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Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes

At 10.30 this morning, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the presentation of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope gave the following address to the Roman Curia:

Address of the Holy Father

"The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light" (Rom 13:12).

Dear brothers and sisters,

Filled with the joy and hope that radiate from the countenance of the Holy Child, we gather again this year for the exchange of Christmas greetings, mindful of all the joys and struggles of our world and of the Church.

To you and your co-workers, to all those who serve in the Curia, to the Papal Representatives and the staff of the various Nunciatures, I offer my cordial good wishes for a blessed Christmas. I want to express my gratitude for your daily dedication to the service of the Holy See, the Church and the Successor of Peter. Thank you very much!

Allow me also to offer a warm welcome to the new Substitute of the Secretariat of State, Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, who began his demanding and important service on 15 October last. The fact that he comes from Venezuela respects the catholicity of the Church and her need to keep expanding her horizons to the ends of the earth. Welcome, dear Archbishop, and best wishes for your work!

Christmas fills us with joy and makes us certain that no sin will ever be greater than God's mercy; no act of ours

can ever prevent the dawn of his divine light from rising ever anew in human hearts. This feast invites us to renew our evangelical commitment *to proclaim Christ, the Saviour of the world and the light of the universe*. “Christ, ‘holy, blameless, undefiled’ (*Heb 7:26*) did not know sin (cf. *2 Cor 5:21*) and came only to atone for the sins of the people (cf. *Heb 2:17*). The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal. She ‘presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God’”, – amid the persecutions of the spirit of this world and the consolation of the Spirit of God – “announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes (cf. *1 Cor 11:26*). But by the power of the risen Lord, she is given the strength to overcome, in patience and in love, her sorrows and her difficulties, both those from within and those from without, so that she may reveal in the world, faithfully, albeit with shadows, the mystery of the Lord until, in the end, it shall be manifested in full light” (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

In the firm conviction that the light always proves stronger than the darkness, I would like to reflect with you on the light that links Christmas (the Lord’s first coming in humility) to the Parousia (his second coming in glory), and confirms us in the hope that does not disappoint. It is the hope on which our individual lives, and the entire history of the Church and the world, depend. Without hope, how unsightly the Church would be!

Jesus was born in a social, political and religious situation marked by tension, unrest and gloom. His birth, awaited by some yet rejected by others, embodies the *divine logic* that does not halt before evil, but instead transforms it slowly but surely into goodness. Yet it also brings to light the *malign logic* that transforms even goodness into evil, in an attempt to keep humanity in despair and in darkness. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (*Jn 1:5*).

Each year, Christmas reminds us that God’s salvation, freely bestowed on all humanity, the Church and in particular on us, consecrated persons, does not act independently of our will, our cooperation, our freedom and our daily efforts. Salvation is a gift, true enough, but one that must be accepted, cherished and made to bear fruit (cf. *Mt 25:14-30*). Being Christian, in general and for us in particular as the Lord’s anointed and consecrated, does not mean acting like an élite group who think they have God in their pocket, but as persons who know that they are loved by the Lord despite being unworthy sinners. Those who are consecrated are nothing but servants in the vineyard of the Lord, who must hand over in due time the harvest and its gain to the owner of the vineyard (cf. *Mt 20:1-16*).

The Bible and the Church’s history show clearly that even the elect can frequently come to think and act as if they were the owners of salvation and not its recipients, like overseers of the mysteries of God and not their humble ministers, like God’s toll-keepers and not servants of the flock entrusted to their care.

All too often, as a result of excessive and misguided zeal, instead of following God, we can put ourselves in front of him, like Peter, who remonstrated with the Master and thus merited the most severe of Christ’s rebukes: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on the things of God but on the things of men” (*Mk 8:33*).

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year, in our turbulent world, the barque of the Church has experienced, and continues to experience, moments of difficulty, and has been buffeted by strong winds and tempests. Many have found themselves asking the Master, who seems to be sleeping: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (*Mk 4:38*). Others, disheartened by news reports, have begun to lose trust and to abandon her. Still others, out of fear, personal interest or other aims, have sought to attack her and aggravate her wounds. Whereas others do not conceal their glee at seeing her hard hit. Many, many others, however, continue to cling to her, in the certainty that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against her” (*Mt 16:18*).

Meanwhile, the Bride of Christ advances on her pilgrim way *amid joys and afflictions, amid successes and difficulties from within and from without*. Without a doubt, the difficulties from within are always those most hurtful and most destructive.

