing, into a way of doing, a form of liturgy. He was not alone: there was Zwingli, there was Calvin, each one of them different, and who was behind each one? The princes, ‘cuius region eius religio’. We must place ourselves in the history of that time. It is a history that is not easy to understand. Then things moved forward, and today the dialogue is very good. The document on justification is, I think, one of the richest and most profound ecumenical documents in the world. There are divisions, but these also depend on the Churches. ... Diversity is perhaps what hurt all of us so badly and today we seek to take up the path of encountering each other after 500 years. I think that we have to pray together. Prayer is important for this. Second, we must work together for the poor, for the persecuted, for many people, for refugees, for the many who suffer; to work together and pray together and the theologians who study together. But this is a long road, very long. One time jokingly I said: ‘I know when the day of full unity will come’ – ‘when?’ – ‘the day after the Son of Man comes’, because we do not know...the Holy Spirit will give us this grace, but in the meantime, praying, loving each other and working together, especially for the poor, for people who suffer and for peace and many other things, against the exploitation of people, and many things for which they are working together”.

The institution of a commission to reflect on the theme of deaconesses was the theme of the following question, posed by a French journalist.

“I was the first to be surprised by this news, because in discussion with the women religious was on other issues”; the Holy Father affirmed. “We had heard that in the first centuries there had been deaconesses, they said, and they asked if a commission could be instituted to study this. I said yes, and asked if it could be studied.

... I spoke with the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who said there that a study had been carried out by the international theological commission in 1980”.

“I spoke to the president and asked him to give me a list of whom he believed could take part in this commission. He sent me the list, and also the prefect sent me a list and I have it on my desk. I think the theme has been studied, and I do not think it will be difficult to shed light on the argument. But, there is another thing: a year and a half ago I formed a commission of women theologians who had worked with Cardinal Rylko, and who did a good job, because woman's thought is important. For me the role of a woman is less important than the thought of a woman: women think differently from men, and one cannot make a good decision without consulting women.

The penultimate question was from a female journalist who recalled that the German Cardinal Marx, speaking at a large conference in Dublin on the Church in the modern world, had said that the Catholic Church must ask forgiveness from the gay community for having marginalised these people. “In the days following the shooting in Orlando, many said that the Christian community had something to do with this hatred toward these people. What do you think?”

“I will repeat what I said on my first trip”, answered Francis. “I repeat what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: that they must not be discriminated against, that they must be respected and accompanied pastorally. One may condemn, not for theological reasons, but for reasons of, let's say, political behaviour – certain manifestations are a little too offensive to others. But these things have nothing to do with the problem. The problem is that if a person in this condition has good will and seeks God, who are we to judge? And we must accompany them well. ... Then there are traditions in some countries, in some cultures that have a different mentality on this problem. I think that the Church must not only ask forgiveness from the gay person who is offended, but she must also ask for forgiveness from the poor too, from women who are exploited, from children who are exploited for labour. She must ask forgiveness for having blessed so many weapons. The Church must ask forgiveness for often not behaving well – when I say the Church, I mean Christians. The Church is holy, we are sinners. Christians must ask forgiveness for having not accompanied so many choices, and so many families. ...I remember from my childhood, the culture in Buenos Aires, the closed Catholic culture. I come from there. You couldn't enter the house of a divorced family; I'm speaking of 80 years ago. The culture has changed, thanks be to God. Christians must apologise for many things, and not just this: they must ask for forgiveness, not just offer apologies. Forgive me, Lord: words we often forget”.

Fr. Lombardi ended by asking the Holy Father about his upcoming trip to Poland to celebrate World Youth Day in the context of the Holy Year of Mercy, and in particular whether, during his visits to Auschwitz and Birkenau, he would prefer silence or words.

“In silence”, Francis concluded. “I would like to go to that place of horror, without speeches, without people, other than the few necessary ... to enter alone, to pray, and to ask that the Lord may give me the grace to weep”.

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