



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

TO BULGARIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

[5-7 MAY 2019] **MEETING WITH THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY** **ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS** *Church of Saint Michael Archangel in Rakovsky*

Monday, 6 May 2019 **[Multimedia]**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good afternoon! Thank you for your warm welcome and for your dancing and testimonies. I am told that the translation is on the screens. That's good.

Bishop Iovcev asked me to help you – full of joy at meeting the People of God with its myriad faces and charisms – to help you to “see with eyes of faith and love”. But first, I would like to thank you for helping me to see better and to understand a little more fully why this land was so dear and important to [Saint John XXIII](#). Here the Lord was preparing what would be an important step in our ecclesial journey. Here he developed strong friendships with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, and this led him on a path that would help foster the longed-for, yet ever fragile sense of fraternity between individuals and communities.

To see with the eyes of faith. I would like to recall something that “Good Pope John” once said. His heart was so attuned to the Lord that he could register his disagreement with those around him who saw nothing but evil and to refer to them as “prophets of doom”. He was convinced of the need to trust in God’s providence, which constantly accompanies us and even in the midst of adversity is capable of bringing about his deeper and unforeseeable plans ([Opening Address of the Second Vatican Council](#), 11 October 1962).

God’s people learn to see, trust, discover and let themselves be guided by the power of the resurrection. They recognize, of course, that there will always be painful times and unjust situations, yet they do not wring their hands, shrink back in fear or, even worse, create a climate of scepticism, discomfort or disruption, since this does nothing but harm the soul, causing hope to flag and hindering every possible solution. Men and women of God have the courage to take the

first step – this is important: to take the first step – in finding creative ways of directly testifying that Love is not dead, but has triumphed over every obstacle. Men and women of God get involved because they have learned that, in Jesus, God himself gets involved. He put his own flesh at stake so that no one will feel alone or abandoned. And this is the beauty of our faith: God gets involved by making himself one of us.

I would like to share with you an experience I had a few hours ago. This morning I visited the Vrazhdebna refugee camp and met asylum-seekers and refugees from various countries of the world who are looking for a better place to live than the one they left. I also met the Caritas volunteers [applause for the Caritas volunteers who stand up, each one wearing a red T-shirt]. When I came in here and saw the Caritas volunteers, I asked who they were because I thought they were fire fighters! All in red! There [at Vrazhdebna Centre] they told me that the heart of the Centre's – this refugee Centre's – life and work is born from the recognition that every person is a child of God, regardless of ethnicity or religious confession. In order to love someone, there is no need to ask for a curriculum vitae; love precedes, it always goes onward, it takes the first step. Why? Why is love gratuitous? In that Caritas Centre are many Christians who have learned to see with God's own eyes. God is not worried about labels, but seeks out and awaits each person with a Father's eyes. But do you know something? We have to be careful! We have fallen into the culture of labels: "this person is like that, that one like this, this one like that...". This is not what God wants. He or she is a person, made in God's image. No labels! Let's leave labels up to God; we just give love, to every person. This is true of gossip too. It's so easy for gossip to come between us! "Ah, this one is like that, this one does that...". We are always labelling people. I am not talking about you, because I know there is no gossiping here, but let's think about places where gossip happens. And that means labelling: labelling people. We must move from the culture of labelling things to the reality of naming persons. Seeing with the eyes of faith is a summons not to spend your life pinning labels, classifying those who are worthy of love and those who are not, but trying to create conditions in which every person can feel loved, especially those who feel forgotten by God because they are forgotten by their brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters, those who love do not waste time in self-pity, but always try to do something concrete. In the Centre, they learn to see problems, to acknowledge them and to confront them; they let themselves be questioned and try to discern things with the eyes of the Lord. As Pope John said: "I never met a pessimist who managed to do something good". Pessimists never do anything good. Pessimists ruin everything. When I think of a pessimist, I think of a delicious pie. What does the pessimist do? He or she pours vinegar onto the pie, and ruins everything. Pessimists ruin everything. Love on the other hand opens doors, always! Pope John was right: "I never met a pessimist who managed to do something good". The Lord is the first not to be pessimistic. He constantly tries to open up paths of resurrection for all of us. The Lord is an incurable optimist! He is always seeking to think well of us, to carry us onward, to wager on us. How marvellous it is when our communities become building sites of hope! The optimist is a man or woman who creates hope in the community.