Afflictions

Many indeed are the afflictions. All those immigrants, forced to leave their own homelands and to risk their lives, lose their lives, or survive only to find doors barred and their brothers and sisters in our human family more concerned with political advantage and power! All that fear and prejudice! All those people, and especially those children who die each day for lack of water, food and medicine! All that poverty and destitution! All that violence directed against the vulnerable and against women! All those theatres of war both declared and undeclared. All that innocent blood spilled daily! All that inhumanity and brutality around us! All those persons who even today are systematically tortured in police custody, in prisons and in refugee camps in various parts of the world!

We are also experiencing a new age of *martyrs*. It seems that the cruel and vicious persecution of the Roman Empire has not yet ended. A new Nero is always being born to oppress believers solely because of their faith in Christ. New extremist groups spring up and target churches, places of worship, ministers and members of the faithful. Cabals and cliques new and old live by feeding on hatred and hostility to Christ, the Church and believers. How many Christians even now bear the burden of persecution, marginalization, discrimination and injustice throughout our world. Yet they continue courageously to embrace death rather than deny Christ. How difficult it is, even today, freely to practice the faith in all those parts of the world where religious freedom and freedom of conscience do not exist.

The heroic example of the martyrs and of countless *good Samaritans* – young people, families, charitable and volunteer movements, and so many individual believers and consecrated persons – cannot, however, make us overlook the counter-witness and the scandal given by some sons and ministers of the Church.

Here I will limit myself to the two scourges of abuse and of infidelity.

The Church has for some time been firmly committed to eliminating the evil of *abuse*, which cries for vengeance to the Lord, to the God who is always mindful of the suffering experienced by many minors because of clerics and consecrated persons: abuses of power and conscience and sexual abuse.

In my own reflections on this painful subject, I have thought of King David – one of “the Lord’s anointed” (cf. *1 Sam* 16:13; *2 Sam* 11-12). He, an ancestor of the Holy Child who was also called “the son of David”, was chosen, made king and anointed by the Lord. Yet he committed a triple sin, three grave abuses at once: “sexual abuse, abuse of power and abuse of conscience”. Three distinct forms of abuse that nonetheless converge and overlap.

The story begins, as we know, when the King, although a proven warrior, stayed home to take his leisure, instead of going into battle amid God’s people. David takes advantage, for his own convenience and interest, of his position as king (the abuse of power). The Lord’s anointed, he does as he wills, and thus provokes an irresistible moral decline and a weakening of conscience. It is precisely in this situation that, from the palace terrace, he sees Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, at her bath (cf. *2 Sam* 11) and covets her. He sends for her and they lie together (yet another abuse of power, plus sexual abuse). He abuses a married woman whose husband is absent and, to cover his sin, he recalls Uriah and seeks unsuccessfully to convince him to spend the night with his wife. He then orders the captain of his army to expose Uriah to death in battle (a further abuse of power, plus an abuse of conscience). The chain of sin soon spreads and quickly becomes a web of corruption. He stayed home and took it easy.

The sparks of sloth and lust, and “letting down the guard” are what ignite the diabolical chain of grave sins: adultery, lying and murder. Thinking that because he was king, he could have and do whatever he wanted, David tries to deceive Bathsheba’s husband, his people, himself and even God. The king neglects his relationship with God, disobeys the divine commandments, damages his own moral integrity, without even feeling guilty. The “anointed” continues to exercise his mission as if nothing had happened. His only concern was to preserve his image, to keep up appearances. For “those who think they commit no grievous sins against God’s law can fall into a state of dull lethargy. Since they see nothing serious to reproach themselves with, they

fail to realize that their spiritual life has gradually turned lukewarm. They end up weakened and corrupted” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 164). From being sinful, they now become corrupt.

Today too, there are consecrated men, “the Lord’s anointed”, who abuse the vulnerable, taking advantage of their position and their power of persuasion. They perform abominable acts yet continue to exercise their ministry as if nothing had happened. They have no fear of God or his judgement, but only of being found out and unmasked. Ministers who rend the ecclesial body, creating scandals and discrediting the Church’s saving mission and the sacrifices of so many of their confrères.

Today too, there are many Davids who, without batting an eye, enter into the web of corruption and betray God, his commandments, their own vocation, the Church, the people of God and the trust of little ones and their families. Often behind their boundless amiability, impeccable activity and angelic faces, they shamelessly conceal a vicious wolf ready to devour innocent souls.

The sins and crimes of consecrated persons are further tainted by infidelity and shame; they disfigure the countenance of the Church and undermine her credibility. The Church herself, with her faithful children, is also a victim of these acts of infidelity and these real sins of “peculation”.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Let it be clear that before these abominations the Church will spare no effort to do all that is necessary to bring to justice *whosoever* has committed such crimes. The Church will never seek to hush up or not take seriously any case. It is undeniable that some in the past, out of irresponsibility, disbelief, lack of training, inexperience – we need to judge the past with a hermeneutics of the past – or spiritual and human myopia, treated many cases without the seriousness and promptness that was due. That must never happen again. This is the choice and the decision of the whole Church.

