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Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with the Heads of the Churches and Christian Communities of the Middle East in Bari (7 July 2018) (I)

At 7.00 this morning, the Holy Father Francis departed by helicopter from the Vatican heliport to travel to Bari for the meeting with the Heads of the Churches and Christian communities of the Middle East on the theme: "Peace be upon you! Christians together for the Middle East".

Upon arrival, after the landing of the helicopter in Piazzale Cristoforo Colombo, the Pope was received by the archbishop of Bari-Bitonto, H.E. Msgr. Francesco Cacucci, the president of the Apulia Region, Hon. Michele Emiliano, the prefect of Bari, Marilisa Magno, and the mayor of the city, Hon. Antonio Decaro. He then transferred by car to the Papal Basilica of Saint Nicholas while the Patriarchs proceeded to the Basilica from their residences.

When he arrived at the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, the Holy Father welcomed the Patriarchs and greeted them individually. The Patriarchs then descended into the crypt to venerate the relics of Saint Nicholas. The last to enter the Basilica, the Pope greeted the members of the community of Dominican Friars, then he too descended into the crypt for the veneration of the relics of the Saint and the lighting of the single-flamed lamp.

The Holy Father and the Patriarchs then left the Basilica of Saint Nicholas and travelled by coach to the "Rotonda" on the seafront promenade of Bari where, at 9.15, the prayer meeting took place. At the end of the joint prayer meeting, the Pope and the Patriarchs returned by Pullman to the Basilica of Saint Nicholas where, at 10.30, a dialogue was conducted behind closed doors.

The following is the Pope's introductory monition to the ecumenical prayer for peace:

Introductory Monition of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers,

We have come as pilgrims to Bari, this window open to the Near East, carrying in our hearts our Churches, our peoples and all those living in situations of great suffering. We are saying to them, "We are close to you". I thank you from my heart, dear brothers, for coming here so generously and willingly. I am also profoundly grateful to all our hosts in this city of acceptance and encounter.

The Holy Mother of God sustains us as we journey together. Here in Bari she is venerated as *Hodegetria*: the one who shows us the way. Here lie the relics of Saint Nicholas, the Oriental Bishop whose veneration crosses seas and bridges boundaries between Churches. May Nicholas, the wonder-worker, intercede to heal the wounds that so many people bear within them. Here, as we contemplate the horizon and the sea, we feel drawn to live this day with minds and hearts turned towards the Middle East, the crossroads of civilizations and the cradle of the great monotheistic religions.

From the Middle East the Lord, the "sun from on high" (*Lk 1:78*), came forth to visit us. From there, the light of faith spread throughout the world. There ever-fresh streams of spirituality and monasticism have their source. There ancient and unique rites are preserved, together with an inestimable patrimony of sacred art and theology. There the heritage of our great Fathers in the faith lives on. This tradition is a treasure to be preserved to the utmost of our ability, for in the Middle East our very souls are rooted.

Yet this region so full of light, especially in recent years, has been covered by dark clouds of war, violence and destruction, instances of occupation and varieties of fundamentalism, forced migration and neglect. All this has taken place amid the complicit silence of many. The Middle East has become a land of people who leave their own lands behind. There is also the danger that the presence of our brothers and sisters in the faith will disappear, disfiguring the very face of the region. For a Middle East without Christians would not be the Middle East.

This day begins with our prayer that God's light may disperse the darkness of the world. We have already lit, before Saint Nicholas, the "one-flame lamp", a symbol of the one Church. Today, as one, we want to kindle a flame of hope. May the lamps we will place be so many signs of a light that continues to shine forth in the dark. Christians are the light of the world (cf. *Mt 5:14*) not only when everything is bright around them, but also when, in dark moments of history, they refuse to be resigned to the encircling gloom but instead feed the wick of hope with the oil of prayer and love. For when we lift up our hands to heaven in prayer, and we stretch out our hands to our brothers and sisters without seeking our own advantage, then the fire of the Spirit, the Spirit of unity and of peace, is kindled and leaps into flame.

Let us pray as one, begging the Lord of heaven for that peace which the powerful of our world have not yet been able to find. From the waters of the Nile to the Jordan Valley and beyond, through the Orontes to the Tigris and the Euphrates, may the plea of the Psalm resound: "Peace be upon you!" (*122:8*). For all our suffering brothers and sisters, and for our friends of every people and creed, let us say again and again: *Peace be upon you!* With the Psalmist, let us offer this prayer in a special way for Jerusalem, the holy city beloved of God and wounded by men, for which the Lord continues to weep: *Peace be upon you!*

Let there be peace! This is the cry of all those who are Abel today, a cry that rises up to God's throne. For their sake, we have no right, in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world, to say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gen 4:9*). Indifference kills, and we desire to lift up our voices in opposition to this murderous indifference. We want to give a voice to those who have none, to those who can only wipe away their tears. For the Middle East today is weeping, suffering and silent as others trample upon those lands in search of power or riches. On behalf of the little ones, the simple ones, the wounded, and all those at whose side God stands, let us beg, "*Let there be peace!*" May the "God of all consolation" (*2 Cor 1:3*), who heals the broken-hearted and binds up every wound (cf. *Ps 147:3*), hear our prayer today.
