Historical Bari meeting between Pope and Patriarchs of the Oriental Churches

Pilgrims in Bari, "this window open to the Near East ", in the words of Pope Francis: The Patriarchs of the various Oriental Christian confessions gathered there with the bishop of Rome, last 7 July, in an ecumenical dynamic aimed at invoking peace for the peoples of the biblical territories. The Order of the Holy Sepulchre was represented by a delegation of the Lieutenancy for Southern Adriatic Italy - led by Lieutenant Ferdinando Parente - and by the Prior of the local section, Msgr. Luigi Renna, bishop of Cerignola-Ascoli Satriano, gathered in prayer around Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Pro Grand Prior of the Order.

The heads of the Churches first gathered in the crypt of the basilica, next to the relics of St. Nicholas - a witness of faith greatly revered in the East - where they lit the "one-flame lamp", a symbol of unity and hope. The Holy Father later commented on this moment, extolling the "sign of a light that continues to shine forth in the dark" and explaining that "when we lift up our hands to heaven in prayer, and we stretch out our hands to our brothers and sisters without seeking our own advantage, then the fire of the Spirit, the Spirit of unity and of peace, is kindled and leaps into flame".

Participants in this unique and historic meeting then travelled in a sort of ‘ecumenical popemobile’ to the seafront, where they implored "God of all consolation" (2 *Cor* 1,3) for all those who suffer in the Middle East, cradle of the great monotheistic religions. **"In the Middle East there are the roots of our own souls**", recalled the Successor of Peter, underlining that the Lord, "the sun rising from above", came here to visit us. He denounced "the complicit silence of many" regarding war and violence, forced occupation and migration. The Pope also evoked the danger that “the presence of our brothers and sisters in the faith will disappear, disfiguring the very face of the region”.

"From the waters of the Nile to the Jordan Valley and beyond, through the Orontes to the Tigris and the Euphrates, may the plea of the Psalm resound: ‘Peace be upon you!’", The Pope exclaimed intoning the prophets. He continued: "**We want to be a voice that contrasts the murder of indifference. We want to give a voice to those who have none, to those who can only wipe away their tears**". Then together with the other leaders of the various Churches including one woman - Souraya Bechealany - Secretary General of the Council of Churches of the Middle East – the pope retired for a closed door meeting.

This beautiful experience of synodality - introduced by Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of Jerusalem - was characterized by a series of exchanges, during which everyone was able to intervene on fundamental topics such as justice, peace and respect for personal dignity. "We feel we must once again convert to the Gospel", the Holy Father later told those gathered before the basilica, revealing that "**as the Middle East endures a night of agony... it will not be flight (cf. Mt 26:56) or the sword (cf. Mt 26:52) that will lead to the radiant dawn of Easter. Instead, it will be our gift of self, in imitation of the Lord**".

"No more occupying territories and thus tearing people apart! No more letting half-truths continue to frustrate people’s aspirations! Let there be an end to using the Middle East for gains that have nothing to do with the Middle East!!", he said, recalling above all" the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki "and hoping" that the lands of the East, where the Word of Peace has arisen, do not turn into dark expanses of silence ".

In his speech, the Holy Father also insisted on the need to **respect the *status quo* of Jerusalem, "a city for all peoples, a unique and sacred city for Christians, Jews and Muslims the world over**", pleading once again for a solution negotiated between Israelis and Palestinians that guarantees "the coexistence of two States for two peoples".

After recalling that "hope has the face of children", Francis has mentioned the eyes of those children who "have spent most of their lives looking at rubble instead of schools, hearing the deafening explosion of bombs rather than the happy din of playgrounds". Finally, the day ended with the release of doves, symbolizing the **promise that "the tender twig of hope will return"** (*Genesis* 8:11).

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(July 2018)