This coming February, the Church will restate her firm resolve to pursue unstintingly a path of purification. She will question, with the help of experts, how best to protect children, to avoid these tragedies, to bring healing and restoration to the victims, and to improve the training imparted in seminaries. An effort will be made to make past mistakes opportunities for eliminating this scourge, not only from the body of the Church but also from that of society. *For if this grave tragedy has involved some consecrated ministers, we can ask how deeply rooted it may be in our societies and in our families.* Consequently, the Church will not be limited to healing her own wounds, but will seek to deal squarely with this evil that causes the slow death of so many persons, on the moral, psychological and human levels.

Dear brothers and sisters,

In discussing this scourge, some within the Church take to task certain *communications professionals*, accusing them of ignoring the overwhelming majority of cases of abuse that are not committed by clergy – the statistics speak of more than 95% – and accusing them of intentionally wanting to give the false impression that this evil affects the Catholic Church alone. I myself would like to give heartfelt thanks to those media professionals who were honest and objective and sought to unmask these predators and to make their victims’ voices heard. Even if it were to involve a single case of abuse (something itself monstrous), the Church asks that people not be silent but bring it objectively to light, since the greater scandal in this matter is that of cloaking the truth.

Let us all remember that only David’s encounter with the prophet Nathan made him understand the seriousness of his sin. Today we need new Nathans to help so many Davids rouse themselves from a hypocritical and perverse life. Please, let us help Holy Mother Church in her difficult task of recognizing real from false cases, accusations from slander, grievances from insinuations, gossip from defamation. This is no easy task, since the guilty are capable of skillfully covering their tracks, to the point where many wives, mothers and sisters are unable to detect them in those closest to them: husbands, godfathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, neighbours, teachers and the like. The victims too, carefully selected by their predators, often prefer silence and live in fear of shame and the terror of rejection.

To those who abuse minors I would say this: convert and hand yourself over to human justice, and prepare for divine justice. Remember the words of Christ: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of scandals! For it is necessary that scandals come, but woe to the man by whom the scandal comes!” (*Mt* 18:6-7).

Dear brothers and sisters,

Now let me speak of another *affliction*, namely the infidelity of those who betray their vocation, their sworn promise, their mission and their consecration to God and the Church. They hide behind good intentions in order to stab their brothers and sisters in the back and to sow weeds, division and bewilderment. They always find excuses, including intellectual and even spiritual excuses, to progress unperturbed on the path to perdition.

This is nothing new in the Church’s history. Saint Augustine, in speaking of the good seed and the weeds, says: “Do you perhaps believe, brethren, that weeds cannot spring up even on the thrones of bishops? Do you perhaps think that this is found only lower down and not higher up? Heaven forbid that we be weeds! ... Even on the thrones of bishops good grain and weeds can be found; even in the different communities of the faithful good grain and weeds can be found” (*Serm.* 73, 4: PL 38, 472).

These words of Saint Augustine urge us to remember the old proverb: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”. They help us realize that the *Tempter*, the *Great Accuser*, is the one who brings division, sows discord, insinuates enmity, persuades God’s children and causes them to doubt.

Behind these sowers of weeds, we always find the thirty pieces of silver. The figure of David thus brings us to that of Judas Iscariot, another man chosen by the Lord who sells out his Master and hands him over to death. David the sinner and Judas Iscariot will always be present in the Church, since they represent the weakness that is part of our human condition. They are icons of the sins and crimes committed by those who are chosen and consecrated. United in the gravity of their sin, they nonetheless differ when it comes to conversion. David repented, trusting in God’s mercy; Judas hanged himself.

All of us, then, in order to make Christ’s light shine forth, have the duty to combat all *spiritual corruption*, which is “worse than the fall of the sinner, for it is a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness. Everything then appears acceptable: deception, slander, egotism and other subtle forms of self-centeredness, for ‘even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light’ (*2 Cor* 11:14). So Solomon ended his days, whereas David, who sinned greatly, was able to make up for his disgrace” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 165).

