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Apostolic Journey of the Holy Father Francis in Budapest for the concluding Holy Mass of the 52nd International Eucharistic Congress, and in Slovakia (12-15 September 2021 – Official welcome at Bratislava International Airport and Ecumenical Meeting at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bratislava

Official welcome at Bratislava International Airport

Ecumenical Meeting at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bratislava

Private meeting with the members of the Society of Jesus at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bratislava

Official welcome at Bratislava International Airport

Upon arrival at Bratislava International Airport, the Holy Father Francis was welcomed by the President of the Republic of Slovakia, Mrs. Zuzana Čaputová. Two children dressed in traditional dress gave the Pope bread, salt and flowers as a sign of welcome.

After the presentation of the respective delegations and the Guard of Honour, the Holy Father and the President proceeded to the VIP room of Bratislava Airport for a brief private meeting.

Then Pope Francis transferred by car to the apostolic nunciature for the Ecumenical Meeting.

Ecumenical Meeting at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bratislava

After the official welcome in Slovakia, the Holy Father Francis arrived at the apostolic nunciature in Bratislava.

Upon arrival he was welcomed by the staff of the Pontifical Representation. Then, at 16.40, in the hall of the apostolic nunciature, the Ecumenical Meeting took place.

Introduced by the greeting of the president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Bishop Ivan Eľko, the Pope delivered his address. After the prayer of Psalm 103, the group photo and the exchange of gifts, the Holy Father greeted the participants individually.

The meeting was attended by: for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Augustan Confession, Bishop Ivan Eľko, bishop general, president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Slovak Republic; for the Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Rastislav, Archbishop of Prešov, Metropolitan of the Czech Lands and Slovakia; for the Church of the Brethren, Štefan Evin, president of the Council of the Church of the Brethren; for the Methodist Evangelical Church, Štefan Rendoš, Superintendent, president of the Council of the Methodist Evangelical Church, Slovak province; for the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Bishop Jan Hradil of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in Slovakia; for the Fraternal Unity of Baptists, Benjamin Uhrin, president of the Council of Fraternal Unity of Baptists in the Slovak Republic; for the Christian Reformed Church, Bishop Róbert Géresi of the Christian Reformed Church; for the Latin Rite Catholic Church, Archbishop Ján Orosch of Trnava; for the Vetero-Catholic Church, Bishop Vlastimil Šulgan of the Vetero-Catholic Church in Slovakia; for the Apostolic Church in Slovakia, Bishop Ján Liba of the Apostolic Church in Slovakia; for the Central Union of Religious Jewish Communities in the Slovak Republic, Richard Duda, president of the Central Union of Religious Jewish Communities in the Slovak Republic.

The following is the address delivered by Pope Francis at the Ecumenical Meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Members of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches in Slovakia,

I offer you a cordial greeting and I thank you for accepting my invitation and coming here to be with me. I am here as a pilgrim in Slovakia, and you are here as welcome guests in this Nunciature! I am pleased that my very first meeting is with you. It is a sign that the Christian faith is – and desires to be – a seed of unity and leaven of fraternity in this country. I thank Your Beatitude, dear brother Rastislav, for your presence. I am grateful, dear Bishop Ivan, President of the Ecumenical Council, for your words that bear witness to your commitment to continue to walk together in moving from conflict to communion.

Your communities made a new start after the years of atheistic persecution, when religious freedom was stifled or harshly repressed. Then, finally, that freedom returned. Now you are sharing a similar experience of growth in which you are coming to discover how beautiful, but also how difficult it is to live your faith in freedom. For there is always the temptation to return to bondage, not that of a regime, but one even worse: an interior bondage.

That is what Dostoevsky warned about in his celebrated *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*. Jesus comes back to the earth and is once again imprisoned. The inquisitor minces no words: he accuses Jesus of having overestimated human freedom. He tells him: “You want to go into the world empty-handed, with the promise of freedom that they, in their simplicity and innate disorder cannot even imagine, a freedom appalling and terrifying, for nothing has ever been more unbearable for man than to be free!” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book V, Ch. 5). He goes even further, adding that men are quick to barter their freedom for a more comfortable slavery: that of submitting to someone who will make decisions for them, as long as they have bread and security. He even reproaches Jesus for not choosing to become Caesar, in order to subdue men’s consciences and establish peace by force. Instead, Jesus continued to offer freedom, whereas humanity cries out for “bread and little

else”.

