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LET US WELCOME POPE FRANCIS WITH AN OPEN HEART

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO MALTA BY POPE FRANCIS

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is with great joy that we welcome the news that His Holiness Pope Francis will visit Malta on the 31st May 2020, the Solemnity of Pentecost.

Last January, in his meditation on the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that narrates St Paul's shipwreck on Malta, Pope Francis had beautiful words for the Maltese people who welcomed Paul and all those on the ship. This is what the Pope said: "The Maltese are good, they are gentle, they were already welcoming at that time." The Pope called us "this good people".¹ He spoke again about this narrative twice in the days that followed, in his reflection during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Pope said: "once they landed on the island of Malta, they experienced the hospitality, kindness and humanity of the island's inhabitants."²

With unusual kindness

Taking our inspiration from this passage that has greatly moved Pope Francis, the theme of his visit among us is: "They showed us unusual kindness" (Acts 28:2). The visit of the successor of Peter on the island of Paul should help us in such a way that what the Word of God says about us Maltese will continue to be the source of constant inspiration in our lives.

Pope Francis also delivered the following meditation on how Paul and his travelling companions were welcomed by the Maltese: "In contrast to the brute force of the stormy sea, they witness the "unusual kindness" of the dwellers of that island. These people, who are foreign to them, are attentive to their needs. They light a fire so that they can warm up, they offer them shelter from the rain and food. Even though they

¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, Paul VI Audience Hall, Vatican City (8 January 2020).

² Homily on the Solemnity of the Conversion of the Apostle St Paul, Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, Rome (25 January 2020).

had not yet received the Good News of Christ, they manifest God's love with practical kind actions. Indeed, spontaneous hospitality and thoughtful gestures communicate something of God's love. And the hospitality of the Maltese islanders is rewarded by the miracles of healing that God works through Paul on the island. Thus, just as the people of Malta were a sign of God's Providence for the Apostle, so was he a witness to the merciful love of God for them."³

Today, almost two thousand years after this event, we thank God for his love for us since the beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel and throughout our history. Let us show our appreciation and welcome Pope Francis with an open heart to help us discern what living "with unusual kindness" truly means when faced with today's challenges. Through his presence and through his words, Pope Francis will encourage us in this mission.

In his short but meaningful visit to Malta, Pope Francis will celebrate and pray with the Maltese and Gozitan people. He will show us how, purified by the Spirit of God who cleanses us from our sins, we can live in true reconciliation together and treat each other with dignity and "unusual kindness".

Every human life is precious

The Pope would also like to meet migrants during his visit among us, just as he did in other places he visited in the Mediterranean. This is what he said when reflecting on the passage of the shipwreck of Paul: "Today, the sea that shipwrecked Paul and his companions is once again a place of danger to the lives of other passengers. All over the world, men and women migrants face risky voyages to flee from violence, to flee from war, to flee from poverty. Just like Paul and his companions, they experience indifference, the hostility of the desert, rivers, seas... They are often not allowed to disembark at ports. But unfortunately, sometimes they are also met with far worse hostility from mankind. They are exploited by criminal traffickers: today! They are treated like numbers and like a threat by some government leaders: today! Sometimes the lack of hospitality drives them back like a wave, to the poverty or the very dangers they had fled." Moved by these dire conditions, the Pope launches a heartfelt appeal: "As Christians we must work together to show migrants God's love revealed by Jesus Christ. We can and we must bear witness that there are not just hostility and indifference but that every person is precious to God and loved by him."⁴

³ Pope Francis, General Audience, Paul VI Audience Hall, Vatican City (22 January 2020).

⁴ *Ibid.*

When the Pope visits our country, we would like him to recognise that for us who believe in Jesus Christ, every human life is precious and is to be embraced with love and tenderness – from conception and through all stages of life until natural death. We are called to give witness of the value of life especially with the weakest, the vulnerable, the suffering who are crying out for help, and those who are most at risk and whose lives are in peril.

Witnesses of a living faith

The visit of Pope Francis is a great blessing for us Maltese and Gozitans. It will help us grow in our faith in the living Christ – the faith brought to us by St Paul which is our greatest treasure. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit that this visit will help us to live our faith with conviction and to be authentic witnesses by leading a life of integrity, honesty, truth, justice and social commitment, whilst passing on our faith to future generations.

We invite the Maltese and Gozitan people to prepare for this special visit, mainly through prayer, so that when Pope Francis is among us, we may welcome him with joy and an open heart, and “with unusual kindness”.

We impart on you our pastoral blessing.

✠ **Charles J. Scicluna**

Archbishop of Malta

✠ **Mario Grech**

Apostolic Administrator of Gozo

✠ **Joseph Galea-Curmi**

Auxiliary Bishop of Malta