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The Pope in Azerbaijan: the weft of faith and the warp of service

The Pope departed this morning at 6.10 a.m. (local time, 8.10 in Rome) from the Georgian airport of Tbilisi, after farewell greetings from the president of the Republic, Giorgi Margvelashvili and Patriarch Ilia II, destined for Azerbaijan, the second stage of his apostolic trip to the Caucasus. The logo of the Holy Father's visit to this country represents the encounter between tongues of fire (colours of Azerbaijan, the "land of fire"), and the yellow cross (the Vatican flag). In the centre there is a sun which radiates rays of mercy in the Jubilee year convened by the Holy Father. The theme is "We are all brothers", taken from the Gospel of St. Matthew.

Upon arriving in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, at 7.30 a.m. (local time), the Pope was received by the deputy president of the government, in a simple ceremony without discourses and only in the presence of a Guard of Honour. From the airport Francis travelled by car to the church of the Immaculate Conception, a distance of 23 kilometres, where he celebrated Holy Mass. The first church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and the first Catholic temple in Baku, it was built between 1909 and 1912, and demolished by the Bolsheviks in 1931. With the public rebirth of the Catholic community of Baku in 1992, a small group of Catholics wrote a letter to the Vatican asking for a priest to officiate at religious functions. Following St. John Paul II's visit in 2002, the Catholic community developed further and President Aliyev decided to dedicate some land for the construction of a church to replace the one that had been destroyed. Thus the new church of the Immaculate Conception was built, completed in 2007 and solemnly consecrated by the then Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. The church forms part of the Salesian Centre where the Pope and his entourage were hosted after the Mass.

The Salesians arrived in Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 2000s, and were assigned the Mission of Baku which subsequently became the Apostolic Prefecture of Azerbaijan. Today the small community of Salesians, which represents all the country's clergy, is composed of six priests, three religious and one young Azeri preparing to become a deacon. Their principal activities are the Maryam Salesian Centre, an educational centre for children and adolescents, and the refectories for the poor and refugees. Alongside them there are the Missionaries of Charity, very active with the elderly and the poorest in society, and since 2015, also two Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, present with the aim of initiating a community in Baku.

Three hundred people awaited the Holy Father in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, and in his homily Pope Francis used the image of the splendid Azeri carpets to illustrate that God wants to make of each of us a masterpiece of creation and of history. Every carpet, he said, must be made according to a weft and a warp; only

with this form can the carpet be harmoniously woven. So too in the Christian life: every day it must be woven patiently, intertwining a precise weft and warp: the weft of faith and the warp of service.

The following is the full text of the homily pronounced by the Holy Father:

“The word of God presents us today with two essential aspects of the Christian life: faith and service. With regard to faith, two specific requests are made to the Lord.

The first is made by the Prophet Habakkuk, who implores God to intervene in order to re-establish the justice and peace which men have shattered by violence, quarrels and disputes: ‘O Lord, how long’, he says, ‘shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?’. God, in response, does not intervene directly, does not resolve the situation in an abrupt way, does not make Himself present by a show of force. Rather, He invites patient waiting, without ever losing hope; above all, he emphasises the importance of faith, since it is by faith that man will live. God treats us in the same way: He does not indulge our desire to immediately and repeatedly change the world and other people. Instead, He intends primarily to heal the heart, my heart, your heart, and the heart of each person; God changes the world by transforming our hearts, and this He cannot do without us. The Lord wants us to open the door of our hearts, in order to enter into our lives. And this act of opening to Him, this trust in Him is precisely ‘the victory that overcomes the world, our faith’. For when God finds an open and trusting heart, then He can work wonders there.

But to have faith, a lively faith, is not easy; and so we pass to the second request, which the Apostles bring to the Lord in the Gospel: ‘Increase our faith!’. It is a good question, a prayer which we too can direct to the Lord each day. But the divine response is surprising and here too turns the question around: ‘If you had faith...’. It is the Lord Who asks us to have faith. Because faith, which is always God’s gift and always to be asked for, must be nurtured by us. It is no magic power which comes down from heaven, it is not a ‘talent’ which is given once and for all, not a special force for solving life’s problems. A faith useful for satisfying our needs would be a selfish one, centred entirely on ourselves. Faith must not be confused with well-being or feeling well, with having consolation in our heart that gives us inner peace. Faith is the golden thread which binds us to the Lord, the pure joy of being with Him, united to Him; it is a gift that lasts our whole life, but bears fruit only if we play our part.