Dear brothers, may this not happen to us! Let us help one another never to fall into the trap of being satisfied with bread and little else. It is a danger that makes itself felt once we think situations are back to normal, when we feel that things have quieted down and we settle into the hope of a peaceful and tranquil life. Then our goal is no longer “the freedom we have in Christ Jesus” (*Gal 2:4*), his truth that sets us free (cf. *Jn 8:32*), but the staking out of spaces and privileges, which, as far as the Gospel is concerned, are “bread and little else”. Here, from the heart of Europe, we can ask: have we Christians lost some of our zeal for the preaching of the Gospel and for prophetic witness? Does the truth of the Gospel set us free? Or do we think we are free when we can mark out comfort zones that allow us to keep everything under control and calmly go our way without particular setbacks? Content with bread and security, have we lost our momentum in seeking the unity for which Jesus prayed, a unity that surely demands the mature freedom born of firm decisions, endurance and sacrifice, but which is also a reason for the world to believe (cf. *Jn 17:21*)? Let us not be concerned only with the things that can benefit our individual communities. The freedom of our brothers and sisters is also our freedom, since our freedom is not complete without theirs.

In these lands, evangelization began with brotherhood and was sealed by the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica. As witnesses of a Christianity still marked by unity and zeal for the preaching of the Gospel, may they help us to persevere on our journey by fostering our fraternal communion in the name of Jesus. For that matter, how can we hope that Europe will rediscover its Christian roots when we ourselves are not rooted in full communion? How can we dream of a Europe free of ideologies if we lack the courage to put the freedom of Christ before the needs of individual groups of believers? It is hard to expect Europe to be increasingly influenced and enriched by the Gospel if we are untroubled by the fact that on this continent we are not yet fully united and are unconcerned for one another. Particular interests, historical reasons and political ties should not be insurmountable obstacles in our path. May Saints Cyril and Methodius, “precursors of ecumenism” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 14) help us make every effort to work for a reconciliation of diversity in the Holy Spirit. May they help us attain a unity that, without being uniformity, is capable of being a sign and witness to the freedom of Christ, the Lord who loosens the bonds of the past and heals us of all fear and anxiety.

In their time, Cyril and Methodius enabled the word of God to take flesh in these lands (cf. *Jn 1:14*). Here I would like to share with you two suggestions as fraternal advice for spreading the Gospel of freedom and unity today. The first concerns *contemplation*. A distinctive feature of the Slavic peoples, one which you are together called to preserve, is the contemplative spirit that, on the basis of an experiential faith, passes beyond philosophical and even theological concepts to embrace the mystery. Help one another to cultivate this spiritual tradition, which Europe greatly needs. The Church in the West in particular thirsts for this, to rediscover the beauty of the worship of God and the importance of not viewing the community of faith primarily in terms of programmes and organizational efficiency.

The second suggestion concerns *action*. Unity is not attained so much by good intentions and agreement about some shared value, but by doing something concrete, together, for those who bring us closest to the Lord. Who are they? They are the poor, for in them Jesus is present (cf. *Mt 25:40*). Sharing in works of charity can open up broader horizons and help us to make greater progress in overcoming prejudice and misunderstanding. It is also a quality that is traditionally important in this country, whose schoolchildren learn by heart a poem containing these very beautiful lines: “When a stranger knocks on our door in heartfelt trust: whoever he or she may be, whether coming from near or afar, day or night, God’s gift will be waiting on our table” (SAMO CHALUPKA, *Mor ho !*, 1864). May the gift of God be present on the table of all, so that, even though we are not yet able to share the same Eucharistic meal, we can welcome Jesus together by serving him in the poor. It will be a sign more eloquent than a multitude of words, and will help civil society to understand, especially in these troubled times, that only by being on the side of the weakest can we all, together, survive the present pandemic.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for your presence and for the journey you are making together. The kindness and hospitality typical of the Slovak people, your tradition of peaceful coexistence and your cooperation for the welfare of the country are precious for spreading the Gospel. I encourage you to pursue your ecumenical journey, so necessary and enriching. I assure you of a remembrance in my prayers, and I ask you, please, to remember me in your own. Thank you.

Private meeting with members of the Society of Jesus at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bratislava

At the end of the Ecumenical Meeting, the Holy Father Francis met in private with the members of the Society of Jesus present in Slovakia.
