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Audience with the young participants in the “Alpha Camp”

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the young participants in the “Alpha Camp”.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present at the meeting:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear young friends, good morning and welcome!

I thank Bishop Camillo Cibotti of Isernia-Venafro for his kind words and particularly because he has accompanied you here, along with a number of priests, educators and directors of “Alpha”, and the Mayor of Macchia d’Isernia, the site of your Camp. “Accompany” is an important word for us in the Church! Accompany.

Just for today, you left hills of Molise in order to come to Rome and meet the Pope. Thank you for this! I feel that it is a gift for me and for the Church.

You are young people who come from Italy and other countries of Europe. You were born into a world that we speak of as “secularized”, meaning that our culture is more influenced by the realities of this world than by the dimension of the sacred. Nonetheless, deep within the human heart there is always a thirst for something greater, for the infinite. You too, who have grown up with instant information, are asking the great questions that arise in every age. Where do we come from? What is at the origin of all that exists? What is the meaning of my life? But also: Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why do little children and innocent people suffer as they do? You should know that God loves questions; in a way, he loves questions more than answers. Why? Obviously, because the answers are closed, while the questions are open. A person who only lives on answers is a person used to being closed, closed, closed. A person who lives on questions is a person used to being open, open, open. And God loves questions. Jesus asked the first two young people who followed him one day on the banks of the Jordan: “What are you looking for?” (*Jn* 1:38). A question. Everybody should ask that question: What am I looking for? If you ask that question, it means that you are young, even if you are eighty

years old. If you don't ask it, you are old, even if you are only twenty. Am I right?

Last week I was in Canada, where I visited the indigenous peoples whose ancestors lived in those lands before the colonization. They are guardians of ancestral values and traditions, yet they live in a country that is very modern and very secularized. Looking at you, I thought of the young men and women of those indigenous peoples. They are very different from yourselves, yet also very similar; I would even say that they are just like you. Just like you in the sense of being human, of sharing in the things that make us human, such as our relationship with God, with others, with creation and with ourselves, in freedom, generosity and self-giving. All those relationships are a sign that we are somehow "incomplete": we long for fulfilment, fullness of life, joy and meaning. And Jesus Christ is fullness: all of us are unfinished, on the road, making a journey. We need to be aware of that.

That is why, a few years ago, I decided to write a long letter to the young people of the world. I started with these words: "Christ is alive! He is our hope. In a wonderful way, he brings youth to our world and everything he touches becomes young, new and full of life... Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive! He is in you, he is with you and he never abandons you. However far you may wander, he is always there, the Risen One. He calls you, and he waits for you to return to him and start over again. When you feel you are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear, doubt or failure, he will always be there to restore your strength and your hope" (*Christus Vivit*, 1-2).

That was the case with Andrew and John, and with Simon and James, who became Jesus' disciples and apostles. It was also the case for me: I heard his call one day when I was 17 years old. And it is the case for you, and you, and you..., all of you, the children of the internet age. Jesus always remains the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. But [remain] open, journeying, always. Not closed.

Your Camp is called "Alpha", like the method of evangelization that inspired it. *Alpha* is another word for birth, a new beginning, the dawn of new life... Christ is "Alpha", the beginning, but he is also "Omega", the end, completion and fulfilment. In union with Christ, each of us, as the microcosm we are, can be saved from the abyss of death and negativity, and can enter into the positive attraction of God, life and love. In union with Jesus, each of you becomes a seed destined to blossom, to grow and bear fruit. But we need to follow him! That means saying no to selfishness, to self-centeredness, to wanting to appear other than what we are. No! Saying no to being closed in every form. It means being ourselves, neither puffed up nor downcast, but seeing ourselves for who we are. That is true humility. And, when faced with the evil that is within us and around us, not to escape, not to evade reality, not to close in on ourselves, but to shoulder, each one of us, our own share of responsibility – Jesus says "our own cross" – and to bear it with love and with joy. Not all by ourselves, either, for that is impossible, but always with Jesus, with him leading and ourselves following.

This gives us true peace and security. We are in the presence of Jesus, who knows us and loves us more than we do ourselves, and who wants each of us to find his or her own unique, personal fulfilment. *God does not want photocopies*, only originals. You know who used to say that? It was Blessed Carlo Acutis, a young Italian born in England and raised in Milan. He was someone like yourselves, a child of this time, passionate about computers and, above all, in love with Jesus and the Eucharist, which he called "the highway to heaven". Carlo's life on earth was brief, very brief, but it was a full life. It was like a race, a race to heaven. He set out on that race from the day of his First Holy Communion, when he encountered Jesus in the sacrament of his Body and Blood. Yes, because Jesus is not an idea, or a moral precept. Jesus is a person, a friend, a companion along the way.

Dear young friends, I leave you with this heat and with this prayer: may Jesus become your great Friend, your Companion along the way. May the living Jesus become your life! Every day and forever. I repeat what Carlo Acutis said: please, don't be photocopies, but originals, every one of you! Thank you for having come! Enjoy camp and keep pressing forward!
