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Declaration of the Director of the Holy See Press Office, Matteo Bruni

This morning, on his birthday, Pope Francis received in the Vatican Apostolic Palace a first group of a dozen refugees in Italy thanks to an agreement between the Holy See and the Italian and Cypriot authorities, as anticipated during his recent apostolic journey in Cyprus and in Greece.

The group will be directly supported by the Holy Father, while the Sant'Egidio Community will take care of their insertion in a one-year integration programme.

The Pope welcomed the refugees in the Throne Hall and listened to their stories and those of their journey from Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Somalia and Syria. Some of them are doctors and computer technicians. "You have saved us!" a Congolese boy said to him, moved. The Pope addressed some words of welcome and affection to them individually, and thanked them for their visit.

Wishing him "long life and good health" on his birthday, the refugees presented the Pope with a painting by an Afghan refugee depicting migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Pope Francis inquired about a little girl he met in the Mavrouni camp in Lesbos, who will be coming to Italy in the next few days with her family for treatment, and after a photo together, he greeted the group and asked everyone to pray for him.