On the other hand, to see things with the eyes of God, we need other people. We need them to teach us to look and feel the way Jesus looks and feels, to let our heart beat with his own feelings. This is why it pleased me when Mitko and Miroslava, with their little daughter Bilyana, told us that for them the parish has always been their second home, the place where they always found strength to carry on, amid community prayer and the support of loved ones. A parish of optimism, that helps people go forwards.

The parish, in this way, becomes a home in the midst of homes. It manages to make the Lord present there, where every family, every person tries to earn their daily bread. There, at every street corner, is the Lord, who did not want to save us by decree, but came into our midst. He wants to enter into the heart of our families and say to us, as he did to the disciples: “Peace be with you!” The Lord’s greeting is good: “Peace be with you!” Where there are storms, where there is darkness, where there is doubt, where there is anxiety, the Lord says: “Peace be with you!”. And he does not only say it: he makes peace.

I am happy that you like the “advice” I share with spouses: “Never go to bed angry, not even for one night”. From what I see, it works for you! It is a bit of advice that can also be helpful for all Christians. I like to tell couples not to argue, but if they do argue, that it’s okay, because it is normal to get cross. It’s normal. And sometimes even arguing rather fiercely – sometimes even plates go flying – but it’s okay to get cross, as long as the day ends in peace. Never finish the day still fighting. To all of you couples: never finish the day still fighting. And do you know why? Because the “cold war” by day becomes very dangerous later. “But, Father, how do we make peace? Where I can learn how to speak words to make peace?” Do it like this [he makes the gesture of caressing]: one gesture and peace is restored. Just one gesture of love. Understood? This is for couples.

It is true that, as you also said, we experience various trials; that is why we need to be on guard against anger, resentment or bitterness taking possession of our hearts. We have to help each other in this, caring for one another, so that the fire that the Spirit has kindled in our hearts never goes out.

You appreciate, and are grateful, that your priests and religious sisters care for you. They are good! A round of applause for them. As I was listening to you, I was struck by that priest who spoke not about how successful he had been during his years of ministry, but about all those people God placed in his path to help him become a good minister of God. And you are these people.

The People of God is grateful to its priests, and priests recognize that they learn how to be believers – pay attention to this: they learn how to be *believers* – with the help of their people, their family, living in their midst. When a priest or a consecrated person, even a bishop like me, distances himself from the People of God, his heart grows cold and he loses that ability to believe

as the People of God do. This is why I like the statement: the People of God help the consecrated – be they priests, bishops or sisters – to be believers. The People of God are a living community, one that supports, accompanies, integrates and enriches. Never separated, but united, where everyone learns to be a sign and blessing of God for others. A priest without his people loses his identity, and a people can grow apart without its priests. The unity between the priest who supports and fights for his people, and the people who support and fight for their priest. This is a great thing! Each dedicates his or her life to the others. None of us can live only for ourselves; we live for others. Saint Paul said this in one of his letters: “No one lives to himself”. “Father, I know a person who lives for themselves”. And is that person happy? Is he capable of giving his life for others? Is he able to smile? They are selfish people. The priestly people can say with its priests: “This is my body given up for you”. This is the People of God united to their priest. That is how we learn to be a Church, a family and a community that welcomes, listens, accompanies, cares for others, revealing its true face, which is that of a mother. The Church is a mother. A Church that is a mother – Mother Church – experiences and makes her children’s problems her own, not offering ready-made answers. No. When mothers have to respond to the reality of their children, they say what comes into their minds at that moment. Mothers do not have ready-made answers: they answer with their hearts, with a mother’s heart. The Church is like this too, this Church which is made up of all of us, people and priests together, bishops, consecrated men and women: all are seeking paths of life together, paths of reconciliation. Trying to make present the Kingdom of God. A Church, a family and a community that takes up the knotty problems of life, which are often like balls of tangled wool; before untangling them, it has to make them its own, taking them into its hands and loving them. A mother does this too: when she sees her son or daughter “knotted up” in all kinds of difficulties, she does not condemn them: she takes those difficulties, those knots in her hands, makes them her own and solves them. Our Church-who-is-a-mother does this. This is how we must look at her. She is the mother who accepts us as we are, with our difficulties, even with our sins. She is a mother, she always knows how to sort things out. Isn’t it wonderful to have a mother like that? Never separate yourself from her, never leave the Church! Because if you do go away, you will lose your memory of the Church’s motherhood; you will start to think badly of your Mother the Church, and the further from her you go, the more that image of a mother will become the image of a cruel stepmother. But the cruel stepmother is inside your heart; the Church is a mother.

