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The Pope pays a surprise visit to the areas affected by the earthquake of 24 August in Italy

This morning, shortly after 9 a.m., the Pope paid a surprise visit to the Italian town of Amatrice to meet with the population affected by the earthquake that occurred on 24 August this year. Accompanied by the archbishop of Rieti, Domenico Pompili, the Holy Father first visited the Romolo Capranica school, set up by the members of the Civil Protection as a container, where he greeted the primary school children, who presented him the pictures they had drawn after the earthquake, and their teachers.

Upon leaving the school, surrounded by people, the Pope said, "I thought that in the first days of these great sufferings that my visit would be more of a hindrance than a help or a greeting. I didn't want to trouble you so I let a little time pass, so that some things could be resolved, such as the school. But from the first moment, I felt that I needed to come to you. Simply to express my closeness to you, nothing more, and that I pray for you. Solidarity and prayer: this is my offering to you. May the Lord bless you all; may Our Lady watch over you in this moment of sadness, pain and distress".

After blessing those present, the Holy Father prayed a Hail Mary with them and added, "Let us move forward; there is always a future. There are many loved ones who have left us, who perished here under the rubble. Let us pray to Our Lady for them, and let us do so together. Always look ahead, with courage, and helping one another. We journey better together; alone we go nowhere. Let us go forward. Thank you".

After greeting the major of Amatrice, Sergio Pirozzi, the forces of order and the fire service, he entered the so-called "red zone", where the earthquake caused the most devastation. He drew as close as possible to the collapsed buildings and prayed in silence. He then greeted the head of Emergency Communication of the Fire Service, Luca Cari, with the following words: "I pray that you do not have to work, as yours is a painful job. Thank you for what you do". He asked for a photograph with all the firemen present as, he emphasised, they are "those who save people".

The Pope continued his trip in the areas affected by the earthquake, first stopping in Rieti to visit the San Raffaele Borbona Residential Health Centre which cares for the chronically ill and those unable to care for themselves. Francis greeted individually all sixty patients, mostly elderly people left homeless as a result of the earthquake, and lunched with them.

Two hours later he went to the fire station of Cittàreale, the base camp of the earthquake zones, from where he transferred to Accumoli, one of the most afflicted towns, where he greeted a number of people including the mayor. In St. Francis' Square he prayed before the church of the same name, destroyed by the earthquake. He then continued to Pescara del Tronto, pausing three times along the way to greet small groups of people. Shortly after 2 p.m. he arrived in Arquata del Tronto. In both villages he was accompanied by Bishop Giovanni D'Ercole of Ascoli Piceno.

In Arquata del Tronto the Pope greeted more than a hundred people, with whom he prayed, and then visited the school set up provisionally in tents. "Good afternoon to all", he said to the inhabitants of Arquata. "I wish to be with you in these moments and to tell you that I keep you in my heart, and that I know, yes, I know your suffering and your anguish, and also that you have lost your loved ones, and I am with you. And this is why I wanted to be here today".

"Now, let us pray to the Lord that he bless you, and let us pray also for your loved ones who have remained there, and who have gone to heaven. Hail Mary".

After imparting his blessing, the Pope again urged those present to "be courageous and to keep going. Times will change and it will be possible to go forward. I am close to you; I am with you".

In the afternoon he arrived at the last stop of his visit to the earthquake zones: St. Peregrine di Norcia, in Umbria, accompanied by the archbishop of Spoleto-Norcia, Msgr. Renato Boccardo. The Holy Father prayed in the so-called "red zone" in front of the church of St. Peregrine, badly damaged by the quake. He then greeted those who awaited him outside and, using the police loudspeaker, said: "I greet you all. I have been close to you; I feel very close to you in this moment of sadness and I pray for you, asking the Lord to give us the strength to go on. Now, let us pray a Hail Mary together".

At 3.30 p.m. the Pope departed for Rome, arriving in the Vatican at 5.40 p.m. The full journey was made by car.

Last Sunday, during his conversation with journalists on his return flight to Rome following his trip to Georgia and Azerbaijan, the Pope expressed his intention to visit those affected by the earthquake "privately, alone, as a priest, as a bishop, as the Pope. But alone, I would like to do so that way, to be close to the people".

In the Angelus of 28 August he expressed his "spiritual closeness" to the inhabitants of Lazio, the Marches and Umbria, hard hit by the earthquake in these days. I think in particular of the people of Amatrice, Accumoli, Arquata and Pescara del Tronto, Norcia. Once again I would like to tell these beloved people that the Church shares in their suffering and their worries. Let us pray for the departed and for the survivors. ... Dear brothers and sisters, I also hope to come to you to bring personally the consolation of faith, the embrace of a father and brother, and the support of Christian hope".
