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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in Cyprus and Greece – Visit to Refugees in the “Reception and Identification Centre” of Mytilene, Lesvos

Visit to Refugees in the *Reception and Identification Centre* of Mytilene, Lesvos

This morning, after leaving the apostolic nunciature, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to Athens International Airport, in order to depart on board an Aegean A320neo bound for Mytilene, Lesvos.

Upon arrival at Mytilene Airport, the Pope was received by the President of the Hellenic Republic, Her Excellency Ms. Katerina Sakellaropoulou, and by the ordinariate of the diocese, Bishop Josif Printezis. He then transferred by car to the *Reception and Identification Centre* in order to visit the refugees.

Upon arrival at the camp, he proceeded by car to the location where the meeting with refugees was to take place, where around 200 people were present.

After the opening hymn and the greeting from the bishop, a refugee and a volunteer gave their testimonies. The Pope then delivered his address.

At the end, some children offered a gift to the Holy Father. The Pope then spoke a while with some refugees and subsequently visited their quarters.

At the end of the visit, the Holy Father transferred by car to Mytilene Airport and, after taking leave of the bishop and the authorities present, he boarded an Aegean A320neo in order to return to Athens. After arriving at Athens International Airport, he returned by car to the apostolic nunciature, where he lunched in private.

The following is the address delivered by Pope Francis during his visit to the refugees in the *Reception and Identification Centre* of Mytilene, Lesvos:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you for your kind words. I am grateful to you, Madam President, for your presence and your words. Sisters and brothers, I am here once again, to meet you and to assure you of my closeness. I say it from the heart. I am here to see your faces and look into your eyes. Eyes full of fear and expectancy, eyes that have seen violence and poverty, eyes streaked by too many tears. Five years ago on this island, the Ecumenical Patriarch, my dear brother Bartholomew, said something that struck me: “Those who are afraid of you have not looked you in the eye. Those who are afraid of you have not seen your faces. Those who fear you have not seen your children. They have forgotten that dignity and freedom transcend fear and division. They have forgotten that migration is not an issue for the Middle East and Northern Africa, for Europe and Greece. It is an issue for the world” (*Address*, 16 April 2016).

It is an issue for the whole world: a humanitarian crisis that concerns everyone. The pandemic has had a global impact; it has made us realize that we are all on the same boat; it has made us experience what it means to have identical fears. We have come to understand that the great issues must be faced together, since in today’s world piecemeal solutions are inadequate. Yet while we are working to vaccinate people worldwide and, despite many delays and hesitations, progress is being made in the fight against climate change, all this seems to be terribly absent when it comes to migration. Yet human lives, real people, are at stake! The future of us all is at stake, and that future will be peaceful only if it is integrated. Only if it is reconciled with the most vulnerable will the future be prosperous. When we reject the poor, we reject peace.

History teaches us that narrow self-interest and nationalism lead to disastrous consequences. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council observed, “a firm determination to respect the dignity of other individuals and peoples along with the deliberate practice of fraternal love are absolutely necessary for the achievement of peace” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 78). It is an illusion to think it is enough to keep ourselves safe, to defend ourselves from those in greater need who knock at our door. In the future, we will have more and more contact with others. To turn it to the good, what is needed are not unilateral actions but wide-ranging policies. Let me repeat: history teaches this lesson, yet we have not learned it. Let us stop ignoring reality, stop constantly shifting responsibility, stop passing off the issue of migration to others, as if it mattered to no one and was only a pointless burden to be shouldered by somebody else!

Sisters and brothers, your faces and your eyes beg us not to look the other way, not to deny our common humanity, but make your experiences our own and to be mindful of your dramatic plight. Elie Wiesel, a witness to the greatest tragedy of the last century, wrote: “It is because I remember our common beginning that I move closer to my fellow human beings. It is because I refuse to forget that their future is as important as my own” (*From the Kingdom of Memory, Reminiscences*, New York, 1990, 10). On this Sunday, I ask God to rouse us from our disregard for those who are suffering, to shake us from an individualism that excludes others, to awaken hearts that are deaf to the needs of our neighbours. I ask every man and woman, all of us, to overcome the paralysis of fear, the indifference that kills, the cynical disregard that nonchalantly condemns to death those on the fringes! Let us combat at its root the dominant mindset that revolves around ourselves, our self-interest, personal and national, and becomes the measure and criterion of everything.

Five years have passed since I visited this place with my dear brothers Bartholomew and Ieronymos. After all this time, we see that little has changed with regard to the issue of migration. To be sure, many people have committed themselves to the work of welcoming and integrating. I want to thank the many volunteers and all those at every level – institutional, social, charitable and political – who have made great efforts to care for individuals and to address the issue of migration. I also acknowledge the efforts made to finance and build dignified reception facilities, and I cordially thank the local population for the great good they have accomplished and for the many sacrifices they have made. I also thank the local authorities for welcoming and looking after the people coming to us. Thank you for what you are doing! Yet, with deep regret, we must admit that this country, like others, continues to be hard-pressed, and that in Europe there are those who persist in treating the problem as a matter that does not concern them. This is tragic. I recall the final words spoken by the President: “That

Europe might do the same”.