A family among families – this is the Church – open to bearing witness in today’s world, as our sister told us, open to faith, hope and love for the Lord and for those whom he has a preferential love. A home with open doors. The Church is a home with open doors, because she is a mother. Something that a great priest wrote really struck me. He was a poet who loved Our Lady very much. He was also a priest and a sinner, he knew he was a sinner, but he went to Our Lady and wept before her. He wrote a poem once, asking forgiveness from Our Lady and resolving never to separate himself from the Church. This is what he wrote: “This evening, my Lady, my promise is sincere. But, just in case, don’t forget to leave the key on the outside of the door”. Mary and the Church never close the door from inside! If they do close the door, the key is always on the

outside: you can open it. And this is our hope. The hope of reconciliation. “Father, you say that the Church and Our Lady are a home with open doors, but if she knew, Father, the dreadful things that I’ve done in my life: for me the doors of the Church, and even the doors of Our Lady’s heart, are closed”. “You are right: they are closed, but come closer, look carefully and you will see that the key is on the outside. Just do that, open and go in. You don’t have to ring the bell. Open with the key right there”. And this is true for the whole of our lives.

In this sense, I have a “job” for you. You are the children, in faith, of the great witnesses who testified by their lives to the love of the Lord in these lands. The brothers Cyril and Methodius, holy men with great dreams, were convinced that the most authentic way to talk to God was in one’s own language. This made them boldly decide to translate the Bible, so that no one would be without the Word of life.

Being a home with open doors, in the footsteps of Cyril and Methodius, means that today too, we need to be bold and creative. We have to ask how we can translate the love God has for us into concrete and understandable language for the younger generation. We have to be bold, courageous. We know from experience that “young people frequently fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues” (*Christus Vivit*, 202). And this requires of us new and imaginative efforts in our pastoral outreach. Finding ways to touch their hearts, to learn about their expectations and to encourage their dreams, as a community-family that supports, accompanies and points to the future with hope. A great temptation faced by young people is the lack of roots, of deep roots to support them; as a result, they feel uprooted and alone. Our young people, when they feel called to express all the potential they possess, often give up half-way because of the frustrations or disappointments they experience, since they have no roots to rely on as they look to the future (cf. *ibid.* 179-186). How much more so, when they are forced to leave behind their homes, their country and their family.

I would like to emphasize what I said about young people, who so often lose their roots. Today, in the world, there are two groups of people who suffer a great deal: young people and the elderly. We must help to let them meet up. The elderly are the roots of our society; we cannot send them away from our community; they are the living memory of our faith. Young people need roots, need memory. Let us ensure that they can communicate between each other, without fear. There is a beautiful prophecy of the prophet Joel: “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men see visions” (cf. 3:1). When young people meet the elderly and the elderly meet the young, the elderly start to live again, start dreaming again, and young people take courage from the old; they go forwards and begin to do what is most important in their lives, that is, to “spend time” with the future. We need young people to “become familiar” with the future, but this can only happen if they have roots of the elderly. When I arrived here in the parish, there were many elderly in the streets, many older men and women. They were smiling... They have treasure inside them. And there were many young people who also greeted and smiled. May they meet up with each other! May the elderly give to the young this ability to prophesy, that is, to “spend time” with the future. These

are the wagers of today. And let us not be afraid. Let us meet new challenges, as long as we make every effort to ensure that our people never lack the light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus, a community of faith to support them, and ever new horizons that can give them meaning and a goal in life (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49). May we never forget that the most beautiful chapters in the life of the Church were written when God's People set out with creativity to translate the love of God in their own time, with the challenges they gradually encountered. A united people, the People of God, with the *sensus fidei* which is proper to it. It is good to know that you can count on a great living history, but it is even more beautiful to realize that you are being asked to write its next chapter. These pages have not been written. *You* have to write them. The future is in your hands; *you* must write the book of the future. Never tire of being a Church that continues to give birth, amid the contradictions, sorrows and also much poverty, the Church-who-is-a-mother that continually has children, that gives life to the sons and daughters that this land needs today, at the start of this twenty-first century. Always listen with one ear to the Gospel and the other to the heart of your people.

Thank you... I haven't finished! I'm still tormenting you a little more – thank you for this very enjoyable meeting. And, thinking of Pope John, I would like the blessing I now give you to be a caress of the Lord for each of you. Pope John had given this blessing with his wish that it be a caress, that blessing he gave in the moonlight [at the opening of the Second Vatican Council].

Let us pray together, let us ask Our Lady who is the image of the Church. Pray in your language. [They recite the Hail Mary in Bulgarian]

[Blessing]