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Pastoral Visit of the Holy Father Francis to Venice – Celebration of Holy Mass

After crossing the pontoon bridge connecting the Basilica of *Santa Maria della Salute* to Saint Mark's Square, the Holy Father Francis was welcomed at the opening of the square by the President of the Veneto Region, the Honorable Luca Zaia, the Prefect of Venice, Dr. Darco Pellos, and the Mayor of the city, Dr. Luigi Brugnaro. After a tour by electric car among some 10,500 faithful and pilgrims present in Saint Mark's Square, at 10.40 the Pope presided over Holy Mass.

At the end of the Eucharistic celebration, after the words of thanks from the Patriarch of Venice, Msgr. Francesco Moraglia, the Holy Father led the recitation of the *Regina Caeli*.

The following is the homily delivered by the Holy Father after the proclamation of the Gospel:

Homily of the Holy Father

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Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. Like a patient farmer, God, the merciful and good Father, tenderly cultivates us so that our lives may be filled with much fruit. This is why Jesus urges us to safeguard the invaluable gift of our relationship with him, upon which our life and fruitfulness depend. He persistently repeats, "Remain in me, as I remain in you. [...] Abide in me, and I in you. [...] He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (*Jn 15:4-5*). Only those who remain united with Jesus will bear fruit. Let us pause to consider this.

Jesus is about to conclude his earthly mission. At the Last Supper with those who will become his apostles, he entrusts to them several key words, along with the Eucharist. This is one of those words: "remain", keep the connection with me alive, remain united to me as branches to the vine. Using this imagery, Jesus revisits a biblical metaphor that was well-known to the people and found in prayers, as in the psalm that says, "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine" (*Ps 80:15*). Israel is the vineyard that the Lord planted and cared for. When the people fail to produce the fruits of love that the Lord expects, the prophet Isaiah issues an indictment using the parable of a farmer who plows his vineyard, removed the stones, and planted choice vines, expecting it to produce good wine, but it yielded only sour grapes. The prophet concludes: "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, the men of Judah, are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry!" (*Is 5:7*). Jesus himself, drawing from Isaiah, recounts the dramatic parable of the murderous vineyard workers, highlighting the contrast between God's patient work and his people's rejection (cf. *Mt 21:33-44*).

Thus, while the metaphor of the vine expresses God's loving care for us, it also warns us that if we sever this connection with the Lord, we cannot produce fruits of good life and we run the risk of becoming dry branches. It is a shame to become dry branches, those branches that get cast aside.

Brothers and sisters, against the backdrop of the image used by Jesus, I also think of the long history that links Venice to vineyards and wine production, the care of many viticulturists, and the numerous vineyards that arose on the islands of the Lagoon and in the gardens between the city's alleys, and those in which monks produced wine for their communities. Within this historical memory, it is not difficult to grasp the message of the parable of the vine and the branches: faith in Jesus, the bond with him, does not imprison our freedom. On the contrary, it opens us to receive the sap of God's love, which multiplies our joy, takes care of us like a skilled vintner and brings forth shoots even when the soil of our life becomes arid. And our heart often becomes arid.

Yet, the metaphor that came from Jesus' heart can also be interpreted while thinking of this city built on water, recognized for its uniqueness as one of the most picturesque places in the world. Venice is one with the waters upon which it sits. Without taking care of and safeguarding this natural environment, it could even cease to exist. Similarly, our life is also immersed forever in the springs of God's love. We were regenerated in Baptism, reborn to new life from water and the Holy Spirit, and grafted into Christ, like the branches in the vine. The sap of this love flows through us, without which we become dry branches, bearing no fruit. When Blessed John Paul I was Patriarch of this city, he once said that Jesus "came to bring people eternal life". And he continued: "That life is in Him, and from Him it passes to His disciples, like sap rising from the trunk to the branches of the vine. It is a fresh water that He gives, a fountain always bubbling forth" (cf. A. Luciani, *Venice 1975-1976. Complete Works. Speeches, writings, articles*, vol. vii, Padova 2011, 158).

Brothers and sisters, this is what matters: to remain in the Lord, to abide in him. Let us reflect on this for one minute: to remain in the Lord, to abide in him. This verb — to remain — should not be interpreted as something static, as if it were telling us to stand still, parked in passivity. Indeed, it invites us to move, because to remain in the Lord means to grow in relationship with him, to converse with him, to embrace his Word, to follow him on the path of the Kingdom of God. It thus involves following him on a journey, letting ourselves be challenged by his Gospel, and becoming witnesses of his love.

Therefore, Jesus says that whoever remains in him bears fruit. And it is not just any fruit! The fruit of the branches where the sap flows is the grape, and from the grape comes the wine, which is a quintessentially

messianic sign. Jesus, the Messiah sent by the Father, brings the wine of God's love into the heart of humanity and fills it with joy. He fills it with hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the fruit we are called to bear in our lives, in our relationships, in the places we visit every day, in our society, at work. As we gaze upon this city of Venice today, we admire its enchanting beauty. Yet, we are also concerned about the many issues that threaten it: climate change, which impacts the waters of the Lagoon and the land; the fragility of constructions, of the cultural heritage, but also of people; the difficulty of creating an environment that is fit for human beings through adequate management of tourism; and moreover, all that these realities risk generating in terms of frayed social relations, individualism, and loneliness.

And we Christians, who are branches united to the vine, the vineyard of God who cares for humanity and created the world as a garden so that we may flourish and make it flourish — how do we Christians respond? By remaining united to Christ, we can bring the fruits of the Gospel into the reality we inhabit: fruits of justice and peace, fruits of solidarity and mutual care; carefully-made choices to preserve our environmental and human heritage. Let us not forget the human heritage, our great humanity, the one that God took on, in order to walk with us. We need our Christian communities, neighbourhoods, and cities to become hospitable, welcoming and inclusive places. Venice, which has always been a place of encounter and cultural exchange, is called to be a sign of beauty available to all, starting with the least, a sign of fraternity and care for our common home. Venice, a land that makes brothers and sisters. Thank you.