Joys

Let us now turn to the joys. They have been many in the past year. For example: the successful outcome of the Synod devoted to young people, as the Cardinal Dean mentioned. Then, the progress made in the reform of the Curia. Many people are asking when it will be finished. It will never finish, but the steps forward have been good. For example, the efforts made to achieve clarity and transparency in financial affairs; the praiseworthy work of the Office of the Auditor-General and the AIF; the good results attained by the IOR; the new Law of the Vatican City State; the Decree on labour in the Vatican, and many other less visible results. We can think, speaking of joys, of the new Blesseds and Saints who are “precious stones” adorning the face of the Church and radiating hope, faith and light in our world. Here mention must be made of the nineteen recent martyrs of Algeria: “nineteen lives given for Christ, for his Gospel and for the Algerian people ... models of everyday holiness, the holiness of “the saints next door” (Thomas Georgeon, “Nel segno della fraternità”, *L’Osservatore Romano*, 8 December 2018, p. 6). Then too, the great number of the faithful who each year receive baptism and thus renew the youth of the Church as a fruitful mother, and the many of her children who come home and re-embrace the Christian faith and life. All those families and parents who take their faith seriously and daily pass it on to their children by the joy of their love (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 259-290). And the witness given by so many young people who courageously choose the consecrated life and the priesthood.

Another genuine cause for joy is the great number of consecrated men and women, bishops and priests, who daily live their calling in fidelity, silence, holiness and self-denial. They are persons who light up the shadows of humanity by their witness of faith, love and charity. Persons who work patiently, out of love for Christ and his Gospel, on behalf of the poor, the oppressed and the least of our brothers and sisters; they are not looking to show up on the first pages of newspapers or to receive accolades. Leaving all behind and offering their lives, they bring the light of faith wherever Christ is abandoned, thirsty, hungry, imprisoned and naked (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). I think especially of the many parish priests who daily offer good example to the people of God, priests close to families, who know everyone's name and live lives of simplicity, faith, zeal, holiness and charity. They are overlooked by the mass media, but were it not for them, darkness would reign.

Dear brothers and sisters,

In speaking of light, afflictions, David and Judas, I wanted to stress the importance of a growing awareness that should lead to a duty of vigilance and protection on the part of those entrusted with governance in the structures of ecclesial and consecrated life. In effect, the strength of any institution does not depend on its being composed of men and women who are perfect (something impossible!), but on its willingness to be constantly purified, on its capacity to acknowledge humbly its errors and correct them; and on its ability to get up after falling down. It depends on seeing the light of Christmas radiating from the manger in Bethlehem, on treading the paths of history in order to come at last to the Parousia.

We need, then, to open our hearts to the true light, Jesus Christ. He is the light that can illumine life and turn our darkness into light; the light of goodness that conquers evil; the light of the love that overcomes hatred; the light of the life that triumphs over death; the divine light that turns everything and everyone into light. He is the light of our God: poor and rich, merciful and just, present and hidden, small and great.

Let us keep in mind this splendid passage of Saint Macarius the Great, a fourth-century Desert Father, about Christmas: "God makes himself little! The inaccessible and uncreated One, in his infinite and ineffable goodness, has taken a body and made himself little. In his goodness, he descends from his glory. No one in the heavens or on earth can grasp the greatness of God, and no one in the heavens or on earth can grasp how God makes himself poor and little for the poor and little. As incomprehensible is his grandeur, so too is his littleness" (cf. *Ps.-Macarius, Homilies* IV, 9-10; XXII, 7: PG 34: 479-480; 737-738).

Let us remember that Christmas is the feast of the "great God who makes himself little and in his littleness does not cease to be great. And in this dialectic of great and little, we find the tenderness of God. A word that worldliness is always trying to take out of the dictionary: tenderness. The great God who becomes little, who is great and continues to become small" (cf. *Homily in Santa Marta*, 14 December 2017; *Homily in Santa Marta*, 25 April 2013).

Each year, Christmas gives us the certainty that God's light will continue to shine, despite our human misery. It gives us the certainty that the Church will emerge from these tribulations all the more beautiful, purified and radiant. All the sins and failings and evil committed by some children of the Church will never be able to mar the beauty of her face. Indeed, they are even a sure proof that her strength does not depend on us but ultimately on *Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the world and the light of the universe*, who loves her and gave his life for her, his Bride. Christmas gives us the certainty that the grave evils perpetrated by some will never be able to cloud all the good that the Church freely accomplishes in the world. Christmas gives the certainty that the true strength of the Church and of our daily efforts, so often hidden – as in the Curia, with its saints –, rests in the Holy Spirit, who guides and protects her in every age, turning even sins into opportunities for forgiveness, failures into opportunities for renewal, and evil into an opportunity for purification and triumph.

Thank you very much and a Happy Christmas to all!

After the blessing:

This year too, I would like to leave you a little gift. It is a classic: Tanquerey's *Treatise on Ascetic and Mystical*

Theology, in the recent Italian edition prepared by the Auxiliary Bishop of Rome, Bishop Libanori, and by Father Forlai, the spiritual director of the Roman Seminary. I think it is good. Don't read it from beginning to end, but look up this or that virtue, disposition or word... It will do us good, for our own reform and the reform of the Church. It is a gift for you!