How many conditions exist that are unworthy of human beings! How many hotspots where migrants and refugees live in borderline conditions, without glimpsing solutions on the horizon! Yet respect for individuals and for human rights, especially on this continent, which is constantly promoting them worldwide, should always be upheld, and the dignity of each person ought to come before all else. It is distressing to hear of proposals that common funds be used to build walls and barbed wire as a solution. We are in the age of walls and barbed wire. To be sure, we can appreciate people’s fears and insecurities, the difficulties and dangers involved, and the general sense of fatigue and frustration, exacerbated by the economic and pandemic crises. Yet problems are not resolved and coexistence improved by building walls higher, but by joining forces to care for others according to the concrete possibilities of each and in respect for the law, always giving primacy to the inalienable value of the life of every human being. For as Elie Wiesel also said: “When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders become irrelevant” (*Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*, 10 December 1986).

In various societies, security and solidarity, local and universal concerns, tradition and openness are being ideologically contraposed. Rather than *bickering over ideas*, it would be better to *begin with reality*: to pause and broaden our gaze to take in the problems of the majority of humanity, of all those peoples who are victims of humanitarian emergencies they did not create, yet have to endure as the latest chapter in a long history of exploitation. It is easy to stir up public opinion by instilling fear of others. Yet why do we fail to speak with equal vehemence about the exploitation of the poor, about seldom-mentioned but often well-financed wars, about economic agreements where the people have to pay, about covert deals to traffic in arms, favouring the proliferation of the arms trade? Why is this not spoken of? The remote causes should be attacked, not the poor people who pay the consequences and are even used for political propaganda. To remove the root causes, more is needed than merely patching up emergency situations. Coordinated actions are needed. Epochal changes have to be approached with a breadth of vision. There are no easy answers to complex problems; instead, we need to accompany processes from within, to overcome ghettoization and foster a slow and necessary integration, to accept the cultures and traditions of others in a fraternal and responsible way.

Above all else, if we want to start anew, we must look at the faces of children. May we find the courage to feel ashamed in their presence; in their innocence, they are our future. They challenge our consciences and ask us: “What kind of world do you want to give us?” Let us not hastily turn away from the shocking pictures of their tiny bodies lying lifeless on the beaches. The Mediterranean, which for millennia has brought different peoples and distant lands together, is now becoming a grim cemetery without tombstones. This great basin of water, the cradle of so many civilizations, now looks like a mirror of death. Let us not let our sea (*mare nostrum*) be transformed into a desolate sea of death (*mare mortuum*). Let us not allow this place of encounter to become a theatre of conflict. Let us not permit this “sea of memories” to be transformed into a “sea of forgetfulness”. Please brothers and sisters, let us stop this *shipwreck of civilization!*

On the banks of this sea, God became man. Here Jesus’ word resounded, proclaiming that God is the “Father and guide of all people” (SAINT GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Oration VII for his brother Caesarius*, 24). God loves us as his children; he wants us to be brothers and sisters. Instead, he is offended when we despise the men and women created in his image, leaving them at the mercy of the waves, in the wash of indifference, justified at times even in the name of supposedly Christian values. On the contrary, faith demands compassion and mercy. Let us not forget that this is God’s style: closeness, compassion and tenderness. Faith impels us to hospitality, to that *philoxenia* (love of strangers) which permeated classical culture, and later found in Jesus its definitive expression, particularly in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:29-37*) and the words of Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew (cf. vv. 31-46). Far from being a religious ideology, this has to do with our *concrete Christian roots*. Jesus solemnly tells us that he is present in the stranger, in the refugee, in those who are naked and hungry. The Christian programme is to be where Jesus is, for the Christian programme, as Pope Benedict has written, “is a heart which sees” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31). I do not want to conclude this address without thanking the Greek people for their welcoming spirit. Many times this becomes a problem because it is difficult for the people who are coming here to go elsewhere. Thank you, brothers, and sisters, for your generosity!

Let us now pray to Our Lady, that she may open our eyes to the sufferings of our brothers and sisters. Mary set out in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant. How many pregnant mothers, journeying in haste, have found death, even while carrying life in their womb! May the Mother of God help us to have a maternal gaze that regards all human beings as children of God, sisters and brothers to be welcomed, protected, supported and integrated. And to be loved tenderly. May the all-holy Mother teach us to put the reality of men and women before ideas and ideologies, and to go forth in haste to encounter all those who suffer.

Let us all now pray to Our Lady.

[*Angelus*]