And what is our part? Jesus helps us understand that it consists of service. In the Gospel, immediately following His words on the power of faith, Jesus speaks of service. Faith and service cannot be separated; on the contrary, they are intimately linked, interwoven with each other. In order to explain this, I would like to take an image very familiar to you, that of a beautiful carpet. Your carpets are true works of art and have an ancient heritage. The Christian life that each of you has, also comes from afar. It is a gift we received in the Church which comes from the heart of God our Father, Who wishes to make each of us a masterpiece of creation and of history. Every carpet, and you know this well, must be made according to a weft and a warp; only with this form can the carpet be harmoniously woven. So too in the Christian life: every day it must be woven patiently, intertwining a precise weft and warp: the weft of faith and the warp of service. When faith is interwoven with service, the heart remains open and youthful, and it expands in the process of doing good. Thus faith, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel, becomes powerful and accomplishes marvellous deeds. If faith follows this path, it matures and grows in strength, but only when it is joined to service.

But what is service? We might think that it consists only in being faithful to our duties or carrying out some good action. Yet for Jesus it is much more. In today’s Gospel, and in very firm and radical terms, He asks us for complete availability, a life offered in complete openness, free of calculation and gain. Why is Jesus so exacting? Because He loved us in this way, making Himself our servant ‘to the end’, coming ‘to serve, and to give his life’. And this takes place again every time we celebrate the Eucharist: the Lord comes among us, and as much as we intend to serve Him and love Him, it is always He who precedes us, serving us and loving us more than we can imagine or deserve. He gives us His very own life. He invites us to imitate Him, saying: ‘If anyone serves me, he must follow me’.

And so, we are not called to serve merely in order to receive a reward, but rather to imitate God, who made Himself a servant for our love. Nor are we called to serve only now and again, but to live in serving. Service is

thus a way of life; indeed it recapitulates the entire Christian way of life: serving God in adoration and prayer; being open and available; loving our neighbour with practical deeds; passionately working for the common good.

For Christians too, there are no shortage of temptations which lead us away from the path of service and end up rendering life useless. Where there is no service, life is useless. Here too we can identify two forms. One is that of allowing our hearts to grow lukewarm. A lukewarm heart becomes self-absorbed in lazy living and it stifles the fire of love. The lukewarm person lives to satisfy his or her own convenience, which is never enough, and in that way is never satisfied; gradually such a Christian ends up being content with a mediocre life. The lukewarm person allocates to God and others a 'percentage' of their time and their own heart, never spending too much, but rather always trying to economise. And so, he or she can lose the zest for life: rather like a cup of truly fine tea, which is unbearable to taste when it gets cold. I am sure, however, that when you look to the example of those who have gone before you in faith, you will not let your hearts become lukewarm. The whole Church, in showing you special affection, looks to you and offers you encouragement: you are a little flock that is so precious in God's eyes.

There is a second temptation, which we can fall into not so much because we are passive, but because we are 'overactive': the one of thinking like masters, of giving oneself only in order to gain something or become someone. In such cases service becomes a means and not an end, because the end has become prestige; and then comes power, the desire to be great. 'It shall not be so among you', Jesus reminds all of us, 'but whoever would be great among you must be your servant'. This is the way the Church grows and is adorned. Returning to our image of the carpet, and applying it to your fine community: each of you is like a magnificent silk thread. Only if you are woven together, however, will the different threads form a beautiful composition; on their own, they are of no use. Stay united always, living humbly in charity and joy; the Lord, Who creates harmony from differences, will protect you.

May we be aided by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and by the saints, especially St. Teresa of Calcutta, the fruits of whose faith and service are in your midst. Let us recall some of her noble words to summarise today's message: 'The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. The fruit of service is peace'".
