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## **Apostolic Trip of His Holiness Francis to Thailand and Japan (19 to 26 November 2019) – Meeting with the bishops of Thailand and the FABC in the Church of the Shrine of the Blessed Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung and private meeting with the Members of the Society of Jesus of Thailand**

This morning, at 11.00 local time (5.00 in Rome), the Holy Father Francis met with the bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Thailand and of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in the Shrine of Blessed Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung in the Catholic village of Wat Roman in Tha Kham.

Upon arrival at the Church of the Shrine, the Pope proceeded to the podium together with the president of the Thai Episcopal Conference, His Eminence Cardinal Francis Xavier Kriengsak Kovithavanij, archbishop of Bangkok, and the president of the FABC, His Eminence Cardinal Charles Bo, S.D.B., archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar.

After a brief greeting from the president of the Thai Bishops' Conference, Pope Francis gave his address.

At the end, following the greeting of the bishops and the group photograph, the Holy Father met in private with the Members of the Society of Jesus of Thailand in the nearby conference room of the Shrine. He then returned by car to the apostolic nunciature in Bangkok.

The following is the Pope's address during the meeting with the bishops of Thailand and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences:

### **Address of the Holy Father**

I thank His Eminence Cardinal Francis Xavier Kriengsak Kovithavanij for his kind words of introduction and welcome. I am happy to be with you and to share, even briefly, your joys and hopes, your projects and dreams, but also the challenges that you face as pastors of God's holy and faithful people. Thank you for your fraternal welcome.

Our meeting today takes place at the Shrine of Blessed Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung, who devoted his life to evangelization and catechesis, forming disciples of the Lord, primarily here in Thailand but also in part of Vietnam and along the border with Laos, and who crowned his witness to Christ with martyrdom. Let us place our meeting under his watchful gaze, so that his example may inspire us with a great zeal for evangelization in all the local Churches of Asia, so that we may increasingly become missionary disciples of the Lord, enabling his Good News to spread like a fragrant balm throughout this great and beautiful continent.

I realize that you are making plans for the 2020 General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, which will mark the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation. This is a fitting occasion to revisit those "shrines" where the missionary roots that left their mark on these lands are preserved, to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the footsteps of our first love, and to welcome with courage, with *parrhesia*, a future that you yourselves must help develop and create. In this way, both the Church and society in Asia will benefit from a renewed and shared evangelical outreach. In love with Christ and capable of bringing others to share in that same love.

You are living in the midst of a multicultural and multi-religious continent, with great beauty and prosperity, but troubled at the same time by poverty and exploitation at various levels. Rapid technological advancements can open up immense possibilities that make life easier, but can result in the growth of consumerism and materialism, especially among young people. You have taken upon yourselves the concerns of your people: the scourge of drugs and human trafficking, the care of great numbers of migrants and refugees, poor working conditions and the exploitation experienced by many labourers, as well as economic and social inequality between rich and poor.

In the midst of these tensions stands the pastor who struggles and intercedes with his people and for his people. The memory of the first missionaries who preceded us with courage, joy and extraordinary stamina can help us take stock of our present situation and mission from a much broader, much more transformative perspective. In the first place, that memory frees us from the belief that times past were always more favorable or better for the proclamation of the Gospel. It also helps us to avoid taking refuge in fruitless discussions and ways of thinking that end up making us turn in on ourselves, paralyzing any kind of action. "Let us learn from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 263). Let us cast aside everything that has "stuck" to us along the way and that makes it harder for us to press forward. We know that some ecclesial structures and mentalities can hamper efforts at evangelization. Yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Ultimately, without new life and an evangelical spirit, without "the Church's fidelity to her own calling", any new structure will soon prove ineffective (cf. *ibid.*, 26) and detract from our important ministry of fervent prayer and intercession. Sometimes this can help to give us perspective when dealing with enthusiastic though unwise methodologies that appear to be successful, but offer little by way of life.

As we contemplate missionary progress in these lands, one of the first lessons we learn is to be confident in the knowledge that it is the Holy Spirit himself who goes before us and gathers us together. The Holy Spirit is the first to invite the Church to go forth to all those places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities and cultures (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 74). Let us not forget that the Holy Spirit arrives in advance of missionaries and remains with them. The power of the Holy Spirit sustained and motivated the Apostles and countless missionaries not to discount any land, people, culture or situation. They did not look for places of "guaranteed success"; on the contrary, their "guarantee" lay in the certainty that no person or culture was a priori incapable of receiving the seed of life, happiness, and above all friendship, that the Lord wants to sow in them. They did not expect a foreign culture to receive the Gospel easily; rather, they plunged into these new realities, convinced of the beauty of which they were bearers. All life has value in the eyes of the Master. They were bold and courageous because they knew that in the first place the Gospel is a gift to be shared with and for everyone: shared among all people, the doctors of the law, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. With and for all sinners, then as now. I like to observe that the mission, even prior to things to be done or projects to be implemented, demands the cultivation of a gaze and a sense of smell. The mission calls for a paternal and maternal concern, because the sheep is only lost when the shepherd gives it up for lost, and not before. Three months ago, I received a visit from a French missionary who has been working for forty years in the north of Thailand, among the tribes. He came with a group of twenty or twenty-five people, all mothers and fathers, young people, not more than twenty-five years old. He himself had baptized them, the first

generation, and now he was baptizing their children. One could think: you have given your life for fifty or a hundred people. But that was the seed, and God is giving him the consolation of baptizing the children of those he first baptized. Simply put, he experienced those indigenous people from the north of Thailand as a source of wealth for evangelizing. He did not give up on that sheep; he took it in charge.

One of the most splendid aspects of evangelization is our realization that the mission entrusted to the Church does not lie only in the proclamation of the Gospel but also in learning to believe the Gospel. How many there are who proclaim – at times we proclaim, in moments of temptation – the Gospel, but we do not believe the Gospel, do not let ourselves be laid hold of and transformed by it. This means living and walking in the light of the word of God that we are charged to proclaim. We do well to remember the words of Saint Paul VI: “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15). In this way, the Church enters into the dynamic of conversion-proclamation demanded of each disciple. Purified by the Lord, she becomes a witness by vocation. A Church that goes forth, unafraid to take to the streets and come face to face with the lives of the people entrusted to her care, is a Church able to be open in humility to the Lord. With the Lord, she can experience the wonder, the amazement, of the missionary adventure without the need, conscious or unconscious, to be in first place, to seek or occupy any possible place of preeminence. How much we can learn from you, who are a minority in many of your countries or regions, and sometimes are overlooked or impeded or persecuted minorities, yet have not let yourselves be carried away or corrupted by an inferiority complex or the complaint that you are not given due recognition! Go forwards: proclaim, sow, pray and wait. And you will not lose your joy!

Dear brothers, “in union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 267). Let us not be afraid to make his priorities our own. You are well aware that yours is a Church small in numbers and resources, but full of zeal and eager to be a living instrument of the Lord’s loving concern for all the people of your towns and cities (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). Your commitment to advance that evangelical fruitfulness by proclaiming the kerygma with deeds and words in the various areas where Christians are present is a striking form of witness.

A missionary Church knows that its best message is its readiness to be transformed by the word of life, making service its hallmark. We are not the ones in charge of the mission, and even less our plans and strategies. The Holy Spirit is the true protagonist who propels us, as sinners who have been forgiven; he constantly sends us forth to share this treasure in earthen vessels (cf. *2 Cor 4:7*). We have been transformed by the Spirit in order to transform wherever we are placed. The martyrdom of a daily and often silent commitment will bear the fruits your people need.

This motivates us to develop a specific spirituality. The pastor is a person who, in the first place, loves his people deeply and knows their idiosyncrasies, weaknesses and strengths. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus Christ and a passion for his people. When we stand before the crucified Jesus, we see the depth of his love that exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 268).

Let us remember that we too are part of this people; we are not masters, we are part of the people; we were chosen to be servants, not masters or managers. This means we are to accompany those whom we serve with patience and kindness, listening to them, respecting their dignity, always promoting and valuing their apostolic initiatives. Let us not lose sight of the fact that many of your lands were evangelized by the lay faithful. Let us not clericalize our mission, please, and no less should we clericalize the laity. These laypeople were able to speak the dialect of their people, a simple and direct exercise of inculturation, neither theoretical nor ideological, but the fruit of their zeal to share Christ. The holy and faithful People of God possesses the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which we are called to recognize, esteem and expand. Let us never lose the grace of seeing God working in the midst of his people, as he did in the past, as he is doing now and as he will continue to do. An image comes to mind which was not in our programme, but...: the young Samuel who woke up at night. God respected the elderly priest, whose character was weak, he let him carry on, but he did not speak to him. He spoke to a boy, one of the people.

In a particular way, I encourage you always to keep your door open for your priests. The door and the heart. May we always remember that the closest neighbor of the bishop is the priest. Be close to your priests, listen to them and seek to accompany them in every situation, especially when you see that they are discouraged or apathetic, which is the worst of the devil's temptations. Apathy, despondency. Do so not as judges but as fathers, not as managers who deploy them, but as true elder brothers. Create a climate of trust for honest dialogue, an open dialogue; seek and implore the grace to show the same patience with them that the Lord, whose patience is so very great, has shown to each of us, and it is a great deal, a great deal.

Dear brothers, I know that there are many issues you must confront within your communities, both daily and as you look to the future. May we never lose sight of the fact that in that often uncertain future, it is the Lord himself who comes with the power of the resurrection to transform every wound into a fountain of life. Let us look to the future in the certainty that we are not alone, we do not journey alone; the Lord is there, waiting for us, and inviting us to recognize him above all in the breaking of the bread.

Let us beg the intercession of Blessed Nicholas and that of all the many missionary saints, so that our people may be renewed with that same anointing.

Given the presence here of many Bishops from Asia, I take this opportunity to extend my blessing and affection to all your communities and, in a special way, to the sick and to all who are experiencing moments of difficulty. May the Lord bless, care for, and accompany you always. And you, may he take you by the hand; and may you let yourselves be taken by the Lord's hand, and do not seek out other hands.

And please, do not forget to pray for me and to ask your communities to do the same, because everything I have said to you I need to say to myself as well.

Thank you very much.

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